

City of Orphans

{ Avi }

{Draft 1-1-11}

New York City, 1893

***1**

Amazing things happen.

Look at someone on the street and you might never see that person again — *ever*. Then you bump into a stranger and your whole life changes — *forever*. See what I'm saying? It's all `bout them words: "luck," "chance," "coincidence," "accident," "quirk," "miracle," plus a lot of words I'm guessing I don't even know.

But the thing is, I got a story that could use *all* them words. `Bout a kid by the name of Maks Geless. That's Maks, with a k.

M. A. K. S.

Now, this Maks, he's regular height for a thirteen-years-old, ruddy-faced, shaggy brown hair, always wearing a cloth cap, canvas jacket, and trousers, plus decent boots. He's a newsboy — what they call a "newsie." So he's holding up a copy of the New York City newspaper, *The World*, and he's shouting, "Extra! Extra! Read all `bout it! Murder at the Waldorf. Terrible Struggle with a Crazy Man! Two men killed! Read it in *The World*! The world's greatest newspaper. Just two cents!"

Now, not everything gets into the papers, right? But see, the only one who knows what really happened up at the Waldorf is — Maks.

You're thinking, how could this kid – this newsie know?

I'll tell you.

This story starts on Monday, October 9, 1893. That's five days *before* the day of that headline you just heard. It's early evening, the night getting nippy. Electric street-lamps just starting to glow. In other words, the long workday is winking.

Not for Maks. He's still on his regular corner, Hester Street and The Bowery. Been peddling *The World* for *five* hours and has sold thirty-nine papers. Sell one more, and he'll have bailed his whole bundle. Do that and he'll have eighty cents in his pocket.

Now listen hard, 'cause this is important.

In 1893 newsies buy their papers, and *then* sell 'em. So next day's bundle is gonna cost Maks seventy-two cents. *Then* he sells 'em for two cents each. Means, for his five hours work, he'll earn a whole eight cents. Not much you say? Hey, these days six cents buys you a can of pork and beans, enough eats for a day, which is all some people gets.

You're probably thinking, eight pennies – that ain't hardly worth working all them hours. But this is 1893. These are hard times. Factories closing. Workers laid off. Not many jobs. Housing not easy to find. Fact, people are calling these days the "Great Panic of 1893." And the thing is, Maks's family's rent is due *this* week. Fifteen bucks! For them, that's huge.

All I'm saying is, Maks's family needs him to earn his share, which is – you guessed it – eight cents a day.

Now – most days when Maks finishes selling his papers, he likes staying in the neighborhood to see how his newsie pals have done. Don't forget, this is New York City. The Lower East Side. Something always happening.

This night all Maks wants to do is to get home and eat. No surprise; he's hungry twenty-five hours a day, eight days a week. And last time he ate was

breakfast – a roll and a bowl of coffee-milk.

So Maks holds up his last newspaper and gives it his best bark. “Extra! Extra! Read all `bout it! Joe Gorker, Political Boss, Accused of Stealing Millions from City! Trial Date Set! Others Arrested! Read it in *The World*! World’s greatest newspaper. Just two cents! Only two cents!”

Sure, sometimes crying headlines, Maks gets to head doodling that someday *he’ll* be in the paper for doing something great, like maybe making a flying machine. So *The World* would pop *his* picture on its first page like this here mug Joe Gorker. Then Maks reminds himself that his job is selling the news, not being it. Besides, *The World* is always laying down lines `bout Joe Gorker, screaming that the guy is a grifter-grafter so crooked that he could pass for a pretzel.

Anyway, Maks’ shout works `cause next moment a fancy gent – top hat, handlebar mustache, starched white collar – what some people call a *swell stiff* – wags a finger at him.

Maks runs over.

The guy shows a nickel. “Got change, kid?”

“Sorry sir. No, sir.”

I know: Maks may be my hero, but he ain’t no saint. Like I told you, for him, pennies are big. Needs all he can get.

“Fine,” says the *swell*. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you, Sir!” Maks says as he slings his last sheet to this guy.

The guy walks off, reading the headlines.

Maks, telling himself his day is done, pops the nickel into his pocket. Except, no sooner does he do that than who does he see?

He sees Bruno.

This Bruno is one serious nasty fella. Taller than Maks by a head, his face is sprinkled with peach fuzz, greasy red hair flopping over his eyes, one of which is

squinty, and on his head, he's got a tipped-back brown derby, which makes his ears stick out like cute cauliflowers.

And the thing is, Bruno may be only seventeen years old, but he's head of the Plug Ugly Gang. Lately, Bruno and his gang have been slamming *World* newsies, beating `em up, stealing their money, burning their papers.

So Maks knows if Bruno is giving him the eye, things gonna be bad. And it's not just `bout being robbed. If Maks loses his money he ain't gonna be able to buy papers for next day. No papers, no *more* money, *and* the family rent don't get paid. In other words, no choice. Maks has to get home with his money.

Trouble is, his home is a three-room tenement flat over to Birmingham Street, near the East River. That's fifteen big blocks away, which, right now, feels as far as the North Pole.

In other words, if Maks wants to keep his money, he's gonna have to either out-run that Plug Ugly or fight him.

Don't know `bout you, but Maks would rather run.

***2**

Maks looks over his shoulder. There's another Plug Ugly down the street. Next moment he sees a *third*. Then, *three* more. *Six Plug Ugliers* in all – including Bruno.

Maks looks for help. He ain't exactly alone. People like to say the Lower East Side is the busiest place in the whole world. Crowds of people buying, bargaining, begging, strolling. Kids, grownups, dogs scrambling for dropped food. Oh, sure, some stealing. These days, folks are really hungry.

Sidewalks packed with hundreds of curb-stalls, two-wheel handcarts, plus backpack peddlers selling anything and everything, whatever jim-jam a person should want, might want, could want, can want. Food, clothing, or furniture. On

the Lower East Side, you can buy bent spoons, used books, four-fingered gloves, one-eyed eyeglasses, or a shoe for your best-left foot. Hey, one old beard is selling cracked eggs.

Sellers crying out their goods in English, German, Italian, Yiddish, Chinese, Spanish, Hebrew, Romanian, plus so many other languages it's like the cheapest boarding-house in Babel.

Even the air is crowded. Criss-crossing telephone lines make the smoky sky look like ruled paper. Hundreds of signs posted here, there, everywhere. It's like someone plucked a newspaper clean of words, then stuck `em all on walls, windows, doors, and sandwich boards, telling people to *buy, buy, and buy some more*.

Overhead, the clattering elevated steam train – called the “El” – rains down smoke, sparks, hot ash. Every time a train *rackety-racks* by, Maks wishes he could ride one. Trouble is, costs a nickel to ride the El. That's five cents Maks' family can't spare. If Maks wants to go somewhere, he walks.

And the neighborhood stinks too. Stinks of rotten food, sweat, smoke, plus horse dung piles. Don't forget, this is before motor cars.

So streets are clogged wheel-to-wheel with wagons, trolleys (bells *ting-a-linging*) cabs, and carts. All hauled by horses. During rush hour if you don't look out, you're gonna be mashed or rolled out dead by metal-rimmed wheels or iron horseshoes. Maks knows kids who've been hurt, killed even. Hey, cabbies and teamsters don't care.

Neither do Bruno and his Ugliers.

You're asking: How come Maks don't cry for a cop? `Cause coppers don't like newsies. Call `em “street rats,” “gutter-snipes.” Besides, these times, city police are hardly better than crooks. Fact, lots of those cops *are* crooks, ready to be

bribed if you have the clink. Don't forget: This is before Commissioner Teddy Roosevelt started bending things straight.

Anyway, Maks ain't supposed to call for help. Kids' doings – good or bad – are just for kids. Keep that in mind.

Not that it matters. `Cause right now, when Maks looks around, ain't a cop in sight.

In other words, Maks is gonna have to get home on his own.

***3**

Maks take another look at Bruno, shoves a hand into his pocket, makes a fist over his pennies, checks to see where the other the gang guys are.

Closer.

Maks yanks his cap down tight and shoots the only way open to him, right down the middle of Hester Street. But the crowds are so thick, he can't keep from knocking folks.

"Excuse me, Ma'am. Sorry, sir."

At Chrystie Street, Maks halts and looks back.

Plug Uglies are coming hard.

Maks keeps shooting south. Gets to Canal Street and races `cross in front of two horse trolleys. One horse shies, causing the driver to scream curses.

Still pounding down Chrystie Street, Maks searches for a hiding place along the walls of brick tenement buildings. Can't find one. Now his side is starting to ache. Getting hard to breathe. Worse luck: an ice block wagon and four fat drays pull in front of him. He tries to get round, only to squeeze up `gainst a stall where an old Chinese lady is selling baskets. Wiggles free, but the Plug Uglies are gaining on him.

That's when Maks remembers that up ahead is an alleyway, a shortcut to

Forsyth Street. If he can get through without the gang seeing, he might be safe.

Galloping like a runaway horse, Maks reaches the alley. Gives it a quick check. It's four feet wide, dismal, gloomy, with grimy brick walls on either side, garbage on the ground.

Maks dives in.

Trouble is, halfway through the alley, a high wooden fence blocks his way. The fence is smack against the bricks, making it impossible to get round. He tries jumping but can't reach eight feet, not with one hand in his pocket clutching pennies.

As Maks tries to think what to do, he sees, right there on the ground, along the base of the wall, a body. The body's so tangled in rags, he can't tell if it's a he, a she, someone sleeping, drunk, maybe even dead.

Next second he swings round just in time to see the Plug Uglies – Bruno in the lead – coming down the alley. In other words, Maks has to fight.

{ The rest will be published on 9-9-11:

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