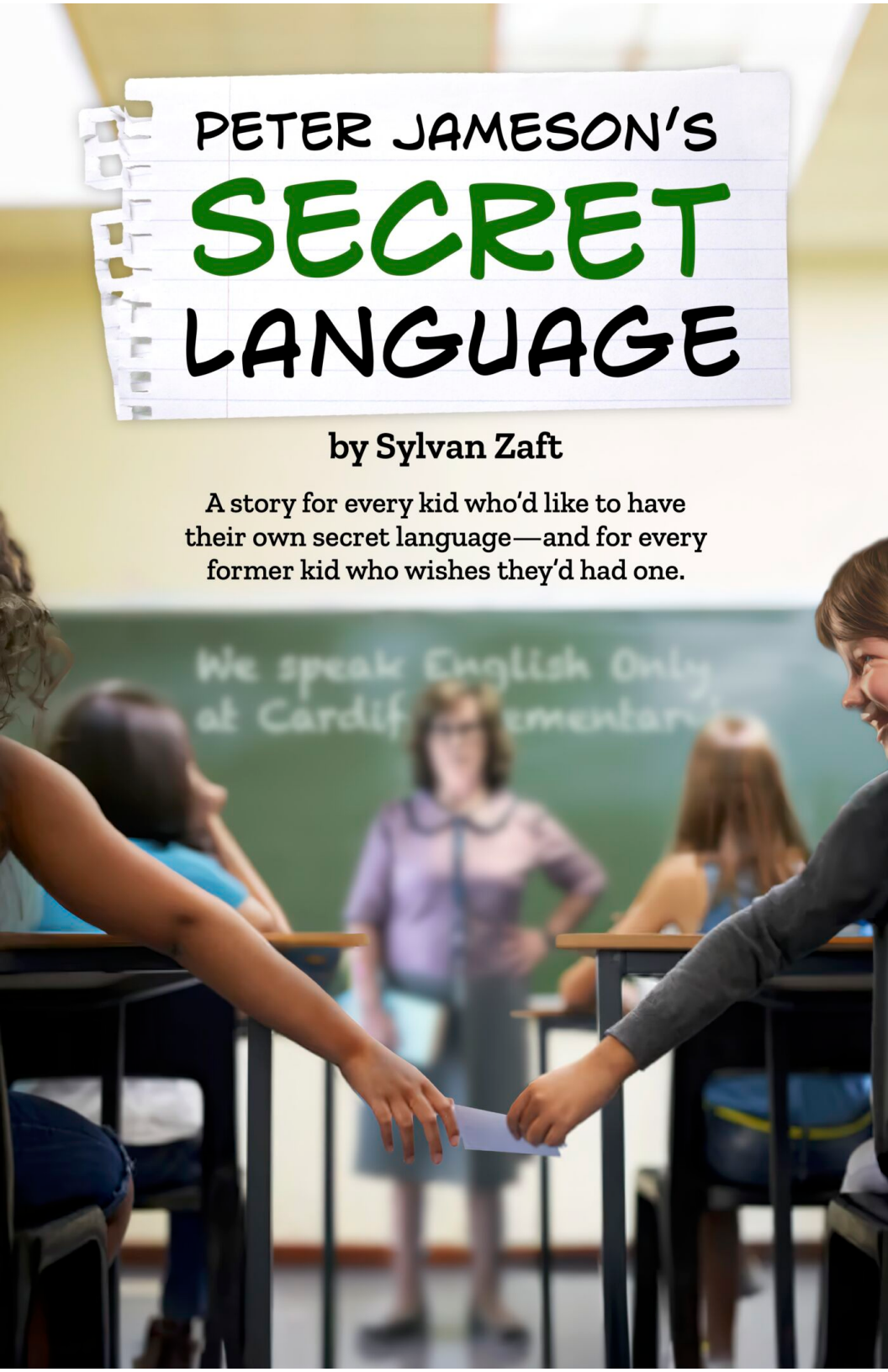


The background of the entire page is a photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, two children are seated at their desks, facing each other and holding a small piece of paper. In the background, a teacher stands in front of a chalkboard. The chalkboard has text written on it. The title of the book is overlaid on the top part of the image, appearing as if it's on a piece of lined paper with a torn edge.

PETER JAMESON'S **SECRET** LANGUAGE

by Sylvan Zaft

A story for every kid who'd like to have
their own secret language—and for every
former kid who wishes they'd had one.

We speak English Only
at Cardiff Elementary

PETER JAMESON'S SECRET LANGUAGE

PETER JAMESON'S SECRET LANGUAGE



Sylvan Zaft



ELDONEJO FENIKSO
PHOENIX BOOKS

Rochester, New York, USA • 2022

Peter Jameson's Secret Language, Second Edition.
version 1.2

This second, revised edition was adapted from digital scans of the original print edition (1996, Bela Lingvo Press). Many thanks to Anna Bennett, Sheila Devlin, Ruth Kevers-Cohen, Creede Lambard, William Patterson, Benson Smith, Gregory Wasson, and other generous volunteers for their careful proofreading and helpful suggestions. The text was edited and revised by Hoss Firooznia, Debra Hamel, and Jorge Rafael Nogueras.

First Edition © 1996 Sylvan Zaft
Second Edition © 2022 Sylvan Zaft and Esperanto-USA

ISBNs: 978-1-955994-00-2 (print), 978-1-955994-01-9 (e-book)

Peter Jameson's Secret Language is a work of fiction. All of the characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The city of Cardiff, the Cardiff School System, and the Cardiff Public Library are all completely fictional. However, the eagles, the emotions, and the secret language are all real.

ELDONEJO FENIKSO / PHOENIX BOOKS is an imprint of Esperanto-USA,
a nonprofit educational organization in the United States.
<http://esperanto-usa.org/fenikso>

You may freely share this edition under the terms
of the Creative Commons *BY-NC-ND 4.0* license.
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

For Paige and Lynn

Contents

1. How Indians Talk	1
2. In the Library	3
3. Rude Laughter	5
4. Two Quotations	7
5. Years and Years	11
6. In the Rectory	14
7. Someone Who Hopes	17
8. The Green-Star Lady	21
9. Parental Approval	26
10. Spring Vacation	30
11. Dancing Angels, Invisible Friends	35
12. Passing a Note in Class	40
13. The Torn-Up Letter	46
14. Jes	50
15. The Punishment	56
16. Impossible Dreams	59
17. English Only!	62
18. Tony's Bloody Nose	65
19. Ne	68
20. The End of the School Year	73
21. The Bald Eagle	77
22. The Meeting on the Beach	81
23. The Letter About Pyoter Ivanovich	84
24. A New School Year	87
25. A Phone Call	90
26. "I'll Get Back to You"	94
27. A Language for Hatred	100
28. The Friendly Language	104
Appendix: About the Secret Language	111

How Indians Talk

Peter was always interested in learning new things, but they weren't always the things his teachers wanted him to learn. And while he did well enough on tests, he didn't always get the best grades. But when his fourth-grade teacher taught a unit on Indians toward the end of the school year, one thing caught his attention: the Indians' special language, their sign language.

He raised his hand. The rest of the class was working on a handout, so Mrs. Johnson came over to his desk. She was a slender woman with a round face, light brown skin, and black hair that fell to her shoulders. It was her first year of teaching at Cardiff Elementary.

"Yes, Peter," she whispered. Mrs. Johnson was one of those teachers who made it easy to ask questions—not like Mrs. Martin, who would have said, "This is a time for working on your handout, Peter, not a time for asking new questions."

"Mrs. Johnson, why did the Indians need sign language?" he asked.

"A little quieter, Peter. I'm right here."

"Sorry," he whispered.

Mrs. Johnson smiled and said, "So they could understand one another."

Peter whispered loudly, "But why didn't they just use their voices?"

"Well, maybe they used sign language when they were hunting," she said, "so they wouldn't frighten the animals away."

Peter nodded. "If we were Indians," he whispered, not quite as loudly as before, "then I could ask questions in sign language and not disturb the class!"

Mrs. Johnson smiled and nodded, and Peter smiled, too. Then he

got a faraway look in his eyes. Mrs. Johnson knew he was thinking, so she went over to Sally Morrison, who had been waving her hand. Later, when it came time to collect the handouts, Peter's was still incomplete. Mrs. Johnson asked him to finish it at home and turn it in on Monday.

It was raining when Peter walked home that afternoon. He was wearing his yellow raincoat, a rain hat, and black rubber boots. Peter liked to walk home through the little park that stretched along a creek next to the school. He was following a path that wound past a baseball diamond, three picnic tables, and some woods where woodpeckers nested. He was enjoying the sound of the rain and the smell of the earth. The brim of his hat shielded his glasses from the drizzle.

"Hey, Pete!" someone called. It was his friend Ronny James, catching up with him. "I'm going to form a gang. Want to join?"

Ronny was small and wiry, and he could run faster than anyone else in class. "Maybe," Peter said. "What do you think about using sign language?"

"Sign language?"

"You know, like the Indians used."

"My Aunt Dorothy uses sign language."

"She *does*?"

"Yep. She works with people who can't hear. They talk with each other in sign language."

Peter was so excited to hear this that he forgot all about the gang.

"There are deaf people in my aunt's church," Ronny went on, "so on Sundays, she stands up through the whole service and tells them what's happening."

Peter had that faraway look in his eyes again. Seeing him distracted, Ronny punched him in the arm and ran away. Peter knew what was expected of him, so he chased after Ronny, but of course he couldn't catch him.

And that was how Peter Jameson started to think about language.

In the Library

It was sunny on Saturday, so Peter took a trip to the Cardiff Public Library. It was a mile and a half from his home, an easy ride on his twelve-speed Schwinn. Peter wore his helmet, and he rolled up his right pant leg so it wouldn't catch on the bike chain while he pedaled.

The Schwinn had rear baskets that could hold quite a few books. He chained his bike to a sign, went inside, and walked up to one of the computers. He hit two keys to reach the "Subject Browse" screen and typed in "sign language." The computers were much easier to use than the old card catalog in his school library.

The search turned up a single book about American Sign Language in the children's section. Peter hit "Save Entry." Then he thought for a moment and entered a new subject: "Indians."

A few minutes later, he had two more entries saved: two books about "Indians, American" that included chapters on Indian languages. One was in the children's section, and one was in the adult section. He printed out his list.

Peter found the books and brought them to the circulation desk. Usually, the ladies there didn't hassle him about borrowing books from the adult section. They did make a fuss one time when he tried to borrow *Frankenstein*, and he had to get permission from Miss Klein, the head librarian. She sighed and gave him a funny look. "Well, I suppose this won't hurt you," she said, shaking her head, "not with everything they show in the movies and on TV these days." Peter didn't understand everything he read in the book, but he did understand a lot. The story made him sad, but he also thought it was amazing—and a little surprising. He had seen a *Frankenstein* movie once, and he wondered how a book and a movie that were supposed to tell the same story could be so different.

Mrs. Blake was at the circulation desk today. She was new. When she saw the thick book from the adult section that Peter wanted to borrow, she said, "This looks a bit advanced for you, Peter."

But he knew how to deal with her. "I just want to read one chapter, Mrs. Blake."

She nodded and made no further fuss. She was still getting to know him. Miss Klein had once told Peter that he was one of their best customers.

Peter went home and read about the Indians, their languages, and their sign language. He even learned a few words in American Sign Language. But he didn't know any deaf people to practice with, and he couldn't get any of his friends to learn it with him. Then he got distracted learning about other things, like the difference between astronomy and astrology. But years later, he would trace his interest in languages back to the little bit he had learned about sign language in that last month of fourth grade.

What stuck in his mind was the fact that each of the hundreds of Indian tribes had its own language. When members of two tribes met and they didn't know each other's language, they used Indian sign language to communicate. What a neat idea, Peter thought. He tried to imagine a Frenchman and a German using a European sign language to talk to each other.

Rude Laughter

In the middle of fifth grade, Peter became interested in languages again. It happened in Du Berry's Family Restaurant, where Peter, his parents, and his older sister, Carrie, had gone for dinner. Peter's mother was a dentist, and his father was a high school math teacher. Often, after a long day at work, neither of them felt like cooking. His mother liked Du Berry's because it had a salad bar and a low-fat menu. She was always trying to get his father to order the sort of things she ate, but she rarely succeeded.

"You're getting thick around the middle, Henry," she'd tell him on the way in. Then he'd kiss her and say, "But you *do* still love me, don't you, dear?!" He said it in such a theatrical, worried voice that she couldn't keep a straight face, and they would both end up laughing.

Peter was eating some vegetables from the salad bar, enjoying the crunchiness of the carrots and celery sticks. He'd even gotten some cauliflower and broccoli to munch on. The healthy stuff kept his mother happy, so she wouldn't object too much to the triple-decker DuberryBurger he always ordered. Of course, he was very good about brushing and flossing his teeth, and that made his mother happy, too. She was talking to his father about some new treatment for gum disease when Carrie asked to be excused. Peter stood up so she could slide across their booth on her way to the bathroom.

Carrie was sixteen, and she had blonde hair like her mother. She was wearing lipstick, a wool pullover, and jeans that her mother had said were too tight. She looked almost grown up.

Before Peter sat down again, he noticed the two men in the next booth. They were drinking coffee and eating DuberryBurgers and fries. They hadn't bothered with the salad bar. Their mustaches

were thicker than his father's, and even in the noise of the restaurant, he could tell they were speaking a foreign language. It wasn't unusual to hear foreign languages in Cardiff. Peter often heard people speaking Chinese when his parents took him to Chinese restaurants, for example. And once, at the Mandarin restaurant, he saw Chinese-looking people who were speaking a language he'd never heard before. He thought it might have been Japanese.

But the conversation between these two men was different from others that Peter had overheard. Peter noticed that one of the men was following Carrie with his eyes. The man said something to his friend in a voice loud enough for Peter to hear, but of course Peter couldn't understand him. The second man swung his head around to look at Carrie. When he turned back, both of them laughed. Peter gave them a dirty look, which one of them caught. Then they said something else to each other and laughed again. Their laughter was lost in the chatter of a hundred conversations, and no one noticed it except for Peter. He felt furious and helpless. He knew they had said something insulting, but he didn't know what it was.

Back at home, Peter kept thinking about their rude laughter. They could get away with saying anything because no one else understood their language. There were probably millions of people who spoke the language in their home country, but in Du Berry's Family Restaurant, it was a secret language, and they could say whatever they wanted. They could even plan a crime—a bank robbery, murder, anything—and no one would be the wiser. Their secret language gave them a special power. They were like invisible men.

Two Quotations

One evening, Peter was sitting with his parents in the family room. His mother and father were talking about the terrible things they had just seen on the news: what the Serbs and Croats and Slavic Muslims were doing to one another, what the Chinese were doing to the Tibetans, and what the Indonesians were doing to the people of East Timor. His parents were speaking to each other as if Peter wasn't there. Adults do that on occasion, especially when they're talking about things most kids don't care about. But Peter read the newspaper sometimes and looked at maps of faraway countries, and when his parents talked about such things, he paid attention and tried to understand what he could. Listening to them now, a question occurred to him, and he blurted it out:

"Why are all these people treating each other this way?"

His parents looked at him as though they were surprised to see him there, sitting across the room with his legs drawn up on the love seat.

"Do you understand what we're talking about?" his mother asked.

"I think so," he nodded. "The Chinese are taking over Tibet even though the Dalai Lama doesn't want them to, the Indonesians have killed lots of people in East Timor, the Serbs are trying to drive the Croats and the Muslims out of Bosnia, and the Croats and Muslims are fighting each other."

His parents seemed impressed.

"Are they fighting over land?" Peter asked.

"Partly," his mother said, and his father nodded along with her.

"Isn't there enough land?"

"It wouldn't matter," his father said. "Russia has more land than any country in the world, but it's arguing with Japan over four tiny

islands.”

“Is it like when kids fight over something small like a pencil, and they keep yelling, ‘It’s mine! It’s mine!’?”

“Hold that thought,” Peter’s mother said. “I’ll be right back.” She got up and left the room.

“Yes, sometimes it’s over small things,” his father said, and in a moment he was scratching his head. His black hair was getting thin on top, and there was just a hint of gray by his ears. “But sometimes they fight over things that have real value, too.”

His mother came back carrying a heavy black book. She sat down and leafed through it while Peter and his father watched her expectantly. “Ah, here it is.” Her voice became a bit more serious: “We go to gain a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name.”

“Hamlet!” Peter’s father said. “I remember that.”

“To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it, nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole a ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.” Then her voice came down in tone to show that some other character was speaking: “Why, then the Polack never will defend it.”

“It’s not nice to call Polish people ‘Polacks,’” Peter interrupted.

“This was written a very long time ago,” Peter’s father said.

“Does that make it right?” Peter challenged him.

“Hush!” his mother commanded. “Let me finish. I’m almost done.” And she went on: “Yes, it is already garrisoned.” She looked up. “That’s it. Do you understand my point, Peter?”

“I’m not sure.”

“The first character says the Norwegian army is going to war with Poland over a tiny piece of land that’s essentially worthless. The second character doesn’t think the Polish army will bother defending it, but the first character says they’ve already put their soldiers there.”

“Ah, okay. So it’s just like I said, like kids fighting over nothing.”

His mother closed the book and smiled in the way only she could. He loved that smile, so alive and full of love. It often appeared when he or Carrie understood something, but sometimes it was just there.

Peter loved his family, and he felt very lucky to be living in such a safe place in such a dangerous world. Here, the Serbs, the Chinese, and the others could not reach them. For a moment, Peter imagined the people of all those nations as giant, powerful children gone crazy.

But he knew they were just regular people like everyone else, of course. “Why don’t the Chinese and the Tibetans understand each other better?” he asked.

“Maybe because they speak such different languages,” his father said.

Peter frowned.

His mother said, “The Serbs and the Croatians don’t really speak different languages.”

“I know,” his father agreed, “but they do use different alphabets.”

Peter started laughing. He laughed so hard that his parents stared at him for a moment. Then his father left the room and came back with another book. This one was beige and had a familiar drawing on the cover. It showed a bespectacled man pulling a number of tiny ships toward the shore—Gulliver helping the Lilliputians.

Peter reached out. “Let me!”

His father handed him the book and waited patiently, watching while Peter searched through it. Then Peter began to read, glancing up with a little smile on his face. He saw his father’s face light up, and he knew that he’d guessed right. Peter read on from the strangely capitalized prose:

It is allowed on all Hands, the primitive Way of breaking Eggs before we eat them, was upon the larger End: But his present Majesty’s Grand-father, while he was a boy, going to eat an Egg, and breaking it according to the ancient Practice, happened to cut one of his Fingers. Whereupon the Emperor his Father, published an Edict, commanding all his Subjects, upon great Penalties, to break the smaller End of their Eggs. The People so highly resented this Law, that our Histories tell us, there have been six Rebellions raised on that Account; wherein

one Emperor lost his Life, and another his Crown. These civil Commotions were constantly fomented by the Monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire. It is computed, that eleven Thousand Persons have, at several Times, suffered Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller End.

Peter stopped reading, and there was a short silence. Then he looked up. "People will fight over just about anything, I guess. It's not always about speaking different languages."

"No," his mother agreed, "only sometimes."

"Only sometimes," Peter said, closing the book. "Can we listen to some music now? My brain hurts." He shook his head.

His father got up and went to where their videos were stored. He held one up. "How about this? *The Ode to Freedom*?"

Soon they were watching Leonard Bernstein's fluid hand movements as he conducted musicians and singers from many lands in the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Years and Years

S now was on the ground, five or six inches of it, enough to build snowmen and a snow fort. Peter and Ronny and their friend Tony Charboneau had been busy all Saturday morning in Tony's backyard. The temperature was in the high twenties, the wind was calm, and the sun was shining. Peter was wearing long johns under a cotton turtleneck and his brand-new parka, just as if he were going cross-country skiing with his family. He had worked up a good sweat and felt warm in the mild winter weather. Only his face was cold, and it was a refreshing cold, like the cold of lemonade on a hot afternoon. The snow sparkled.

He found it satisfying to pack snow into a ball and roll it along the ground, feeling and seeing it fatten as it left behind a widening track. After a little while, the whole yard was crisscrossed by tracks. Peter moved awkwardly, stooped over in the snow, listening to Ronny and Tony argue over where to place the next building blocks of their fort. He was barely aware of the distant roar of a snowblower.

At first they had thought of going to the park to build a fort, but Ronny pointed out that the bigger kids could kick them out and take it over. Tony's yard was a better option. It had plenty of snow and plenty of room for everything they wanted to build, and Tony's mother would make them hot chocolate. After they started building, Darlene and Judith came to join them. Darlene was Tony's sister, just a year older than Peter and Tony, and Judith was her friend.

Peter was afraid that Ronny might object with a loud "Boys only!" so he waved for him to come over, shouting, "Ronny, help me lift this! It's too heavy!" As they lifted the not especially large ball of snow onto the wall they were building, Peter said, "Building the

fort here was a great idea, Ronny. And Tony's mom will be happy we're letting the girls work on it with us." And so the satisfying work went on, and there were five of them now.

When Mrs. Charboneau came out and called, "Ready for hot chocolate?" it was Ronny who exclaimed, "I sure am!" His face was red from the cold air and the hot work—he was not dressed as warmly as Peter—and even though the fort wasn't ready for the snowball fight that would soon follow, he was happy to take a break.

Inside there was a healthy fire in the fireplace, and it was nice to sip hot chocolate—with real whipped cream!—and stare into the mesmerizing glow. Peter felt overheated even with his parka off, and drowsy and good, like when you get into a snug bed after a long day.

"Tony and Darlene," Mrs. Charboneau was saying, "your father will be home in a little while, and then we'll be leaving to visit our new cousins in Windsor. The rest of you are welcome to stay here and play in the yard."

Peter wasn't looking at him, but he knew what Ronny was feeling—relief that they could still work on their fort. You always knew what Ronny was thinking. He was a good friend.

Then Peter thought to ask, "New cousins?"

"Not really new, of course," Mrs. Charboneau said. "They're distant cousins, but when they moved to Windsor recently, they looked us up."

Windsor was in Canada, just across the river from Detroit. Peter liked it when his family drove across the Ambassador Bridge to Canada, over the wide river with its great boats. He enjoyed gazing at the enormous Detroit skyline from the beautiful parks that lined the Windsor shore. The train cars of the People Mover wound more than forty feet above the street, but they looked like toys when seen from across the river.

"Where did your cousins move from?" Judith asked. She was a heavily freckled girl with red hair, and she was sitting cross-legged on the dull orange carpeting.

"Quebec," Darlene told her. Darlene had freckles too, but they

were lighter, and her hair was more of a strawberry blonde, like her mother's.

"Where's Quebec?" Judith asked.

But before anyone could answer, Peter blurted out, "Do they speak French?"

"They certainly do," Mrs. Charboneau said. She was a thin, tiny woman in a white apron, and somehow she reminded Peter of the canary that she kept in a cage in the living room. She also loved to feed people. Maybe that was her way of dieting, Peter thought.

"They're bilingual," Darlene said. "When I'm in high school, I'm going to take French so I can talk with them!"

Ronny asked, "Can't you talk with them now?"

"Of *course* I can. I told you, they're bilingual."

"Tony's father is French-Canadian," Mrs. Charboneau said. "But he doesn't speak French. His family moved here before he was born, and he grew up speaking English."

"What if we all learned French?" Peter asked. "We'd have our own language."

"We have our own language now," Ronny said. "It's English."

"I *know* that," Peter said, exasperation creeping into his voice, though it was immediately followed by enthusiasm. "But *everybody* speaks English here. So when you talk, everyone knows what you're saying. But if we had our own language, a different language, we could talk to each other in secret!"

Ronny nodded. Then he turned to Mrs. Charboneau and asked, "How long would it take for us to learn French?"

Mrs. Charboneau put her hands on her thighs and laughed. "Years and years," she said. "I studied Spanish for four years in high school, and I can't speak it at all!"

"That's no good," Ronny said, shaking his head. "We'd be grown-ups before we learned our secret language."

Peter sighed. It had seemed like such a good idea. He thought of the two men with mustaches in the restaurant. They had been really rude, but he wasn't mad at them anymore. He did still envy them, though, because of the power their secret language gave them.

In the Rectory

That winter it snowed a lot for the first time in years, and Peter and his friends spent many afternoons building and rebuilding their snow fort in the Charboneaus' backyard. They had snowball fights too, and the girls gave as good as they got. There were five constant members of the group: Peter, Ronny, Tony, Darlene, and Judith. And there were others who drifted in and out.

Over hot chocolate, Peter kept bringing up his idea that they should have their own secret language. That way they could speak it in front of other people—teachers and other grown-ups and kids at school—and nobody would understand them. His friends liked the idea, but they knew they couldn't study languages in their school district until ninth grade, and that was far, far away.

Tony said that his family's priest knew Latin, and that a long time ago, Latin was used all the time in church. Peter was eager to find out more, so during the week-long winter break at the end of February, he and Tony and Darlene trekked over to the church to find Father Clemons.

"Will he talk to us?" Peter asked.

"He always says hi to me, and he always asks how I'm doing in school," Tony said.

They knocked at the door of the priest's house—Tony called it a rectory—and waited. Nothing happened, so Peter rang the bell.

"I hope we're not interrupting something."

"He might be in the church," Darlene pointed out, but just then the door opened. Father Clemons appeared before them, sweat running down his face and splotching his T-shirt, which read "Saint Andrew's Parish." He was a middle-aged man with the beginnings of a potbelly, no taller than Peter's sister, and his long face was red

with exertion. He was breathing heavily.

“Hi, Tony! Hi, Darlene!” Father Clemons huffed.

“We *are* interrupting something,” Peter said.

“Not . . . exactly,” the priest said slowly. His voice was rich and deep, very appropriate for a preacher, Peter thought. “I just finished my workout. Good timing. What can I do for you?”

“We have some questions about languages,” Peter said.

Father Clemons laughed. “Ask your teachers!”

“They don’t know very much about languages.”

“Neither do I,” he said, shaking his head. “Never was my strong suit. I got by, but not by much. . . . Say, I need something to drink. Come join me inside, will you?” He held the storm door open for them, and they trooped through a dimly lit hallway into a very clean living room.

“Have a seat. Martha’s not here to complain,” the priest said as he left the room. Peter noticed that they were tracking in snow on the beige carpet. The three of them sat on a couch next to a fireplace that looked as though it was rarely used.

They heard a bustling somewhere, and in a moment Father Clemons returned and set a tray on the maple coffee table. There were two large bottles of Gatorade on it, one yellow and one red, and a stack of small paper cups.

“Help yourselves.”

The children politely drank one cupful each. Father Clemons downed cup after cup. He smelled the way you do after a lot of heavy exercise.

“Ah, that’s better!” the priest said. He patted his belly. “We run to fat in my family, so I need to work out every day. Except Sunday, that is!” He laughed. “Now, what is this about languages?” He looked at Peter as if he had just noticed him. “I don’t believe I know you, son.”

“I’m Peter Jameson, a friend of Tony and Darlene’s. I live just across the creek from them, and we go to Cardiff Elementary together.” Father Clemons nodded. Peter went on to explain that they were searching for a secret language they could learn, and they

were wondering about Latin.

“Not Latin!” Father Clemons laughed and laughed. Peter wondered what it was about languages that made people laugh. “Oh no, not Latin. That would take you many, many years to master.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, then downed two more cups of Gatorade and wiped his face with the back of his hand. “But I do know someone who has a lot of experience with languages. He knows seven or eight of them, I think. Before he retired, he was a professor. If anybody can help you, Morgan can.” Father Clemons nodded. “He lives not far from here, about a mile and a half away. A healthy walk. I’ll give him a ring.”

Father Clemons got up and left the room again. Peter and his friends looked at one another.

“This is really important to you, isn’t it?” Darlene asked Peter.

“We could be at school, and I’d want to tell you something or you’d want to tell me something that we wouldn’t want others to know, and we wouldn’t have to whisper.”

“That would be rude, though, wouldn’t it, to talk in a language that other people don’t understand?”

“It happens all the time when people are in a foreign country. It wouldn’t be rude.”

Darlene scratched her head and looked a little uncertain. For the first time, Peter realized that she had a friendly face. Maybe it was her habit of seeming super sure of herself that made her look stern a lot of the time.

Father Clemons was back in the doorway. “He’ll see you! Morgan Renfrew thinks he may have your language.”

Someone Who Hopes

Professor Renfrew was a tall, slender man with a dry smile, observant blue eyes, and a neatly trimmed gray beard. Gray hair that was not trimmed so neatly fringed the back of his head. He wore gray jeans and a light blue shirt. Although he seemed about the same age as Peter's grandparents, he moved easily, not at all stiffly, and Peter could not imagine him complaining about his aches and pains. He invited the three children into the kitchen.

There were settings for five people at the big wooden table. It held platters of sandwiches, raw vegetables, and two kinds of pickles. The raw vegetables made Peter think of his mother. Mrs. Renfrew wore light-colored blue jeans and a red flannel shirt. She was as slender as her husband, and she moved even more gracefully than he did, although her hair was completely white.

It was lunchtime, and Mrs. Renfrew insisted that they call home to let their folks know where they were and to ask permission to eat over. Peter got permission from his sister Carrie, and Tony and Darlene got permission from their mother.

There was only water to drink. "We weren't expecting children today," Mrs. Renfrew said. "Our grandchildren all live very far away."

"Where do they live, Mrs. Renfrew?" Darlene asked.

"In California and Massachusetts. San Diego and Sudbury. Very far away, to the west and to the east."

Tony picked up what he thought was a tuna sandwich and took a big bite. "This isn't tuna!" he blurted out with his mouth full.

"No, it's tofu salad! Very rich in calcium. How do you like it?"

"It's okay, I guess," Tony said. "I'm *very* hungry. . . . Ouch!"

Darlene smiled at Mrs. Renfrew, giving no sign that she had just poked her brother in the ribs. "The sandwiches are *delicious*," she

said in an overly enthusiastic voice.

The professor's wife threw her head back a little and laughed. "I know it's not what you're used to, but I have some very tasty brownies for dessert."

"I've had tofu before," Peter piped up. "At the Inn Season Café."

"In Royal Oak!" Professor Renfrew said. "That's our favorite vegetarian restaurant."

"Are you vegetarians?" Peter asked.

"Not exactly," Mrs. Renfrew said with a polite smile and a shake of her head. "But we don't eat meat all the time, either."

Peter turned to her husband. "Are you a professor of languages?"

"I was an anthropologist, and I had to be able to learn languages for my work."

Before Peter could ask what an anthropologist was, Mrs. Renfrew added, "Morgan knows Indian languages."

"*Knew*. I'm afraid my Hopi and Navaho are extremely rusty, but there was a time when I could speak them with some real fluency."

Peter was finishing his sandwich, and Mrs. Renfrew smiled and pointed at the platter, so he reached out and took another. He remembered to thank her only when his mouth was half full. After swallowing and taking a drink of water, he asked, "Are you a professor, too?"

"No, not at all. I left that up to Morgan."

"Sarah teaches," the professor explained. "I envy her sometimes."

"I teach yoga. Downstairs. I have only a few students."

"So that's why you don't look old!" Peter exclaimed. "My mother was thinking of taking up yoga." He turned to the professor again. "Do you do yoga too?"

"A little," Professor Renfrew admitted. "But a little goes a long way." He drew himself up and stated in an especially slow and deliberate manner, "If something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly."

"Huh?" Peter asked, but it was Tony who said, "Oh!"

Peter turned to his friend and saw him nodding. "What is it?"

Tony was waving his hands, and they waited a few moments

as the words came to him: "He means it's okay to not get A's in everything."

Professor Renfrew nodded vigorously. "I was quoting Chesterton. His idea is that we can enjoy a lot of things that we are not experts in. I do a little yoga, and I am mediocre. But I do it every day, and it benefits me."

Peter was getting it. "Like it's okay that my sister likes to swim even though she's not on the swim team."

The professor nodded again, just as vigorously as before.

"But in school we're *supposed* to get A's," Darlene added, back in her super-sure mode. "That's what my parents say."

Professor Renfrew shrugged. "Depends on what you need them for. I gave out A's and B's and C's and D's and F's for thirty-seven years, and I'm not sure what good came of it." His somewhat high voice sounded irritated now. "Too many of the students had their interest in learning *squeezed* out of them. Their only goal was their damned grade point average."

"Morgan!" Mrs. Renfrew said sharply. "The children don't need to hear you go on about the problems with our education system."

He breathed out slowly and looked at the kids. "You're right," he sighed. "That isn't why Mike Clemons sent them to me."

"No," Darlene agreed, and she looked a little shocked at hearing Father Clemons referred to as "Mike." "Peter wants us to learn a secret language, but all the languages take too much time. We would be grown-ups before we learned them. But Father Clemons said you have a language for us."

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Renfrew threw her hands up. "You're not going to sic *Ethel* on them!"

"I might," Professor Renfrew said with a little grin. "Ethel is quite harmless. You know that. These children might learn something they actually *want* to learn instead of just scrabbling for grades."

Mrs. Renfrew shook her head as she stood up and started clearing away the dishes. She was mumbling something, but the only words that Peter caught were "Green stars . . . green stars . . ."

"Of course, it would still take a good deal of time to learn this

language,” the professor explained. “You can’t learn any language in a few minutes. But it wouldn’t take years, either.”

“How long would it take?” Peter asked. He held his breath a little, waiting for the answer.

“About thirty hours, I’ve been told.”

“Wow! That’s not very long.”

“Yes . . . thirty hours, a solid week of intensive work, and I think you could begin to communicate with some proficiency,” the professor said, nodding to himself. “There’s always more to learn, of course. After all, I’m still looking up words in English after a lifetime of reading. But with thirty hours, you could make a good start.”

“Do you know the language?” Darlene asked.

“No.” He paused. “But maybe I could learn it along with you.”

Mrs. Renfrew laughed, and then she turned from where she was loading the dishwasher: “So she’s finally gotten to you after all these years!” She shook her head in wonder.

“You’re not going to be in our gang, are you?” Tony asked, wide-eyed.

“I’m far too old for that,” Professor Renfrew reassured him, “but I *am* skilled at learning languages, and I could help you learn this one if you’re interested. It wouldn’t hurt me to pick up another language at seventy-two,” he added thoughtfully. “Cato the Elder supposedly learned Greek at eighty. Surely this will be much easier than Greek. Yes, I think I’ll let Ethel talk to you. She will either interest you in this language of hers, or she will drive you far away from it.”

“What is her language?” Peter asked.

“I think I’ll let Ethel tell you the name. But I *will* tell you what the name means.”

“Yes?”

The professor smiled again, this time more broadly. “It means ‘someone who hopes.’”

Mrs. Renfrew served the brownies. They were delicious. Peter was so delighted at finding his language that he hardly missed the taste of milk washing down the thick, nutty chocolate.

The Green-Star Lady

“Saluton infanoj, mia nomo estas Ethel Wingate! Vi rajtas nomi min ‘Nobla’!”

Peter and a bunch of other students were sitting in Professor Renfrew’s study when Ethel Wingate entered the room carrying two heavy tote bags. The study took up much of the basement of the Renfrew home. It held thousands of books, in a number of different languages. Peter’s parents loved to read, but even they didn’t have that many books. A smaller room next to the study served as Mrs. Renfrew’s yoga studio.

Peter had arrived early that Saturday morning, so he’d had a chance to explore the rows of metal bookshelves before his friends got there. Professor Renfrew hadn’t seemed to mind when Peter took down some books and leafed through them. “It must be fun to be able to read books in other languages,” Peter had said. “Are there books written in this Someone-Who-Hopes language?”

“Ask Ethel Wingate when she arrives,” the professor had said.

Now she was here in all her glory, a tall, heavy woman with steel-gray hair. She had a square face with a bulbous nose and some sort of growth under her left eye. Her green, tent-like dress was decorated with a pattern of vines and tiny white blossoms, and she was talking in an exaggerated, theatrical manner. Her words made no sense at all to Peter, but he was dying to know what language she was speaking.

“Ethel,” the professor said, “calm down. If you can contain your enthusiasm, you might actually entice some of these young people to have a look at your language.” He smiled his dry smile. “And if they’re interested in learning it, I might even study it along with them. Now, have a seat. We have tea and juice, and Sarah’s made some of her applesauce brownies.”

“Applesauce?” Judith asked. “They don’t taste like applesauce.”

“That’s Sarah’s magic. She replaces the butter with applesauce. There’s no extra fat, but they’re still delicious.”

“*Ili certe estas!*” Ethel Wingate agreed. She had set down her bags and was helping herself to the brownies.

“These are great!” Tony mumbled with his mouth full. “Do they have a lot of calcium too?”

Peter now understood why Mrs. Renfrew had muttered, “Green stars ... green stars ...” when the professor had first mentioned Ethel. Each of Ethel’s bags was decorated with big green stars. There were green stars hanging from her ears, and a pin with a big green star on it was almost lost in the green of her dress. She seemed really excited about green stars for some reason. Maybe *too* excited.

Peter started to worry. He looked around, and sure enough, some of his friends were holding back giggles. If the language was serious, as this woman apparently was not, Peter did not want her strange appearance to scare his friends off.

He walked over to Mrs. Wingate and reached out his hand. “I’m Peter Jameson,” he said, “and these are my friends.” He introduced them one by one, and they became polite and said hello. Mrs. Wingate smiled a syrupy smile at each of them, replying, “*Saluton!*”

“Professor Renfrew said you would tell us the name of your language. He said it means ‘someone who hopes.’”

“That’s right!” she said. A good sign—she was speaking English. She turned to Professor Renfrew with a big smile, showing her perfect teeth. Peter thought he knew what that meant: they were probably false. “You remembered!” she exclaimed.

“After hearing something hundreds of times, I often do,” the professor said. His face was serious, but he was teasing.

“So what’s the name of your language?” Peter asked excitedly.

“‘Esperanto.’ But Zamenhof originally called it ‘*La Internacia Lingvo*,’ which means ‘The International Language.’”

“Who is Zamenhof?”

“He was the man who invented Esperanto. Or ‘initiated’ it, as

he liked to say.”

“Was he an old man?” Judith asked, thinking of someone like the professor.

“Actually, no. He was about sixteen when he began working on his language.”

“He was in school?!” Ronny said.

“Yes, he was. His school was in another country, thousands of miles away from here, and it was more than a hundred years ago, but yes, he was in school. He wanted people to understand one another, to speak to one another, to be able to visit any country and talk with the people who lived there. He wanted everyone in the world to be able to communicate without having to spend years studying a foreign language first. He wanted a new language that could be learned not only by college professors, like Morgan here, but by factory workers and farmers and children.”

Ethel Wingate was not a beautiful woman, but she was speaking with such feeling that, for a moment, she seemed beautiful to Peter.

Ronny suddenly stood up and asked, “How do you say, ‘Edward Brown is an old fool’ in Esperanto?”

Someone gasped. Edward Brown was their principal, an overly formal man that none of the kids liked very much.

Ethel Wingate looked as though she were about to scold Ronny, but then she glanced at the professor. She must have seen something in his eyes, because she nodded slightly. When the words came out of her mouth, Professor Renfrew seemed to relax a little bit:

“‘Edvardo Bruno estas maljuna stultulo.’”

“Edvardo Bruno . . .” Ronny began.

She repeated the words slowly until Ronny got them right. Finally he said the whole sentence gleefully.

Then Darlene called out, “How do you say, ‘Mr. Brown is a very nice man’?”

“‘Sinjoro Bruno estas tre afabla viro.’ You see, children, you can say anything in Esperanto that you can say in English. You can insult people, you can compliment people, you can even . . .”—she looked right at Ronny—“tell a girl that you love her.”

Some of the boys laughed.

It was going well, Peter felt. It was on the right track now. "Are there books in Esperanto?" he asked.

Ethel Wingate reached into one of her bags and started pulling out books. "Jen *La Sankta Biblio*, the Holy Bible. Zamenhof translated *La Malnova Testamento* himself. He was Jewish." Her face became very solemn. "His daughter died in Treblinka."

"May I look at the Bible?" Darlene asked.

"Certainly, *kara*." Ethel handed it over, and then she pulled out a thin hardcover book. She opened it in the middle to display two pages with colorful cartoons of a boy and his dog. "*Tinĉjo!*" she announced. Two of the boys tried to be the first to grab it, but she held the book up high and said "Please!" and they backed off. Then she reached into her bag to pull out a second book, twin to the first. With a blazing smile, she held out one to each of the boys.

"Do you have *Gulliver's Travels* in Esperanto?" Peter asked.

"There are many books about Gulliver in Esperanto, but I'm sorry, I don't have any."

"Shakespeare?"

She rummaged in her bag and pulled out a softcover book. "Jen *Hamleto!*"

"To be or not to be?"

She leafed through the book and found the line for him.

He looked down at the strange words. Then he asked, "Can we really learn this language in thirty hours? If we study very hard?"

She blinked several times and swallowed. "Well, some people can learn it that quickly. But for some it takes a bit longer."

"How much longer?"

"Well, it's different for everyone. I had to study for three months before I could start writing to people in other countries, but I'm afraid I wasn't a very good student."

"Let me see that," Professor Renfrew said, and Peter handed him the book. After looking through it for a minute or so, he nodded. "Yes, I can make out most of these words already. I don't think it'll be a problem. If you want to learn Esperanto, I can have you passing

notes to each other by the end of spring vacation.”

“Wow!” Peter exclaimed. “We have our secret language.”

“Oh, no, no, certainly not!” Ethel Wingate threw her hands up in protest. “Esperanto is not a secret language. Esperanto is a language for *la tuta mondo*, for the whole world!”

Peter looked up at her and said, “Honestly, Mrs. Wingate, how many people actually speak Esperanto in Michigan?”

She blinked rapidly. Her eyes looked up to the left and made little movements back and forth. In a small voice and with a weak smile, she finally said, “Maybe a hundred.”

“Okay. So maybe a hundred, and there are about nine million people in Michigan.” He started thinking out loud: “Let’s say ninety, then. Ninety out of nine million. That’s nine out of nine hundred thousand. That’s one in a hundred thousand. So only one in a hundred thousand people speaks the language here. You know, Mrs. Wingate, I think Esperanto will be a secret-enough language for us.”

He turned around, spread his arms proudly, and announced, “We have our secret language!”

The children cheered. Mrs. Wingate looked dismayed.

Parental Approval

Professor Renfrew threw himself into the task of studying Esperanto with all of his skills in learning languages. He sent away for dictionaries and other books from the Esperanto League for North America, and he ordered copies of an Esperanto textbook from the Cardiff bookstore. In the meantime, he borrowed a copy of the textbook from Ethel Wingate and dug into it. After a week of careful study, he had a good grasp of the fundamentals. He would be ready to teach Esperanto to Peter and his friends by the time spring vacation came.

First, however, he asked to meet with the children's parents. That was Mrs. Renfrew's idea.

The meeting took place at Peter's house a week before spring vacation. Peter's parents were intrigued by the idea that he was going to learn a language in a week.

Peter's father said, "Maybe we should learn this language too."

"No, Dad!" Peter protested. "That would spoil everything. This is going to be *our* secret language."

"Okay, okay!" his father laughed, shaking his head and holding up his palms. "I won't learn Esperanto without your permission."

They held the meeting in the family room, where Peter's parents had set up some folding chairs and a table with drinks and desserts. Not all of the parents were there, but the Charboneaus came, and Mr. James, and Mr. and Mrs. Ericson, who were Judith's parents, and two or three others. Peter was the only one of the kids present.

Mr. James was a big man who owned a trucking company. His right hand practically swallowed up Mr. Jameson's when they shook hands.

"I'm confused about these language lessons," he said. "This is the first time Ronny's ever been interested in studying anything

outside of school. My wife wanted him to take piano lessons, but he was so against it that I told her to let up on the kid. Now suddenly he wants to learn a language!" He scratched his head. "I guess that's good, but if he's going to learn one, she was hoping it would be French."

"I'd prefer that my children learn French too," Mr. Charboneau said. "My parents could speak French, but they spoke it around us only when they didn't want us to know what they were saying."

"That was *their* secret language," Peter piped up.

"Yeah, I guess it was, Peter. They sure kept it a secret from us."

"My grandparents used to do the same thing with Norwegian," Mr. Ericson said.

Professor Renfrew was a little late. The grown-ups were sipping coffee and nibbling coffee cake when he arrived with his wife, carrying a well-worn leather briefcase.

Peter introduced the professor and Mrs. Renfrew, and then he said a few words about why the children wanted to study Esperanto. Some of the parents looked doubtful.

Professor Renfrew cleared his throat. "Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I'm a retired professor of anthropology, and I taught at Wayne State University for twenty-seven years."

"I took your intro course back in seventy-three," Mrs. Ericson said. She was a plump little woman with bright eyes and a very clear complexion. Judith must have inherited the red hair and freckles from her father.

"You did? I hope you liked it."

"I still remember you explaining how time has different meanings in different cultures."

"Yes." Professor Renfrew smiled. "You do remember. Back then I was researching my book, *Time and Space in Three Cultures*. It came out in seventy-five." For a moment he looked past them with unfocused eyes, as if he were looking back in time. Then he shook his head sharply and went on. "I've been retired for seven years, and in a way, I've missed teaching. Though not some of the students," he added. "Not the ones that wouldn't take—"

“Morgan,” his wife cautioned.

“Yes, well, it’s very simple. Peter and his friends, your children, want to have a secret language that practically nobody else speaks around here, and Esperanto fits the bill perfectly.”

Mr. James said, “But Esperanto isn’t a real language, is it?”

Professor Renfrew smiled mischievously. “If I swore at you in Esperanto, maybe you would think it was.” He bent over and opened his large briefcase, taking out books and stacking them on an end table. Peter recognized some of the same books that Mrs. Wingate had shown them. “I studied the language intensively for a week, and then I made a phone call to ELNA—that’s short for the Esperanto League for North America—and I talked to them, in Esperanto. They gave me the phone numbers of some Esperantists around the country, and I called them and chatted with them. The language works just fine.”

“I don’t believe it!” Mr. James exclaimed. “I couldn’t learn a language in a week.”

“Well, maybe not, not even Esperanto. But there are a lot of things I couldn’t do. I couldn’t run a trucking company, for instance, as Ronny tells me you do. But learning languages is part of my trade, and Esperanto is so easy that I’m convinced I can teach it to your children over spring vacation. They’ll be able to chat in it, write notes in it, whatever they want.”

“What makes it so easy?” Mrs. Ericson asked.

“Well, for starters, it’s perfectly phonetic. And there are no irregular verbs. There’s no irregular anything. If you studied a foreign language in school, think about all the time you wasted trying to master the irregular verbs. Esperanto makes do with just six verb endings, and they apply to every verb without exception.”

“I’d still prefer that you taught them French,” Mr. Charboneau said.

“Je peux le faire certainement, mais pas dans une semaine,” Professor Renfrew said fluently.

Mr. Charboneau shook his head. “I don’t understand French.” He made a little wave of dismissal with his left hand. “Anyway, I’ve

no objections. If the kids want to learn something, let them learn it." Other parents nodded and muttered approval. "Say, how much is this going to cost us?"

"I'm not going to charge you."

"You're *not*?"

"I have an excellent pension, Mr. Charboneau. More than I deserve, probably. We have investments. My wife and I both inherited some money. So we have everything we need. It would be a real pleasure for me just to teach students who are interested in learning something, without having to think about grades or money."

"What about the books?"

"We'd like them to be our gift to the children," Mrs. Renfrew said. "With your permission, of course."

Permission was granted.

Spring Vacation

They started on the Monday after Easter, and they kept at it for six days. Mrs. Renfrew began studying the language too. She made them lunch every day, and she taught them the words for “plate,” “fork,” “cake,” “carrots,” and so on. She didn’t know if she really approved of Ethel Wingate’s language, but she certainly did approve of a group of young people spending their vacation learning something new. “They aren’t like the kids I knew when I was young,” she said. She insisted on being called “Sarah” instead of “Mrs. Renfrew,” and then the professor said they should call him “Morgan.”

“We’re going to make this very informal,” Morgan explained. “We’re going to have a full week’s work, but by next Sunday you’ll have your own secret language.” He opened up a box and took out loose-leaf binders, handing one to each of the children. “I decided to prepare materials for you on my computer.” He handed each of them four printed sheets, already punched with holes for the binder. “You can slip them right in. I’ll be giving you more of these throughout the day, every day.” The first sheets had pictures from a clip art program, and under each picture there was a caption in Esperanto.

Morgan began his first lesson by reading the words below a drawing of a small group of boys and girls: “Esperanto estas la sekreta lingvo de Peter kaj de liaj amikoj.” He looked up and scanned the students’ faces. “Can anyone recognize a word?”

“Peter!” Tony called out, laughing.

Judith raised her hand and spoke at the same time: “‘Sekreta’ means ‘secret,’ and I’ll bet that ‘lingvo’ means ‘language.’”

“Tre bone!” the professor beamed. “Tre bone.”

“Very good!” three of the children guessed together.

“Jes,” Morgan said. “In Esperanto we say ‘yes’ the same way we do in English, but we spell it the Esperanto way. In the Esperanto way, ‘j’ sounds like ‘y.’” After a moment he added, “Just like in German.”

“Ja,” said Carl Wenniger.

Morgan walked up to a whiteboard on an easel. He wrote the words “jes” and “ne,” and then stepped back to look at what he had written. “Jes’ kaj ‘ne,’” he said. “‘Yes’ and ‘no.’”

They were on their way.

It went quickly. It almost wasn’t like school at all. When you wanted to go to the bathroom, you just got up and went. There were always drinks and snacks—healthy snacks, but still snacks—right there in the big family room on the coffee table. Sometimes Mrs. Renfrew—Sarah—got out her guitar and they sang songs in Esperanto. Professor Renfrew—Morgan—explained that the main thing was to keep at it for the whole week and then to use the language *every day* for at least fifteen minutes. “That way it will never go into the sleeping part of your brain,” he said.

After every hour of study, they took a fifteen-minute break for play. Sarah insisted on that. They played inside and outside, and soon they were mixing Esperanto sentences with English while they played. By the end of the week, they were playing more in Esperanto than they were in English.

They played hospital in Esperanto. In Esperanto, Dr. Darlene Charboneau set Peter Jameson’s (imaginary) broken arm. They played cops and robbers in Esperanto, and one day they even played school in Esperanto.

They watched a video of a movie they all knew—*One Hundred and One Dalmatians*—with the sound turned off. Every few minutes, Morgan would freeze the frame and have them describe what they had just seen. If they didn’t know a word, they asked for it, and Morgan would tell them. If he didn’t know the word, he would look it up in one of the dictionaries that ELNA had sent him. Pretty soon the children were going directly to the dictionary instead of asking him.

As the week went on, Morgan showed them how to build words. He showed them how you could turn a verb into a noun, or a noun into an adjective, simply by changing the ending. For example, “paroli” was the verb “to speak,” and from that you could make the noun “parolo”—“speech”—and the adjective “parola”—“spoken.”

In Esperanto, you could create new words from the words you already knew! It was fun building new words. It reminded Judith of the fun she had writing computer programs in Pascal.

“My parents know lots of computer languages,” she said. Both of her parents were programmers for auto companies. Her mother worked at Ford, and her father at Chrysler. “Why shouldn’t we know lots of human languages too?”

Morgan taught them how to pronounce the language on the very first day. He had them say “Pa, let me go too!” to learn the vowel sounds. They learned how to pronounce the “r” with the tip of the tongue, and they learned that “c” has the funny sound of “ts” in “hats.” On Thursday, Morgan played a recording of an Esperantist reading a folk tale.

“You see?” Morgan told them in Esperanto. “You already pronounce the language just as well as she does.”

They had picked up the pronunciation quickly, and they could all spell in Esperanto much better than they could in English—except for Darlene, who was great at English spelling too. Morgan explained that Esperanto is “phonetic,” meaning that each letter has only one sound. A spelling bee in Esperanto would be a joke because everyone would be able to spell every word perfectly as soon as they heard it.

“Why don’t we spell English phonetically?” Peter asked. “It would save a lot of trouble.”

“Which English?” asked Morgan. “The English we speak in Michigan? The English they speak in Mississippi? Or one of the many varieties of English that they speak in England? There is only one way to pronounce Esperanto, but there are hundreds of ways of pronouncing English, and some of them are changing, believe it or not.”

“Now don’t get started on linguistics, Morgan,” Sarah cautioned. She was sitting on the floor with her legs crossed, like some of the children. “Our friends are here to learn their secret language.”

Peter remembered the funny way a waitress in Massachusetts had spoken, how she was puzzled when he asked for “pop,” and how his father had to translate it to “soda.” He thought about how cowboys talk in westerns, and how the president of an African country had sounded on TV.

Morgan asked everyone to write letters to one another in Esperanto, as though they were writing from faraway states or even faraway countries. Carl Wenniger wrote from Germany—he had gone there on vacation once with his parents—Peter wrote from Cape Cod, Judith wrote from the Upper Peninsula, and Sarah wrote from San Diego. They found the words they needed in the dictionaries that were scattered around the room. They were looking up words all the time, but by the end of the week, they were reading one another’s letters with ease.

Once, when Tony was angry with himself for making a mistake, Morgan clapped his hands and announced, “I want everyone’s attention. This is *very* important! You cannot learn a language without making at least *a thousand* mistakes. I’ve made more mistakes than all of you put together, except for maybe Sarah.” For a moment he was looking at his wife with real fondness, but then he got serious again and went on.

“This is *not* school—this is *learning*. It is *okay* to make a mistake here. It is okay to make a *thousand* mistakes here. It is okay to make the same mistake more than once. Sometimes I have to see a new word several times before I learn it. That’s okay! We’re in *learning mode* here—pure learning mode. Have you ever watched a baby learn how to walk? Does she make mistakes? She falls down and gets up and falls down and gets up, lots and lots of times. Is that okay? Of course it is! Well, we’re baby Esperantists. We can make our mistakes. Nobody’s going to criticize us here. Ni estas ĉiuj amikoj. We are all friends.”

By the end of the week, everyone felt they had made a thousand

mistakes, and it didn't matter at all. Making mistakes wasn't just a natural part of learning, it was *essential* to learning—if not at school, then certainly here.

On the last day of class, the parents were invited in for two hours. In the first hour, the children put on skits in Esperanto. They set broken arms and caught crooks and sang while Morgan translated into English for their audience.

Peter's parents, the Charboneaus, the Ericsons, and four or five others applauded in the very crowded family room. Then Sarah served a buffet brunch that Peter's mother thoroughly approved of.

Dancing Angels, Invisible Friends

Seven of them had attended Morgan's class every day that week: Peter, Tony, Darlene, Judith, Ronny, a very quiet girl named Marjorie Vandenberg, and Alan Spenser, whose father was a fishing buddy of Ronny's dad. Ronny had written in one of his letters about the time he, Alan, and their fathers had gone fishing together. They had caught panfish and bass at Kent Lake, which was out in the country, about fifteen minutes away from where they lived. Once, they had even driven south to Point Pelee, an hour into Canada, where they scooped up the smelt that run by the millions in Lake Erie.

Other students had drifted away after a few days—including Carl Wenniger, who did not show up after Wednesday—but the seven who were left made a solemn promise to stick together and use their language every day: in school, on the phone, and on the playground. And they would write letters to one another, just as they had during Morgan's class.

On Saturday afternoon, after the parents had left, Ronny said, "When we get good in our language, we'll go on adventures together." He had to look up the word for "adventures." It turned out to be "aventuroj." Then he turned to Morgan: "But what if we forget a word?"

"There's a way to get around that," Morgan explained, "especially in Esperanto. You can just build another word that expresses the same idea. For example, if you forget the word for 'galaxy,' you could say 'stelarego,' which means 'a huge collection of stars.'

"You know that 'stel' means 'star,' and that 'ar' makes 'a group of,' and 'eg' makes something enormous, and 'o' makes a noun—a word that names something. So 'stel-ar-eg-o' is a name for an enormous group of stars, which can be a galaxy."

“But what is the *right* word in Esperanto for ‘galaxy’?” Marjorie asked.

“Well, ‘stelarego’ is *a* right word for ‘galaxy,’ and we have the right to use it even if I just made it up. Back in Shakespeare’s day, English-speaking people were free to make up new words. Shakespeare himself made up new words all the time. Today, everyone has the right to make up new words in Esperanto. We usually do that by putting together existing words, or pieces of words, in whatever way makes sense.”

Marjorie picked up a dictionary and thumbed through it. Then she stopped and smiled.

“What is it?” Darlene asked.

“‘Galaksio’ is another right word for ‘galaxy.’ Esperanto is a very easy language sometimes.”

“That’s why we’re learning it,” Peter said. “So we can start using it right away.”

“Without having to study for years and years first,” Tony added in Esperanto. “Judy,” he said, switching to English, “I’ve been thinking. Could you teach me how to program in Pascal? I only know Basic.”

“Sure. You’ll pick it up right away. When you know one computer language, it’s easy to learn others.”

“Is it the same with human languages?” Peter asked Morgan, switching back to Esperanto.

“There’s always a lot to learn with a human language,” Morgan said, “but it is much easier, yes. When you speak a second language fluently,” and here he switched to English, “it sort of builds up the language-learning part of your brain. Afterward, other languages come more easily. Once you have an Esperanto part of your brain—and you’re building one up now—it becomes a lot easier to build, say, a French part.”

Darlene looked confused. “But where does the brain find room for all the languages?” (In their simple Esperanto, she actually said, “Kie estas la spaco en la kapo?” which literally means, “Where is the space in the head?”)

Morgan smiled. “Nobody knows for sure,” he admitted, and then he grew thoughtful. “Psychologists have a lot of theories. I once knew a professor of business who spoke twenty-seven languages. He had room for all of them. The brain can hold millions and millions of ideas.”

Peter frowned. “How big is an idea?”

Morgan turned to him and answered his question with another one: “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

“Huh?” Peter said, just as Sarah called out, “Morgan!”

But this time he ignored her. “Back in the Middle Ages, the days of knights and castles and so on, professors used to argue about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Some said there was no limit to the number. Can you guess why?”

Peter’s mouth opened as he nodded. “Because angels don’t take up any space at all.”

“Guste,” Morgan said, which means “exactly.”

“And maybe ideas don’t take up space either.”

Morgan nodded. It was easy switching back and forth between the two languages now. At times, after saying something in English, they would hunt through their dictionaries and then say it again in Esperanto. Morgan went on: “There was a German philosopher named Immanuel Kant who said that space and time don’t exist outside the mind. They’re just the mind’s way of organizing what *does* exist.”

Peter considered this for a while, and then he shook his head.

Morgan nodded again. “It’s pretty deep.” He thought for a moment and said, “It’s okay if we use English sometimes when talking about deep things like that. When we’re able to philosophize in Esperanto, we’ll be masters of the language.”

Tony, who was not quite following—although he was trying to—picked up on Morgan’s last comment. “So we’re not masters of Esperanto yet. What are we now?”

“You mean, what level are we at?”

Tony nodded.

“Well, we can read and write letters using a dictionary, certainly,

and we understand quite a bit when people speak. We can say a good number of things to one another, but not all things yet. We've reached the level where we can improve our knowledge of the language *while* we use it."

"I'd like to know this language really well," Marjorie said softly, "as well as Judith knows Pascal."

Most of them nodded, and that was when they all agreed to use their secret language every day for at least fifteen minutes.

"But what if we're on vacation or something?" Al asked. "If my father takes me on a fishing trip?"

Morgan tilted his head and got a faraway look in his eye. "When I was learning a new language, I would pretend I had an invisible friend. I would describe things to my friend in the language, and we would carry on conversations together. I did it with Navaho. And as I learned more and more, the conversations became more and more interesting."

Darlene said, "An invisible friend like Harvey."

"Harvey?" Morgan looked puzzled for a moment, and then his face lit up. "Oh, you mean the pooka—Jimmy Stewart's invisible rabbit."

"We have that movie on videotape," she said.

"Yes. It could be a giant, invisible rabbit. Or a real dog, if you prefer."

"I could talk in Esperanto to Pal!" Ronny said.

"I'm sure he'll understand it just as well as he understands English. It's a useful technique. You start out saying, 'The sky is blue. There are clouds in the sky. The clouds are white.' That sort of thing. And then after a while, it gets more interesting." Morgan paused to look at Peter, who had begun laughing out loud.

Peter calmed himself down. "I'm just picturing us speaking our secret language to our invisible friends. I've decided to have a lot of them, and they'll all be angels. Sometimes they'll be so small that they'll dance together on the head of a pin, but when they want to, they'll be as big as Godzilla. And they'll all speak Esperanto."

Peter laughed again thinking about it, and then Marjorie was

speaking in her soft voice: "I had an invisible friend when I was little. They told me to send him away. But I think I'll let him come back now. He'll be my secret friend again, and I think I'll teach *him* Esperanto."

And then they were all very quiet, each thinking their own thoughts. They were being silent in Esperanto.

Passing a Note in Class

The first time someone took notice of them in school was when their fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Romberg, caught Tony passing a folded slip of paper to Judith. Mr. Romberg was a youngish man with a dark brown beard, and he always wore turtleneck sweaters to class except in very warm weather.

“Let me see that,” he said sternly as he stepped in front of Judith, reaching out his hand. He was a little surprised when she handed over the note without protesting. She even seemed to be smiling a little.

All the students watched carefully as Mr. Romberg unfolded the paper. A few were snickering. He looked down at the note, but he couldn’t read what he saw. He shook the paper as if doing so might rearrange the letters into words that made sense. But the note wasn’t any clearer:

Dankon por via helpo lerni Paskalon. Mi komencas programi en la nova lingvo. Ĝi estas pli bona ol Baza. Ĉu vi scias ĉu ni povas sendi leterojn per e-poŝto? En nia sekreta lingvo?

Mr. Romberg drew his head back, opening his eyes wide. For a moment he reminded Ronny of a very surprised Ninja Turtle.

“What is this?” Mr. Romberg barked out. “Do you understand this?” Most of the students were quiet now, but someone began to laugh. It was Ronny. Mr. Romberg glared at him, and Ronny became very quiet and did his best to look respectful. Then the teacher looked down at Judith. “Can you read this?”

“I suppose I can,” she said. “I—I haven’t seen it yet.”

“What does it say?” Mr. Romberg asked, handing the note back to her.

There was silence while she examined it. Finally she nodded wisely and began to speak: “Thank you for your help learning Pascal. I start to program in the new language.” She looked up. “In English, we would say ‘I’m starting to program in the new language.’” She looked back at the note: “It is better than . . . Basic. Do you know whether we can send letters by e-mail? In our secret language?” Judith looked up again with a pleasant little smile, shaking her head. “That’s all it says.”

“How do I know that’s all it says?” Mr. Romberg asked suspiciously.

Judith thought for a second, and then she rummaged through her bag and handed him a thick softcover book. “Here’s the dictionary,” she said. “You can check it yourself, but I’m pretty sure I didn’t make any mistakes.”

“What kind of language is this?” Mr. Romberg asked, beginning to leaf through the dictionary.

“It’s their secret language,” Carl Wenniger called out from the back of the room. “Esperanto. My father says it’s not really a language at all. He says that if I want to learn a foreign language, I should study German.”

Peter remembered that Carl’s parents had not attended the meeting with Professor Renfrew. Now he understood why Carl had stopped coming to the classes despite doing so well the first three days.

“It looks like a language to me,” Mr. Romberg said. “This is *your* secret language, Judith? And *Tony’s*?”

“Yes,” Judith said, “and Darlene’s and Ronny’s and Peter’s and—”

“Hold on!” He looked around the room. “How many of you know this language?”

Five hands went up. (Darlene and Al were in Miss Gorbeck’s sixth-grade class across the hall.)

Mr. Romberg looked intrigued. He forgot to be upset that a note had been passed in his class.

“Can you talk to each other in it?”

“Certe, ni povas paroli kun la aliaj en nia lingvo,” Tony said.

“What did he say?” Mr. Romberg asked. His face was twisted in a kind of curious smile.

“Certainly, we can talk with the others in our language,” Judith said, and when Mr. Romberg looked confused, she added, “That’s what Tony said.”

Mr. Romberg started to pull on his beard. “Where did you learn this . . . Esperanto?” he asked slowly, and then he began asking question after question without waiting for answers: “How long have you known it? Where do they speak it? Ronny, can *you* speak this language?”

Ronny did not have a reputation for being a very good student, and Mr. Romberg had been surprised to see his hand shoot up with the others.

“Say something in Esperanto, Ronny,” Mr. Romberg commanded.

After a moment Ronny grinned and said very loudly, “Io!”

“E-O?”

“Io!” Ronny repeated, braying the word like a donkey and still grinning. Peter, Tony, and Judith chuckled, and even Marjorie laughed out loud.

“Quiet!” Mr. Romberg shouted. He did not shout very often, but when he did, his voice deepened and filled the room. He sounded like a master sergeant in an old movie about the Marines. In fact, he was a master sergeant in the National Guard, and he had gone off to fight in the Gulf War.

When the class had quieted down, he asked, “What is going on here? What kind of trouble are you trying to get into, Ronny?”

Marjorie raised her hand.

“Yes, Marjorie?”

“You asked Ronny to say something in Esperanto,” she explained, “and he said ‘io.’” She did not bray the word as Ronny had. “‘Io’ is the Esperanto word for ‘something.’” She turned to Ronny: “Ronny, estu afabla al Sinjoro Romberg. Parolu pri io.”

Ronny was not grinning anymore. He looked scared, and he said to Mr. Romberg apologetically, “Mi bedaŭras, Sinjoro Romberg, sed mi . . . ne estis serioza.”

Mr. Romberg shook his head, and then he smiled a little. Peter felt sympathy for his teacher. It must have shown on his face, because Mr. Romberg turned to him and asked, "Do you know what they're saying?"

"Marjorie told Ronny to be nice and talk about something, and Ronny said he was sorry and that he wasn't serious. He was just joking, Mr. Romberg. You know how Ronny is. He didn't mean anything."

There was silence while Mr. Romberg thought this over. Then he asked more questions, waiting for answers this time, and the class did not get back to learning how to diagram sentences that day. Mr. Romberg had never heard of Professor Renfrew before, but it made sense to him that someone who had taught college students could teach these children a language. What did not make sense was Ronny's claim that the professor had started teaching them Esperanto just two weeks before.

"Two weeks ago? You can't learn a language in two weeks."

Peter tried to explain: "We don't know the whole language. When Ronny said, 'I wasn't serious,' I think he wanted to say, 'I was only joking,' but he didn't know the word for 'joking.'"

Ronny nodded. Then he asked, "Peter, what *is* the word for 'joking'?"

Peter shrugged.

Judith raised one hand while she rapidly flipped through the dictionary that Mr. Romberg had set back on her desk. "I found it! It's 'ĝerci.' So 'mi ĝercis' means, 'I was joking.'"

"May I look at that again?" Mr. Romberg asked.

Judith nodded and handed him the book.

"Where did you get this?"

"From the Renfrews, on the last day of class. They gave us each four Esperanto books as a graduation present."

Mr. Romberg leafed through the book. "Here's a section on the grammar of the language." He went back to his desk with it and wrote something down.

Just as he was handing the dictionary back to Judith and saying

“Thank you,” Carl Wenniger blurted out, “But my father says it’s not a real language, and that it’s a waste of time to learn it!”

Mr. Romberg looked at Carl, who was a tall, thin, rapidly growing boy, and nodded. “I suppose it’s not a real language for your father, Carl, and that’s all right. But I think that for . . .” and he looked around the room, saying their names slowly: “. . . Ronny and Peter and Judith and Tony and Marjorie, it is a real language.” He shook his head. “I just can’t believe you learned so much of it in a week!”

“Morgan—Professor Renfrew—said he was using an intensive method,” Judith said.

“Oh, I’ve heard of that. But I didn’t believe that kind of thing worked, at least not the way they say it does.”

Peter said, “He told us that the most important thing is to use our language every day: talk in it, write in it, think in it. That way it won’t go into the sleeping part of our brains.”

Mr. Romberg was now scratching his beard, and Peter noticed a few tiny flakes of dandruff drifting down onto his sweater. “I was never good at languages. I studied Spanish for two years in high school and a year and a half in college, and I can’t speak it.”

“Maybe Spanish is in the sleeping part of your brain, Mr. Romberg. Did you speak in it and think in it and write in it for at least fifteen minutes every day?” Mr. Romberg shook his head. “Then maybe you’ll just have to wake up your Spanish.”

“How long would that take?” Mr. Romberg wondered.

Peter shook his head a little sadly. “I don’t know. Maybe you shouldn’t have let your Spanish go to sleep.”

“Maybe not,” Mr. Romberg sighed, “but nobody told me.” Then he almost jumped. “My God! Today’s lesson!” Just then the bell rang, and the room was filled with the clatter of thirty children gathering their books and rushing for the door.

Marjorie did not hurry out. After putting her books in her book bag, she put the strap over her shoulder and walked up to Mr. Romberg to offer a comforting word. “Mr. Romberg, we can learn how to diagram sentences tomorrow.”

He was shaking his head. "I suppose so. But my lesson plans! I'll be behind in my lesson plans!"

Peter joined them at the front of the room. "Is something the matter, Mr. Romberg?"

"I'll catch up," he said. "But . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm just thinking. If you can learn a language in a week, well enough to send notes like that . . . then maybe we're on the wrong track here."

"But this is what we're supposed to do in school, isn't it?" Peter asked. "Learn how to diagram sentences and things like that?"

"I guess so." Mr. Romberg started to gather up his things. "I've got a teachers' meeting to get to, unfortunately."

Suddenly Ronny was at the door. "Peter, venu!" he said. "Ni povas kuri kune. Mi kuros pli rapide ol vi!" And then he was gone.

Peter said a quick goodbye and ran after his friend. But he would have to get a lot faster before he could ever hope to catch him.

Out in the little park that ran north from the school, Peter called out in Esperanto for Ronny to wait. "Mi ne povas kuri rapide!" he shouted. Ronny slowed down. As Peter closed the distance between them, he thought about what Mr. Romberg had said about the class being on the wrong track. Then he remembered what Morgan had said once when Tony was upset with himself for making a mistake. He'd explained why mistakes were okay and said, "This is *not* school. This is *learning*."

Peter's tongue pushed at the inside of his left cheek. Morgan was right, he thought. Sometimes there was a big difference between school and learning. Sometimes you could learn a whole lot more outside of school than they taught you in class.

The Torn-Up Letter

Peter and his friends were making progress in their language. They spent at least fifteen minutes on it every day, and on most days they had letters for one another. But that's how the trouble started.

On Thursday morning, just before school, Al handed Darlene his letter. A boy in their class named Jim Turner saw what was happening and started making fun of them: "Al's in love with Dar-lee-een! Al's in love with Dar-lee-een!" he called out, pointing. "He's giving her a love letter!"

Al turned to Jim and yelled, "Ne estu stulta!"

"Huh?" Jim said. He didn't realize that Al was just telling him not to be a jerk.

Then Darlene joined in. "Estu afabla, Jiĉjo."

For all Jim knew, they were being nasty to him. And when Al said, "Ni rajtas interŝanĝi leteroj," and Darlene said "leterojn," correcting him, Jim didn't know what to do. So he punched Al, and Al punched him back, knocking him down, and Jim started to cry.

All of this happened right in front of the school before the first bell rang. Al was vaguely aware that a crowd of students had gathered around them, and someone was yelling, "Fight! Fight!" Then the kids in front of him started backing away, looking past him, and he felt a painful pressure on his upper arm. He looked over his shoulder to find the silently furious face of Mr. Brown glaring down at him.

And then the bell rang.

Mr. Brown let go of Al's shoulder and said to the crowd, "It's all over now, children. Get to your classrooms." Then Mrs. Johnson was there, quietly herding the slowpokes into the building.

"He hit me first," Al told the principal.

Jim was still on the ground, crying. "Did not," he mumbled.

"Vi diras malveron!" Darlene said. She was accusing him of lying.

The four of them were alone now on a little triangle of grass that wasn't green yet, not far from the entrance to the building. The school was on a residential street, but they could hear the sounds of traffic from the main road a few blocks away.

"They were swearing at me in that stupid language!" Jim said through his tears. He was still on the ground.

"We were not!" Darlene said. "You're crazy!"

"See?" Jim shouted, pointing at her. "Their language makes *them* crazy! I'll bet it's a Communist language or something."

The Cold War was over, and the Communists had lost, but Jim had spent so many years listening to his father condemning everyone as "Communists" that the word had become just something to bad-mouth people with.

The principal dragged Jim to his feet. He had dealt with the boy before and was certain he was nowhere near as badly hurt as he was pretending to be.

Mr. Brown was dressed in the same sort of dark suit that he always wore. He had a slightly stooped posture and wire-rimmed glasses, and his sparse hair was combed very neatly, as always.

"Come to the office, the three of you," he ordered. Together they walked out of the cold spring air into the dry, overheated atmosphere of the school. In the office he made them sit on a long wooden bench against the wall while they waited for him to call them in.

Al sighed. He had sat there more than once before, and it was so boring having nothing to do but listen to the secretary answer the phone and type on the computer. It made him want to be home at his own computer, playing video games.

Darlene sat between Al and Jim at one end of the bench. At the other end sat Miss Flanders, a frequent substitute teacher at Cardiff Elementary. She was waiting for her daily assignment.

"I'm sorry, Miss Flanders," the secretary was saying. "Mrs. John-

son forgot to call in to let us know that she was coming back, and I thought that we needed you for one more day. I'm calling around to the other schools now to see if they can use you."

Miss Flanders sighed. Today she did not have the somewhat harassed expression that she often wore in class. She was a young, dark-complexioned woman with stringy hair who was trying to break into the tight teaching market by substituting. After a year of receiving low pay for frustrating work, she was wondering if she had chosen the right profession.

Jim was no longer crying. He was a little shrimp of a kid who liked to tease, and he was always getting into scrapes. Even though he often wound up in tears, he never thought of changing his approach. He looked especially glum now, and then he looked angry and frustrated when Darlene and Al started talking to each other quietly in Esperanto.

"What are we going to do now?" Darlene asked.

"Tell the truth, that's all we can do. We haven't done anything wrong. Do you have the letter?"

"Yes."

"Don't let them know what it says."

"Why not?" she asked, as she pulled it out of her pocket and opened it. The letter was rather long, and Darlene saw right away that it had several mistakes, but she could understand it perfectly. She and Al were the only two Esperantists in sixth grade, so they often exchanged letters. This was the first time that Darlene had ever corresponded with a boy. She enjoyed it, even if it was only with someone she'd gone to school with since kindergarten.

She continued reading while they waited. It was one of Al's fantasy letters:

Dear Friend,

I cannot tell you the name of the city that I am in. The enemy is near. They do not know how to read our secret language. If they knew that I was sending you information, it would be bad for us.

They have spies in the United States. They disguise their spies as teachers! The principal of your school is one of the spies. He does not really like children. He works in a school so that no one will know what he really is. He is an enemy of our language and of all the people who speak our language.

You must not let him see this letter.

It was signed, "Your secret friend."

Darlene walked over to the wastebasket and tore up the letter, letting the little pieces flutter down into the trash.

Jim had been watching all of this very carefully. After Darlene returned to the bench, he walked over to the wastebasket and looked inside. It was hopeless: the paper had been torn into too many pieces. He'd never be able to pick them all out and put them back together again.

And even if he could, he wouldn't be able to read the letter anyway.

Jes

Mr. Brown spoke briefly and separately with each of the three children and then sent them to class. During lunch period later that day, Darlene and Al sat with Peter and Tony and told them what had happened. All four of them usually brought their lunches from home because they couldn't stand the slop that was served in the cafeteria, so they were already seated while other kids were still waiting in line. Peter had just finished a fruit cup and was unwrapping his sandwich when he heard Carl Wenniger's annoying voice:

"Still speaking your stupid language?"

Peter looked up. Carl was standing next to the table, holding a tray piled with drab meat loaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, and overcooked broccoli.

"Getting into fights about your stupid language?" Carl continued.

Peter went back to unwrapping his sandwich, telling the others in Esperanto, "Don't say anything. Maybe he'll go away."

"I know what you said!" Carl shouted. "Why don't you just use English, like normal people?"

"Let's all eat quietly," Peter said, still in Esperanto. "We don't need any more trouble." He took a bite of his sandwich. Tony's eyes flicked up angrily at Carl, and then he turned his attention to his own lunch. His mother had packed tuna again.

"Is that a *tofu salad* sandwich?" Carl asked sarcastically. "Are you still eating that *tofu salad*, Tony? Does it have enough *calcium* for you?"

Tony almost choked on his food—Peter wasn't sure whether he was holding back laughter or anger—but he didn't look up. Peter didn't look up either. He kept his eyes on his lunch until Carl's tray

suddenly hit the table with a crash. Then Peter leaped up, whirled around, and saw Ronny and Carl fighting.

Peter cried, "Stop it!" and he grabbed Ronny's shoulders, trying to pull him off the taller boy. The noise in the cafeteria grew louder. Carl was getting pummeled. Peter caught a self-satisfied look on the face of Jim Turner, who was now standing behind Carl. Someone was chanting, "Food fight! Food fight!" and soon the large figures of the cafeteria monitors were making their way toward the disturbance.

The only good thing about the whole loud, messy situation was that Al had been sensible enough to remain in his seat. Peter finally succeeded in pulling Ronny off Carl, but then Carl shoved Ronny into Peter, knocking him off-balance, and Peter's glasses flew off his head, making the whole scene look fuzzy.

Then there were strong adult hands pulling them apart, and teachers were pouring out of the teachers' lunchroom to help the monitors.

As they were being led out of the cafeteria, Peter panicked because he couldn't see clearly. "My glasses!" he cried, but then Darlene was there, handing them to him. Fortunately they weren't broken. As he put them back on, he felt his confidence returning—along with his good, clear eyesight.

It was quieter out in the hallway with the cafeteria doors closed, but Mrs. Martin was shouting, "Turn around, Peter! Just look at you!" Then Mrs. Johnson came up to him, and he felt something rub across his chest. She was using a napkin to remove a blob of gravy from his green pullover, leaving behind a nasty stain.

"You come down to the office, all of you," Mrs. Martin commanded, and they followed her in single file down the hallway.

A short while later, Carl, Jim, Peter, and Ronny were standing in front of the principal's desk. Mr. Brown sat behind it, glaring. "After this morning's disturbance," he said, "I had hoped I wouldn't need to have parents in." The teachers had just finished giving him their versions of what had happened, and Mr. Brown had asked them for written accounts to put in the students' files.

The principal's dark, slightly protruding eyes swept back and forth from one student to another. Peter was nervous. In his more than five years at Cardiff, this was the first time he had seen the inside of Mr. Brown's office. On one of the file cabinets stood a small bronze statue of a cowboy riding a bucking bronco. The cowboy was flapping his hat with one hand and holding the reins with the other, and he looked very confident. The horse just looked frustrated. It would never succeed in getting the rider off its back, Peter thought to himself.

"We cannot have fighting in school," Mr. Brown was saying. "If I must, I will suspend each of you for three days." His eyes fastened on Carl's, and Carl looked down.

"Carl, do you want to be suspended?"

Carl shook his head and answered in a very quiet voice, "No, sir."

"Jim, do *you* want to be suspended?"

Jim shook his head vigorously.

"*Jim?*"

"No, sir."

Mr. Brown spoke to each of them in turn. Nobody wanted to be suspended.

"There are to be no more incidents. Cardiff Elementary School has had a fine reputation for longer than any of you have been alive, and it is up to each of us to maintain that reputation. You boys will not eat in the cafeteria next week. You will bring your lunch and eat in Room 107, right next to the office. You will not sit with one another, and you will remain silent for the entire period. Do you understand?"

"Can we read?" Peter asked.

"Yes, I suppose so. You can read appropriate materials. Like your schoolbooks, or books from the school library."

Carl shot out, "Are you going to let them read books in their crazy language?"

"Carl, what I let them read is *not* your concern. You are *not* to pick fights with them. Any more difficulty, and I will have to

suspend you and have your parents in. You understand me, don't you? Good. Very good." He wrote out a pass. "Now take this, go to class, and behave yourself."

Carl left the room without looking at anyone.

"Jim, you were not fighting, but you had no business being out of your seat. When there is a disturbance, you stay put. You do not join a crowd gathering around it. Do you understand?"

Jim nodded, and Mr. Brown gave him a pass to return to class. He then dealt with Ronny, and after Ronny had left, he turned to Peter. The principal sighed and shook his head, looking very sorrowful. Peter wished that Mr. Brown would let him sit down.

"I am disappointed in you, Peter. This is the first time in all your years at Cardiff Elementary that I've had to call you into my office. I understand that you were just trying to break up a fight. You told me that, and I believe you. You are a truthful person. But what you are doing now is very odd and very disturbing to the peace of our school."

Mr. Brown's features seemed to soften for a moment, and he looked almost kindly. "When I was a boy, we too had fun with pig Latin and writing messages in secret codes."

"But this isn't a code, Mr. Brown. It's a language. A regular language."

The gentle expression left Mr. Brown's face. "I do not care what it is. You and your friends are being disruptive. It is leading to fighting. In our school system, we study foreign languages starting in the ninth grade, and even in high school we do not condone students passing around notes in a foreign language."

The principal's voice, although not loud—it was never loud—had become stern again. "All of this nonsense about your so-called secret language has to stop. There is a regular curriculum to master. What you do outside of school hours and school grounds is your parents' concern. But we are to have no more of this Esperanto nonsense at Cardiff Elementary. Do you understand?"

Peter gasped. This was not fair at all. He looked into the eyes of this stern, slightly stooped man that he had watched speak at school

assemblies ever since first grade. He had seen Mr. Brown discipline other students, and he had watched as teachers sent students to the office for discipline—the very office where he now stood.

“You aren’t answering.”

“I . . . don’t know.”

“You *don’t know*?”

Peter sensed something almost sinister in the principal’s voice. He felt an urge to just give in and agree so he could get out of there, but Mr. Brown was demanding the impossible. It was not fair at all.

“I don’t know what to say, Mr. Brown.”

Peter heard the principal suck in air through his clenched teeth. Mr. Brown had been in charge at Cardiff Elementary for a very long time. Sally Morrison said her mother remembered Mr. Brown from when *she* had been in school. He was not used to students even hinting at disagreement with him. He was silent, and Peter was silent.

Then Mr. Brown said, “I do not want to have to call your parents in.”

Peter felt like saying, “Maybe you’d better call my parents in,” but he said nothing.

The silence seemed to last longer than before. Peter realized that anything he might say would only make matters worse.

Mr. Brown finally broke the silence: “You are not being at all cooperative, Peter. I did not expect this of you.” His voice sounded very disappointed, almost sad.

Peter was careful to stand up straight. He looked Mr. Brown in the eye, occasionally shifting his gaze away briefly just to be polite.

Mr. Brown shook his head. “I will have to investigate further.” He wrote out a pass in his slow, deliberate way and handed it to Peter. “Go to class.”

Peter had his hand on the doorknob when Mr. Brown spoke again: “And next week, Peter, when you eat lunch in Room 107, I expect you to do no writing or reading in your code language.”

Looking back at Mr. Brown, Peter thought about protesting, but he saw from the look on the principal’s face that he had gotten

away with as much as he could. He nodded and answered with one word.

Mr. Brown heard Peter say “Yes,” and he nodded, dismissing the boy.

But Peter heard himself say “Jes,” and as he walked down the empty hallway, he was determined not to give up his special language without a struggle.

The Punishment

When Mr. Brown looked into Room 107 during lunch on Monday, everything seemed to be in order. Teachers' meetings were often held in this room, which had a number of smaller tables that could be pushed together to form long conference tables. The cloth-covered chairs were very plain, but not at all uncomfortable for people who knew how to sit up straight. Fluorescent lights lit the room brightly, and large, cheerful posters encouraged reading. Mrs. Singh, a librarian who had since moved on to the high school, had decorated the room over a decade earlier.

Mrs. Martin was sitting at a table in the front of the room, and the boys were seated well apart from one another, eating their lunches. Mrs. Martin was eating lunch, too. It had been brought to her on a tray from the cafeteria. She also had her briefcase, which was filled with papers she would soon be busy correcting. The principal thought highly of Mrs. Martin. She had worked at the school for almost as long as he had, and she understood the importance of maintaining order—something that certain new hires had to learn painfully. Some never did. They either transferred to one of the other schools in the district, or they moved on to other work that was better suited to their talents.

The principal ran a tight ship. Over the years, he had always been deferential to his superiors, but in an unbending way: he was very good at carrying out the directives that he thought were necessary while silently ignoring the rest. Mr. Brown was not fond of innovations, but he would accept them once they were fairly well established. By then it was as though they were not innovations at all, but just the usual way of doing things.

He was fond of saying that students *learned* in his school. And they did learn, though perhaps no more than students in the dis-

trict's other elementary schools.

Jim was eating his sandwich and drinking milk from a thermos. The principal knew that the boy would be getting fidgety soon. These lunch periods would be difficult for him, just sitting and waiting for the bell to ring. Mr. Brown thought that learning how to sit quietly would help the boy mature, but Jim was not the kind to enjoy books. Perhaps looking at the posters would implant the benefits of reading in his mind.

Ronny was the same type. He was not much bigger than Jim, but he was wiry, the sort of boy who loved to scuffle. With discipline, he might amount to something. Even though the principal was looking at a grade-school student, he was imagining a future in which Ronny, just out of high school, would be enlisting in the armed forces, about to be made into a man.

Mr. Brown himself had been slightly too young to fight in World War II, but after high school he enlisted in the army and spent several years stationed in Europe. The military had taught him discipline, and the G.I. Bill had given him an education. He was satisfied with his career, and he was very careful to keep it satisfactory.

Carl was looking at him sideways, sullenly. Mr. Brown had phoned the boys' parents to make sure they would each bring a lunch, and Carl's father had been the only one to assure the principal that this kind of thing would never happen again. Mr. Brown felt that some parents could be almost too rough on their children. They did not understand that it was necessary to break the will of a child without breaking the child.

Peter was reading while he ate. A bad habit, Mr. Brown thought. When you eat, you should eat, and when you read, you should read. Do one thing at a time, and do it well. None of this scattering of energies.

Peter's eyes were glued to his book, which he apparently found fascinating. Mr. Brown walked up to him to see what he was reading. It appeared to be a regular adult book, not one from the school library. And it was in English, he was relieved to see.

"What are you reading, Peter?"

Peter looked up at him and smiled. "It's a book by Mario Pei, a famous linguist. He wrote about the languages you would need to know if you wanted to talk with people anywhere in the world. There are lots of languages you would have to learn. He has chapters on French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese. He even has a chapter on our secret language. Would you like to see it?" Peter looked back down again and started flipping through the pages.

The principal's lips tightened. It was no doubt commendable that Peter was studying such a mature book, but Mr. Brown suspected that the boy was stepping as close as he dared to the line between obedience and insubordination.

When Peter found what he was looking for and offered the open book to the principal, Mr. Brown said only, "Remember your promise, Peter. Good day." And then he stepped out of the room.

Impossible Dreams

Every day that week, Peter read another chapter or two of the book by Mario Pei. He began to realize how many languages there are, and how impossible it would be to learn enough of them to speak with anyone, anywhere in the world. The chapter on Esperanto was especially interesting. He had read it as soon as he got home from the library on Saturday, but on Thursday he read it again over lunch.

Peter had originally chosen the book so he could read it in Room 107 as a kind of silent protest. But now he found his attitudes shifting. His dream of speaking a secret language was being joined to a second, apparently contradictory dream—that everyone in the world could have a shared second language.

What if Peter could go anywhere in the world and talk to people—to Arabia, to China . . . ?

Yes!

Imagine being lost in the jungles of central Africa, struggling through clusters of vines hanging from the trees. Thorns tear your clothes, scratching your arms and legs, leaving long, red, itching marks. Brightly colored birds screech high overhead, and a beast roars in the distance. You're frightened, desperate, growing weak from hunger, but you're also afraid to pluck the strange fruits hanging within reach all around you. Some of them must be good to eat, but some are almost certainly poisonous, and you can't tell them apart. You come to a little clearing, and a band of Pygmies emerges from the trees on the other side, carrying long, sharp spears. They are ready to hunt, ready to fight!

You are filthy and itching, staring at the short men dressed in loincloths and animal skins. At the sight of you, they grow fierce and lift their spears. You realize that one wrong move will bring

instant death.

You manage to choke out the words: “Mi ne estas malamiko! Mi estas perdita. Mi bezonas manĝaĵon. . . .”

Then the spears come down, and white teeth appear in broad smiles. One of the strangers, who is wearing a bone through his nose, goes to a tree and plucks a large red fruit. He bites into it to show that it’s safe, and then he hands it to you. “Prenu,” he says. “Manĝu. Ĝi estas bona.”

After you eat and get some of your strength back, he asks, “Kiu vi estas?” and you talk with each other. Later, you go off with your new friends to their village, and they help you make your way back home.

Wow!

Then Peter had an even stranger dream: While bicycling on Main Street in downtown Cardiff, he spots a Pygmy, dressed for the jungle, armed, lost, and bewildered by the noises of a hundred cars and trucks on a busy city street. Peter goes up to the stranger and asks, “Ĉu vi estas perdita? Ĉu mi povas helpi vin?”

The Pygmy lowers his spear in relief and says, “Dankon! Ĉio estas tre danĝera ĉi tie. Dankon por via helpo!”

Peter realized that these dreams were not at all realistic, but he still thought they were beautiful.

On Thursday, Mr. Brown came in to check on the boys toward the end of the lunch period. He found Mrs. Martin halfway through a stack of papers, Jim resting with his head down—the age-old response of schoolboys to boredom—and Carl staring out the window. Ronny was reading one book and leafing through a second. Peter had the same book he’d been studying on Monday, but now he was staring off into space with a smile on his face. The principal wondered what Peter was thinking, but he resisted the urge to ask.

The situation with the boys seemed to be resolving itself. Mr. Brown knew how to deal with parents effectively, but it was always much better not to involve them if possible. The children seemed to be responding to his discipline appropriately.

Mr. Brown had told the teachers to confiscate any notes passed

in their classes and bring them to him. And he instructed them not to permit conversations in any language other than English.

He did not think to check on what Ronny was reading—he had actually been a little surprised to see Ronny so busy with books—but the principal had a lot on his mind. He went back to his office and considered how to deal with a new custodian who was working too slowly. Any disciplinary action would have to be done just right. The custodians, like the teachers, had unions to back them up. Thank goodness the students didn't have a union, or the school would be completely ungovernable.

English Only!

The school year would be over in a month, and Peter was upset. The teachers were confiscating any notes they saw him and his friends passing to one another. They said, “English only!” whenever they heard members of the group speaking in their special language. Even other students would cry out, “English only!” if there was a teacher close enough to hear. And the kids in sixth grade had a good laugh when their teacher made Al write a hundred times, “In our school we speak English only.”

One day, after Mr. Romberg scolded Peter and Judith for uttering a few words of Esperanto to each other, Peter noticed a look of satisfaction on Carl Wenniger’s face. When Carl saw Peter looking at him, he just laughed silently and mouthed, “English only.”

Peter knew that if they didn’t practice their language, it would go into the sleeping part of their brains, and all their efforts would be wasted. Sometimes, when he hadn’t used Esperanto for a few days, it took some work to get his fluency back.

Peter protested to Mr. Romberg. His teacher said, “I can’t fall behind in my lesson plans to discuss this with you, Peter. We have a lot of work to do. You can play with Esperanto outside of school.” It was as if their language was just some stupid little toy.

It wasn’t fair. Now that they were fluent enough to really enjoy communicating, they were prevented from using the language in the one place they were sure to see one another every day.

Peter asked his friends to come to a meeting at his house one Saturday. The sky was overcast, and from time to time it drizzled. Four of his friends showed up, but Al and Ronny had gone fishing with their fathers. Drizzly days were good for catching fish, apparently.

Peter insisted that they speak mostly in Esperanto. It was a little

hard, though, because they were getting out of practice.

"It's very important that we speak our language every day," Peter was saying. "And write in it every day. We don't want to forget how."

He was pausing from time to time, trying to remember the right words. He had to look up the word for "special," for example. It was "aparta," and Peter considered for a moment how their language set them apart.

Marjorie asked, "But what are we going to do, Peter? We can't disobey teachers. And the other kids look at us funny. They say 'English only!' and sometimes I feel stupid. I thought it would be neat to speak another language, just like it's neat to be able to play the piano, but our language makes us different. Other kids don't like it when you're different. Not if you're different like this, anyway."

"Marjorie's right," Judith agreed. "I thought we were going to have a lot of fun, and it really was fun learning the language, but if we can't speak it in school, what good is it?"

Peter was worried. It felt really good to be able to speak a second language, but he was afraid that soon he might have no one left to speak it with. He turned to Darlene with a questioning look.

"Well, I think they're wrong," she said firmly. "They *should* let us speak our language."

Now everyone was staring at Darlene.

"Why do you all look so surprised?" she asked. "We're *supposed* to get an education, aren't we? Well, what could be more educational than learning another language? And what's the point of learning a language if we can't speak in it and talk in it and write in it?"

"You might be right," Marjorie said.

"Yes," Judith said, "but so what? What can we do about it?"

"Are we going to disobey our teachers?" Tony asked. "Disobey Mr. Brown?"

"We can speak Esperanto across the street from school," Darlene said, sitting up very straight. "We can talk in the park *before* school. The park isn't on school grounds. We can give each other letters

before we get to school. We can bring Esperanto books to school, and maybe we can get away with reading them during our free time. We've put too much work into learning our language just to give it up because it isn't popular."

Marjorie looked at Darlene for a long time. Then she said, "I guess we could do that. But is it worth the trouble? Why keep fighting?"

"Why?" Darlene asked. And then, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, she said, "Because it's the right thing to do. We have a right to speak our language."

"Not according to the principal."

Now it was Darlene's turn to think. Finally she tightened her lips, just like Mr. Brown, and announced with a little shake of her head, "Sometimes, even principals are wrong." And like most of what she said, the sentence was in Esperanto: "Ĝi, eĉ lernejestroj eraras."

Tony's Bloody Nose

When Al and Ronny heard Darlene's plan, they agreed to it immediately. Every day before school, the children stood across the street from the building and spoke to one another in their language. They started to exchange letters again, and after a few days, the letters became longer and more detailed. Al wrote another one of his fantasy letters to Darlene:

Dear Friend,

Your plan is working! The enemy is helpless! He wants to destroy our organization, but we won't let him. The enemy chief wants everyone to use his language only. He is scared to let us speak in our own way.

But all he can do is look out the door and watch helplessly. He can do nothing as long as we stay on the other side of the border. We can meet together openly and make our plans.

And in the future, at long last, we will win.

And he signed the letter with a big, bold "Alan Spenser."

Some of them began to write little stories. Every day, Marjorie handed Peter a new chapter of her story about two mice who lived in the school. They would come out at night to eat food that hadn't been swept up from the cafeteria floor. Peter had told Marjorie about Mr. Brown's cowboy statue, and in this chapter, one of the mice hid behind it to spy on the principal.

Before class started the next day, Peter told Marjorie how much he had enjoyed her last chapter. He spoke in English to avoid getting into trouble: "I liked the part where the mouse distracted everyone," he said, "just when the principal was going to tell the boy's mother how bad he'd been."

Mr. Romberg was standing nearby, and he overheard them. In a friendly voice, he asked, "What are you talking about, Peter?"

"Oh, Marjorie's writing a little book."

"I'd like to see it, Marjorie," the teacher said enthusiastically.

"I don't think I'm allowed, Mr. Romberg. It's in the language we're not supposed to speak."

Mr. Romberg's eyebrows rose, and his mouth opened a little. "In that case, I guess you'd better not show it to me." Then he stepped out into the hallway and herded the last few lingering students into the classroom.

Two weeks before the semester ended, there was another fight. And even though it happened across the street from the school, the principal went out and brought the boys who were involved back to his office.

Ronny and Tony had been standing on the sidewalk, happily jabbering away in Esperanto: both boys had been getting more fluent in the language. Carl had come to school in a rotten mood, apparently, and when he saw them talking, he yelled, "English only!" When they didn't respond, he became enraged. "Ass!" he shouted. "Esperanto ass! Esperanto is a language for asses!"

Ronny gave Carl a surprised look at first, but then he turned away. Carl's pathetic insults had no sting. The look of amusement on Ronny's face must have made that clear, because in a moment Carl was punching him, and then the three of them were tangling together. It was already hot and very humid, and Tony didn't know how Carl had the energy to pick a fight with them. Soon he and Ronny had Carl down on someone's lawn, and Carl was kicking and screaming, and then two of Carl's friends were pulling them off of him. Tony's nose was bleeding, and he was crying and fighting at the same time. Then the adults were there.

The principal was quietly furious. He heard what each student had to say, and then he phoned their parents to say he would be suspending each of the boys for three days.

He met separately with Carl and his mother, Ronny and his father, Tony and Mrs. Charboneau, and the other two boys and their

parents.

Peter never found out what happened in the meeting with Carl and his mother, but the principal told Ronny's father and Mrs. Charboneau that all this language business had to stop. It was leading to too many fights and was disrupting school. Mr. James agreed that the children should cool it in their use of the language. And while Mrs. Charboneau didn't understand why Esperanto was leading to fights, she didn't argue. She didn't want Tony's hobby causing problems at school.

To put an end to the whole thing, Mr. Brown decided that he would speak to all of the Esperantists together.

Chapter Nineteen

Ne

After the three-day suspension was over and all the students were back in school, Peter and his friends were sent by their teachers to Room 107. Peter asked Mr. Romberg what it was all about, but his teacher would say only that the principal wanted to see them.

“Come in, children,” the principal said. “Sit down.” He waved them to a little group of seven chairs. He sat down in a taller chair facing them, under a poster of a wise old owl with a book under its wing. The poster read: “Reading is a Hoot!” Next to Mr. Brown was a table with some folders and a softcover book.

When Darlene and Al had arrived and joined the others, the principal took the book and handed it to Peter. “Look at the title, Peter. See anything familiar?”

Peter’s eyes widened in amazement. He held the book out at arm’s length as though that might help him make sense of what he saw.

“Well? Is this the language of your little gang?”

Peter lowered the book and glared at the principal. He was about to say, “‘Gang’? We don’t have a gang,” but then he remembered that Ronny had once tried to form one. What they had now was sort of a gang, but certainly not the kind that this book would imply.

“Can you answer me?”

Peter slowly and deliberately read the cover of the book aloud: “FM thirty—dash—one oh one—dash—one. Department of the Army Field Manual. *Esperanto, the Aggressor Language*. Headquarters, Department of the Army, February 1962.” Mr. Brown did not interrupt him. Peter opened to the first page and continued: “‘Esperanto has been adopted as the official language of Aggressor, the Maneuver Enemy.’ What does all of this mean, Mr. Brown?”

“Peter, I asked you if that was the language of your little gang. And then I asked if you could answer me. Well? Can you?”

Peter leafed through the book. Most of it seemed to be lists of English and Esperanto words. “This looks like a dictionary of our language. It’s an old dictionary, and not a very good one. And it has a really strange title.”

Mr. Brown opened a folder and took out a few slips of paper, some of which had been badly crumpled and then flattened out again. The kids immediately recognized their confiscated notes and letters. “I was looking over these notes, trying to decipher your code, when I remembered something that an old friend in the army once told me. I called him up, and he tracked down this book. It contains many of the same words you children are using in your notes. Without a doubt, your code is the Aggressor Language, the language of the Maneuver Enemy.”

He paused significantly. Seeing that the children only looked puzzled, he continued: “The United States Army used this language in its war games. It was the language spoken by the enemy in those war games. It is therefore completely unsuitable for use by grade-school students. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Peter frowned. He turned to the introduction of the book and began reading quietly. Mr. Brown waited, barely blinking.

“Yes, Mr. Brown,” Peter said at last. “Unless this is some kind of weird hoax, the U.S. Army used Esperanto as an enemy language. That was pretty stupid of them.”

“I’m glad you recognize that, Peter,” the principal said. Peter’s last sentence hadn’t sunk in. “Would anyone else like a look at this?”

The other students nodded, and Peter passed the book along. When everyone had seen it, the principal continued: “We live in very trying times. Terrible things happen in this world, even in our wonderful country. But one place where terrible things do not happen is Cardiff, Michigan. I am proud of where I live, and I am proud of where I work. I will not have the Enemy Language associated with Cardiff Elementary School. This is the oldest and

finest school in our district.”

Mr. Brown took off his glasses and began waving them around. His eyes seemed to protrude more than ever.

“Your language has provoked fighting. It is truly the Enemy Language. None of you are to use it around this school again, and none of you are to have materials in the Enemy Language on school property again. I have explained this to some of your parents already, and if I have to, I’ll speak with the rest of them as well.”

He paused to take a deep breath. “We have less than two weeks left of school. Darlene and Alan, if all goes well with you two, you will be attending Cardiff Junior High in the fall. The rest of you will be in the sixth grade. I hope that by then you will have developed other interests. No, this is not a matter for discussion, Ronny. Put your hand down. I am responsible for your safety and for the peaceful operation of this school. There will be no more of the Enemy Language here.”

Mr. Brown looked directly at Darlene and Alan. “I expect you to obey my directives in this matter.”

Al was nodding, but Darlene stood up, shaking her head. “This is not right, Mr. Brown.”

“I already spoke with your mother, Darlene, when she was in with Tony. She understands the situation.”

Darlene shook her head again. “I don’t think so, Mr. Brown. When I get home, I’ll explain it to her. I don’t know where you got that crazy book, but—”

“Darlene, go to my office right now! I will not tolerate insubordination. I will talk to you later.”

“Yes, sir.” She got up and stepped out of the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

The principal turned to Al again. “It’s good that you understand what I was saying, that you will refrain from using the Enemy Language or having any materials—”

“Ne.”

“What did you say?”

Al bit his lip and then said, “You can look the word up in your

Enemy Language dictionary, Mr. Brown. It's 'ne.' Spelled 'no-eh' in Esperanto. In English, you spell it 'en-ee.'"

"No?"

"Ne. We're not doing anything wrong. Darlene explained that to me. When other people do something wrong, like picking fights with us, you should punish them, not us. And our language is not an enemy language."

"Other students have been punished," Mr. Brown said. He was now waving his glasses in smaller and smaller circles, and his breaths were coming quickly.

Suddenly all of the fifth-graders were agreeing with Al and Darlene.

Mr. Brown's head swiveled rapidly, like an owl's, with his body not moving. He seemed to be gasping for air.

Peter tried to calm things down: "Mr. Brown, maybe we should have a meeting with all of our parents here. And Professor Renfrew, too. And maybe the green-star lady. They could help you understand."

"Professor? Green-star lady? Are you talking nonsense? I do not need help understanding. I already understand very well, thank you." He picked up the army manual with his left hand and waved it. His right hand was still busy with his glasses. "This book tells me all that I need to know. You are only students. Your minds have been corrupted by television. You will do as I say. Now go back to class!"

The students remained in their chairs.

"I said: Go ... back ... to ... class!" The principal was almost yelling.

"But we need passes," Marjorie said quietly.

Peter thought Mr. Brown's eyes would pop out of his head, and then the principal *was* yelling. "Just go back to class!" He stood up, slapping the book down on the desk next to him. "Just go back to class!"

It was the first time any of them had heard Mr. Brown yell. Suddenly the principal looked very old to Peter. He thought that

maybe it was time for the man to retire, just as Mrs. Leech had retired after teaching Peter's second-grade class.

Marjorie stepped quietly to the door. The other children followed.

Peter was the last to leave. He was the only one who heard the principal say, "I will investigate further. I will investigate further. . . ."

The End of the School Year

“What is he going to do?” Ronny asked on the way home. “I don’t know,” Peter said. “He seemed awfully upset. I’ve never seen him so upset.”

“Do you think he’s afraid to meet with Morgan?”

Before Peter could answer, he heard a voice behind him: “You’re in trouble. You’re in *big* trouble!” It was Jess Brothers, a boy in fourth grade who lived on the same block as Carl Wenniger. “I heard what happened. You’re in *real* big trouble, all of you. That’s what you get for speaking a funny language.”

Peter saw that Ronny was clenching his fists and pressing his lips together, so he said quickly, “I don’t think he can do anything. Not even a principal can punish you when he’s wrong.”

Jess’s mouth dropped open. For a moment, he seemed to Peter like a ventriloquist’s dummy when the ventriloquist forgets to speak. Then he sputtered, “But . . . but you keep using your language. He told you not to use your language!”

“Ni rajtas uzi nian lingvon,” Ronny told him, adding in English, “So there!”

“I’m gonna tell! I’m gonna tell Mr. Brown!”

“What difference will that make?” Peter replied. “We’re not even on school grounds.” Then he turned to Ronny and started saying in Esperanto that they shouldn’t pay attention to rude people.

“What are you saying?” Jess shouted.

“Learn Esperanto and you’ll know,” Peter replied.

But Peter was more afraid than he had let on. He thought about telling his parents what had happened, but he didn’t want to worry them. His friends weren’t really comfortable with the situation, either. In the mornings they spoke briefly across the street from the school to show that they weren’t scared, but they stopped bringing

in letters, stories, and notes—except for Darlene, who had a little letter for someone every day. Those were put away and read after school—away from Mr. Brown’s school.

Whatever had happened between Mr. Brown, Carl, and his mother seemed to have worked. Carl gave them dirty looks, and sometimes one of his friends would say something like, “You’re gonna get it. Sooner or later, you’re gonna get it,” but the fighting had stopped.

They were counting down the last days of the semester, and nothing had happened yet. No one had gotten it—whatever *it* was.

But something did seem to be changing. Peter and his friends started to overhear kids in school talking about how the Esperantists had told the principal off—and were getting away with it! They actually seemed to admire the “Enemy Language Gang,” as Peter once jokingly referred to his group.

A few kids even approached them to ask if maybe they could learn the language too.

Marv Braddock was the first. His seat was right next to Peter’s. Marv was a chubby kid who was always wolfing down food, sneaking miniature candy bars during the day, even managing to get down the glop they served in the lunchroom. He wasn’t great at sports, but he was really good at English, and he liked to read. Before class one day, he asked, “Can anyone learn your language?”

“Sure,” Peter said. “Anyone who wants to put in the time. But it takes a lot of work to learn a language.”

“I guess if you guys all learned it, I could too.”

Peter nodded in agreement.

“What do you do with it?”

“We talk, and we write letters and stories.”

“Do you write letters to people in other countries?”

“Not yet,” Peter said, surprising himself with the “yet.”

“But you could?”

“Yeah.” It was a neat idea. Then the bell rang, and Mr. Romberg entered the room.

Marv resumed the conversation on the way to lunch. He walked

next to Peter, and although they weren't supposed to talk in the halls, they often did.

"I thought your language was supposed to be secret. Carl Wenniger says it's a secret language."

"Yeah," Peter said.

Marv looked puzzled. "So how can it be a secret language if anybody can learn it?"

"That's easy," Peter said. "It's a secret language because everybody *doesn't* learn it. Not because they *can't*, but because they *won't*."

Marv went over to stand in the regular cafeteria line, and Peter quickly got through the short line for milk. Over lunch, he told some of his Esperantist friends about the conversation, and Darlene said that Molly Pacquin had asked about learning Esperanto too.

"I wonder if Morgan would teach another class."

"Maybe we should ask him."

"I could call him up."

Ronny asked, "How many people are we going to let speak our language?"

"I don't know," Peter said. "Maybe anybody who wants to learn it should be able to."

"Then it won't be our secret."

"But maybe if a lot of people speak it, nobody will try to stop us from using it. We don't know what Mr. Brown might try to do next semester, especially if Carl starts fighting again. I'll call Morgan this afternoon."

But Morgan Renfrew was not at home. The message on his answering machine said that the Renfrews were visiting their daughter and grandchildren on the West Coast and that they wouldn't be back until the end of the month. By then, Peter and his family would be on the East Coast, staying at his Aunt Ann's house on Cape Cod.

Maybe somebody else could teach a new class, Peter thought. Maybe the green-star lady. . . . No, she would just turn students off with her big, syrupy smiles. Maybe they should try to teach it themselves?

No, Peter decided. Nobody could teach as well as Morgan Renfrew. Peter was sure of that. He was by far the best teacher that Peter had ever had.

Peter decided to make a list of students who had shown an interest in speaking Esperanto. Then, if Morgan agreed, they could put together a second class sometime in July or maybe August.

The last day of the semester came, and as usual, Peter and his friends met across the street from the building before the first bell. They had one last good talk in their special language. Peter promised to send his friends letters in Esperanto from Cape Cod, and Marjorie promised to write from Florida, where she was going to spend the summer with her dad.

The Bald Eagle

Peter's parents spent several days driving their tan minivan to Buzzards Bay, near East Falmouth on Cape Cod. Carrie hadn't wanted to go. She had begged her parents to let her stay behind with one of her friends.

But their mother had insisted: Carrie was going to come with them. She was almost grown up now, and it might be the last time they would take a vacation together. She had only one more year in high school, and then she would be going away to college.

"Don't rush growing up," her mother had told her. "Besides, you might meet some cute boys on Cape Cod."

So Carrie had come along in a grumpy mood, and she stayed that way until they saw the bald eagle soaring between the clouds.

Carrie and Peter had never seen a bald eagle outside of a zoo. From time to time they went bird-watching with their parents, and on this vacation they took along several pairs of binoculars and their old, worn copy of the Peterson field guide to birds. They stopped at Niagara Falls on the first night, and the next morning they went under the falls in a boat called *Maid of the Mist*. Carrie enjoyed the ride, but she was grumpy again when they were back in the car, and she complained about missing her friends. They stopped at a motel in Geneva on the second night, in the Finger Lakes region of New York. And after breakfast the next day, instead of returning to the thruway, they took a detour through the pretty countryside to the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge.

After they looked at the displays in the building there, a lady behind the counter who was dressed like a park ranger told them about a drive they could take on the dikes between the ponds. They could view the wildlife up close along the way, and afterward they could cross the highway and go to an observation tower to see a

nest of bald eagles.

Peter told his friends all about it in his first letter. After describing Niagara Falls, he wrote:

On the third day of our trip, we drove through a wildlife refuge. We were on a one-way road that went along a dike between two large ponds. We saw a large black bird standing on the limb of an old dead tree with his wings held out. The bird was a cormorant....

Peter was pleased to find that the word for “cormorant” was “kormorano.” Like so many other words in Esperanto, it was not very different from English.

My father told me that cormorants hold their wings out to dry after they go swimming.

But the most exciting thing was the eagle. After we finished the drive on the dikes—we couldn’t go faster than fifteen miles an hour—we made our way to the observation tower. There were four people at the top of the tower when we got there: two couples traveling from New York City on their way to see Shakespeare plays in Stratford, Ontario. One of the couples was black, and one was white. They had been looking for the eagles for half an hour, and they were almost ready to give up.

After we had talked a little bit and they were ready to go, the black man took a last look up at the sky, and then he lifted his binoculars and shouted, “There it is! I see it!”

We all looked up, and I scanned the sky with my binoculars, but I couldn’t find it. “Where is it?” I asked. “Where’s the eagle?”

“There it goes,” my father said, “between those two clouds.”

I was just about to ask, “Which clouds?” when I saw two fluffy ones with a nice blue space between them and a dark speck floating across it. It was high up like an airplane is high up. I aimed my binoculars at the speck, and I saw my first bald

eagle soaring. It was wonderful! And then it started flying slowly toward us. I was so happy. I couldn't stop smiling.

"It's going to one of the other ponds," one of the women said.

And then it was right above us, and I could see it perfectly without my binoculars. You can't make a mistake with a bald eagle, with its white head and the big white patch on its tail. We talked about the bird for a long time after it was out of sight, and then we saw it again with another bald eagle and a bird that was as big as an eagle but without any white.

"What kind of bird is that?" I asked. "The one with them?"

"That's a bald eagle too," the black woman said. "It's immature. That means it hasn't grown up yet. It will look like the others in another year."

"Isn't it wonderful?!" the white woman said. "They were almost extinct around here, but now they're coming back."

One of the grown-up bald eagles flew away. The other two flew to a tall, dead tree in the middle of the pond and got into their nest. Peterson's guidebook says the wingspan of a bald eagle is seven or eight feet. I tried to imagine how big that nest had to be for it to swallow up those two enormous birds.

While they were staying in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where his mother wanted to visit a museum, Peter and his father found a place to make five copies of the letter. When Peter was stuffing the letters into envelopes back in the motel, his father said, "You've written quite a lot. Is that all in Esperanto?"

"Yup!"

"I saw you looking up all those words."

"Yeah. I found out that 'aglo' means 'eagle' and 'larĝo' means 'wingspan,' and guess what the Esperanto word for 'nest' is!"

His father laughed. "I give up."

"Nesto," Peter said, and he laughed too.

"Hey, if you teach me too many words, your language won't be secret anymore."

“That’s okay,” Peter said. “You can learn Esperanto too if you want. It won’t be a secret language if everyone learns it. But it will still be pretty neat.”

Peter’s father smiled.

Peter went on: “It’s fun being able to write letters in another language. And when I’m writing, I’m not even really thinking in English, except for the words I have to look up. I’m thinking in this other language, and, I don’t know . . . it kind of makes me feel like I’m *another person* or something. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Well, maybe someday I’ll learn another language too,” his father said, “and then I’ll know what you mean. Now let’s find a post office, buy some stamps, and mail those letters of yours.”

The Meeting on the Beach

Something had happened to Carrie when she saw the bald eagle. She had been just as happy as Peter to see the great bird soaring. When they were back on the thruway, Peter said, “Wasn’t he beautiful?!” and Carrie said, “Or wasn’t *she* beautiful!” Peter thought for a minute, and then he remembered reading in the Peterson guidebook that male and female bald eagles look the same. He wondered how they tell themselves apart, but then he thought that, to bald eagles, maybe all people look the same, too.

In the house on Cape Cod, Aunt Ann and Uncle Henry greeted them with big hugs. They talked about how much Carrie and Peter had grown, and they helped bring in the luggage. Peter’s aunt and uncle had bought a very large retirement house so they could have lots of guests.

“I want to swim in the ocean!” Carrie announced when they had unpacked.

The weather was a little cool, but not really cold, so Peter was surprised when his mother said, “Oh, no. It’s too cold to swim today.”

“I don’t care!” Carrie said. “I came all the way out here because you insisted, and if I can’t swim in the ocean, then what’s the point?”

“You know how much she loves swimming,” Peter’s father said. “Let her try it out and see. I can take her to that beach where we saw all the terns last time.”

Peter remembered the graceful birds that loved to dive for fish but never seemed to swim. Somebody had called them “sea swallows.”

“Can I come too?” Peter asked.

In the end, all four of them went. Carrie had on her swimsuit. The others carried binoculars, and Peter’s father brought along the

bird book. There was a sign at the parking space that read, "Permit Parking Only," but Uncle Henry had said they could ignore it. The police never enforced that parking regulation until July, when the Cape got crowded.

Peter's mother was still warning Carrie about how cold the ocean would be, saying she should dip her hand in the water before going in, when two wrinkled old men joined them near the water's edge. One wore a summer hat, a short-sleeved shirt, and linen pants. The other was wearing a black swimsuit and had a large towel draped over his shoulders. He looked very muscular for such an old man.

"Are you going to swim?" Carrie asked him.

He made an apologetic smile. The other man answered for him, speaking with some sort of accent: "He doesn't speak English. Yes, he goes swimming every day."

Carrie turned to her mother and said, "See?" and then she ran out onto the dock and dove gracefully into the water. In a moment she was swimming on her back in the little bay.

The old man in the swimsuit folded his towel and gave it to his friend. He smiled at everyone and then went out and slowly lowered himself into the water. Soon he was swimming with powerful strokes.

Peter's parents smiled a goodbye at the man holding the towel and started walking down the beach, but Peter stayed behind, curious to learn more about the man and his friend.

"My brother-in-law is from Lithuania," the man said when Peter asked about him. "He doesn't speak English. My wife has him come over every summer to spend time with us. She wants him to move here, but he doesn't want to leave the old country now that it's free back there. It was such a long time before he could come and visit."

"If he doesn't speak English," Peter asked, "how do you talk to him?"

"In German. I'm from Norway, originally."

"So German is your interlanguage."

"Yes, you could say that. In Europe, it's normal for people

to speak more than one language. Not like here, where almost everyone speaks the same language.” He looked up to see where his brother-in-law was in the water. “Pyoter loves visiting. I don’t understand why he won’t move here now that he’s getting older.”

“Hey, Peter! Look!” his mother shouted from down the beach. “A black-backed gull!” And her shout made Peter forget a couple of questions he’d wanted to ask. He left the man to join his parents.

Peter walked along the sand for a while with his mother and father, looking at the many types of birds they didn’t have back home. Everything was beautiful: the boats on the bay, the houses along the coast, and the sky, which was a gorgeous blue with just enough fluffy clouds. Peter loved the smell of the ocean, too. That was another thing they didn’t have back home.

Peter’s parents walked ahead along the beach while he was watching the terns. After a while he heard Carrie shouting, “Peter! Come here!” He turned and saw his sister standing next to the two old men, waving for him to come join them. The man who’d been swimming was drying himself off.

Peter started running across the sand. He had to hold his binoculars so they wouldn’t bounce against his chest.

When he reached the three of them, Carrie said, “I tried talking to him in the water, but he kept saying, ‘No English, no English,’ and so I said—I just said—‘Esperanto?’ And then he started talking the same way you do!” She pointed to Peter and said to the old man, “Esperanto! My brother speaks Esperanto.”

Peter’s jaw dropped. The old Lithuanian swimmer was looking at him expectantly. Peter said, “Mia fratino diris, ke vi parolas Esperanton!” The old man’s face lit up with a beautiful smile. His words came so quickly that Peter had to say, “Malrapide bonvolu, malrapide!” which means, “Slowly please, slowly!” And their conversation began.

The Letter About Pyoter Ivanovich

That afternoon, Peter spent an hour writing a letter to his friends. He told them all about his conversation with Pyoter Ivanovich, partly to share his excitement, and partly to get it all down on paper. The whole conversation had lasted for maybe twenty minutes, but a whole lot can be said in twenty minutes.

He would later think of that letter as a kind of picture of the conversation. People use snapshots to bring back memories, and he would use that letter when he was older to bring back memories of a very important day. He would be able to feel the sand under his feet again and the ocean breeze in his hair as he ran over to Carrie and the old man. And he would remember how excited Carrie had looked while she waited to tell him the amazing news. Peter was just as excited to share the news with his friends.

He has the same first name as mine, except it's in Russian. He wrote it out for me, and it looked strange: the "r" looks like our "p," and the "p" looks kind of like a little table. He pronounces it "pea-YO-ter." He also told me that his name in Esperanto is "Petro," just like mine.

He has lived in Lithuania for more than forty years, even though he is Russian. He speaks Russian, Lithuanian, and German, but he knows only enough English to be able to tell people that he doesn't speak it and to give the telephone number and address of his sister and brother-in-law if he gets lost.

He belongs to an Esperanto club in Vilnius, which is the capital of Lithuania. The club has Russians and Lithuanians in it, and they get along well. A long time ago, before what he called "The Great Patriotic War," there were Jews in their club, too.

He told me that they couldn't use Esperanto for a long time under Communism, and that the Communist dictator Stalin called Esperanto "the language of spies." Stalin had a lot of Esperantists killed—and Hitler did too!—but after he died, they could use Esperanto again. He told me about a book called "The Dangerous Language" that describes how the Esperantists were persecuted by people like Hitler and Stalin. He said I should read it when I grow up.

Mr. Brown has it all wrong. Esperanto is not the Enemy Language. It's the language of peace. Mr. Ivanovich told me that again and again—Peace! Peace! Peace! That is why people learned Esperanto, so they could talk to each other and write to each other even though they come from different countries and speak different languages. People learn Esperanto to spread the idea of peace, of people getting along. That's the whole idea. It's a language that doesn't belong to any country. It belongs to the whole world. It's just like I thought: the U.S. Army was crazy when it called Esperanto the Enemy Language. When school starts, I'm going to tell Mr. Brown all about this.

And best of all, I gave Mr. Ivanovich my address, and he's going to send it to his Esperanto club. He said there are boys and girls our age in the club, and that they would love to write to us.

He told me that I should keep on studying and using Esperanto, and that I was very good at speaking it, and that meeting me was one of the best parts of his trip.

I was so happy!

Peter was too modest to write about what Carrie had said after the two old men walked off. She said, "Wow, Peter! That was great. You were able to talk to him even though he doesn't speak English. I'm so proud of you!"

And she gave him a big hug.

And then Carrie shouted, "Mom! Dad! Guess what! Peter talked to the old man in Esperanto."

Their parents were walking toward them, ready to tell them about a tern they had spotted. But they forgot all about it when they heard what had happened: Peter had used Esperanto to talk to someone from another country who couldn't speak English at all!

A New School Year

Mr. Brown came back to school a week before the new semester began. The whole business about the Enemy Language was far from his mind. He had been very irritated at first, but he eventually decided that he'd handled things correctly. It would have been a mistake to make a big fuss about the language and haul parents in for conferences just when they were about to head off for their summer vacations.

Over the summer, he and his wife traveled to Massachusetts to visit her sisters, and then they spent two very quiet weeks in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Mrs. Brown was always talking about how they should buy a condominium in Vermont when they retired, and he kept saying it would be too expensive. He liked to travel to places during the off-season, when it was cheaper and there weren't a lot of people around. He had his fill of people while running a school all year. It was pleasant to sit and look at mountains, to go for little walks in elegant resort towns, and to wait outside shops while his wife hunted for bargains. She would carefully pick out clothes for the two of them, and on this trip she bought another painting they didn't need, this one for the living room. Every day he permitted himself four drinks, and he even watched some of Mrs. Brown's favorite television shows with her.

For the two weeks he and his wife were alone together in Vermont, Mr. Brown put school completely out of his mind and enjoyed the quiet. But now, back in the building that had been his workplace for half of his sixty years, he was ready to face the new semester. The summer had dragged on for too long. His wife kept asking him to retire, but he knew it was not for him. Eight weeks of summer away from work was plenty. Even mowing the lawn, which he insisted on doing himself, could not take up enough of his time.

The week before school began, Mr. Brown attended meetings with the superintendent to talk over changes in the curriculum. He learned that he would have to get by with one less teacher. No one would lose their job, but Mrs. Johnson would be transferred to another elementary school to take the place of a teacher who'd retired.

On the first day of classes, he was busy in Room 107 supervising the registration of new students. The first week of school was always somewhat messy, with new students forgetting where their rooms were and parents who were new to the district bringing their children in to register at the last minute. But once a routine was established, everything would go smoothly. The main thing was to establish the routine.

It was only Monday of the second week when he heard the words that brought back the unpleasant incidents of the spring. He was out in front of the building before the first bell, keeping an eye on the children who were walking to school.

He was especially bothered because the two students who exchanged those strange words had not been part of the Enemy Language Gang the previous semester.

"Saluton, Marv," Molly Pacquin said. The only hint of trouble with Molly had been some years ago. She had gotten very angry when a boy made fun of her.

"Saluton, Molly."

"Ĉu vi aŭdis, ke Petro ricevis leteron de ruso?"

"Ne! Ĉu vere?"

Of course, Mr. Brown did not know that Molly had said "Hello, Marv," and that Marv had said "Hello, Molly," and that Molly had asked, "Did you hear that Peter got a letter from a Russian?" and that Marv had said, "No! Is that so?" All Mr. Brown heard were the strange sounds of the Enemy Language, and all he could do was bark, "English only!" The children looked up at him, hearing his sharp voice. Then they looked away and quietly entered the building.

Mr. Brown realized that the sickness was still alive and spread-

ing. He had backed off in the spring, but now he had work to do. It was early enough in the semester, and he felt strong and rested. It was the best time to get this unpleasant work done.

A Phone Call

Carl had been promoted to sixth grade, but just barely. Darlene got the news over the summer from a girl who knew his sister. He didn't come back to school refreshed at all, but he was a little more clever about his bullying: now he waited until after school to pick fights. Along with two of his friends, he got into a fight with Tony one afternoon and bloodied his nose again.

Peter was very angry when he heard the news the next morning. He was across the street from the school, talking with Tony and a few other friends. Carl came by and laughed at them, and they shouted insults at him in Esperanto, but he didn't lose his cool. He just said, "I'll see you after school, Tony," and walked away.

Tony looked worried.

Peter said, "We'll walk home together, Tony, a bunch of us."

"But we don't live in the same direction."

"It doesn't matter. We're not going to let this happen again. We've got to stick together." Tony seemed a little less scared now, so Peter asked, "Did you get a letter from Vilnius?"

Tony shook his head. "Darlene got a letter from Moscow yesterday, though. Elena Taimanova gave her name to a cousin in Russia."

"Neat! Now we're writing to people in two countries. I wonder if we could bring their letters to school and read them in class."

"I don't know," Judith said. "Miss Gorbeck told Marv that he has to speak English only, and then she gave him a long lecture about how English makes us one country."

Miss Gorbeck almost got started on her lecture again later that day when Peter suggested bringing in letters from their pen pals.

At first she seemed pleased with the idea. "You're corresponding with children in Lithuania, Peter?"

"Yes ma'am, and with an old man too. I met him on Cape Cod, on the beach. He was visiting his sister and brother-in-law."

"How *wonderful*," Miss Gorbeck exclaimed with a toothy smile. She was an angular woman with just a little gray in her hair, and she had been at the school for a long time. She talked the way some teachers do, exaggerating her tone when she said something nice in order to emphasize the niceness. She explained everything very clearly, whether it needed to be explained clearly or not. Peter preferred Mr. Romberg's more natural way of speaking. Miss Gorbeck even scolded students in an exaggerated manner. Her voice had an unpleasant sound that reminded Peter of rusty door hinges. He supposed he would get used to it in time.

"It's wonderful how people all over the world speak English," she went on. "Now that the Cold War is over, English has become the world language!"

"Mr. Ivanovich doesn't speak English, though."

"He doesn't? Certainly you don't speak Lithuanian, Peter."

Peter laughed. "No ma'am, and Judith doesn't speak Russian, but she's corresponding with a Russian girl in Vilnius. We're writing in Esperanto."

Miss Gorbeck's narrow face immediately hardened. "We're to have none of that, children. I had quite enough trouble with that *enemy language* from two of my students last year. None of that. We are to use English only. If you correspond in English with people in other countries, then you may bring their letters in."

Nora Rhodes raised her hand. She had joined four others in Morgan Renfrew's second Esperanto class in August, and she had just gotten her first letter from a student at the Donelaitis Elementary School in Vilnius.

"Yes, Nora."

"My brother's studying French in high school, and the teacher's trying to get them to correspond in French with students in other countries."

"Yes, but French is a real language, and we teach it in school. I'll tell you what, Nora, if you can correspond with someone in French

or in any other real language, then I'll be happy to have you bring the letters in. Now, no more questions on this. The principal has spoken to us, and we know what to do. We're going to get back to our regular lesson now. I know how you children are. You like to get your teacher off topic, but you may as well learn right now that it won't work with me."

Shortly after that, the principal started having students sent to his office.

He sent for them one at a time and spoke to them one at a time. He focused on the new Esperanto speakers. Each teacher had to tell him which students were using the Enemy Language. He was going to stop it early.

Peter noticed the pattern during the second week of school. He was not called to the principal's office, and neither were the other "old-timers," but Marv was, and Molly was, and Nora was, and the other two were.

It was going to be uncomfortable again, Peter realized. Instead of enjoying their last year of elementary school, instead of being able to share their experience of corresponding with foreign students who knew no more English than Peter and his friends knew Russian or Lithuanian, they had to keep their language out of school as if it were something to be ashamed of.

Peter would give Mr. Brown dirty looks whenever he saw him before school. The principal would just stand there, looking over the students, keeping them in line—in ways he should have kept them in line, certainly, but also in ways he shouldn't have.

As the weekend approached, Peter realized that something had to change. He didn't want to involve his parents. They already had enough to do at their jobs and at home, taking care of him and Carrie.

The principal was the top person in the school, but Peter knew he wasn't the top person in the school *system*. That was the superintendent.

It took a great deal of courage, but when Peter got home on Thursday, he looked up the phone number of the Cardiff Board of

Education, and he made his call.

When a secretary answered, he said, "My name is Peter Jameson. I'm a student at Cardiff Elementary School, and I'd like to speak with the superintendent."

"And what is this regarding?" the secretary asked.

"Esperanto," Peter said.

"*What?*"

"Esperanto," he repeated. "It's a language. Mr. Brown—he's our principal—he won't let us speak it at school."

There was a short silence at the other end of the line. "I think you should have your parents speak with Mr. Brown, young man."

Peter felt very nervous. "May I speak with the superintendent, please?"

"Dr. Wexler is in a meeting. He cannot be disturbed."

"May I make an appointment to see him?"

"Have your parents speak to the principal first," she said. And then she ended the call, politely but firmly: "I have another call to take. Goodbye."

Peter heard the click as she hung up.

“I’ll Get Back to You”

The Monday after Peter made his phone call, he went straight home. He and Ronny and some other friends had been walking Tony home after school, but today the others were doing it without him. He ate a quick snack and left a note for his parents. Then he got on his bike and pedaled to the Board of Education offices, which were in an old brick building that used to be an elementary school. Peter chained his Schwinn to a rusty bike rack and went inside. Following the signs, he made his way to Superintendent Wexler’s office.

It was a warm day, and Peter had been sweating, but the office was cool. There was an air conditioner in one of the windows. Along one wall stretched a row of large, framed pictures. Peter walked over and read the little labels beneath them while the secretary was busy on the phone. They were photographs of past superintendents of the Cardiff School System going all the way back to the nineteenth century. All of them had been men.

“Can I help you, young man?”

Peter turned and saw the secretary looking at him with a curious expression. Her eyeglasses had large lenses with a pink tint, and her hair was swept up on top of her head. Her carefully manicured fingernails were also a deep pink.

“I would like to speak with Superintendent Wexler, please.” Peter felt a little nervous, but he was determined to do this.

“Did I speak with you last week?”

“Yes. On the phone.”

“If you’re having difficulties with language, you will need to speak with your teacher or the principal. Students can’t just come in and talk to Dr. Wexler. He is a very busy person.”

Peter heard a voice behind him: “Are you having trouble with

languages?”

He turned and looked up at the tall, slender woman in a light blue business suit who had just entered the office. She had a small black purse on her shoulder, and she was carrying a heavy-looking leather briefcase in her left hand. She looked at Peter with a friendly, curious expression. Her long neck made him think of a swan.

“No, ma’am. We’re having trouble with our principal over our language.”

Her brow furrowed. “Trouble *over* your language?”

“Yes ma’am. It’s Esperanto, and we speak it together, but Mr. Brown won’t let us use it in school, even when we’re just playing. Some of the other kids make fun of us, and Carl Wenniger beat up Tony Charboneau after school last week, and—”

“Did you say ‘*Esperanto*’?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Peter was careful to be extra polite.

“I thought that was dead. Nobody speaks Esperanto anymore.”

Peter drew himself up tall, but he still had to look up at the woman. “That’s not true. I speak Esperanto. My friends speak Esperanto. Petro Ivanovich speaks Esperanto—”

She looked up suddenly. The door to an inner office was opening, and two men were coming out. They shook hands, saying goodbye, and one of the men smiled and nodded as he walked past them on his way out of the room.

The other man said, “Hello, Lisa. It’s good to see you,” and he came over and shook her hand. Peter assumed he was the superintendent. He was a trim man with a long face, about the same age as Peter’s father. He wore gray-rimmed glasses and a dark blue business suit with a faint pattern to it. He was not short, but he had to look up at the woman. Then he looked down at Peter. “And who is this you have with you?”

“He’s not with me,” Lisa said. “I think he wants to see you. About Esperanto.”

“Esperanto?” The superintendent looked puzzled. “Isn’t that some sort of language?”

“Yes,” Lisa said. “When I was a little girl, my grandfather used

to write to people in other countries in Esperanto. He was always trying to get us to learn it, but of course we weren't interested."

"Very interesting," the superintendent said. "I'd like to talk about it sometime, but we have business to take care of."

"Yes, we do." She turned to Peter. "Nice meeting you. What's your name?"

"Peter Jameson, ma'am."

"Nice to meet you, Peter. My name is Lisa Curtis." She smiled, shook his hand, and went with the superintendent into his office.

Peter turned to the secretary. "Who is she," he asked, "that nice lady?"

"She's a representative for a textbook company in Illinois."

"Oh. So she doesn't live here." Peter felt disappointed. He walked over to a chair.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm sitting down and waiting. I'd like to talk to the superintendent, please."

"You can't. Your parents will be worried."

"No," Peter said, shaking his head. "I left them a note. They know where I am."

The secretary's lips tightened in disapproval, but just then the phone rang, and she had to answer it. After she hung up, she went back to work and paid no more attention to Peter.

He sat very quietly. There were some educational journals on a little table, but he didn't feel like reading.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, the door to the superintendent's office opened, and Dr. Wexler came out with Ms. Curtis.

"It's really up to our textbook committee," he was saying. "The board always goes along with their recommendations, though, so I don't think you'll have a problem." They were shaking hands when he noticed Peter again. "Your friend is still here," he said with a smile.

Peter got up and walked over to them. His knees were trembling a little, and his voice felt shaky when he spoke.

“Dr. Wexler,” he said, “I’m Peter Jameson, and I’m a student at Cardiff Elementary School, and Mr. Brown won’t let us use our language.”

“Peter,” the superintendent said, “the principal sets policy for the school. Have you talked with Mr. Brown about your problem?”

“Not lately. He says that Esperanto is the enemy language, and—”

Peter was interrupted by Ms. Curtis’s gentle laughter. It sounded almost like music.

“What’s so funny, Lisa?” the superintendent asked.

She turned to Peter. “The *enemy* language?”

“That’s what he says. He says the army calls it the enemy language, but it’s not that at all. It’s the language of peace.”

Her face lit up with a gentle smile. “That’s the same thing my grandfather used to say.”

“What?” Dr. Wexler asked.

“He used to say that Esperanto is the language of peace, and that when the whole world learns Esperanto, we’ll all live in peace and brotherhood.”

“That sounds a bit . . . unrealistic,” the superintendent said.

“Maybe it is. He was a bit eccentric. He would get so excited when the letters would come, from Europe, even from Japan. My brother was always begging him for the stamps.” Then she fell quiet for a moment and set down her briefcase. “It is an unrealistic idea, but, thinking back . . . maybe it’s a very *nice* idea. Maybe we could use more ideas like that instead of the ‘sensible’ ones that have gotten us into such a mess.”

Peter took something from his pocket and held it out to her.

“What do you have there?” She smiled broadly as she accepted the envelope with the strange stamp. With a glance at Peter, she carefully removed the letter and unfolded it. “I can’t read this, of course.” She looked at the envelope again. “But I can tell that it comes from Russia. St. Petersburg. Can you read this, Peter?”

Peter took the letter back from her and read the first sentence in Esperanto: “Kara samideano, Mi ricevis viajn nomon kaj adreson

de amikoj en Litovujo.” Then he started over, translating for them:

Dear fellow Esperantist, I received your name and address from friends in Lithuania. I have always wanted to write to an American friend in Esperanto. I am twelve years old, and I go to school. I like to play chess and soccer, and I am studying English, but it is very hard. I make many mistakes when I write in English and I am embarrassed, but I am never embarrassed writing in Esperanto because it is our language, yours and mine. I hope you will want to write to me and be my friend.

“It’s signed ‘Marina Tokareva,’” Peter added, “and here’s her picture. I sent my picture back to her with my answer.”

Lisa Curtis took the black-and-white photograph in her hands. “She’s very pretty,” she said. “Did you share this with your class?”

“I couldn’t,” Peter said. “Miss Gorbeck wouldn’t let us because she says Esperanto isn’t a real language. She says it’s the enemy language—that’s what Mr. Brown told her. But that’s nuts. Esperanto is the language of peace, and we’d like to be able to use it in school.”

The secretary said, “Excuse me, sir. Mr. Henderson just arrived.”

The superintendent noticed the man waiting in a chair. “Oh! Hi, Bill. Just a moment, will you?” He looked over the envelope, the letter, and the photograph. Then he looked back at Peter. “How many students in your school speak Esperanto, Peter?”

Peter looked up to his left and started counting, “Me, Tony, Darlene—no, Darlene’s in junior high now—me, Tony, Ronny . . . about ten or twelve of us.”

“But we don’t have foreign language programs in our elementary schools. Where did you all learn it?”

“From Morgan—Professor Renfrew—he’s retired. He taught it to us. Some of us learned it over spring vacation, and some of us learned it in August.”

“Really? Do you have Professor Renfrew’s telephone number?”

“Yes, sir. It’s four-seven—”

“Please give it to my secretary, Peter, along with your own name and number.” He smiled at Ms. Curtis. “Perhaps there’s been a failure in communication here, and perhaps I can assist in the matter. Mr. Brown has been around for a long time. He’s a fine man, but you have to handle change tactfully with him. I think I just might call him up to offer my congratulations on how well his students are doing with their foreign language studies.”

He reached out his hand, saying, “Peter, I’ll get back to you on this.” And Peter Jameson shook hands with the Superintendent of Schools.

He walked out of the building with Ms. Curtis. Outside, a warm breeze was shaking the leaves of an aspen tree. Peter let out a big sigh of relief. “Thank you very much, Ms. Curtis. You really helped us.”

“I’m happy to do it, Peter. I know that my grandfather would have been pleased.”

They shook hands again, and she walked off to the parking lot. He unchained his bike and fastened his helmet. Students were playing catch across the street. He heard a baseball thump into a mitt.

As he pedaled away, Peter felt like singing. There was a strong, pleasant pressure in his chest that needed to be released. But since he couldn’t think of a good song to sing, he put all that energy into pedaling as fast as he could.

A Language for Hatred

A whole week went by, but nothing seemed to change. Peter grew more and more impatient, and on Wednesday, he finally phoned Superintendent Wexler's office. The secretary took Peter's message and called back a little later. She said the superintendent was working on the problem and would get back to him.

The gang was still walking Tony home. There hadn't been any more fights, but Carl always looked like he was ready to start one. Peter noticed that he never volunteered in class, and one time, Peter overheard Miss Gorbeck when she was handing Carl's homework back to him. She said, "I know you can do much better, Carl. I expect more from you."

Carl just nodded and slouched in his seat.

On Friday, Peter was still hearing "English only!" from the teachers in the cafeteria. He felt he really had to do something. The superintendent was a very busy man, as his secretary was fond of saying, and Peter was worried that Dr. Wexler had forgotten about him.

Peter walked home from Tony's house that afternoon with his head down and his hands in his pockets, thinking about what to do. It was an unusually hot and humid day for September, and he didn't have much energy. He was vaguely aware of a dog barking angrily as he walked past its house. He looked up just enough to see it snarling at him from behind a gate.

It probably wouldn't do any good to bug Dr. Wexler again, Peter thought. He had already phoned the superintendent once since their conversation in the office. He imagined calling over and over again and always getting the same response from the secretary: "He says he's working on it. . . ."

Peter was lost in thought when he heard someone calling his name. He looked up to see Carl crossing the street. Without thinking, Peter had followed a route that took him past Carl's house. For a moment he thought of running away, but then he shook his head and decided to stand his ground.

"What do you want, Carl?" he shouted.

In a few moments, Carl was standing in front of him. His eyes were red, and his voice shook when he spoke. "You don't have to walk Tony home anymore."

"You're going to leave him alone?" Peter asked, surprised.

"My father moved out." Carl pointed to his house, and Peter saw the large red-and-black "For Sale" sign in front of it. "My mother is taking Sue and me back to New Jersey to live near my grandparents."

"I'm sorry, Carl."

"My father is acting like a real . . . He beat up my mother yesterday, and there was nothing I could do about it."

Peter was shocked. "Did you call the police?"

Carl shook his head. "We were afraid to."

Carl's face was all screwed up, flashing one unpleasant emotion after another. "I don't care if I never see him again." He was gulping now, and his bloodshot eyes were fixed on Peter's face as though he might find some solution to his troubles there. "We're leaving tomorrow, so I won't be at school anymore. Ma called Grandma, and Grandma said, 'You better move here right now. You've got to get away from that man.' And she sent money. So we're going."

Peter nodded. He kept his eyes on Carl, not knowing what to expect next. In spite of everything, Peter felt sorry for him. Carl was angry, frightened, and shaking.

"Peter . . ." Carl was chewing his lip. "Can I write to you?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"And you'll answer?"

"I'm really good at answering letters."

"Can I write to you in Esperanto? It won't be any good at first."

"Wow! Sure." Peter wasn't certain what he was feeling—amazement, wonder, and maybe something of the hurt that Carl was going

through. The word “noble” came to mind. What Carl was doing was noble.

“I know your father didn’t want you to learn Esperanto,” Peter said. “Even though you’re mad, it must be hard to go against him. But I guess when a person’s wrong, he’s wrong. Even when he’s your father.”

There were tears in Carl’s eyes. He looked both sad and angry at the same time. Then he turned suddenly and ran back to his house.

Peter just stood there, shaking his head. Even if Carl didn’t write, Peter would write to him. Carl needed a friend. And if Peter didn’t have Carl’s new address, he could write to the old one, and the post office would forward the letter. He remembered that from when their old neighbors moved away, and his mother wanted to return a book they had lent her.

As Peter made his way home, all kinds of thoughts ran through his head. He was grateful that he had a good family and that his father would never dream of hitting his mother.

A memory came to him from when he was little. He was crouching in a corner while his parents yelled at each other. Their fight seemed to go on forever, but it was really only a few minutes. He didn’t know what to do, so he just sat there, hugging his knees. Then his mother caught sight of him, and she and his father rushed over to reassure him.

He tried to imagine. . . . What if it had gone differently? What if it hadn’t stopped with yelling?

His mother had said something to his father like, “What are we doing?” And then, suddenly, it was over. The yelling stopped. But he had been gasping, just as Carl had been gasping, too frightened to let go and cry.

And now he thought about how small his problem with Esperanto was compared to the one that Carl was facing. Speaking the same language didn’t solve everything. Carl’s parents spoke the same language, but that didn’t mean they got along.

Even if everyone spoke Esperanto, Peter thought, there would

still be fights. People could argue in Esperanto, express hatred in Esperanto. It was just as easy as in English, maybe even easier. You just put “mal” in front of any word, and the word became its opposite. It was easy to change “alta,” which means “high,” into “malalta,” which means “low.” And it was just as easy to turn “amo,” “love,” into “malamo,” “hate.”

Peter started to imagine sentences expressing hatred: “Mi malamas vin. Mi malamegas vin. Vi estas malaminda. Ĉiuj malamas vin. Ni mortigos vin. Vi estas mortiginda.” When he tried to say the same things in English, his translations seemed awkward. They lacked the venom of the Esperanto expressions. “Mi malamegas vin” came out as “I hate you very much,” but putting that little “eg” inside of “malamas” intensified the hatred far more than “very much.”

So Esperanto worked just as well for hate as it did for love. It wasn’t the language that mattered, but the intentions of the people using it. Peter and his friends had even shouted insults at Carl in Esperanto once. At first, Peter had wanted a secret language so he and his friends could talk about other people without them understanding. The other people would be just as helpless as Peter had been with the two mustached men in Du Berry’s Family Restaurant.

When Peter got home, he went up to his room. It was a mess. The bed was unmade, his underwear and socks from the night before were still on the floor, and his books were scattered all over. With a little burst of energy, he straightened everything up. He put his dirty clothes in the hamper, made the bed, and put the books in the bookcase. Looking at his clean room afterward, he was pleased, but still a little sad, too: it wouldn’t be nearly as easy for Carl Wenniger to straighten up the mess in his life.

The Friendly Language

It was Wednesday of the fifth week of school when they noticed that the teachers had stopped saying “English only.” Peter noticed it first in the cafeteria. He had been sitting with Ronny, Molly, Judith, and Tony—who was walking home by himself now. When there were no cafeteria monitors near their table, they would talk quietly in Esperanto. Once, Peter looked up to see Mrs. Yerkes standing right next to them, but she didn’t say anything. They stopped talking, and she just walked away.

The next time Mrs. Yerkes came near their table, Peter deliberately kept on talking. And soon it became clear that she wasn’t going to say, “English only!”

Maybe she was just tired, Peter thought. When they got back to the classroom, he decided to try a little experiment. Miss Gorbeck was still at the door, not far from where he was sitting. Speaking loud enough for the teacher to hear, Peter asked Judith if he could borrow a pencil: “Ĉu vi povas doni al mi kraĵonon?” But Miss Gorbeck didn’t even look at them!

It all came out on Friday afternoon, just a few minutes before the school week ended. Miss Gorbeck had finished her geography lesson a little early and was closing her textbook. “We are learning about many faraway lands,” she said. “I spoke with Mr. Brown, and we have decided to encourage you to communicate with boys and girls in other countries. We understand that it is too soon for you to do that in their real languages, so we will permit you to bring in letters in Esperanto from Russia and other countries and show them to the class. If you like, we will set aside twenty minutes for this on Monday. I think that will be an appropriate use of our current events time.”

She made it sound as though she and the principal had just

coincidentally changed their minds, but Peter knew better. He felt grateful again for Lisa Curtis, and then, suddenly, for her grandfather. He wondered if the old man had ever received letters from Lithuania or Russia.

Miss Gorbeck was still smiling her toothy smile when Peter raised his hand. When she called on him, he said, "Thank you, Miss Gorbeck. We appreciate that very much." There was no sense in rubbing her nose in it, no sense in pointing out that Esperanto was just as real a language as Lithuanian, French, Hopi, or English. He didn't need to convince her. If she was going to pretend that Esperanto wasn't a real language, that was fine with him, as long as she let him use it.

He and his friends were going to speak in Esperanto, think in Esperanto, write in Esperanto, and read in Esperanto! No more "English only!"—what a relief! No one was going to persecute them like Hitler and Stalin had persecuted Esperantists. No one was going to hit them anymore, like Carl had hit Tony, or like Mr. Wenniger had hit Mrs. Wenniger. No one was threatening them, and no one even hated them now.

When Peter got home, the first thing he did was call the superintendent's office.

He told the secretary who he was, and before she could say anything about Dr. Wexler getting back to him, he quickly added, "I know Dr. Wexler is very busy, but please just tell him 'Thank you' from me."

"He's right here, Peter," she said. "Just a moment, please."

And then Dr. Wexler was on the line. His voice had a pleasant, reedy quality to it, like a professional singer's. "I'm sorry I didn't get back to you, Peter."

"But you did!"

"I *did*?"

"Yes. They're letting us speak Esperanto in the cafeteria now, and Miss Gorbeck said we could bring in our letters. That's getting back to us, Dr. Wexler. That's the best way of getting back to us."

There was a little pause, and Dr. Wexler said, "I like your way of

looking at things, Peter. You know, I think you're going to be very successful someday."

"Thank you. But I feel pretty successful right now. With your help."

Dr. Wexler laughed and said, "I'll be seeing you, Peter." And they said their goodbyes.

On Monday, Mr. Romberg saw Peter in the hallway and said, "Saluton!"

Peter's eyes opened very wide, but he managed to say "Saluton" back. Then he asked, "Ĉu vi parolas Esperanton?" which means, "Do you speak Esperanto?"

Mr. Romberg said "Iomete," which means "a little." Then, in perfectly acceptable Esperanto, he said he had found an Esperanto textbook and was studying it because he wanted to understand what the students were saying.

"Maybe you'll take Morgan's class when he teaches it again."

Mr. Romberg smiled and said, "Ĝis la revido," which means "See you later."

It wasn't until Thursday that Peter and the other Esperantists were called in to Room 107. Mr. Brown and Superintendent Wexler were waiting for them. Dr. Wexler said, "Hello, Peter," and he had them all sit around a very large table that had been formed by pushing the smaller tables together. Mr. Brown formally introduced the superintendent, who held up an elegantly printed certificate.

"Mr. Brown," he said, "I'm very proud of your students here. This certificate recognizes the extraordinary achievements of Cardiff Elementary School in foreign language." He looked at Peter. "I had a long and pleasant lunch with Professor Renfrew recently, and I learned a little bit about your language. I want all of you students—all of you Esperantists—to know that the Board of Education understands the scope of your achievement, and we feel it should be shared with the community. I spoke with Tom Lindberg, the editor of the *Cardiff Weekly News*, and he'll be sending out a reporter and a photographer next week to interview you and take pictures." He turned to Mr. Brown and smiled. "We need every kind of good

publicity we can get, especially with the budgeting process coming up.” Mr. Brown nodded dryly. “The reporter will call you and let you know when he’s coming, so please have your students get their materials ready. You know, letters, pictures, and so on.”

Mr. Brown thanked the superintendent. “We’re team players here at Cardiff Elementary,” he said, “and we’re ready to do everything we can to help the district. Boys and girls, I want to thank you for your help and cooperation.” Then he added a few words, saying, “I am delighted to accept this certificate on behalf of the students of Cardiff Elementary School, which is, in my opinion, the finest elementary school in Michigan. As always, we encourage every good kind of learning here at Cardiff.”

Ronny made a noise at this, and then another one as Peter jabbed him hard in the ribs.

“Friendship among nations is very important for all of us,” Mr. Brown went on, ignoring the noises, “and we are going to do everything we can to encourage it among our students. Thank you very much for this certificate, Dr. Wexler. We are going to frame it and hang it among the other fine certificates in our halls. And Peter?”

Peter stood up. “Yes, sir?”

“I think it would be good to have a display case ready when the reporter visits our school. Perhaps one of the teachers will work with you on this.”

“I could ask Mr. Romberg. He’s learning Esperanto.”

There was a little murmur of excitement from some of the students, which Mr. Brown interrupted by saying, “Mr. Romberg will do just fine.”

When the reporter came on Tuesday, she was shown a display case right next to the office. Green cut-out letters on a beige background read “Esperanto—the Friendly Language,” and there were photographs, letters, and a few books: *La Sankta Biblio*, *Hamleto*, *Don Kiĥoto*, and *Winnie-la-Pu*. There was even a discreet little green star, the symbol of Esperanto.

And, if people walking by the case were to look very closely, they would notice that one of the letters on display—a short one, in

simple Esperanto—came not from Lithuania or Russia, but from a small town in New Jersey.

Peter realized that Esperanto was not going to solve all of the world's problems, but he believed it could be used to make a start. He spoke for a long time with the reporter, a young black woman named Alice Green, and he asked her to please make the title of her article "Esperanto—The Language of Friends."

"That's a good idea, Peter," she said. "I don't write the titles, but I'll see what I can do."

Mr. Brown stood nearby during the interview, acting as though the whole business had been in accordance with school policy from the very beginning.

Over the next few weeks, Peter felt proud every time he walked by the display case with its big green letters. He didn't mind Mr. Brown pretending that he'd always approved of the language. He was just happy the principal had changed his mind. But Ronny was upset. He kept saying, "Mr. Brown is a liar."

"I don't think he's a liar, exactly," Marjorie said. "I think he's more of a hypocrite."

Later, Peter told Morgan Renfrew what Ronny had said, and Morgan replied with a quote: "Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue."

Peter passed it on to Ronny one Saturday when a bunch of them were at Du Berry's Family Restaurant, enjoying ice cream sundaes as a little celebration of their success. There was a special pleasure in speaking Esperanto at the restaurant. And Peter was certain that they were mystifying the waitress.

Al and Darlene were explaining how they were getting the principal of Cardiff Junior High interested in introducing Esperanto into the general language class. Judith said it was just the kind of news she'd like to put in her paper: she wanted to use her parents' word-processing program to make an Esperanto newsletter for the group. They all seemed to like the idea. Tony said they could include stuff from the letters they were getting.

Then Ronny added, "And we can write an article about Mr.

Brown's hypocrisy."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Judith said.

"Leave the poor man alone," Peter said. "We've won! Don't mess it up." And then he passed on the quotation from Morgan. Ronny didn't get it at first, so Peter explained: "By pretending that he supported us all along, he's admitting that we were right." Then Ronny got it, laughed, and said, "Okay."

A few moments later, Peter became aware of someone standing right next to their table. He looked up to see a familiar black mustache, but the man was alone this time. No—his friend was over by the cash register, paying their check.

"Excuse me," the man said, speaking with a foreign accent. "What country are you children from?"

There was laughter at the table, and Peter said, "Esperantujo," which means "Esperanto-land."

"Is that far away? I have never heard of such a place."

Peter answered in English, and his standard American accent seemed to surprise the man. "Esperantujo isn't far away," he explained. "Esperantujo is right here. Esperantujo is everywhere!"

The man glared at Peter. He muttered something in his own language, adding in English, "This must be some sort of joke." And then he stormed off.

But it wasn't a joke at all.

About the Secret Language

Pronunciation

Each letter in Esperanto has only one sound, so words are pronounced as they are spelled, and vice versa. The vowels are **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, and **u**, and they rhyme with the English phrase, “Pa, let me go too!”

a rhymes with *pa*

e rhymes with *let*

i rhymes with *me*

o rhymes with *go*

u rhymes with *too*

The other letters are consonants, and most of them sound just like they usually do in English. However, always pronounce:

c like *ts* in *hats*

ĉ like *ch* in *chair*

g like *g* in *good*

ĝ like *g* in *gym*

j like *y* in *yes*

ĵ like *s* in *treasure*

s like *s* in *said*

ŝ like *sh* in *show*

ŭ like *w* in *walk*

Words with more than one syllable are always stressed on the second-to-last syllable. For example: *aglo* is pronounced “AG-lo,” *fratino* is pronounced “fra-TI-no,” and *aventuro* is pronounced “a-ven-TU-ro.”

Words of the Secret Language

List #1. Grammatically important little words (and parts of words) that appear in the story:

- a** Makes an adjective. For example, *amiko* means “friend,” but *amika* means “friendly”; *dangero* means “danger,” but *dangera* means “dangerous.”
- ar** Makes a group of things. For example, *stelo* means “star,” but *stelaro* means “a group of stars”; *aglo* means “an eagle,” but *aglaro* means “a flock of eagles.”
- as** Makes a verb in the present tense. For example, *parolo* means “speech,” but “*Mi parolas*” means “I speak,” or “I am speaking.”
- ĉu** “Whether.” At the beginning of a sentence, *ĉu* makes a yes-or-no question. For example, “*Vi parolas Esperanton*” means “You speak Esperanto,” but “*Ĉu vi parolas Esperanton?*” means “Do you speak Esperanto?”
- e** Makes an adverb. For example, *rapida* means “fast,” but *rapide* means “quickly”; *vera* means “real,” but *vere* means “really.”
- eg** Makes a thing large or intense. For example, *domo* means “house,” but *domego* means “mansion”; *ami* means “to love,” but *amegi* means “to love very much.”
- i** Makes an infinitive verb. For example, *programo* means “a program,” but *programi* means “to program”; *rapida* means “fast,” but *rapidi* means “to hurry.”
- ind** Makes something worth doing. For example, *skribi* means “to write,” but “*skribinda*” means “worth writing,” as in “*skribinda letero*,” which means “a letter worth writing.”
- is** Makes a verb in the past tense. For example, *ŝerci* means “to joke,” and “*Mi ŝercis!*” means “I was joking!”

- j A plural ending, like the English ending -s. For example, *letero* means “a letter,” but *leteroj* means “letters”; *infano* means “child,” but *infanoj* means “children.”
- mal-** Makes an opposite. For example, *rapide* means “quickly,” but *malrapide* means “slowly”; *amo* means “love,” but *malamo* means “hatred.”
- n Marks a direct object, the thing or person that something is done to. For example, “*Mi amas vin*” means “I love you,” and “*Vi amas min*” means “You love me.” The -n also lets you change the word order without changing the meaning: Both “*Mi amas vin*” and “*Vin amas mi*” mean the same thing!
- o Makes a noun. For example, *alta* means “high,” but *alto* means “height”; *danĝera* means “dangerous,” but *danĝero* means “danger.”
- os Makes a verb in the future tense. For example, *kuri* means “to run,” and “*Mi kuros*” means “I will run.”
- pli** “More.” For example, *rapide* means “quickly,” but “*pli rapide*” means “more quickly”; *bona* means “good,” but “*pli bona*” means “better.”
- u Makes a command. For example, *parolo* means “speech,” but “*Parolu pri io*” means “Talk about something.”

List #2. Other words that appear in this book:

adreson address	diris said
afabla nice, friendly, kind	Don Kihoto Don Quixote (the name of a book)
aglaro a flock of eagles	doni (to) give
aglo an eagle	eĉ even
al to	Edvardo Edward
aliaj others	en in
alta high	e-poŝto email, electronic mail
amiko friend	eraras make mistakes
amikoj friends	Esperanto the name of the secret language
amo love	Esperanton the name of the secret language (<i>see also -n on p. 113</i>)
aparta special, apart	Esperantujo an imaginary country where people speak the secret language; the worldwide community of people who speak Esperanto
aŭdis heard	estas is, are, am
aventuroj adventures	estis was, were
Baza Basic (a computer language)	estu be (as in, “Be good!”)
bedaŭras am sorry	fratino sister
bezonas need	galaksio galaxy
Biblio Bible	ĝi it
bona good	ĝis until; ĝis la revido see you later, goodbye
bone good, well	ĝuste exactly
bonvolu please	Hamleto Hamlet (the name of a play)
bruno brown	helpi (to) help
certe certainly	helpo help
ĉi tie here	
ĉio everything	
ĉiuj all, everyone	
ĉu (<i>see ĉu on p. 112</i>)	
danĝera dangerous	
danĝero danger	
dankon thanks, thank you	
de of, from	
diras are saying	

iam sometimes	lingvon language
ili they	Litovujo Lithuania
infanoj children	malalta low
internacia international	malamas hate(s)
interŝanĝi (to) trade, exchange	malamegas hate very much, detest
io something	malamiko enemy
iomete a little bit	malaminda unlovable
jen Here is (like “behold!”)	malamo hate
jes yes	maljuna old (opposite of young)
Jiĉjo Jim	malnova old (opposite of new)
kaj and	malrapide slowly
kapo head	malveron something that isn’t true, a falsehood
kara dear	manĝaĵon food
ke that (as in, “I saw that you were there.”)	manĝu eat (as in, “Eat your ice cream!”)
kie where	mi I
kiu who	mia my
komencas start	min me
kormorano cormorant (a type of bird)	mondo world
krajonon pencil	mortiginda worth killing
kun with	mortigos will kill
kune together	ne no, not
kuri (to) run	nesto nest
kuros will run	ni we
la the	nia our
larĝo width; wingspan	nian our
lernejestroj principals	nobla noble (also Ethel’s nick- name, because <i>Ethel</i> means “noble” in Old English)
lerni (to) learn	nomi (to) call, refer to by a name
letero letter	nomo name
leteroj letters	
leterojn letters	
leteron letter	
liaj his	
lingvo language	

nomon name	sankta holy
nova new	scias know
ol than	sed but
parola spoken	sekreta secret
parolas speak	sendi (to) send
paroli (to) speak, talk	ŝerci (to) joke
parolo speech	ŝercis was joking
parolu speak (as in, “Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”)	serioza serious
Paskalon Pascal (a computer language)	sinjoro mister, Mr.
per by means of, via	skribi (to) write
perdita lost	spaco space
Petro Peter	stelarego an enormous group of stars, a galaxy
pli more (<i>see pli on p. 113</i>)	stelaro a group of stars, a constellation
por for	stelo a star
povas can	stulta foolish, stupid
prenu take (as in, “Take it!”)	stultulo a fool, stupid person
pri about	testamento testament
programi (to) program (a computer)	tie there; ĉi tie , here
rajtas can, may (have the right or permission to do something)	Tinĉjo Tintin (a comic book character, popular in France)
rapida fast	tre very
rapide quickly	tuta whole
revido a next meeting (literally, “a re-seeing”)	uzi (to) use
ricevis received	venu come (as in, “Come on!”)
ruso a Russian	vera real, true
saluton hello, hi!	vere really, truly
samideano someone who speaks the secret language (literally, “same-idea-person”)	vi you
	via your
	viajn your
	vin you
	viro man
	Winnie-la-Pu Winnie the Pooh

To Learn More About the Secret Language

Peter Jameson's secret language is a real language, and everything you read about it in this story is true. You can get more information from the Esperanto League for North America, also known as Esperanto-USA. Just scan the QR code at right, or visit:



<http://esperanto-usa.org/PJSL>

Peter Jameson and his friends at Cardiff

Elementary want their own secret language that the grown-ups won't understand, but learning Latin, French, or Spanish would take too long. Their search finally leads them to Ethel Wingate, an eccentric old lady with an infectious smile and a strange obsession with green stars. She introduces them to a special language they can begin speaking after just a week of study.

When they use the language at school, however, some of the other kids start treating them differently. Ugly rumors are spread. Fights break out. And the principal clamps down with an order of "English Only!" forcing Peter and his friends to make a difficult choice.

Both children and adults can enjoy *Peter Jameson's Secret Language* and start learning this real-life "secret" language along with Peter and his friends.



"An engrossing book. From the very start, you want to turn the page to see what happens next. . . . I found the story moving because it brought back much of my childhood. As it turns out, the language of Peter and his friends was my secret language, too. Like him, I taught it to some of my classmates, and we were mocked and scolded by the teachers. One of my friends picked it up in a month, so I know that young people really can learn it with incredible speed in comparison with other languages."

— **Claude Piron**, Translator at the United Nations and the World Health Organization



Fiction: Eight years old to adult