

# In Flew Enza

A

Novel

by

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*I had a little bird, its name was Enza.*

*I opened the window and 'in flew Enza.'*

Children's street rhyme 1918

## **Prologue**

### **October 1919 - New York City**

Sarah Sentner made a bold and audacious decision for a twenty-year-old. She would leave Brooklyn.

Thirty-six hours later, terrified, exhausted, hungry, and alone, Sarah entered Penn Station at six in the morning. Having never ventured outside New York City, Sarah contemplated the possibility that she may never return.

To reach her destination, a village named Leslie in upstate New York, she would travel all day, or more, and need to transfer trains three times.

Sarah found a wooden bench in railcar 4B of the Hudson River Line of the New York Central railway. As the train headed north out of Manhattan, a foggy window blocked her view of the only city she knew. Rubbing the window with her arm gave her nothing but a wet sleeve. Unable to see outside, and uncertain of her life as it was to be, she clutched her old Gladstone travel bag to her chest and slid away from the window.

Sarah reached into her pocket and withdrew a crumpled piece of newspaper. She read it twice.

**October 4, 1919**

**CHANCE FOR STRONG SPINSTER  
OR WIDOW TO WED**

*Seneca County, New York.*

*I am a healthy man of twenty-nine years who has just lost his dear wife in childbirth three months past. The baby survived but I cannot properly care for the child. No women of marrying age reside nearby, and I cannot leave work to look for a wife. The wet nurse will be leaving no later than November 1. I own a bully general store hereabouts and have a good name in the community of nearby farmers. My wife thought me good enough looking and with a pleasing countenance. Need a mature, strong and healthy, white, god-fearing wife to help with child and store. I require that you have had the Spanish influenza already and recovered. I do not wish women over thirty-five years of age, Catholics, or who use spirits to excess. Send inquiries to the Personal section of this paper. Box OT22*

A tear formed in each eye, but before the tears crossed her cheek, she caught them with the wet sleeve of her overcoat.

## Chapter One

### Brooklyn and Belinda

Solomon Sentner grew up in a village called Chemerivtsi in the Galicia region of Europe. Control of Galicia changed as often as wind direction and in the last part of the nineteenth century, Galicia fell within the borders of Russia.

In 1895, Solomon, an apprentice butcher to his uncle and just twenty, married his second cousin, Rachel Weitzman, three weeks past her sixteenth birthday. Three months later, Solomon escaped conscription in the Russian Army by hours after a man on horseback from a nearby *shtetl*<sup>1</sup> rode into Chemerivtsi claiming the Russian Army was going town to town conscripting every eligible male between sixteen and forty. Four years earlier, Solomon's older brother had been taken and never returned. Rachel filled a knapsack for Solomon with bread, potatoes, and cheese, kissed her husband good-bye, and watched as he fled on foot heading west. Solomon had with him a letter from a cousin, Daniel Sentner, who lived in Hoboken, New Jersey, inviting him to come to America.

A month later, Solomon found himself in Hamburg, Germany, where he gained employment as a butcher. Within four months, he had saved enough money for passage to the United States. Proceeding through Ellis Island weeks later, Solomon found his way to Hoboken, only to discover Daniel Sentner had moved two thousand miles to the west to somewhere in California.

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<sup>1</sup>Shtetl: pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewish village

Undaunted, Solomon rented a one-room apartment in Newark and found two jobs, a butcher during the day and a meatpacker at night. Within thirteen months he had earned enough money to book passage for Rachel to join him. She arrived in New York in September of 1897, and Sarah was born eleven months later, followed by a son, Seth, two years later.

When Solomon found a better paying job in Brooklyn in 1904, he moved the family into a four hundred square foot, fourth floor, two-bedroom tenement apartment, three blocks from the butcher shop. The Sentners shared a water closet with three other families, one Polish, one Irish and one German.

To work, Solomon learned English, but Yiddish remained the language in the apartment. Rachel left Galicia physically, but never spiritually. She saw no reason, nor need, to learn another culture or another language despite pleas from her husband and children. Rachel's English vocabulary rarely proceeded past "yes," "no," and "tank you (sic)."

Rachel believed maintaining the apartment, preparing food, and raising children were her only responsibilities. She never considered, nor was asked, to find employment outside the apartment.

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Sarah, a joyful child, started public elementary school at age six and excelled in her studies. When Seth turned five, Solomon enrolled him into an Orthodox Jewish elementary school or cheder. The cost of cheder strained the Sentner's budget and after Seth celebrated his Bar Mitzvah<sup>2</sup> at thirteen, Solomon moved him to a free public school.

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<sup>2</sup> Bar Mitzvah: the religious initiation ceremony of a Jewish boy who has reached the age of 13 and is regarded as ready to observe religious precepts and eligible to take part in public worship.

At school, Sarah encountered many immigrant children and their parents from various parts of the world, but her life, her thinking, and her actions centered around her mother's friends and their children, exclusively from the Yiddish speaking shtetls of Eastern Europe.

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Sarah's life changed dramatically when, at age ten, Belinda Murphy, moved into the Sentners' building. Six months pregnant with her first child, Belinda, a first-generation Irish American, took an immediate liking to Sarah, whose family lived one flight above.

To Sarah, Belinda was a creature from another planet, so unlike anyone she had ever known. Belinda's unruly red hair, green eyes, full face of freckles, loud voice, and broad, welcoming smile contrasted Rachel Sentner's constant sense of apprehension.

With the door open, Belinda's lilting Irish accent would float up into the Sentner's apartment. Sarah would rush to the stairwell, walk down three steps, sit and stare. One weekend morning soon after the Murphys had moved in, Belinda took note of the dark-haired girl with enormous brown eyes. "What's your name young lady?"

Sarah smiled at being referred to as a 'young lady.' "My name is Sarah Sentner. We live a floor above you."

"I know where ya' live, Sarah Sentner. If ya' keep staring at me, ya' will wear a hole in my forehead," Belinda said, pointing above her eyes. "I'm Belinda Murphy."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Murphy. I didn't mean to stare. I was just curious."

"Curious of what?"

"Your hair. Do you paint it red? I've never seen hair so beautiful."

Belinda laughed. "Actually, I set it on fire every morn until it's red hot, then douse it with saltwater before it hurts too much. That keeps it red."

Sarah's eyes and mouth opened wide, leaving her speechless.

"I'm kidding. It's my natural color. Same as my mother and two sisters. Come on down and I'll show ya'."

Sarah descended the stairs cautiously and Belinda stooped over to let Sarah inspect her hair.

"I need to sit a bit, carrying all this extra baggage," Belinda said, pointing to her expanded belly. "Please come in."

Belinda entered her apartment, but Sarah got only as far as the doorway, afraid to enter.

"Are ya' hungry?" Belinda asked.

"We haven't eaten breakfast yet," Sarah said.

"Go ask your parents if ya' can have breakfast with us. My husband, Seamus, went out to get a newspaper and I'd love a bit o' company."

Sarah rushed upstairs, received permission from her parents, and bounded down the stairs into Belinda's unit. Unusual, unexpected, but pleasant aromas greeted Sarah as she entered Belinda's kitchen.

"Have a seat," Belinda said. "You're Jewish? Right?"

"Yes. But we go to shul<sup>3</sup> rarely now. My parents think God has forgotten about them, so they're going to forget God for a while. My father says you're Irish."

"Yes, we are. How old are ya?"

"I'll be eleven in August."

"Okay, then. I've got ten years on ya'. Are there foods you're not allowed to eat?"

"We don't keep kosher because it's too expensive," Sarah said. "Mama says if it's between starving and eating pork, eat. Of course, my mother says it in Yiddish. She won't speak English because she's embarrassed by her accent. She said I can eat anything."

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<sup>3</sup> Shul: A synagogue or Jewish place of worship

“That’s a lot of information. Are ya’ hungry?”

“I’m starving,” Sarah said, smiling.”

Belinda laughed. “Then eat. I think I like ya’. We’ll be friends.”

“Everything smells so good.”

Into the apartment walked Seamus Murphy. “And who do we have here?” he asked, in a deep booming voice.

Sarah, intimidated by the large, brown-haired, Irish longshoreman, swiveled her head to Belinda, then back. Seamus had a huge chest, heavily muscled forearms and the biggest hands, heavily calloused, she’d ever seen. Sarah grabbed the table edge with both hands and tried, but failed, to appear courageous. “I’m, I’m Sarah. I, uh, live upstairs.”

“Did ya’ invite yourself in for breakfast?”

Sarah gripped the table even tighter, unable to answer.

“Be nice, Seamus. I invited her,” Belinda interjected, stopping the inquisition. “This beautiful young girl is our first guest.” With that, Belinda placed a loaf of soda bread with butter and jams in front of Sarah along with a glass of orange juice, followed by a platter placed in the center of the table with eggs, sausage, vegetables, and potatoes that had been fried in creamery butter.

“Give me your hand, Sarah, while we say grace,” Belinda said. “Ya’ can just listen and it won’t hurt ya’ a bit.’

Belinda took Sarah’s hand and Seamus’ in the other and thanked God for the food on the table.

“We do the same, but in Hebrew,” Sarah said.

“Well, there ya’ go,” Belinda said with a smile.



Sarah, accustomed to a breakfast of dark bread, a soft-boiled egg and a small slice of smoked herring or whitefish, sat paralyzed, not knowing where to start. Belinda dished out portions of everything onto a dinner plate and placed it in front of the awestruck pre-teen. Sarah waited, hands in her lap, for everyone to have a plate before eating, for which Seamus nodded to Belinda at the act of politeness.

Five bites into her breakfast, Sarah said, "Oh my, Mrs. Murphy. I have never tasted anything so wonderful. A king never ate this well. I think it's food from the Gods."

Belinda and Seamus both laughed.

"Belinda, my love," Seamus said. "I think you've made a very good friend."

"Yes." Belinda turned to Sarah. "Since we're now friends, I think ya' should call me Belinda."

"I don't have adult friends," Sarah said, "My parents will be upset if I call you by your first name."

"I'll talk to your pa the next time I see him. I canna have you calling me Mrs. Murphy now. Mrs. Murphy is Seamus' mother, and we don't exactly see eye to eye, and that's a kind description after she claimed I stole her son."

After breakfast, Sarah helped clean, then demanded Belinda come up a flight and say hello to her mother.

With Sarah interpreting, introductions were made. Belinda's first comments to Rachel complimented her on what a beautiful, respectful and polite daughter Sarah had been that morning. Sarah blushed appropriately at the comments.

"Ven iz di beibi rekht?" Rachel asked which Sarah quickly translated - "When is the baby due?"

"Three months," Belinda said which Sarah translated to "Drey khdshim."

"Iz deyn muter noent durkh?" Rachel asked.

"Is your mother close by?" Sarah translated.

"No." Belinda said, which needed no translation.

“Demolt ikh vet helfn ir,” Rachel said. “Ir vet nisht zeyn aleyn.”

“Then I will help you. You won’t be alone.” Sarah translated.

Over time, Belinda Murphy and Rachel Sentner came to a tacit understanding that each would have a necessary role with regard to Sarah. Rachel would teach Sarah family values, tradition, and respect. Belinda would teach Sarah how to survive in a changing and modern America. Both women loved Sarah and, in turn, Sarah loved them back.

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From that point on, a day rarely passed that Sarah did not spend some time with Belinda, enjoying her company and collecting wisdom about navigating the streets of New York.

Belinda would have a son ten weeks later. Seamus’ mother offered no assistance and Belinda’s mother had returned to Ireland. In their stead, Rachel’s experience and cooking helped the novice mother through the first few months. The extra hands Sarah provided cemented their friendship.

Belinda had two more sons in short order. After each pregnancy, Rachel cooked for the Murphys. Although Seamus and Belinda didn’t enjoy Rachel’s bland Jewish cooking style, freshly cooked meals were better than no meals. While Sarah had friends at school, Belinda remained her modern confidante, filling a role Rachel could not.