13. Cowboy

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it’s invalid.
I will provide the chapter now.

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13
Cowboy

oshe leaned on the railing of the outdoor pavilion that stood high above the Ringing Rocks skating rink and stared absently at the skaters below, one hand thrust in his pocket against the freezing cold. Behind him, several teenage skaters sipping hot chocolate laughed, ducking and tossing light snowballs that whizzed past the short, squat man in a felt fedora hat and coat holding an unlit, half-smoked cigar. Moshe ignored them.

He loved coming to Ringing Rocks Rink, just outside of town. The rocks were a tourist attraction, a geographical curiosity left over from the Stone Age. When struck by a hammer, they rang in various tones. The rink and tower with its pavilion were built beside the clump of rocks to accommodate visitors. Climbing to the top of the pavilion and viewing the mountains surrounding Berks County forest was a release for him. He’d offer a Birkhot Hashachar, a morning prayer that helped to free his mind and clear his head and enjoy a temporary respite from the chaos of his theater. It was on the advice of his old friend Malachi that he’d begun these kinds of outings. His friend who had wowed his theater with his wild dancing to the glorious music of the great Mickey Katz, who had written him several times from a small Jewish settlement in Janów Lubelski, Poland, where he’d finally opened, of all things, a chicken farm, selling eggs and kosher chickens. Malachi’s letters were full of his usual boundless enthusiasm, extolling the virtues of country life and the humorous lives of the customers he’d encountered. Moshe admired Malachi’s ability to adapt after every failure despite his adherence to the old ways. Malachi’s letters were always packed with jokes and light humor, and Moshe always tried to return the favor.

He’d come to write to his old friend this morning, and he’d planned to keep his news light and airy as much as he could, for that was the unacknowledged rule between the two, to keep the news bright and cheerful. Except now there was nothing to be cheerful about. His wife lay in a Reading hospital in a coma. Doctors were unsure what was next. The boy was in the hands of the state. He didn’t want to think about it. It was a horrible spiral. How had this all happened?

He gazed down at the skaters and sighed. Chona had insisted on escaping with him to the skating rink after the boy came. They were an odd family, the Jewish merchant, his disabled wife, and their twelve-year-old Negro charge puttering up the hill into the parking lot in his old Packard, coming to a stop not more than ten yards from the rink entrance where a sign had

been posted not many years before stating “No Jews, no dogs, no niggers.” That sign had since been removed, but Chona never skated on her visits. Not once. Nor did she allow the boy to skate. She complained that her foot prevented her from skating, but Moshe knew better. Chona could do whatever she set her mind to. She could have a special skate made. Marv Skrupskelis would do anything for her—he would have made her one in a hot second. And the boy—he didn’t need a skate. He could fly across the rink in his shoes, he was so athletic. Moshe tried to convince Chona to let the boy skate, but she refused. Instead, she commanded, “Go to the tower and smoke your cigar,” and he happily obliged, climbing to the top, where he’d puff his cigar in peace and watch from above as the two clambered among the clump of ringing rocks below. He’d watch as she struck the rocks with a hammer while the child placed his hands on them to feel the vibrations. He thought the whole business foolish and at one point said so, but Chona disagreed. “The rocks are as old as the earth. He can hear them a little. They’re helpful to him,” she said.

Helpful, Moshe thought bitterly. That’s how she thought. Helpful here, helpful there. Now look. Who was helping them now? “All that is past now,” he said aloud, ignoring the teenagers who giggled behind him and playfully romped about the odd man at the railing chomping on the unlit cigar and acting as if they weren’t there. An errant snowball landed near him, so Moshe moved to a bench. He dusted the light snow off it, seated himself, produced a pen and paper, and began his letter to Malachi.

He scribbled fast, the unlit cigar clenched between his teeth, ignoring the cold in his hands. It wasn’t just Chona being in the hospital, he wrote. Nor the Negro child placed in the nuthouse, that was bad, too. It’s the theater business, he explained. Times are changing. You were right, he wrote. Jews here don’t want Yiddish theater and Yiddish music and good old frolic and fun anymore. They want American things. They want to be cowboys. Even the Negro jazz musicians have grown difficult. Last night was the last straw.

He paused, intent on telling Malachi in detail the events of the previous night. He tried three times, crossed out what he had written, then stopped writing and pondered how to explain it. He sat a moment, thinking back over it, unsure how to proceed, the cold beginning to work its way into his neck, for he’d forgotten to wear a scarf. He reached into his pocket for a match to light his cigar, found none, thought a bit more, then simply scribbled, Just so you know, I’m thinking of getting out.

It was last night’s incident that bore that out. After leaving Chona in the hospital, he’d rushed to the theater and arrived at 7:30—horribly late for an 8 p.m. start—to find himself in a hot mess.

Lionel Hampton’s band and Machito and his Afro-Cubans were booked to play a dual date. The Afro-Cubans were a last-minute replacement for the original headliner, Louis Armstrong, who was hung up in Denver because of bad weather. It was not a good situation to start. Armstrong’s manager was the powerful Joe Glaser out of New York. Glaser had offered a sub, but Moshe, distracted by Chona’s illness and tired of paying Glaser’s huge percentage, declined and decided to book the replacement himself. He called his old friend Chick Webb. But alas, his old pal, the first Negro he’d ever booked, the wonderful hunchbacked musical genius, was very ill. “Get Mario Bauzá and his Afro-Cubans,” Webb croaked over the phone. “They’re fantastic.”

It was in tribute to the ailing Webb that he’d booked the Afro-Cubans, because he was certain that his Chicken Hill audience had no idea who

Mario Bauzá, Machito, and the Afro-Cubans were. Mario was a wonderful musician, and Moshe was sure the Afro-Cubans were fantastic. But he'd assumed the Afro-Cubans would be the warm-up act and Hampton's band would close as headliners. He should have worked that out before the two acts arrived. Instead, when he walked backstage last night, both bands were milling around while Lionel Hampton's wife, Gladys, who ran her husband's band, and Mario Bauzá, who ran the Afro-Cubans, were at each other's throats about who would play last.

"We play last," Gladys said. "We're the headliners."

"You can go first," Mario said.

"Act your age, not your color, Mario. G'wan out there."

"Ladies first, Gladys."

As Moshe stepped in the door, both turned to him. "Moshe," Gladys snapped. "You better tell us something."

Moshe stood at the stage door entrance afraid to speak—he hated confrontations—while both bands, clad in suits and ties, milled about anxiously, clasping horns and smoking nervously, pretending they weren't listening.

He looked at his watch. "It's nearly eight," he said meekly. "Can't you two work it out?"

He spoke to both, but he was really addressing Mario, the cooler of the two. Mario was calm and professorial. Gladys, on the other hand, was a hurricane. She was a handsome Negro woman, always dressed to the nines, and would fight with any man in the business.

Instead of answering, Mario, a genteel Latino clad in a blue suit, bow tie, and wire-rim glasses, stepped to a billboard poster hanging on the wall, a few of which Moshe had managed to get printed up at the last minute to advertise the event. He dropped his finger on the words "Featuring Mario Bauzá and Machito and the Afro-Cubans." He did it calmly, like an economics professor pointing out an equation to a class, then said, "Gladys, what's this mean?"

"It means you can read English."

"It means we're the headliners."

"No, it doesn't. Pops was the headliner," Gladys said, using the name musicians affectionately called Louis Armstrong.

"That's right," Mario said, "and we're replacing him."

"Mario, you can look in the mirror ten times and comb your face ten times, and you still won't see Pops looking back at you."

Mario's professorial calm dissipated and he muttered in Spanish, "Tienes razón. Te pareces mucho más a Pops que a mí. Y eso es un hecho." (You're right. You look a hell of a lot more like Pops than I do. And that's a fact.)

Several Afro-Cubans standing nearby chortled.

Gladys turned to a member of her band. "Pedro, what'd he just say?"

The man looked away mumbling. "I don't know, Gladys."

Gladys turned back to Mario and pointed to the stage. "All right, ya cow-walking turd! Get to work!"

"I am at work!"

"On the stage!"

"The contract says we're the headliners!"

"What contract?" she said.

"Did you read the contract, Gladys?"

"We played DC last month with Pops and we went last, Mario!"

"That was DC!" Mario sputtered. "This is Potthead . . . Pottsville—"

“Pottstown,” Moshe interjected politely.
Mario was seething. He glanced at Moshe and mumbled in Spanish.
“Todo el mundo alrededor de este maldito lugar está en la niebla!”
(Everyone around this goddamned place is in a fog!)
Gladys broke in. “Stop jabbering, ya bush-league greaser! The crowd’s waiting! G’wan out there so we can make our money and get down the road!”
The insult struck the demure Mario like a lightning bolt and rage climbed into his face. Before he could respond, Moshe stepped in.
“Please!” he said.
They both glared at him now. He was petrified, staring down at the floorboards, wishing he could disappear beneath them. He hated moments like this. He had no idea what to do. If only Chona was here. How many times had she helped him work these things out beforehand, talked through problems, made him put his foot down, and pointed him in the right direction? He glanced at Gladys’s husband, Lionel Hampton, hoping for some help, but the great bandleader stood in a far corner with his vibes, which were on wheels, ready to be rolled onstage. Hampton seemed to be focused on his mallets, which suddenly needed all sorts of tampering and adjusting.
“Maybe Mario can go last . . . tonight,” Moshe said weakly. “And you guys can go last tomorr—”
Gladys spun on her heel and stomped off toward the backstage pay phone before he even finished. “I’m calling Joe Glaser,” she said.
That did it for Moshe. If Joe Glaser found out he’d booked another band behind his back, he was sunk. Glaser was a booking powerhouse. Cross Joe Glaser and the lucrative stopover dates that small theaters like his depended on—the Louis Armstrongs, the Duke Ellingtons, the Lionel Hamptons—would vanish.
He called out. “Wait, Gladys, please! Just gimme a minute!”
She paused and looked back, nodding satisfactorily as Moshe gently touched Mario’s elbow and led the great musician through a side door as far away from the others as he could. The door led to a hallway that separated the stage from the dance hall.
Moshe stood with his back to the dance floor, the bustling of the crowded dance hall buzzing behind him, and looked at Mario, whose face was tight with fury.
“I’ll never play this batshit town again,” Mario said.
“I made a mistake, Mario. I’m sorry.”
“You should’a worked this out before. You know how Gladys is.”
“I couldn’t reach her.”
“That nut lives on the phone.”
“She was on the road, Mario. I was . . . my wife is sick.”
Mario nodded tersely, cooling slightly. “So I heard. What’s she got?”
Moshe sighed. “Got” didn’t seem the appropriate word. People “got” the flu. “It’s a brain tumor . . . or something. The doctors . . . there was a fight in her store . . . she had a bad seizure. She hasn’t come around yet.”
The great musician, holding his trumpet at his chest with both hands, peered at Moshe for a long moment, the color returning to his face. Then the usual patient kindness for which the great trumpeter was so well-known worked its way back into his face. He glanced down at his instrument, fingering its valves nervously. “That’s bad news, mijo. It’s going around. Chick’s sick, too.”

“I know. You seen him?”
Mario nodded, frowning, at the floor. “Not good, mijo. He’s not doing too good.”
The two men were silent a moment. Moshe, thinking of the great Chick Webb, so heartful and talented, banging his drums, laughing with joy, shouting to his thundering band as the customers danced, his music roaring through the great All-American Dance Hall and Theater, bringing light to Moshe’s life, his theater, the town, and his wife. It was too much, and Moshe found himself wiping tears from his eyes.
“I’m losing everything,” he said.
Mario sighed, then said, “We’ll open the show.”
Moshe recovered and cleared his throat. “My cousin Isaac runs the Seymour Theaters down in Philly. I’ll get him to book you down there. We’ll do it next year, when you’re going west. Then you can come here after.”
“You gonna book it through Joe Glaser or me?” Mario asked.
“However you want.”
“I don’t wanna do nothing with Glaser. I want to go through my people,” Mario said. “Lemme show you something.”
Moshe was leaning on the door. Mario gently pushed him aside and cracked open the door behind him. The sound of excited Spanish chatter flowed into the hallway. Then Mario closed the door again.
“Hear that?”
“Hear what?”
“That’s Spanish, mijo. That’s the sound of the future. These people don’t want swing music. They want the descarga, ponchando, tanga, piano guajeos, mamba, Africano-Cubano. Swing’s not enough.”
Moshe couldn’t help himself. The promoter in him came through, and he thought, Where do these people come from? Reading? Phoenixville? Where did Nate put up those posters? He felt ashamed at that moment, thinking of business when his wife was in the hospital fighting for her life. But it was, after all, an opportunity. “I didn’t know there were so many Spanish people around here,” he mumbled.
Mario smiled. “To you, they’re Spanish. To me, they’re Puerto Rican, Dominican, Panamanian, Cuban, Ecuadorian, Mexican, Africano, Afro-Cubano. A lot of different things. A lot of different sounds mixed together. That’s America, mijo. You got to know your people, Moshe.”
Mario opened the backstage doorway, summoned his band, and moments later, Moshe watched in awe as the Afro-Cubans proceeded to burn the wallpaper off the walls of the All-American Dance Hall and Theater with the wildest, hottest Latin beats Moshe had ever heard. The audience went mad, dancing like demons. And when Mario’s band was done, the hard-charging Lionel Hampton band took the stage demoralized, their swing music falling on ambivalent ears, leaving even the usual black customers in their seats, reaching for drinks, talking, chortling, and laughing, using the time to drink and joke and as a chance to rest their tired feet, which had carried them all week as they swept floors and poured coffee and emptied garbage bins and slung ice. It was a lesson. And Moshe received it in full.
Seated on the platform above the Ringing Rocks ice-skating rink as fresh snow began to fall, Moshe took his letter out again. You are right, he wrote. The old ways will not survive here. There are too many different types of people. Too many different ways. Maybe I should be a cowboy.
He sealed the letter and sent it.

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THREE WEEKS LATER, Moshe received a package in the mail that was carefully wrapped in a series of three boxes, with newspaper in each, each carefully bundled with string with a label marked “Fragile.” It took him a good twenty minutes to open it, and when he finally did, he burst out laughing, for inside was a tiny pair of cowboy pants made of what appeared to be some kind of moleskin, too small to be worn, infant-sized, with frills on the side and with a tiny Star of David sewn onto the back. Attached to them was a note from Malachi in Yiddish saying, Try these, cowboy.

Moshe responded by sending the awful pants back in a package that was even harder to open. He rolled them into a tight ball, stuffed them in a metal tobacco can, filled the top of the can with newspaper and corn husks, then inserted the can into yet another larger coffee can that he sealed with wax. He inserted that into a larger empty pretzel can stuffed with paper wrappings and cellophane, then walked into the theater and told Nate, who was atop a ladder fixing the curtain pulley, that he wanted it soldered shut.

Nate, high on the ladder, stared down in silence a moment, then said, “You want it what?”

“Soldered shut. I’m sending it overseas to my friend Malachi. It’s a joke.”

“I don’t know how to solder.”

“You know anyone who can?”

“Fatty learned to solder over at the Flagg factory. He can do it. He solders stuff all day.”

“Can you ask him?”

There was a long silence. From the floor, Moshe watched Nate lift his head to stare into the dark shadows of the walkway above, the network of pulleys, ropes, and skeletal metal rods that lived atop the stage.

“I’ll get it done.”

Moshe placed the can on the floor. The delight in this silly exchange lightened his heart, and he began to think things through more clearly—about his wife, and their circumstance, and that of Dodo, of whom his wife was so fond. A clarity arrived in his head for the first time, and he called up,