

18. The Hot Dog

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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The Hot Dog

week after she'd been assaulted, Chona, lying in her hospital bed, found herself awake with the words of the song-prayer Barukh She'amar swirling about her head like butterflies. She felt the prayer more than heard it; it started from somewhere deep down and fluttered toward her head like tiny flecks of light, tiny beacons moving like a school of fish, continually swimming away from a darkness that threatened to swallow them. She was witnessing a dance, she realized, one that originated in a place far out of her view, someplace she had never been before. Her lips felt suddenly dry. She was overcome by a sudden massive thirst and must have announced it, for water came from somewhere. She felt it touch her throat and heard the words of the prayer, "Blessed be the One who spoke the world into being." She was grateful. She loved that prayer as a child. She sang it with her father as she held his hand on Sabbath mornings as the two walked to shul. It always drew the same response. He'd chuckle and say, "You can never go wrong when you express your love to the master of the world," then slip a marble or a coin or a small gift into her hand. Wonderful. How come she hadn't remembered this before? Then she sensed, more than felt, a hand slipping into hers, and she knew then that she was alive and that he was near, somewhere, her Moshe; and in the recesses of her mind, far from the conscious place where it should have been, and forever from where it might ever be again, she heard once again the sweet trumpet, the lovely cornet, that beautiful longing, the message that everlasting love, forever impressed, forever stamped, forever noted, the one great piece of sensibility stamped into the life of those lucky enough to receive it, remained. She also knew at that moment that she was not long for this world, that she was dying, and that she must tell him and release him. With that knowledge came the smell of something strange. Something trefah, forbidden. Unmistakable in its odor. And delicious.

A hot dog.

There was a hot dog in there somewhere, in her dream. In the room. Somewhere close. The aroma was unmistakable. It was so strong and present, she felt embarrassed and unclean, for the two things did not belong together—the precocious call of the universe and the sloppy, happy piece of trefah that her friend Bernice considered life's greatest treat when they were in school. She had tasted one once. It was delicious. She and Bernice had ventured to Fatty's dilapidated hamburger stand up on Pigs Alley when— Was she fifteen then? Was it after Mrs. Patterson's cooking class? Then, as her mind pushed into the memory, she felt pain slice in and smash the

memory to bits, rendering it cold—pain, real pain, in her middle section, inside, somewhere deep—and the faint cloud of memory and the aroma vanished; and slowly, gradually, she opened her eyes and peered around the room.

She found her hand in Moshe's, who was asleep on a chair next to her. He sat parallel to where she was lying, facing outward so that his head could be near hers, just inches away, but in full slumber, his chin at his chest, his hand cradling hers. He looked ghastly, pale and exhausted, and her guilt was so extreme she wanted to call out, "What have I done?" But she could not. The young man who wandered into her father's basement that November afternoon twelve years ago, so funny and innocent, with a pocket full of flyers and not a dime to his name, so charming, always so positive, was gone. In his place was a frightened, downtrodden, middle-aged man. She wanted to beat herself over the head for the times she'd chastised him for being so naïve, for eating losses from musicians who flayed him with their drinking and borrowing and constant quarreling, and for yammering in his ear, saying, "Why would you do something so stupid?" She felt rent in two by guilt, for not once in all their years together had he muttered a word of grievance or protest about her store, which never made a dime, and her unwillingness to move off the Hill or that she'd been unable to give him a son or daughter. He was a true Jew, a man of ideas and wit who understood the meaning of celebration and music and that the blend of those things meant life itself. And how she regretted, watching his face locked in grief even as he slept, his lip trembling, that she'd frittered hours away reading about socialists and unions and progressives and politics and corporations, fighting about a meaningless flag that said "I'm proud to be an American," when it should have said "I'm happy to be alive," and what the difference was, and how one's tribe cannot be better than another tribe because they were all one tribe. An extraordinary wisdom came upon her, one she had not imagined possible, and she wanted to share it with him in those first—or perhaps last—moments of her consciousness. But after seeing his lovely face, she felt yet again an enormous burst of pain from her stomach and her head. It was so great that it felt as if her arteries were ripping out the back of her skull, and the little white flecks of magic that zipped about ahead of the chasing darkness as the Barukh She'amar danced in her dream went zip, poof, then fluttered away and was gulped by the dark and the wonderfully horrible odor of the hot dog that seemed to press against her nose. She waved a hand in the air and said, "Throw that thing out."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw figures in the room move. There was a quick shuffle of feet and Moshe was awake.

He saw her gazing at him and his face brightened. "Throw out what?" he asked.

"The hot dog," she said.

Moshe looked around the room. Her gaze followed his. Surrounding her bed stood Moshe's cousin Isaac, Rabbi Feldman, the twins Irv and Marv Skrupskelis, and behind them Addie, Nate, and Bernice. There was someone missing.

"Where's Dodo?" she asked.

"We'll get him back," Moshe said.

But she did not hear the rest, for the suffering at the moment was too great to dwell on what had happened in the store. Dodo had tried to defend her, poor thing, and he'd been denied. She saw Moshe spin out of his chair,

still clasping her hand, and place his other hand on her face, kneeling beside her bed. He said a few words to her, but she could not hear or speak. She felt movement on the other side of her bed and glanced over to see Addie, who grabbed a towel and wiped her face. Bernice was behind her and looked ashen, which touched Chona, for Bernice was very shy, and she had not seen Bernice away from her house in Chicken Hill since they were children.

“Are you eating a hot dog, Bernice? That’s cheating.”

It was a joke, and Chona was immediately sorry she said it, not because both knew Bernice wasn’t kosher but because the act of speaking sent a thousand daggers of pain through her insides. Bernice appeared confused, and it was only after Moshe turned to her and translated did Chona realize she had spoken in Yiddish. Bernice, her gorgeous dark face always so grim, the smooth black skin of an unmelting armor draped over the gorgeous nose and full lips, smiled sadly. That was a rare thing to see. It was as if a sweet drizzle of desert rain had come into the room and washed them all.

Bernice, a torrent of sadness dripping off her long, beautiful face, said softly, “No, Chona. I haven’t had a hot dog.”

That was the last Chona saw of Bernice, for the pain was too great for her to keep her eyes open so she closed them. She heard another shuffling of feet and Rabbi Feldman singing, intoning the prayer of *Mi Shebeirach* for healing, mangling it with his horrible cantoring, and she wanted to thank him and say, “Well, you’re improving,” even though he was not, but she appreciated his presence. And then she heard Moshe’s voice speaking firmly, almost angrily, to the room, saying, “Get out. Please. Everyone.” She heard more shuffling of feet and sensed bodies leaving. They were alone. As always, Moshe knew what to do.

IN THE HALLWAY of the Reading hospital unit, the odd group of well-wishers gathered in front of the nurses’ station. Three white nurses glanced at them, then turned back to their charts. No one bothered to mention if there was a place for the group to go, so they stood there. There was nowhere to sit, no coffee to drink, no kind Presbyterian minister to offer words of solace. They just stood uncomfortably as the odd clump of Americans they were: Jews and blacks, standing together—Marv Skrupskelis leaning on the wall in workman’s clothing, his large fists balled in his pocket; Irv, fresh from work at the shoe store, in salesman’s garb, suspenders and white shirt; Isaac, tall, proud, imposing, and impeccable, clad in a wool suit and black homburg, his stern face etched in stressed sorrow; Rabbi Feldman, his nervous hands fingering a worn siddur (prayer book). A few feet from them stood Nate and Bernice, worlds apart from each other, staring at Addie down the hall, who stood nervously outside the doorway to Chona’s room, her hands clasped before her chest, peering inside.

There was nothing to do but talk, which at times like these is all that’s left.

Rabbi Feldman gently touched Isaac’s arm and spoke in English. “How was your travel from Philly?” he asked.

Isaac shrugged.

“I take it you received my letter?”

“What letter?” Isaac said.

“The one I sent telling you about the shul and the rumors about what happened at the store. We wanted to contact the pol—”

Isaac thrust a quick finger in the air to silence Feldman, who was

intimidated by the barrel-chested well-dressed stranger with the stone face. He had never met Moshe's cousin. He had only heard rumors. A hard man. Not to be fooled with.

Isaac turned to the Skrupskelis twins. He spoke Yiddish. "Which of you were here when Chona's father built the shul?"

Marv was silent and looked away. He was the grimmer of the two Skrupskelises, and no rich Romanian theater owner from Philadelphia would speak to him like he was chopped liver. It was Irv who answered.

"We were here."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Did he build it?"

"Of course he did."

"Alone?"

Irv shrugged. He was in no mood to answer demanding Romanian theater owners who gave him the third degree.

It was Marv who spoke out. The gruff Lithuanian answered with the kind of gravity and directness that Isaac appreciated. "He built it with a colored named Shad."

"So the colored would know where the water pipe is connected to the public faucet's well?" Isaac asked.

"He'd tell us but he's dead."

"Who worked with him?"

Marv nodded at Bernice. "That's his daughter. Her brother might know."

Isaac glanced at Bernice, then at Nate, who stood next to her. He started to say something, then stopped. Instead, he said, "I'll see it repaired."

Marv shrugged. "Go ahead if you want. Doc Roberts, though, that's another matter."

"I don't know that name," Isaac said.

Rabbi Feldman said, "I wrote about him in the letter to you."

Isaac didn't respond. He didn't even look at Feldman. The man was weak. Weak Jews were a waste of time. Weak Jews would never survive in America. Or anyplace. He kept his eyes trained on Marv. The two men eyed each other for a moment. Then he turned to Feldman and said, "I told you I don't know that name."

"It was in my letter."

"I never received any letter. And I never heard that name."

Rabbi Feldman started to interject that he had clearly spelled out the whole business in his letter and that the letter was probably misplaced or lost, but he was interrupted by Moshe's long, piercing howl, which rang down the hallway. The group turned and saw Addie at the doorway of the room, her hand clasped to her mouth now, her shoulders hunched as she stepped into the room.

The odd group of well-wishers slowly moved down the hallway as Moshe's sobs cascaded up and down the walls, bouncing from one side to the other. The discourse on Doc Roberts was forgotten now as the group tromped forward, a ragtag assortment of travelers moving fifteen feet as if it were fifteen thousand miles, slow travelers all, arrivals from different lands, making a low trek through a country that claimed to be so high, a country that gave them so much yet demanded so much more. They moved slowly, like fugees, wanderers seeking a home in Europe, or erú West African tribesmen herded off a ship on a Virginia shore to peer back across the Atlantic in the direction of their homeland one last time, moving toward a

common destiny, all of them—Isaac, Nate, and the rest—into a future of American nothing. It was a future they couldn't quite see, where the richness of all they had brought to the great land of promise would one day be zapped into nothing, the glorious tapestry of their history boiled down to a series of ten-second TV commercials, empty holidays, and sports games filled with the patriotic fluff of red, white, and blue, the celebrants cheering the accompanying dazzle without any idea of the horrible struggles and proud pasts of their forebears who had made their lives so easy. The collective history of this sad troupe moving down the hospital corridor would become tiny blots in an American future that would one day scramble their proud histories like eggs, scattering them among the population while feeding mental junk to the populace on devices that would become as common and small as the hot dog that the dying woman thought she smelled; for in death, Chona had smelled not a hot dog but the future, a future in which devices that fit in one's pocket and went zip, zap, and zilch delivered a danger far more seductive and powerful than any hot dog, a device that children of the future would clamor for and become addicted to, a device that fed them their oppression disguised as free thought. Had the group of stragglers moping down the hallway seen that future, they would have all turned en masse and rushed from the hospital out into