20. The Antes House

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The Antes House

us Plitzka, chairman of the Pottstown city council, hated Memorial Day. Every year for as long as anyone could remember, the annual meeting of the John Antes Historical Society's Cornet Marching Band was held in conjunction with the meeting of Pottstown's city council. The meetings were held five minutes apart—one after the other. First the city council met. Then the entire historical society assembled out front. Declarations were made, proclamations exclaimed. Then the John Antes Historical Society's Cornet Marching Band played. Next, everyone put down their instruments and breakfast was served with German beer and sausages because the Germans had to be thrown in there somewhere, since they owned practically everything in town. Then the band played again. Then the fire engines from the Empire Fire Company showed up ringing their bells, and finally, by afternoon, with lots of harumphs and yahoos and boops and bangs and fits and starts and proclamations, the Memorial Day march began, with the city council members clad in Revolutionary-era costumes serving as parade marshals.

It was a nod to history, a sentimental bid to the great John Antes, Pottstown's greatest composer. Nobody outside Pottstown had ever heard of Antes, of course, in part because he wrote trumpet sonatas that nobody played, and in part because the John Antes Historical Society's Cornet Marching Band, which was composed of forty-five souls—numbskulls, pig farmers, heavy smokers, bums, drunks, cheerleaders, tomboys, bored college students, and any other white American in Montgomery County who could purse their lips tight enough to blast a noise through a trumpet—sounded like a cross between a crank engine trying to start on a cold October morning and a dying African silverback gorilla howling out its last. It was all a nod to Antes, the great composer, husband, father, revolutionary, statesman, plunderer, iron maker, wife beater, cornetist, Indian grave robber, and all-around great American who served as president of Pottstown borough and as a colonel under the great George Washington himself—and still found time to write marching band sonatas for trumpet, imagine that. After the daylong party and parade celebrating his life wound its way back to the Antes House, more speeches were delivered, followed by a giant outdoor pig roast party, followed by fireworks blasted into the night, at which time everyone got drunk and forgot all about old John.

The entire celebration began and ended every year at the great composer's Revolutionary-era home, an exhausted, crumbling, stone-and-stucco structure hunched at the corner of High Street and Union guarding

Chicken Hill like an old witch, the tattered neighborhood that rose up behind it like a drunk male cousin hovering over little cousin Mary at Christmas, who just turned eighteen and suddenly evolved from a gap-toothed tomboy into a flamethrower. The beloved Antes House was a cherished treasure, admired and saluted, the center of the universe for Pottstown's white citizens on Memorial Day. It also faithfully honored the town's Negro citizens the other 364 days a year, serving as a wonderful shithouse, beer-guzzling headquarters, hideout from the cops, playpen for runaways, tiedown spot for errant mules, and last-resort sex spot for Chicken Hill teenagers in lust and love, all of whom graciously vanished a week before Memorial Day when a truck bearing the words "Pottstown. History in IRONG" with the G crossed out—a painter's mistake—clunked to the curb. A crew of men tumbled out and the annual transformation began. American flags were hoisted. Plywood coverings were removed from the windows, sashes painted and repaired, the sidewalk swept clean, the brick walkway hosed down, the house scrubbed from top to bottom, and when they finished, the exhausted workmen did the same thing they did every year: they stood back and gazed at the old house with their hands on their hips, shaking their heads like a mother who had just washed her son's face ten times only to realize that he was just plain ugly in the first place. But American history is not meant to be pretty. It is plain. It is simple. It is strong and truthful. Full of blood. And guts. And war. "Iron," the mayor announced with his usual cheery bluster at the end of the 1936 annual city council and Antes society's meetings, "is what made this town great. We are the cannon makers. The gun makers. The steelmakers. The blood! The guts! The glory! God is on our side! Remember: George Washington's victory here at Pottstown was the precursor to the great battle of Valley Forge! Never forget!"

Plitzka, seated at a table inside the Antes House among the council members, received this speech with a grumble and a wince. His big toe was killing him. It was swollen to the size of a meatball. Plus, he had a headache—two of them. The first was in his head. The second no aspirin could solve. Plitzka was the new owner of the Clover Dairy, employer of twenty-nine people—the first in his family to do such a thing, which, if that wasn't the American dream, he told friends, what is? Imagine that. Of course, the friends who knew him well liked to imagine him drowning, but that wasn't the point. He was the boss! The top dog. Owner of the deck.

Problem was, the deck dealt him from a bottom card. Not a month before, just as the deal closed, he discovered he hadn't lined up his nickels properly and was $1,400 short. In desperation, he called on his cousin Ferdie, who had a wonderful head on his shoulders for swindling suckers and banking horses at the nearby Sanatoga Racetrack. Ferdie declared himself short as well but recommended Plitzka to a "good friend" in Philadelphia who happily loaned him the money. The friend turned out to be a frightening mobster named Nig Rosen.

Every time Plitzka thought of Rosen, his insides felt like liquefying Jell-O. He was $1,400 plus interest in the red to a bona fide gangster and had nowhere to find the money. Now, instead of spending the day scheming up ways to burn himself out of that hole, he had to waste a precious day limping around as a parade marshal while hoping Rosen's palookas wouldn't make a public appearance. They had already shown up at his office twice. It was a mess. Sitting at the table, with his toe throbbing, he wanted to burst into tears.

When the meeting ended, he sat drumming his fingers on the table as the other council members headed for the door and band members clambered into the room bearing all manner of cornets. Plitzka lingered, scanning the newcomers for Doc Roberts. He was hoping that Doc, who was a member of just about every historical society in town and marched in every parade, was a member of the John Antes Historical Society as well. He sighed in relief when he spotted Doc's recognizable hobble at the far end of the room. Doc was holding, of all things, a tuba.

Plitzka rose from the table, his toe aching, and made his way past the band members to Doc, who was busy fumbling with the instrument. "Hey, Doc, my toe is killing me," he said.

Doc glanced at Plitzka and turned back to his instrument, fumbling with its valves. "Come by my office tomorrow," he said.

"It's bad. Can you take a look now?"

Doc turned and took a quick glance around the crowded anteroom.

"Here?"

"Outside."

"I gotta play."

"It can't wait," Plitzka said.

Doc turned back to fiddling with his tuba as Plitzka stood behind him, helpless. He couldn't stand Doc. Old-money clubfoot snob. One of the Mayflower children. Parade co-marshal because his family had been here since the Indians and all that. Got to blow a tuba in an all-trumpet marching band. The two had tangled years before on the city council back when Doc had served. Plitzka wanted to spend seventy dollars on a bronze plaque to celebrate the establishment of the town's first Polish business. Doc had objected, saying, "We can't give a plaque to every family that baked bread here. The Polish have only been here since 1885—that's after the Civil War." Plitzka never forgot the insult and was happy to engineer Doc's exit from the council by moving a few political odds and ends around and getting him to resign.

Doc, for his part, bore equal distaste for Plitzka, whom he regarded as a climber, a two-fisted political-club fighter, and the "new" kind of Pottstown resident: i.e., a man without honor. Plitzka supplied cases of bourbon to locals for their votes. He bullied local bankers into submission by threatening to ban coal deliveries on streets where their businesses were. Even the big boys at McClinton Iron and Bethlehem Steel answered his calls. His house on the west side had a living room the size of a rugby field and a welcome mat written in Old English. How did a Pole, whose family's pisshole of a farm atop Chicken Hill couldn't sprout fleas, get that kind of money? But given what happened up at the Jewish store on the Hill, Doc didn't need any new enemies, especially now. Especially Plitzka, who was dangerous.

"All right, Gus," he grumbled.

The two men moved toward the door. Neither noticed the two Italian women picking up papers and sweeping, moving around like ghosts. Pia Fabicelli, the city council's official janitor, was also reluctantly in attendance, having been summoned away from her usual duties at city hall to clean up behind the masters at the Antes House. She'd brought Fioria to help.

As the two swept through the room removing coffee cups, cake crumbs, and leftover papers that were the city council's usual fare, they noticed Doc and Plitzka hobbling for the door, both limping, with Plitzka leading the

way.
Pia nudged Fioria and quipped in Italian, “Look. Twins.”
Fioria chuckled. “If you stick your finger in the mouth of one, the other will bite.”
They laughed and went back to work as Doc followed Plitzka outside. Plitzka took a seat on the cracked brick front steps of the Antes House, removed his shoe, peeled off his sock, and revealed the toe. It was ghastly: bulging, red, and wrinkled. “What do you think?” he asked.
Doc stared at the wrinkled toe. “Whatever it is,” he said, “it needs pressing.”
“Ain’t you gonna check it out? It’s killing me.”
“I need my instruments. How did it get that way?”
“That’s what you’re here for.”
“I’m not a mind reader, Gus. Did you hit it on something? A desk? A chair? Did something fall on it?”
“No.”
“What have you done lately?”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Maybe you went for a walk somewhere and stepped on something. Or maybe something fell on it, maybe in the plant, on the job?”
“This is my job,” Plitzka said dryly. “I don’t work in a plant, Doc. I’m city council president.”
“Gus, give me a break. I’m trying to figure it out.”
“I’m in pain!”
Doc sat on the stoop one step below Plitzka, gingerly picking up the foot by the heel but avoiding touching the disgusting toe, hoping it didn’t smell like mustard gas. He placed the foot down gently. “When did it start? The pain.”
“I’m not sure,” Gus said. “Last month me and the missus went to John Wanamaker’s department store in Philly. She wanted to ride the elevator. The thing got stuck on the fifth floor for twenty minutes. I think it started then.”
That was partly true. He had done those things. But his foot had actually started aching later that afternoon when he had left his wife in Wanamaker’s to shop and walked four blocks to the gangster Nig Rosen’s tavern on Broad Street. It was all so innocent. His cousin Ferdie said Rosen was a straight shooter. Clean. A good guy. And at first, Plitzka found him just as his cousin described: down-to-earth, reassuring, as Plitzka explained the situation to him. “I’m a farmer’s boy,” Plitzka said. “Worked my way up. Street sweeper. Clerk. City council. Now I’m at the door. This close to buying the dairy that owns half the milk in town. I just need to get over this last hump.” Rosen had been reassuring. “I’m a tavern owner,” he said. “I know a little about supply and demand. Thank goodness Prohibition didn’t kill us off.” He gave Plitzka the $1,400 with a smile and a 5 percent monthly interest rate on a handshake. Then, the next week, he arrived at Plitzka’s office with two large goons, demanding 35 percent interest starting that day, with that interest bringing the loan payoff to $2,900. Plitzka refused. “Do I look stupid? That’s more than double the amount,” he said. “I won’t pay.” Rosen’s kindly features vanished and he coolly pulled back his jacket to reveal a pistol and said, “How about I show up at your house and jam this in your face?”
And just like that, the deal that was supposed to boost him into the echelons of Pottstown royalty had closed up tightly around his neck,

strangling him. An extra $420 a month over his normal expenses, including payroll, that were figured to the penny. Where would he get that from? Sitting on the steps, his toe bristling with pain, thinking of Rosen and those gorillas standing at the front door of his house, with his wife and kids just inside, made Plitzka's skin prickle.

"So it's from nerves?" Doc Roberts said.

"If it's nerves, it's working overtime, Doc. This feels like a mousetrap."

"Soon as the rehearsal's done, before we march, I'll run by the office and pick up a little something," Doc said.

Plitzka seemed relieved. He reached for his sock and gingerly placed it on his foot. "Thanks, Doc. You might want to take something, too. You look a little peaked yourself."

"I'm okay." Doc shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. The truth was, since Chona died a week ago, his nerves were frayed to pieces. No one questioned his version of events. No one suspected. The matter died away quietly. But in the confusion of the moment, he'd somehow—he never did figure out how—snatched a pendant off Chona's neck, a mezuzah bearing an inscription in a foreign language. He had no idea what it said or how it landed in his fist. It couldn't have been intentional, grabbing the darn thing, but the truth was he simply couldn't remember. It was just a moment of passion, that's all. He'd gotten carried away. Women do that to men sometimes. Happens every day. He wanted to return the cursed thing, but to whom? He could have thrown it out, but that made it feel like murder, which it was not. He was a decent man. He decided to mail it but was afraid someone might track it to him. Instead, he carried it in his pocket to the parade. His intent was to leave it somewhere near Chicken Hill, where it might be found, knowing that the Antes House was close to the Hill. Just set it on the ground and walk away. But now Plitzka had shown up; plus his stomach was bothering him. It was tension. Things simply had not gone well since the . . . accident. There were rumors. He had heard plenty. Did Plitzka know? Plitzka, of all people, a shady carpetbagger, a one-generation-removed immigrant who would sell his grandma for a quarter. Had someone said something? And now the parade, right at the foot of Chicken Hill, basically in the Negroes' backyard. I shouldn't have come here today, he thought.

Even as he said it to himself, Doc noticed a Negro woman walking briskly past on the road glance at him, then move on, turning up the dirt road to Chicken Hill. Two more Negroes followed, men in work clothes, cutting suspicious glances, then hurrying on.

"A lot of new darkies in town," Plitzka said.

"Yeah." Doc shrugged. Had someone said something?

"There's more niggers coming every year," Gus said. "They're like roaches."

Doc sat up painfully and said, "I'll be over after we rehearse a few songs. Then we'll run over to the office."

He was about to push himself to his feet when he heard Plitzka say, "Too bad about the Jewess."

Doc felt his heart racing with panic, and suddenly felt too weak to stand. Still seated facing the road, he managed to murmur, "Shame," and rose to his feet, anxious to leave.

Just then a Negro couple walked past, and Doc, now standing, froze with his back to Plitzka. The Negro man didn't look at him, but the woman slowed to a halt, glaring straight at Doc. She wouldn't stop staring. Doc's

head felt light. He suddenly felt thirsty. He needed a drink of water.
“You know her?” Plitzka asked.
“Huh?”
“I asked did you know her.”
“Who? Her?” Doc said, pointing at the Negro woman who suddenly turned and moved up toward the Hill.
“Not her. The lady who died.”
Doc nodded, still facing the road, his back to Plitzka. He placed his hands in his pockets, trying to be nonchalant. “She was sick a long time.”
He heard Plitzka say something else, but a blast of a trumpeter warming up inside the Antes House drowned out Plitzka’s utterance. Something about “letters.”
“What?” Doc asked.
“The letters. She was the one who used to write letters to the Mercury complaining about our White Knights march. Not to speak evil of the dead and all, but this is America, Doc. Everybody gotta play by the rules.”
Doc, his insides feeling like jelly, merely nodded.
“Whatever happened to the boy?” Plitzka asked.
Doc wasn’t sure whether to leave. He wanted to. But do . . . guilty people run? he thought to himself. No. I did nothing wrong.
He decided to sit back down on the steps just to show indifference. He lowered himself to the step just beneath Plitzka and cleared his throat. “The kid?” He tried to sound nonchalant. “Oh, we got him some help. He’s up at Pennhurst.”
“That’s good. He’ll get a good education at least.”
Doc found his eyes searching the road again. Another Negro walked by, this one a man. The Negro slowed, staring perceptively, then stopped, openly staring now, facing them, twenty feet off. He looked as if he were about to shout something. Then, to Doc’s relief, he waved. Doc did something he rarely did. He waved back.
Plitzka frowned. “Some of ’em are all right,” he said. “If they’d just clean themselves. Have you been up on the Hill lately? The filth up there, the open sewers, gosh . . .”
Doc felt his throat tightening; he was afraid to move and afraid to stay. How did he get in this fix? Sitting here, gabbing with Plitzka, a low-life cheating farmer turned political thug. He had given his whole life to the town. His family had been in Pottstown more than one hundred years. And now he had to sit here and listen to this moron quip. He felt anger working its way into his throat. He couldn’t help himself.
“Speaking of clean,” he said. “You know the basement bathroom in the Antes House? The one you guys voted to put in three years ago for the public? I turned on the faucet today and muddy water came out.”
“It did?”
“Came right out the tap. I ran it a couple of minutes, but it didn’t clear up. Is the city running water from the reservoir into Chicken Hill?”
Now it was Plitzka’s turn to be nervous. “I don’t know where the water comes from.”
“Doesn’t the new reservoir near your old farm supply water to the Hill?”
“I don’t read every city contract, Doc.”
“You guys gotta look into that. Muddy water coming out of a tap on the Hill will keep my office full of people from around here, Gus. And they don’t pay.”
“We can’t keep track of every colored on the Hill, Doc. We got big

numbers up there. How many, who knows? We got open sewers up there running down to Main Street. We close 'em up, they dig new ones. We gotta straighten that out before we dig new water lines. Otherwise, they're crapping and throwing slop in the open sewers all over."
"Water and sewers are two different things, Gus."
"The Hill's a zoo, Doc. Believe me. My old farm is up there."
Doc nodded. He'd heard the stories about the Plitzka farm. How they had made a deal with the city in years past to supply water to the town before the new reservoir was built. And how the city was still paying the farm for its well water. Now Plitzka, as head of the dairy company and owner of his family's farm, was collecting on both ends—from the city for supplying water and getting free water from the city for his business to boot. A real winner. Typical immigrant gangster. No honor. No sense of history.
Doc couldn't help himself. "You been up to the new reservoir?" he asked.
"Many times," Plitzka said. "It was a pond when I was a kid."
"Has someone from the city ever gone up to look at those old pipes around it? Maybe one of 'em's cracked and mud's getting in there."
"If those pipes are cracked, I would have heard complaints from the Hill," Plitzka said.
"Why would the Negroes complain?" Doc said. "They still got wells, a lot of 'em, don't they?"
"If you want to draw a map of every house that has a well up there, go ahead. It's a maze up there."
Doc's anger boiled over. Why did Plitzka have to be such a jerk about everything? He heard himself say, "You could ask the Negroes, Gus. You're their city councilman. You ought to talk to your constituents."
Plitzka's face reddened. "If I did, maybe they'd tell me what they heard about you."
"What about me?"
"You and that Jewess. I heard the rumors."
"What rumors? The boy attacked me."
"Not the rumors I heard."
"Rumors don't prove much."
"They prove people can talk is all," Gus said coolly. "You ever think of talking to Chief Markus about it?"
"I already talked to him. She had a seizure. I tried to help her. The boy got antsy and attacked. He's deaf and probably dumb. I ran out and got the cops. They wrote a report."
"That they did," Plitzka said slyly.
"She died of a stroke, Gus. That's what the hospital in Reading said, too, by the way."
"Too bad there wasn't a white man in the store when it started. That would put an end to it."
"To what?"
"The rumors."
Doc rose, furious now. "Look after your own foot," he said.
"Don't lose your shirt, Doc," Gus said. "I didn't mean nothing. We cleared the air. Got to the truth of the matter and all. C'mon, Doc. Let's