

22. Without a Song

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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Without a Song

he closing of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store was not something that Moshe ever imagined doing. It was harder than going through Chona's things in their bedroom, for closing the store involved working in the basement, and in the basement, he found a tiny wooden barrel and wooden spoon that he recognized. She was spinning yellow into butter in that barrel when he first wandered into that basement twelve years before with a head full of problems and a world full of debt. She was the only one in the world who would remember that first moment. When he peeked inside the barrel and found it full of tiny toys, marbles, and knickknacks that she had collected to dole out as gifts to Dodo and the neighborhood children, he sat on a nearby crate and burst into tears.

Nate and Addie were there helping him clean out matters, working the far side of the room, for his plan was to rent the first floor of the building and continue to live in the apartment above. The two worked silently as he sobbed but they said nothing, for they had their share of suffering, too. Neither had mentioned the matter of Dodo in Pennhurst. Moshe suspected they felt guilt about Chona's death because it was Nate's idea that he and Chona take Dodo in the first place. Moshe felt no anger toward them, for the boy had brought his wife joy, and he would have told them that at that moment had his heart had the strength to allow him to speak of such matters, but it did not. Still, he felt relief that they were with him at this moment, for they were the only ones he wanted near. The new faces at shul were strangers. The world had shifted.

As for what happened at the store, Addie had given him the details of what she saw that afternoon. Doc's contrasting version of the event, that Chona had been attacked by the Negro boy and collapsed, made the whole matter troublesome, for Moshe was certain the boy had done no such thing. Yet to question Doc's version of the events was to swim against the tide, as that would call attention to Chona's protestations about Doc's involvement with the Klan. Neither the town fathers nor the police would want to discuss those things. Neither were overly fond of Moshe and his business. To protest was to bring too much unwanted attention, and perhaps more police. His only allies were the shul, which was small and powerless, and the coloreds, who were terrified of the police, especially Nate. He'd noted in years past that when the police were occasionally called to quell the odd disturbance at the theater, Nate seemed to disappear. He suspected Nate had had some trouble in the past. It did not bother him, for underneath Nate's quiet nature, Moshe sensed an iron-fired solidity not unlike that of his

cousin Isaac. That kind of bearing was a window into a troubled heart, he knew, one forged by past troubles and unjust treatment. It bothered Moshe that Nate, who was his best friend in town, likely had such troubles. He thought he might be the cause of it, somehow, and that thought caused him even more worry.

Seated on a crate, Moshe let his short burst of sobbing work through, then felt a sudden pain in his chest, which caused him to lean over and cough a moment, gasping for breath; then it passed. He looked up to see Addie standing on the other side of the basement looking at him, concerned. Nate, taking down shelving in the far corner, also stopped his work. Neither moved to console him. It occurred to him in that moment that he had rarely touched either one of them physically. His wife had done those things. His wife had not been afraid to hug Addie or grab a reluctant Nate by the hand to show him something or hug Dodo or cuff a female customer playfully on the face or arm or place an arm around a woman's shoulder or pick up a Negro child who was wailing. Those things were almost forbidden in this country, he realized. Chona had never been one to play by the rules of American society. She did not experience the world as most people did. To her, the world was not a china closet where you admire this and don't touch that. Rather, she saw it as a place where every act of living was a chance for tikkun olam, to improve the world. The tiny woman with the bad foot was all soul. Big. Moshe was a foot taller, yet she was the big one. He was just a man who put music shows together. A promoter. A man without a song of his own. His chest hurt.

He heard Addie say, "You all right, Mr. Moshe?"

"Fit as a fiddle," he said, wiping his face. He put aside the barrel full of toys and gifts, and continued sorting out crates, boxes, decorative items, and old tins. After a few moments, he turned to Nate, who was emptying some old papers into a garbage bin, and said, "There's nothing here we need to keep. But maybe there are some items you'd like."

Nate nodded, silent, dumping the papers and grabbing a broom.

"Have you been to see Dodo?" Moshe asked.

Nate shook his head and began sweeping. Addie, working near the far wall, spoke. "We gonna see him in a week or so," she said.

"Has it been arranged?"

She glanced at Nate. "We're working on it."

"I'll set it up for you."

Nate, as if to answer, moved back to a far corner of the basement with his broom, leaving Moshe and Addie standing alone.

"Leave it to him at his own time," she said.

Moshe nodded. Nate had not spoken much to him in the past few days, even during shiva. It occurred to him that the last thing Nate had spoken of was his suggestion that Moshe invite a few of the fabulous musicians who had played at the All-American Dance Hall and Theater to perform at Chona's funeral. Moshe's grief at the time was too great to consider such a suggestion. He thought he'd later ask one of the great musicians who came through his hall to write a song for Chona or perhaps he would give a dinner in her honor and invite a few of her Chicken Hill customers, but that was too much trouble, for it meant just about every black person on the Hill. He could not handle even the shiva. It was Feldman who made the hasty arrangements. The burial and the seven days of shiva were a blur. He largely spent them sleeping in his living room chair as a few souls from the shul came and chatted and ate with Isaac while Nate and Addie managed

things. It was over in no time and she was gone. Just like that. And the absence of her meant a thousand tomorrows empty of whatever promise they had once held.

After a few more moments of shoving crates around and packing boxes, he sat down and said, "I've had enough." He was winded and felt a tightness in his chest.

"We'll finish here," Addie said.

He picked up Chona's barrel and was about to head upstairs with it when he heard the sound of a car outside rumbling up to the store. From the tiny basement window, Moshe saw the polished steel of a black sedan and shiny whitewall tires. He heard heavy shoes clumping into the store, moving toward the back room and the basement stairs. From the top of the stairwell, he heard the familiar voice of his cousin Isaac calling out.

"Moshe?"

"What are you doing back here, Isaac?"

"Come look at this."

Moshe peered up the staircase. He was in no mood to see anything. He could see Isaac's familiar bowler hat blocking out the light above. He spied a face behind Isaac, but he could not make out the features.

"What is it?" he asked impatiently in Yiddish.

He heard a chuckle. Then from the top of the stairs, an item was flung down, a towel or rag of some kind. It landed on his face. He yanked it off, irritated.

It was leather or some kind of moleskin . . . a pair of pants. Tiny leather moleskin pants. Infant-sized. With a Star of David on the backside. Then he heard laughing, and a voice from the top of the dark stairwell—a familiar, gay voice—spoke out, in Yiddish.

"I did not have time to wrap them," Malachi said. "So I brought them myself."

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AFTER THEIR FIRST exultation and cries of delight, followed by a short burst of tears on Moshe's part, the three of them—Isaac, Moshe, and Malachi—gathered in the back room of the store to sip hot tea in glasses while Nate and Addie worked in the basement. Moshe could barely believe his old friend was there, seated before him.

"How did you get here so quickly?" he asked.

Malachi seemed nonplussed. "The SS Normandie. Five days. Very fast boat."

"How did you hear about my wife?"

Malachi glanced at Isaac, who shrugged. Moshe wiped his eyes. "Dear cousin," he said, "that was not necessary. I do not have the money to pay for such a gift."

"He did not buy my ticket," Malachi said. "I bought it myself."

Moshe sat up straight. "What trade have you that you can float back and forth across the Atlantic so easily? Are you a pickpocket?"

"All the pickpockets are here in America now. Not in Europe."

"How will you get home?"

"I am home," Malachi said.

"But you don't like it here. You said that many times."

Malachi was silent a moment, then replied: "I like to live. There is trouble back home, friend. Do you not read the Jewish papers?"

Moshe felt his chest tighten again as he said, "My mother . . ." And once again felt a squeeze in his chest and so much sadness that he didn't know if

the pain was coming from his heart or his sagging spirit. He coughed and swallowed, taking a moment to catch his breath. He glanced at Isaac, whose stern face, so lightened by the joyous reunion he had witnessed moments ago, once again darkened with sorrow, for Isaac had no mother. Moshe's mother had raised them both. "She won't come. She feels the same way about America as you. She thinks this land is dirty."

"I would not disagree," Malachi said.

Isaac was now frowning, as the conversation had taken a dark turn. The three were speaking in Yiddish, but Isaac spoke now in English. "I need to speak to your help," he said.

"About what?"

"About what happened here."

"Isaac, let's not sweep out the corners. It's done."

"Of course. I'd like to speak to them anyway."

"There'll be trouble for me after you leave."

"There'll be no trouble, cousin. I just want to chat with them. To thank them. Are they about?"

"They'll be around later," Moshe lied, but Isaac knew him too well, for he simply stood up and made for the basement stairs.

Moshe spoke to his back. "There's nothing to be done, Isaac. We are not in Europe anymore. We are free here."

But Isaac's bowler was already heading downstairs.

Nate saw the brilliant shiny shoes first, then the creased suit pants, moving with the sprightliness and power of a man who was sure of himself. He leaned the broom against the wall as the rest of the man, clad in a fine gray suit, appeared.

Isaac stopped at the bottom of the stairs, his shiny shoes on the dirt floor, one hand on the railing, and he peered at Nate, who came to the staircase to meet him. Addie never stopped work. She continued to move crates and box up items as the two men, the powerful theater owner in the crisp suit and the tall Negro in the Irish cap, his shirt blanched with sweat, faced each other.

"I never got a chance to speak to you at the hospital," Isaac said. "You avoided me at shiva."

Nate shrugged.

"Were you here at the store when it happened?"

Nate looked at Addie, then back at Isaac. "No."

Isaac looked over Nate's shoulder at Addie.

"I wonder if whoever was there might speak on what they saw," Isaac said. He looked at Nate as he spoke, though they both knew it was Addie he was addressing.

"There's trouble in that," Nate said.

"I'll look out for whoever might speak on it," Isaac said.

"If it's all the same to you, we'll stay outta that territory. We doin' fine on our own."

Isaac reached in his pocket, withdrew a thick roll of money, and held it out. He realized his mistake instantly, for Nate smiled bitterly.

"I reckon it's hard to live in a world where a man's word ain't worth a pinch of snuff when there's money about," Nate said. "You can keep your chips, mister. We ain't telling what we seen. You got my word."

"This is to thank you," Isaac said. "For looking out for my family."

"We been thanked."

"Everybody needs money."

“The last time I took money from a stranger it cost me eleven years. So if it’s all the same to you, you can keep that.”

“But I am not a stranger.”

“I didn’t say you was. You’re a boss man.”

“No bossier than you.”

Nate smiled grimly. “You and I are strangers in this land, mister. Mr. Moshe told me a little about your raising, the two of y’all coming up as you did, all the troubles you had getting to this country. I reckon that struggle’s made you strong in some ways and weak in others. And I figure it’s made Mr. Moshe strong in ways that you ain’t, and weak in ways that you is not. It all evens out. Me, I’m just a poor colored man who knows the ways of his own self. But if I could choose it, if God allowed it, I’d choose Mr. Moshe’s ways over yours and mine, for his ways is the right ways. There ain’t many people about these parts like him, or his wife, God bless her soul. They been good to our Dodo. So you can put your money up.”

“Not all of it,” Addie said, staring at the money from across the room.

Nate turned to her and wagged his first finger slowly back and forth at her, then turned again to Isaac. “Like I said, we’re all right.”

“I’ll leave it here on the banister.”

“That’s where you’ll find it in the morning. And the morning after. Till you come fetch it,” Nate said.

Isaac bristled. “Don’t be a fool.”

“Whatever names you call me can’t hurt me. And all your money can’t get our boy out from where he is now.”

“It could. Over time. I can make a few calls. I know some people. I can get you a lawyer.”

“If it’s all the same to you, we got one or two ideas ’bout how to fetch him out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. A lawyer will get it done. This is a land of laws.”

“White folks’ laws,” Nate said softly, “The minute you leave the room, the next white fella comes along and the law is how he says it is. And the next one comes along and the law is how he says it is. So whatever money you burns up to get Dodo, come time Doc Roberts and his kind gets ahold of whatever rulin’s your man fixed up, they’ll put other rulin’s together and make sure Dodo goes back in that place again and never gets out. Or worse, send him to the penitentiary. Then we got to come to you again with our hand out, and round and round we go. The law in this land is what the white man says it is, mister. Plain and simple. So you’d be wasting your dollars on us. We already in debt to Mr. Moshe. We got to pay him back for what he and his missus already gived us.”

“And what is that?”

“If you can name another man in this town who would do what him and his missus done for us, I’ll find a roll big as the one you holding and give it to you outright. You know somebody?”

Isaac frowned. He was unaccustomed to talking to anyone so arrogant, especially a Negro. On the other hand, Moshe trusted this man more than any other. He had seen with his own eyes the tall, lanky Negro standing at the hospital window as Moshe and the others gathered, sobbing around Chona’s hospital bed. He’d watched Nate as he stood with his back to them, wiping the tears from his face. He’s like me, Isaac thought bitterly. He suffers his sorrows in private.

He glanced upstairs, where Moshe and Malachi could be heard chatting, and spoke softly so that his words wouldn’t carry up through the wood-

paneled floor, for if he could hear their words, they could hear his.

"I'm a patriot," he said. "I love this country. It's been good to me."

"Good for you then."

"Moshe's an honest man. Chona, she was a . . . she had opinions. Writing letters to the papers about things she had no business talking about. She was a good person. A kind woman. She shouldn't be dead."

"We agrees there, too," Nate said.

"I wonder, then, about Doc Roberts."

Nate glanced at Addie, who turned away and began sweeping.

"What about him?"

"What he might do now."

"Better part of nothing is my guess. So long as he don't come round here, he ain't a bother to us. Ain't but one person other than Dodo seen what he done. And that person ain't told a soul other than Mr. Moshe what they saw. I don't know that Doc even knowed he was being seen. There was others round who come to the store quick right after the mess was over. I got there pretty quick myself—someone come and fetched me. The cops was chasing Dodo off the roof when I come. Everybody cleared out pretty fast then. Folks pawned it off as the usual trouble and forgot about it already. They ain't got no more Heaven and Earth Grocery Store to shop in is all. And they lost a friend. But they'll pray for Miss Chona as they should. And that's it."

"Was she alive when you got there?"

"Yes, she was. She had passed out but was yet living. She smiled a little bit before they took her off. She asked after her husband. And Dodo." Nate stared at the floor. And though he was several feet off, Isaac sensed something he hadn't sensed before from the tall, rangy man. Something he had felt in his own heart. Silent, burning, utter rage.

"Can I ask you, then, about Bernice?"

Nate was silent a moment. "What about her?"

"Is she still next door?"

"She been there all her life. Her and them children."

"She and Chona were close?"

"Very close. Went to school together as children."

"Will she talk to me?"