

29. Waiting for the Future

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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29

Waiting for the Future

The parade start was delayed for two reasons. First, the Empire Fire Company's hook-and-ladder truck broke down inexplicably right in front of the Antes House, blocking the parade route. Second, the costumes were a mess, which drove Hal Leopold, the parade director, nearly mad. Leopold was a stickler for detail. He served as tea master for the ladies' auxiliary and was head dog for all things celebratory in Pottstown. He also baked the best coffee cake in town and ran his own catering outfit. The sorry state of the Revolutionary-era costumes drove him into fits. He stalked around inspecting the milling parade marchers and was outraged to find that four of his ten parade marshals, including Gus Plitzka and Doc Roberts, were wearing red British coats with red facings and white linings and white buttons on their uniforms instead of buff facings with white linings and blue buttons.

"You two are a mess," he scoffed, tapping Plitzka's coat with his finger. "Gus, you're in a British coat with red facings and white linings and white buttons. That means a British jacket with Pennsylvania trim. And Doc, why are you British? We're the Continental Army, people. We wear blue coats. Not red. The Continental Army wears blue tricornered hats, too, not red British private hats. Whose side are you on?"

"I put on what they gave me," Doc said. He was exhausted. He and Plitzka had rushed over to his office so he could administer a shot to Plitzka's toe to numb the pain, then rushed back to find that the uniforms had already been doled out. What's more, the uniforms, normally pressed, cleaned, and repaired, were a mess. The leather sashes and belts, normally pristine, were ragged and torn. Moths had eaten away at the edges of the coats. The musket rifles, always shiny and the wood polished, were rusted and the wood moldy. "Who takes care of this stuff?" Plitzka asked Leopold. Leopold frowned. "The Jewish tailor, what's his name, Druker? He does the uniforms."

"Does he do our holsters and buckles and rifles?" Doc said. "Look at this," he said, noting the rough leather and the dull musket. "This is a mess."

Leopold shook his head. "No, that's . . . the crazy ones. The Skrup brothers, they do the leather, the sashes, the buttons, shoes, rifles, all that. They didn't do it this year."

It didn't occur to any of the three men that every stitch of the costumes and paraphernalia was cared for, stored, tailored, and repaired by the town's Jews for free. Nor did it occur to anyone that the small contingent of butt-

kissing English-speaking German Jews who normally participated as members of the John Antes Historical Society's Cornet Marching Band were not present today, neither was Avram Gaisinsky, the Russian Jew who was actually an excellent cornet player and who always brought along his four sons, Todrish, Zusman, Zeke, and Elia, all of whom could play cornet as well. They were a remarkably musical family.

"At least the instruments are in good shape," Doc said.

"Moshe keeps them," Leopold said. "He's good about that."

"Who's he?" Plitzka asked.

"You know Moshe," Leopold said. "He's the theater guy. His wife passed a couple of months ago? She got attacked by the crazy colored boy they sent out to Pennhurst."

There was an uncomfortable pause as Doc looked away.

"You guys look like crap," Leopold said. "You gotta fix yourselves up. You're parade marshals. Get rid of the red jackets. And Doc"—he shook his head—"you can't wear a purple Continental Army major general's sash and a red British private's hat and coat. Ditch the coat. Get a new hat. Trade with one of the kids. You gotta be in blue, fellas. You're parade marshals. No red."

"Can you round up a kid to switch?" Doc asked.

"Doc, if you wanna be famous or important, die at the right time.

Otherwise, carry your own load. Find your own kid. I got a million things going on. We gotta get the fire truck started." And with that, he was off.

Gus watched Doc lean against a nearby telephone pole to take the weight off his bad foot. The ride in Doc's car to his office and Leopold's dressing down had unified them somewhat, along with Gus's bad toe, which, thanks to Doc, no longer throbbed but simply ached. Gus felt sorry for him.

"Sit tight, Doc," he said. "Gimme your coat. I'll find us blue ones."

Doc took off his red coat and sat down on the bench behind the Antes House, relieved. "Find me a hat, too, if you don't mind."

Plitzka limped off, heading toward the fire truck, where several men were gathered around the hood, frantically working. He noticed several high school kids standing in a knot wearing Continental Army blue uniforms, but their coats were at least two sizes too small for him or Doc.

He spotted another clump of bigger teenagers ten yards away and was about to head toward them when a man in a gray suit appeared out of nowhere and put his arm around his shoulder. "Hey, Gus, you're on the wrong team. Why you wearing red?"

The man was big, and the weight of the arm felt heavy, the bicep stiff and hard against Plitzka's neck. He spoke with a foreign accent. Plitzka guessed Russian. Probably Jewish. Damn Jews. Hoodlums. He felt rage and fear in his gut.

"Get your arm off me."

The man's arm felt like a block of wood. The heavy arm lifted slowly.

"Mr. Rosen said to tell you he's lonely," he said.

"Tell him to get a dog."

"He's already got one. Me. Wanna see my teeth?"

Gus glanced around nervously. No one seemed to notice them. The flurry of men near the fire truck down the hill suddenly backed away as the engine roared to life and burped a cloud of black smoke from its tailpipe. This was followed by a cheer and a hasty scrambling to collect instruments, costumes, hats, and banners.

"I'll have his money next week," Gus said.

“You said that last week. And the week before.”

“What do you want? I’m tapped out.”

“Me, too. What a coincidence.”

“You can’t get water from a stone,” Gus said.

The man nodded and clapped Plitzka good-naturedly on the shoulder.

His hand was so big, it felt like an anvil striking him. “Speaking of water,”

the man said, “I’m thirsty.” His gaze danced over to Chicken Hill above

them. “Where does the drinking water around here come from anyway?”

Gus felt rage working its way into his chest. “You wouldn’t dare.”

The man shrugged. “You’re out of time, Gus.”

“The hell with you.”

“You ain’t gonna get many gold stars talking that way.”

“I said I ain’t got it!”

The man’s expression, one of calm consideration, never changed. He

nodded slowly, sadly. He was not an evil-looking fellow. He appeared, Gus

thought, rather sorrowful. “We’ll talk later, Gus. Maybe at home. Tonight.

After the parade.”

“I’ll call the cops.”

“How do you know I ain’t the cops?” the man asked, and with that, he

pushed down his hat brim and slipped past the Empire Fire Company’s

truck, turned down High Street, and melted into the crowd.

Plitzka felt bile rise in this throat. He heard Hal Leopold calling him.

“Gus! Line up!”

He drifted toward the front of the parade, rubbing his forehead, flustered.

I have to find a way, he thought. He was nearly at the front of the gathering

marchers when he remembered that Doc was waiting for him behind the

Antes House.

As he passed the side of the Antes House, he saw several high school

kids moving into line wearing Continental Army uniforms. He made one

last effort to finagle a blue coat out of one of the taller ones by offering him

fifty cents and his red coat in exchange, and he finally succeeded.

He walked to the back of the Antes House, where Doc was standing

impatiently, still holding his red coat.

“You couldn’t find a blue coat for me?” Doc asked.

Gus was distracted. Who cared about the blue coat? What if the guy

really did come to his house? His wife! His kids! “Here,” Gus said, peeling

off his blue coat. “Take mine. You can be American. I don’t mind being

British.” He held out his blue coat.

Doc took the blue coat. Then in a decision that would alter forever his

already fraught, twisted, small-town American life, he changed his mind

and handed it back to Plitzka.

“Hell with it,” he said. “I’ll be British. Your coat is too small for me

anyway.”

“You sure, Doc? You don’t wanna wear the blue coat?”

“Blue coat, red coat, who cares?” Doc said. “It’s just a damn parade.

What difference does it make?”

It turned out to make a big difference. All the difference in the world.

THE GOON WHO worked for Nig Rosen didn’t wait for Gus to get a long look at him. He turned right on Washington Street and doubled back up into Chicken Hill as the front of the long flow of parade marchers passed on High Street behind him. He was distracted. It was nearly 5 p.m. and not yet dark. Now he had to wait for hours for the parade to finish and then find a

safe place to plant brass knuckles in poor Gus Plitzka's face. It could be done. But he had to rest. He was tired. He'd taken the train from Reading, and there was a pinochle game tonight back in Reading with some big dollars in play, which he'd have to miss now.

He strolled up the street lost in thought. His name was Henry Lit. He was thirty-four, a Russian Jew from Kiev, a former boxer, and a hopeless gambler. Like many in that world, Lit was normally a gentle man who did not like violence, largely because he knew how much damage it could do and the cost, financial and otherwise, involved in getting whatever was broken fixed. He couldn't understand why anyone would be so stupid as to borrow money from Nig Rosen. But those were his marching orders, and when Nig delivered them, they were iron.

At the corner of Washington and Beech, Henry removed his jacket and placed it over his shoulder. He was, in fact, quite thirsty. He noticed a heavysset Negro followed by a huge, barrel-chested white man bearing a handful of tools and pipes. The man looked like a Sephardic Jew, with dark hair and brooding looks, so Lit called out in Yiddish as the man passed, "Is there a water fountain around?"

Big Soap stopped, puzzled, then answered in Italian. "I don't understand."

Lit quickly recovered and asked the same question in English. Big Soap never stopped moving. "Over there." He nodded to what looked like an empty lot full of weeds down the street. "In the middle, there's an outdoor faucet."

"Thanks. Does the parade come back this way?" Lit asked.

"There's a fireworks display and a pig roast after," Big Soap said over his shoulder, "and free beer. Stick around."

Lit nodded and moved on while Big Soap hustled to catch up to Fatty, who had turned up the hill and was moving toward the Clover Dairy.

"What's he want?" Fatty asked.

"He thought I was Jewish."

Fatty was irritated. "I oughta collect from Mr. Moshe for letting Nate use my wagon and mule. This crap is heavy."

"How would you know? I'm carrying it."

"I'm looking out for you. Did you talk to Rusty?"

"He's coming by the jook at seven. You wanna carry something?" Big Soap said.

Fatty ignored that. "We might have to go back and help him haul that mortar down here—without my dang cart, which Nate took."

The two had come to take one more look in the daylight at the outdoor faucet and the manhole cover over the well, and hide some tools and supplies for the job. They chose for their hiding place a back corner of the empty lot, for no one ventured to the lot's edges, which were lined with junk. The two strolled past the dairy, noting that it was, as Fatty predicted, closed for the day, then moved on up the hill to the lot behind it, which was full of weeds and discarded crates and garbage. They walked past it as if they were moving to the next block; then at the last minute, they cut into the high weeds of the lot and hid the shovel, wrenches, drill, pipe threader, short pipes, and two valves under an old crate. They then reemerged onto the street, walked down the long block, and doubled back to the well-worn path that led to the center of the lot where the well and the outdoor faucet were located, joining five people who stood patiently in line waiting with barrels and pails to draw water.

“I hadn’t counted on that,” Fatty said, glancing at the line and at the sun above. “It’s hot.”

The two waited their turn, and when they reached the fountain, Fatty leaned over with his hands cupped while Big Soap turned on the spigot. While leaning over, his eyes probed the top of the well, and he saw what he needed to see.

A cement manhole cover. And along the edges, an old pry hole. Perfect. The two reversed places, with Fatty pumping. He took a long look around again, this time at the base of the fountain and the cement manhole that covered the well, chatting and joking with folks in line as he did so, for Fatty knew just about everyone on the Hill. From there, they walked to the corner and turned up the Hill toward Fatty’s jook.

“That’s a lot of eyes,” Big Soap said.

“Don’t worry. Nobody hauls water at night,” Fatty said. “By nine o’clock, this place will be deserted. There won’t be a Negro fool in sight.”

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HE WAS RIGHT. By 9 p.m., there were no Negroes around. But there were plenty of white people. The John Antes Historical Society’s Cornet Marching Band, having been two hours late to start, was delayed another hour when they got to the far end of town, for the Empire Fire Company’s truck coughed a few times, backfired, and stalled again. This time there was room for the marchers to move around it, but the backfire frightened the horse of a nearby Mennonite family who had come to town by buggy to enjoy the parade. The poor creature was tied loosely to a parking meter, and the backfire caused him to bolt, snapping his line and allowing him to gallop off—with the family buggy in tow. The parade was halted by cries of “Wild horse!” while the farmer and several men corralled the terrified creature, which galloped from one crowded street to the next. That took forty minutes. When the parade finally got moving again and returned to the Antes House, it was eight o’clock. Most of the cheerful women volunteers who had been up since dawn preparing the pig roast had departed to watch the fireworks from home. It took another hour to cram the cornets, costumes, and drums back into the Antes House under the ever-watchful eye of Leopold, who was exhausted and went full-blown German on everyone, yelling that everything must be neatly lined up inside the Antes House hallway for morning pickup, ticking off the few good-natured souls who tried to show good faith by sticking around, so they departed as well. It was the beer that the paraders wanted most, and after the parade, it was beer they needed.

Plitzka quit the moment they arrived. “I gotta get home,” he told Doc. “The missus wants me there when the fireworks start.” Actually, his wife was the last thing on his mind. He was in a state of panic, convinced that Rosen’s man was headed to his home. For a moment, he considered calling the police as he departed, then decided against it. He decided to call his cousin Ferdie instead. If he was going to end up in an urn, at least Ferdie should know that it was his fault.

Gus left his coat inside the Antes House neatly folded in place in the exact manner that Leopold demanded and hastily withdrew.

Doc, on the other hand, decided to stay. He wanted a beer. He’d earned it. He worked hard to get on the good side of that creep Plitzka, and the parade had left him in a better mood. There was no need to rush home. His wife would only yammer at him about some financial problem or other. Plus, his mother-in-law had come to town to see the fireworks. No rush to

see her. Still dressed in the red British army outfit, he grabbed a glass from a nearby picnic table, filled it, and took a seat on the bench behind the Antes House along with several other leftover volunteers, mostly firemen, who were already holding beers. “Here’s to America’s fire engines and wild horses,” he said, raising his glass as several volunteers laughed. “God bless this damn town.” He drank deeply. He was so happy. He loved Pottstown.

FATTY, STANDING IN the empty lot two blocks away, heard the sound of men laughing in the backyard of the Antes House and didn’t like it. There was no more time to delay. He’d taken the man’s money from his sister— whoever that man was. When you take a man’s money, you do the job. It was time to move. He could see the shimmering lights from the lanterns of the Antes House and hear the laughter, but the lot was black, as was the dairy across the street, and the dairy watchman—Reverend Spriggs—was, as he’d suspected, not in sight. He was probably down at the pig roast joking with the white folks and sopping up free beer.

Fatty and Big Soap made their way to the outdoor faucet, which stood about four feet high and was connected to a pipe protruding from below. Big Soap held the pry bar. In the dark, Fatty lay on the ground and blindly groped around the manhole’s cement perimeter for the notch. He found it and guided the end of the pry bar into it.

“Go ’head, Soap,” he said. “Pry it off. Easy now. The cover’s old.”

Big Soap moved slowly. The cement cover rose an inch, then two inches, then, as it came out of the hole, it snapped in two and clattered to the bottom of the well with a splash.

“Christ, Soap!”

“What do you want, magic? I did it slow like you said.”

They stood at the top of the well, staring down into the blackness.

Fatty lit a lantern, lay down flat, and stuck the light in the hole. The well was circular, with sides of stone that were moss-covered and dripping water. It was, he guessed, maybe fifteen feet to the bottom. A crude ladder was attached to the side of the well. At the bottom, an old pump could be seen, as well as the pieces of concrete.

“Lucky that concrete didn’t fall into the spring below,” he said.

“What do we do?” Big Soap said.

“We gotta make another cover,” Fatty said.

“Now?”

“One thing at a time. Let’s do the job. We’ll worry about covering it up after. Maybe Rusty’ll show up.”

The two climbed down, Fatty holding a lantern. Two pipes protruded from a connection at the bottom of the pump. Fatty could see where the original pipe that fed the faucet above ran down to the pump, came back up, and had been run to both the dairy and the shul pipes. He could see also where the outdoor faucet’s and the dairy’s pipes had been cut off and capped and run to a new six-inch pipe coming from the city’s reservoir, leaving only the shul’s pipe attached to the old well pump.

“Somebody at the dairy’s been playing games,” Fatty said. “Look at this connection. This ain’t supposed to be here. The dairy’s supposed to be getting their water from the old Plitzka well, not the city. They’re getting free water from the city, Soap. A lot of it.”

He knelt at the bottom of the well and reached his hand around the well pump to feel the aquifer below.

“I can’t feel nothing, Soap. The aquifer’s run out. This well’s dry as a

bone.”

“Maybe when it rains the water comes up.”

“Don’t ask for the devil to show up. Let’s get to it.”

They got busy quickly, dragging their wrenches, drill, hand saws, and pipes into the hole. It was peaceful, and with the lantern, they could see fairly well. Shortly after they began, the booms and sudden lights from the fireworks overhead lit matters even more for seconds at a time. Because they were in the center of the lot, surrounded by high weeds, they were out of sight of passersby. The booming thunder from the fireworks pushed adrenaline into their systems and they worked fast.

First, they had to draw water from the big reservoir pipe. Shutting it off was impossible. They’d have to impale it. Fatty grabbed a short pipe with a closed shut valve on it and handed Big Soap a hand-cranked drill with a brazen bit.

“Once you start cranking on that pipe, water’s gonna come busting out,” he said. “I don’t know how much pressure’s behind it exactly, but it’s a six-inch pipe. That’s a lot of pipe, Soap, and a lot of pressure, so it’s a lot of water. You keep cranking with that drill and don’t stop. Crank till the bit goes in and threads through all the way. Once you’re through, don’t pull it out. Back it out. Reverse it, okay? Otherwise you’ll strip the threads. Then I’ll screw this pipe in with the valve and stop the water.”

“Okay.”

“You gotta do it fast. It’s gonna be some water now.”

“Okay.”

Big Soap took the hand drill and tapped the pipe twice for good measure, like a baseball player prepping himself for a hit, bracing himself, leaning in to crank. But Fatty stopped him.

“Don’t stop cranking, Soap, once you start. Or we’ll drown in here.”

Big Soap nodded. He cranked for fifteen seconds, twenty seconds, then they both heard an odd thunk, followed by a small trickle, then a powerful burst of water, which knocked Fatty off his feet.

The water surged out with the power of a fire-engine hose, pinging against the stone walls and flying in all directions, but only Fatty fell. Big Soap somehow managed to remain standing, his feet planted on solid earth, straddling the pump, albeit under two feet of water now and rising fast, for the water came hard, the water pouring in up to their waists.

“Hurry up, Soap!”

Big Soap, still straddling the hole in the floor where the well pump lay, leaned against the drill, grit his teeth, and turned the hand drill as the spray blasted his face. He drilled with his head down, his huge arms straining, the water goring into the top of his skull, burning his head and gushing into his nose and mouth.

“C’mon, Soap!”

Big Soap leaned in. The big man’s hair splayed back in a straight line as the water blasted him. Fatty stood behind him, shielded somewhat, his head against the big man’s shoulder blade, the force of the water so strong that he had to brace himself against the wall with his other hand to keep from falling. He had to protect the pipe holding the valve fitting and the wrench. The water was up to his armpits when he felt Big Soap’s back relax and heard him yell above the hissing water, “Got it.”

“Get out the way then!”

Fatty reached up to screw the fitting in, but the water pressure was so great that it took both of them to mash the fitting into the pipe and screw it

in. But once they did, the closed valve on the pipe fitting held, and instantly the water stopped and once again the well was calm and quiet.

Fatty found himself standing in water up to his neck holding Big Soap by the shoulders. But they were both, gratefully, alive.

“You’re a man, Soap. You’re much of a man.”

“Fatty, don’t ask me to do that again. Not for a measly thirty dollars. Not for a hundred dollars.”

“Okay, okay, let’s finish.”

They slopped in the high water to finish the job, but the rest was easy. In half an hour, they cut the shul pipe from the well pump and, using a three-quarter extension, fastened it to the reservoir pipe that fed both the outdoor faucet and the dairy—and just like that, they were done. The shul had fresh water. From the reservoir. Free.

They climbed back up the ladder and sat at the edge of the well, soaked through and exhausted. Only then did Big Soap utter the obvious.

“We got to get that thing covered. Where’s Rusty?” Big Soap asked.

Fatty was thinking the same thing but afraid to say it.

“He must’a not found the mortar. I told him where it was.”

“I recall he said yesterday he was thinking about stopping by the creek up near the reservoir to get sand,” Big Soap said.

“What for?”

“He said it’d be good to use sand from the creek to color the concrete to match just in case we broke the well cover.”

“Well, we broke it, goddamnit. Now where is he?”

Fatty thought a moment. He reached down into the mouth of the well where the lantern hung and killed the light. The well went dark.

“All right. We gotta hurry. I’ll go to the jook and fetch some mortar mix and some planks. You go on down to the theater and fetch the wheelbarrow to mix it in. It’s likely in the wagon where Nate left it. Don’t go round Antes House. Take Hale Street or Washington. Better still, go by the old John Reichner mill. That’s the fastest back way. If you see Rusty, tell him to get his ass up here quick, creek sand or no creek sand. We’ll just mix the mortar we got. We ain’t going to jail ’cause Rusty’s stupid.”

They took off in different directions as the last firecracker from the Antes House soared overhead and boomed its last glow.

AS THE LAST firecracker broke across the sky, Doc, fully drunk, howled out his joy. “It’s all a dream!” he shouted. “This great America. This great land of opportunity. Give us your poor. Your tired. Your weak. And we will give them jobs. And homes. And businesses! We will make them men. And women. And they will”—he burped loudly—“replace us!”

The men of the Empire Fire Company, who along with a few stragglers were the only ones left, laughed. They were not used to seeing Doc Roberts drunk. This was good.

He was seated at a picnic table, and hearing the laughter, he looked around at the firemen winking at one another. He knew many of them, many of whom he had treated. Some he liked, a few he despised. They were largely Irish, uneducated—good for certain things, he thought, but mostly good-for-nothings. The new people in town. Immigrants. Sullyng up matters. They didn’t go to the opera or horse events. They didn’t know history. They went to movies and boxing matches and drank all day. Peasants. No understanding of books or medicine or poetry or women. Wine stains on the white American tablecloth is what they were, foreign

duds amid the bright glow of places like London and Paris that he should have, would have, could have known if he'd wanted. Europe. Land of artists and music and women. Beautiful women.

And then the visage of Chona, the beautiful teenager, the sight of her standing at her locker, her bare white wrist reaching inside it, her lovely eyes that nearly drove him mad. Chona, whose exceptional dark hair and gorgeous limp that made his horselike canter and grubby shoes seem clunky by comparison. Chona, who married a frumpy theater owner, a flowering beauty wrapped in the dimness of grubby store life. Who was she to turn him down all those years ago? And then to turn him down again, years later, when she was nothing but a clerk in a store serving niggers? A Jew!

"Didn't she know who I was?" he roared.

There was a short silence as the guffawing Irishmen stopped laughing and looked at one another.

"Go home, Doc," one of them said.

"Easy, Doc . . ."

Doc snapped out of his reverie long enough to realize it was time to leave.

"This country," he declared, "is going down." He downed his beer.

"Good night, America."

And with that, he sauntered off up toward the Hill instead of down High Street.

His house was only nine blocks away, but he decided he'd cut through the Hill. There was an empty lot up there where the outdoor faucet stood across from the Clover Dairy where that Polish thief Plitzka made his pennies, and if he cut through that, he'd eliminate four blocks off his walk. He knew the Hill like the back of his hand.

"Ain't you going the wrong way, Doc?" he heard one of the firemen call out.

Doc kept walking, staggering a bit, waving away the question in disgust, not even looking back. "Son, I knew this town when you were a glint in your mother's eye."

He marched forward with their laughter ringing in his ears. As he did, he felt something small and hard in his pocket and reached in. The mezuzah pendant. The one that had somehow made it into his hand during the . . . the event . . . at the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store. He'd brought it to the Antes House to discard it on the Hill. Perfect. He'd toss it in the lot when he was out of sight of the Antes House. He withdrew the fist clasp the mezuzah and marched forward. Up the Hill he went. Up, up, up, to Chicken Hill.

NIG ROSEN'S GOON, Henry Lit, woke up at the last boom of the fireworks. He'd fallen asleep behind a tiny Baptist church a few blocks from the Antes House. At first, he thought he'd missed everything. But when he made his walk back down the Hill, stopping at the corner so he could see the plaza behind the Antes House from above, what he saw made him sigh in relief. In the dim light of the lanterns at the table, there was Plitzka, stone drunk, still wearing the red jacket, holding up a beer and yelling something. Perfect.

He watched in amazement as Plitzka made his way up into the Hill toward him. As the red coat neared, Lit turned and leaned against the wall of an old shed, ducking out of sight as Plitzka tromped past, made his way down the gravel road, and staggered into the empty lot where the outdoor faucet was that Lit had satisfied his thirst from earlier. He was sure it was

Plitzka because Plitzka had the red coat, and he had some kind of limp, which he'd noted earlier. Lit waited until he saw the red jacket move into the lot, then removed his shoes and carried them as he walked softly on the path behind Plitzka, hoping not to step on broken glass.

There was no need to be quiet as he approached Plitzka, for the man was humming softly to himself. Lit took two or three steps and then decided not to wait. Tough jobs need to be done fast. No sense thinking it through. Get it over with, he told himself. It's just part of the job. In America, everyone works.

He was four steps into the lot and could see Plitzka's red coat clearly in the moonlight now, ten feet off. It was a beacon, a light.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free . . .

As Lit trotted, holding his shoes in his left hand, his right hand reached into his pocket and his fingers threaded through a pair of brass knuckles. He did it in one motion.

The man did not even hear him until Lit was two steps away. He turned his head just in time to meet Lit's fist—wham!—which smacked his jaw once.

Lit heard the crack and felt the bone break, and as an old boxer, he knew the jaw was broken. He'd done damage. He knew what it felt like. There was no need to do more. He saw the red coat fall back, but that was all, as he spun off.

It was time to leave.

Lit turned and trotted away quickly, and for the life of him, and for as long as he would live—which would not be that long—he always wondered why he heard a big splash after Plitzka fell. For there was a faucet back there. There was no pond. He had seen the faucet.

Later, when Nig Rosen said to him, "How did you get Plitzka to fork over the dough so fast?" Lit said, "I whacked him and broke his jaw, and he fell in some kind of pond."

Rosen said, "You got some kind of imagination, Henry. I saw him. He came here and he didn't have no wired jaw. He talked my ear off, begging. And he didn't say nothing about no pond."

FOUR INCHES.

If Fatty had bothered to shine his lantern down four inches lower, he would've seen the odd shoe that stuck up in the water at the bottom of the well and the glittering mezuzah pendant that shone next to it, still on its chain, hanging from a rock protruding from the stone sides, the mezuzah now clear of the fist that had clenched it and then released it as the body fell. He would have seen the pants and tail end of the red British coattails that floated in roughly five feet of water that stood over the now useless old pump and broken manhole cover at the bottom of the well. The pump was connected to nothing. And sadly, neither was the man. For his wife did not love him. His children did not miss him. The town did not erect a statue in his honor. All the myths he believed in would crystallize into even greater mythology in future years and become weapons of war used by politicians and evildoers to kill defenseless schoolchildren by the dozens so that a few rich men spouting the same mythology that Doc spouted could buy islands that held more riches than the town of Pottstown had or would ever have. Gigantic yachts that would sail the world and pollute the waters and skies, owned by men creating great companies that made weapons of great power

in factories that employed the poor, weapons that were sold cheaply enough so that the poor could purchase them and kill one another. Any man could buy one and walk into schools and bring death to dozens of children and teachers and anyone else stupid enough to believe in all that American mythology of hope, freedom, equality, and justice. The problem was always, and would always be, the niggers and the poor—and the foolish white people who felt sorry for them.

So it was appropriate that a nigger and a foolish white man buried him. Fatty had no idea of what was in the well when he and Big Soap convened back there that night to make a new manhole cover. That was the least of his worries anyway.

“How do we make a manhole cover?” Big Soap had asked.

“We just put the planks in across the top of the well. We wedge them between the stones and pour the mortar. Let the grass make it round. It’s already there. The circle. It’s a mold.”

“It’s like a hockey puck,” Big Soap said.

“A what?”

“They play it in the Olympics. Hockey.”

“You ever seen hockey?”

“No, but I’m gonna someday.”

“Soap, can we just get the planks in place?”

Big Soap climbed down the ladder until his head was even with the well’s opening, and they wedged in several planks, using the pry bar on the last one to make the flooring tight. Then they mixed the concrete using the wheelbarrow and water from the water fountain and poured it.