

## 6. Challah

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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### Challah

Chona's fever broke two days later. Her feverish rants ceased a day after that. The following day she sat up, then peacefulness seemed to descend on her small frame, and wellness began a long, slow return. But alas, she could not stand for long periods or walk unassisted. A visit from a special doctor from Philadelphia that Moshe's cousin Isaac had arranged confirmed that some kind of blood problem had produced a brain attack that, given her bad foot, may make walking unassisted difficult. Moshe didn't care. Even if she needed a wheelchair for the rest of her life, as long as she could be the Chona of old, he was happy.

After a week, he saw the light return to her eyes. A week later, she began to talk in long sentences, albeit slowly. By the third week, she was standing with the support of Addie and giving orders, demanding to go downstairs and open the store.

Moshe happily complied. He attributed her improvement to the arrival of Malachi, who insisted on dropping by the theater every day to deliver a loaf of his challah for Moshe to carry home to his wife. "This will be part of your wife's healing," he said proudly.

He delivered his very first challah to Moshe at the theater, still wearing his ragged costume of sportcoat, hat, tallit, and homburg. He held the loaf proudly, like he was carrying a child. "You will be my first customer," he said.

Moshe took the loaf with the same dainty care it was offered. Although he never liked challah, he was charmed. He preferred regular white sliced bread and American sandwiches of ham and cheese, which were like everything in America—neat and quick, not fluffy and thick and soupy like old European food. But Malachi's bread was new and something about him lifted Moshe's heart, so Moshe readily tore off a piece, shoved it in his mouth, and nearly gagged. He managed to gurgle a thank-you but only to keep from vomiting onto the floor the turgid mess of what tasted like onions, sand, and grease.

"Wonderful," he said.

"It will bring healing wherever it goes," Malachi said proudly. "It will be like your wonderful theater. It will bring people together."

To a hospital maybe, Moshe thought, nodding. But he smiled and said nothing. He hated to offend his new friend. He promised to bring the bread home to his wife that very evening, but instead he offered it to Nate as they walked home together after the theater closed, the two climbing the tight dirt roads of Chicken Hill in the wee hours. He did it with a disclaimer,

saying, "The new baker is just learning."

Nate took a chaw out of the bread, uttered no comment, and tossed the whole mess to a brown spotted mutt who emerged from one of the claptrap houses that lined the roads up onto the Hill. The dog was a nuisance who regularly terrorized them on their night walks home, and when Moshe walked home alone, he took a roundabout route to avoid the creature altogether.

The mutt swallowed the challah in one gulp, and thus, when Malachi asked Moshe the next day if his challah was "bringing healing" to his home, Moshe was happy to inform him, "Yes indeed. And peace as well," for the mongrel, to his surprise, left him alone for the first time ever.

Indeed, as horrible as the challah was, it was proof of the magic that seemed to accompany everything Malachi touched, for the dog never bothered Moshe again. Calamity and disorganization seemed to follow Moshe's new friend everywhere, yet it never touched or stirred him.

Malachi was not a neat man. His suit was forever rumpled, his hat furrowed, his tallit frayed, his clear blue eyes always somewhat distant. His head was constantly bowed, his attention deep in the pages of his prayer book, sometimes for hours, even when he baked, allowing his pies and bread to burn. It was clear to Moshe that his new friend was not a born baker. He noted that Malachi's apartment above the bakery was full of junk, items he had gathered, sold, bought, and somehow assembled from here and there, for Malachi confessed he'd been a traveling salesman of one kind or another since his arrival in the new land from the old country. His travels had clearly broadened him, as he was an endless fount of knowledge about everything from automobiles to the iron-making factories of Pottstown. For all his horrible baking and utter disorganization, Malachi had a lightness and boundless enthusiasm about worldly matters. He seemed to bring light and air and goodness to everything he touched. He marveled at the simplest items—an apple peeler, a barrel, a menorah, a paper cup, a marble—with enthusiasm and humor, often holding the item up and saying, "Marvelous! Imagine. Who thought of this?"

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MOSHE HAD FEW friends. Most of Pottstown's Jews had left Chicken Hill by then. Nate was a friend, but he was a Negro, so there was that space between them. But with Malachi, there was no space. They were fellow escapees who, having endured the landing at Ellis Island and escaped the grinding sweatshops and vicious crime of the vermin-infested Lower East Side, had arrived by hook or crook in the land of opportunity that was Pennsylvania, home to Quakers, Mormons, and Presbyterians. Who cared that life was lonely, that jobs were thankless drudgery, that the romance of the proud American state was myth, that the rules of life were laid carefully in neat books and laws written by stern Europeans who stalked the town and state like the grim reaper, with their righteous churches spouting that Jews murdered their precious Jesus Christ? Their fellow Pennsylvanians knew nothing about the shattered shtetls and destroyed synagogues of the old country; they had not set eyes on the stunned elderly immigrants starving in tenements in New York, the old ones who came alone, who spoke Yiddish only, whose children died or left them to live in charity homes, the women frightened until the end, the men consigned to a life of selling vegetables and fruits on horse-drawn carts. They were a lost nation spread across the American countryside, bewildered, their yeshiva education useless, their proud history ignored, as the clankety-clank of

American industry churned around them, their proud past as watchmakers and tailors, scholars and historians, musicians and artists, gone, wasted. Americans cared about money. And power. And government. Jews had none of those things; their job was to tread lightly in the land of milk and honey and be thankful that they were free to walk the land without getting their duffs kicked—or worse. Life in America was hard, but it was free, and if you worked hard, you might gain some opportunity, maybe even open a shop or business of some kind.

Moshe, the proud owner of two thriving theaters and a grocery store that lost money every year thanks to his American-born Jewish wife, felt proud to be American. He cherished American life. He tried hard to convince his new friend of the goodness of America's ways. He gave his new friend a mezuzah pendant—a mezuzah normally adorns the doorway of a Jewish home. But this pendant could be worn around the neck, and it bore a special inscription on the back that read “Home of the Greatest Dancer in the World.” That way, Moshe explained, Malachi would feel at home and welcome everywhere he went.

But Malachi, normally amused by kind gestures and small gifts, returned the mezuzah and politely begged Moshe to give it to Chona, which he did, to her delight. Unlike most Jews, Malachi was proud of what he laughingly called his “clankety-clank” life in Europe that he'd left behind. He didn't mind being a greenhorn. He refused to dress like an American, preferring to wear his tallit under his shirt, the ends of which hung down his pants. He was kosher to the point of what Moshe considered to be useless. A fat worn prayer book, a mazchor, bulged out of the back pocket of his oversized pants like a big-city cop's ticket book. It went with him everywhere. He was constantly snatching it out of his pocket, stopping whatever he was doing, flipping it open expertly to a well-read passage, sometimes so moved by what he read that he'd place the book to his chest and bow his head, humming a fervent prayer in Hebrew. One afternoon, as the two enjoyed tea, Malachi placed his prayer book on the table. Moshe tapped it and said carefully, “I'm shy about Jewish things in this country.”

“Why?”

“It's not too good to waste time with old things.”

Malachi smiled. “The prayers in that siddur volume,” Malachi said, “are not old.” He picked up the old machzor. “These are actually for high holidays like Pesach and Sukkot. They're not for everyday matters. But I use it for everyday matters anyway.”

“Isn't that wrong?” Moshe asked.

Malachi chuckled. “The prophet Isaiah condemns routine, mechanical prayers anyway. So it doesn't matter.”

“Are you a rebbe?” Moshe asked.

“Depends on who's asking.”

“Doesn't a rebbe have to be educated at yeshiva?”

“Why are you worried if I'm a rebbe or not? So long as your words are uttered thoughtfully and with full intent, it doesn't matter. Our ways give comfort rather than cause sorrow. They bring joy rather than pain. I told you your wife would get well. And she did. What does it matter if a rebbe delivers those words or me? I'm not a rebbe, by the way. I just follow the Talmud, though my bread did make your wife well.”

Moshe laughed. “My cousin Isaac said his doctor made her well.”

Malachi smiled sternly. “Friend, the truth is neither made her well. Not my bread. Nor your cousin's fancy doctor. The fullness of the earth made

her well. Psalm Twenty-four says mankind must enjoy the fullness of the earth. Is bread not part of the earth's fullness?"

Moshe shrugged and let the matter rest. He was so happy that Chona was improving that he was afraid to jinx matters. "Why not come to the house to eat," he said. "You haven't actually met my wife."

"In time," Malachi said.

It was just that kind of response that kept Moshe on edge and curious about his new friend—the series of odd behaviors that seemed to be part and parcel of him. He guessed that perhaps Malachi did not want to meet Chona because he was prohibited, at least in his mind, from touching her. But still, he visited the theater with bread nearly every afternoon after closing his shop and was always bright and cheerful, full of questions about the theater, Moshe's crew, his business, life in America. And while he always asked about Chona's continuing improvement, Malachi declined to talk of his own wife, of whom he'd bragged so freely when he first arrived. Moshe never asked. He understood that marriage for new Jews in America was complex. Some men had wives back in Europe and took new wives here. Others missed their wives so terribly that to mention them brought tears, ranting, and even cursing and fighting. Some worked for years to save enough to send for their wives, only to discover after the wife arrived that both had changed so much the marriage was no longer tenable. Moshe, aware of those matters and happy that his own marriage was intact, stayed quiet on the matter. Still, Malachi's reticence about his past and his wife was a strange divide between them, and it only made Moshe more curious. He wanted to cross it and would have but for Malachi's floundering bakery, which took precedence, for its failure began almost immediately.

Even if Malachi had been the best baker in the world, he'd arrived in Pottstown at a bad time. Fabicelli, the kind old Italian baker who set his week-old pastries out every Sunday evening on a wooden crate for whoever in the Hill wanted them, and from whom Malachi had purchased the bakery, was one of the last white merchants remaining in Chicken Hill. Only Herb Radomitz's Ice House, which delivered ice by horse and cart, and the irascible Lithuanian shoe-store owners, Irv and Marvin Skrupskelis, who scared the bejesus out of everybody, were left. The other white stores had descended to the greener pastures of High Street, just ten blocks away. And while the kind, old Fabicelli was happy to sell his old delivery truck, bakery, and building that contained the upstairs apartment to the itinerant Jew, he obviously did not sell his recipes, for the rest of Malachi's baked goods were as bad, if not worse, than his challah. His cakes were catastrophes. They looked like finger paintings done by a six-year-old, with dripping icing and ragged edges. His buns tasted like chopped liver. The interior of his meat pies looked like moldy corned beef in need of a painter with a brush and a can of red paint. Even Chicken Hill's Negroes, long used to rotting food and old goods, avoided Malachi's shop. It was a testament to the seventeen Jewish families in Pottstown that the bakery survived the first few weeks at all.

Moshe watched this deterioration with concern, and one afternoon, when Malachi came by the theater to drop off his usual gift of flour and water disguised as challah, Moshe decided to bring up the matter of Malachi's baking. The two were standing near the front of the theater as they talked while Nate and a small crew were preparing the stage for an appearance that night by the mighty Count Basie Orchestra.

Before Moshe could even broach the subject, Malachi, in the mood to

talk about his business, tossed a loaf of challah wrapped in brown paper on the edge of the stage and confessed, "I closed the bakery early."

"Why?"

"Business is slow. People don't like my bread. What's wrong with my bread? It's good bread." He leaned on the edge of the stage, glancing at Nate and the three other Negroes in the back who were wiping tables and sweeping up trash from the previous night's event.

Moshe asked carefully, "Have you owned a bakery before?"

"Of course not."

"Why buy a bakery then?"

"It was for sale."

"There are many other businesses."

"What's wrong with buying a bakery?"

"Nothing. But you need to be apprenticed in these matters."

"Why? I am a good cook."

"Baking is not cooking. Baking, from what I understand, requires precision. Did you bake in the old country?"

Malachi did not answer directly. Instead, he removed his hat, ran his fingers through his thick, curly hair, placed his hat back on his head, then fished through his coat jacket pockets, pulling out all manner of baking tools: shaker, sifter, pastry mat, scraper, dough scoop, spatula, and rolling pin. He carefully placed them on the stage edge, lining them up neatly.

"These are my tools. I practice all the time. I'm teaching myself."

"You cannot teach and sell at the same time, friend."

"Why not? Isn't this how they do it in America?"

"Maybe. But before you buy a business. Not after."

Malachi's normally bright eyes darkened a bit. "I'm confused. When I first came to America, I went to Pittsburgh. But nobody wanted to hire me because I went to yeshiva. They thought I was too intellectual. I went to a big department store. I said, 'I can be an interpreter because I speak many languages. I speak Yiddish, German, Polish, Russian, and Spanish. I can talk to customers in their language and suggest things.' Instead, they put me to work tagging dresses. So I worked on a vegetable cart. But the man who owned it wanted me to work on the Sabbath, so I left. Then I worked in a diner cleaning pickle barrels. My fingers were swollen from pickle juice. Then I sold wife supplies off a horse and wagon. I eventually bought the horse and wagon from the man who owned them. From there, I saved enough to buy a bakery. It took nine years."

"Was your wife there during that time?" Moshe asked.

Malachi's eyes misted and he ignored the question, pointing to the bakery tools on the stage.

"I practice all the time. Even at night. I make the prettiest cakes. Have you ever tried my pies?"

Given his experience with Malachi's challah, Moshe had no intention of doing that. Instead, he gently pointed to Nate at the back of the theater cleaning and setting up with his small crew. "My Nate can help you find some colored workers."

Malachi shook his head. "Does he keep kosher?" he asked.

"A kosher bakery doesn't need a kosher baker," Moshe said.

Malachi was silent a moment, then said, "It's not wise to mix things the way they do here in America."

Moshe was stunned by this admission, which he considered ignorant.

"What difference does it make? You want your business to succeed or not?"

But Malachi wasn't listening. He was staring at Nate and his men, who were busy moving chairs and tables, putting white cloths on the tables, setting up candles. He pointed to the back of the hall. "Who is that boy?" he asked.

Moshe followed the direction of Malachi's finger that pointed to the lone Negro child among the men who were wiping tables near one of the exits. He was tall and thin for his age, not more than ten or twelve, Moshe guessed, athletic, with long arms and neck, and skin that looked as if he'd been dipped into a vat of chocolate. He had a dark oval face, wide nose, high cheekbones, and the longest eyelashes of any child Moshe had ever seen. Beautiful, expressive eyes. The child was sweeping popcorn and candy wrappers off chairs with a whisk broom. He noticed them, smiled shyly, then ducked his head, hurrying back to work as Nate directed, the boy moving quickly, as if he wanted to disappear into the tables and chairs. Moshe watched, transfixed. He was accustomed to Negroes disappearing, vanishing, and slipping off. But as he watched the Negro boy work his way across the littered dance floor, corralling the garbage, moving tables and chairs with speed and desperate efficiency, he felt a sudden gust of memory, as if his past had suddenly swept into the room and blew into the back of his shirt collar, like a breeze from an open door that puffs into an office and ruffles all the loose papers, sending them to the floor. He saw himself back in Romania at age nine, hungry and exhausted, standing outside a bread shop in Constanța, one terrified eye on the road watching for soldiers, the other eye on the baker's door, as Isaac burst out holding a loaf of challah under his arm like it was an American football, an old woman on his heels, as Isaac hissed, "Hurry, before the soldiers come!" The two boys ran, gobbling the bread like wolves as they fled. No wonder he hated challah.

He looked away from the child to see Malachi staring at him.

"It's the strangest thing about challah," Moshe said. "Do you want to hear?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I know it's not my baking that you dislike, friend," Malachi said. "It's what it stirs inside you. And for that I cannot help you. Only prayer can help that."

Moshe's eyes widened. How could he know? "What are you talking about?" he said. "You are making up things. It's just bread."

Malachi ignored that. Instead, he pulled himself up so he could sit on the edge of the stage, his legs dangling off it, watching the Negro boy work among the line of men moving fast across the dance hall. He glanced at his watch, then at the boy. "It's one o'clock. That child should be in school."

Moshe shrugged. The boy's schooling wasn't his business. "Nate brought him. Nate brings all my workers."

Malachi's eyes grew sorrowful. Despondency climbed into his face as he watched the Negroes work. "When I got off at Ellis Island, the first American I ever saw was a Negro. I thought all Americans were Negroes."

Moshe laughed nervously. Conversations about race always made him uneasy. He tried to change the subject. "I had never tasted a tomato until I came here," he said cheerily. "I had never eaten a banana. When I did eat one, I didn't like it."

But Malachi seemed distracted. He stared at the boy, watching him toss papers into a small can as he moved toward the back of the hall. "That's

what's wrong with this country," he said. "The Negroes."

Moshe shrugged. "They've done nothing wrong. They're good friends . . . my Nate. His wife, Addie, the helpers they bring. They help me a great deal."

Malachi smirked. "Did you know that all the historical sources of Hanukkah are in Greek?"

"What's that got to do with my Negro workers?"

"Light is only possible through dialogue between cultures, not through rejection of one or the other."

Moshe chuckled and nodded at Nate, who had worked his way to the back of the hall, directing the kid. "My Nate doesn't speak Greek."

"Your Nate? Does he belong to you?"

Moshe looked flummoxed. "You know what I mean," he muttered.

Malachi frowned. "The American ways you've learned." He shook his head. "This country is too dirty for me."

"What's wrong with you? Nate is my friend."

"Is he now?"

"Of course."

"Because you pay him?"

"Of course. Is he supposed to work for free?" Moshe sputtered.

But Malachi wasn't listening. He stared at Nate, and at the boy working behind him, and at the other Negroes. He watched them for several long moments, then murmured, "I think the Negroes have the advantage in this country."

"How's that?"

"At least they know who they are."

He hopped down from the stage and began to gather his baker's tools, the rolling pin, the spatula, cramming them in the oversized pockets of his worn jacket, the tools clanking as he did so. When he next spoke, he spoke in Yiddish: "We are integrating into a burning house," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Moshe demanded. Malachi turned to look at the back of the hall, his blue eyes following the Negroes. Suddenly one of them began to sing softly, a church hymn; and the others joined in, moving in sync, working faster now, as they shifted tables and tossed garbage into barrels.

I'll go where You want me to go,

O'er mountain, plain, or sea.

I'll say what You want me to say.

Lord, I'll be what You want me to be.

The song wafted up and across the dank, dark dance hall.

Malachi listened a moment, then said in Yiddish: "I would like you to sell my bakery for me. I will drop the papers off in the morning. If there is a profit, please send it to me."

"Where are you going?"

But Malachi was already at a side door and was gone.