

A stylized illustration of a woman with dark skin, wearing a blue hairnet and a white t-shirt with a large orange circle on it. She is holding a large orange object, possibly a fruit, in front of her. The background is a light greyish-green.

**THE HEAVEN
& EARTH
GROCERY
STORE**

a novel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JAMES
McBRIDE**

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

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The Color of Water

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Kill 'Em and Leave

Five-Carat Soul

Deacon King Kong



THE
Heaven
& Earth
GROCERY STORE

James McBride

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

New York

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RIVERHEAD BOOKS

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To Sy Friend, who taught all of us the meaning of Tikkun Olam

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PART I

Gone



The Hurricane

There was an old Jew who lived at the site of the old synagogue up on Chicken Hill in the town of Pottstown, Pa., and when Pennsylvania State Troopers found the skeleton at the bottom of an old well off Hayes Street, the old Jew's house was the first place they went to. This was in June 1972, the day after a developer tore up the Hayes Street lot to make way for a new townhouse development.

We found a belt buckle and a pendant in the well, the cops said, and some old threads—from a red costume or jacket, that's what the lab shows.

They produced a piece of jewelry, handed it to him, and asked what it was.

A mezuzah, the old man said.

It matches the one on the door, the cops said. Don't these things belong on doors?

The old man shrugged. Jewish life is portable, he said.

The inscription on the back says "Home of the Greatest Dancer in the World." It's in Hebrew. You speak Hebrew?

Do I look like I speak Swahili?

Answer the question. You speak Hebrew or not?

I bang my head against it sometimes.

And you're Malachi the dancer, right? That's what they say around here. They say you're a great dancer.

Used to be. I gave that up forty years ago.

What about the mezuzah? It matches the one here. Wasn't this the Jewish temple?

It was.

Who owns it now?

Who owns everything around here? the old man said. He nodded at the immense gleaming private school seen through the dim window. The Tucker School. It sat proudly atop the hill behind wrought-iron gates, with smooth lawns, tennis courts, and shiny classroom buildings, a monstrous bastion of arrogant elegance, glowing like a phoenix above the ramshackle neighborhood of Chicken Hill.

They been trying to buy me out for thirty years, the old man said.

He grinned at the cops, but he was practically toothless, save for a single yellow tooth that hung like a clump of butter from his top gum, which made him look like an aardvark.

You're a suspect, they said.

Suspect shuspect, he said with a shrug. He was well north of eighty, wearing an old gray vest, a rumpled white shirt holding several old pens in the vest pocket, a wrinkled tallit

around his shoulders, and equally rumpled old pants, but when he reached inside his pants pocket, his gnarled hands moved with such deftness and speed that the state troopers, who spent most days ticketing tractor-trailers on nearby Interstate 76 and impressing pretty housewives during traffic stops with their bubble-gum lights and stern lectures about public safety, panicked and stepped back, their hands on their weapons. But the old man produced nothing more than several pens. He offered the cops one.

No thanks, they said.

They milled around for a while longer and eventually left, promising to return after they pulled the skeleton out of the well and studied the potential murder scene some more. They never did, though, because the next day God wrapped His hands around Chicken Hill and wrung His last bit of justice out of that wretched place. Hurricane Agnes came along and knocked the power out of four counties. The nearby Schuylkill River rose to a height of seven feet. To hear the old black women of Chicken Hill tell it, white folks was jumping off their rooftops in Pottstown like they was on the Titanic. All those fancy homes down there were swept away like dust. That storm killed everything it touched. Drowned every man, woman, and child that come near it; wrecked bridges, knocked down factories, tore up farms; that thing caused millions in damages—millions and millions—that's white-folks language, millions and millions. Well, for us colored folks on the Hill, it was just another day of dodging the white man's evil. As for the old Jew and his kind that was on this hill, they got all their time back from them that stole everything from 'em. And the Jew lady they wronged, Miss Chona, she got her justice, too, for the King of Kings fixed her up for all the good things she done, lifted her up and filled up her dreams in an instant in only the way He can. That evil fool who called hisself Son of Man, he's long gone from this country. And that boy Dodo, the deaf one, he's yet living. They put that whole camp up there in Montgomery County now on account of him, the Jews did. Theater owners they was, God bless 'em. And them cops and big-time muckity mucks that was running behind them Jews for the body they found in that old well, they can't find a spec against 'em now, for God took the whole business—the water well, the reservoir, the dairy, the skeleton, and every itty bitty thing they could'a used against them Jews—and washed it clear into the Manatawny Creek. And from there, every single bit of that who-shot-John nonsense got throwed into the Schuylkill, and from there, it flowed into the Chesapeake Bay down in Maryland, and from there, out to the Atlantic. And that's where the bones of that rotten scoundrel whose name is not worthy to be called by my lips is floating to this day. At the bottom of the ocean, with the fish picking his bones and the devil keeping score.

As for old Malachi, the cops never did find him. They come back for him after the hurricane business died away, but he was long gone. Left a sunflower or two in the yard and that's it. Old Mr. Malachi got off clean. He was the last of 'em. The last of the Jews round here. That fella was a wizard. He was something. He could dance, too . . . Lord . . . That man was magic . . .

Mazel tov, honey.

A Bad Sign

Forty-seven years before construction workers discovered the skeleton in the old farmer's well on Chicken Hill, a Jewish theater manager in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, named Moshe Ludlow had a vision about Moses.

Moshe had this vision on a Monday morning in February as he was cleaning out the remnants of a Chick Webb one-night stand at his tiny All-American Dance Hall and Theater on Main Street. Webb and his roaring twelve-piece band was the greatest musical event Moshe had ever witnessed in his life, except for the weekend he managed to lure Mickey Katz, the brilliant but temperamental Yiddish genius of klezmer music, out of Cleveland to play a full weekend of family fun and Yiddish frolic at Moshe's All-American Dance Hall and Theater two months before. Now *that* was something. Katz, the kid wizard of clarinet, and his newly formed seven-piece ensemble braved a furious December snowstorm that dropped fourteen inches in the eastern Pennsylvania mountains to make it to the gig, and thanks to blessed G-d, they had, because Moshe counted 249 Jewish shoe salesmen, shop owners, tailors, blacksmiths, railroad painters, deli owners, and their wives from five different states, including Upstate New York and Maine, who came to the event. There were even four couples from Tennessee who drove through the Blue Ridge Mountains for three days, eating cheese and eggs, unable to keep kosher on the Sabbath, just to be with their fellow Yids—and right before Hanukkah, for which they all should be at home lighting candles for eight days. Not to mention one of the husbands was a fanatic and believed that the fast of Tisha B'Av, normally celebrated in July or August, should be celebrated twice a year instead of once, which meant staying home every December and starving and peppering the walls with pictures of flowers for three weeks straight as a show of thanks to the Creator for His generosity in helping the Jewish people of Eastern Europe escape the pogroms for the relative peace and prosperity of America's Promised Land. Thanks to him and the weather, all four couples were in a foul mood once they arrived, having squeezed into two ancient Packards—one of which had no heat—and driven through the savage snowstorm. They announced plans to leave immediately when they heard talk of more snow, but Moshe talked them out of it. That was his gift. Moshe could talk the horns off the devil's head. "How many times in life does one get to hear a young genius?" he said to them. "It will be the greatest event of your life." He led them to his pocket-sized room in a boardinghouse on Chicken Hill, a tiny area of ramshackle houses and dirt roads where the town's blacks, Jews, and immigrant whites who couldn't afford any better lived, set them before his warm woodstove, filled them with warm iced tea and gefilte fish, and amused them with the story of his Romanian

grandmother who jumped out a window to avoid marrying a Haskalah Jew, only to land atop a Hasidic rabbi from Austria.

“She knocked him to the mud,” he exclaimed. “When he looked up, she was reading his palm. So they got married.”

That brought smirks and chuckles to their faces, because everyone knew the Romanians were crazy. With their laughter ringing in his ears, he rushed back to the crowd who waited anxiously in the snow for the theater doors to open.

As Moshe made his way down the muddy roads of Chicken Hill to his theater on Main Street, his heart sank. The makeshift line that had formed an hour before had exploded into a mob of close to three hundred. Moreover, he was informed that the temperamental genius Katz had arrived but was inside the theater in a foul mood, having braved the terrible storm, and was now threatening to leave. Moshe raced inside and found to his relief that his always-dependable helper, an old colored man named Nate Timblin, had settled Katz and his band backstage before the warm woodstove, serving them hot tea in water glasses, fresh kosher eggs, gefilte fish, and challah bread, all neatly laid out buffet-style. The young Katz seemed pleased and announced that he and his band would set up as soon as they finished eating. From there, Moshe went back outside to stall the waiting crowd.

When he saw that more people were coming—stragglers rushing from the train station carrying satchels and suitcases—he grabbed a stepladder and climbed atop it to address them all. He had never seen so many Jews in one place in America in his life. The reform snobs from Philadelphia were there in button-down shirts, standing next to ironworkers from Pittsburgh, who crowded against socialist railroad men from Reading wearing caps bearing the Pennsylvania Railroad logo, who stood shoulder to shoulder with coal miners with darkened faces from Uniontown and Spring City. Some were with wives. Others were with women who, given their fur coats, leather boots, and dazzling hairdos, were not wives at all. One fellow was accompanied by a blonde gey six inches taller than him, clad in gay Irish green, complete with a hat that looked like a cross between a clover leaf and the spikes on the Statue of Liberty’s crown. Some yammered in German, others chatted in Yiddish. Some yelled in a Bavarian dialect, others spoke Polish. When Moshe announced there would be a short delay, the crowd grew more restless.

A handsome young Hasid in a caftan and fur hat, bearing a gunny sack, his curly hair jammed into the hat he wore cocked to the side as if it were a fedora, announced he had come all the way from Pittsburgh and would not dance with a woman at all, which caused laughter and a few harsh words, some of them in German, about Polish morons dressing like greenhorns.

Moshe was flummoxed. “Why come to a dance if you’re not going to dance with a woman?” he asked the man.

“I’m not looking for a dancer,” the handsome Hasid said tersely. “I’m looking for a wife.”

The crowd laughed again. Later, under the spell of Katz’s gorgeous musical wizardry, Moshe watched in wonder as the man danced like a demon all night. He frolicked through every dance step that Moshe had ever seen, and Moshe, who had spent his childhood as a fugeyer—a wandering Jew—in Romania, had seen a few: horas, bulgars, khosidls, freylekhs, Russian marches, Cossack high-steps. The Hasid was a wonder of twisted elbows,

a rhythmic gyroscope of elastic grace and wild dexterity. He danced with any woman who came close, and there were plenty. Moshe later decided the guy must be some kind of wizard.

The next four nights were the most extraordinary gathering of joyful Jewish celebration that Moshe had ever seen. He considered it a miracle, in part because the whole business had nearly fallen apart before it even got off the ground, thanks to a series of flyer notices he'd sent out weeks before to drum up advance ticket sales. Using a Jewish cross directory that listed synagogues and private homes where traveling Jews could stay, Moshe sent flyers to every country Jewish synagogue, boardinghouse, and hostel between North Carolina and Maine. The flyers, proudly proclaiming that the great Mickey Katz Road Show of Winter Yiddish Fun and Family Memories from the Old Country was coming to the All-American Dance Hall and Theater in Pottstown, Pa., on December 15, were printed in four languages: German, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. But Moshe had badly overestimated the organizational power of country Jewish rabbis, and most of the notices were lost in the ongoing rush of death notices, bar mitzvah commitments, once-in-a-lifetime sales, kosher cow-slaughtering requests, tallit-making services, business-dispute refereeing, mohel (circumcision) mix-ups, and marriage-arrangement snafus that were the daily bread and butter of a country rabbi's life. The few souls who had the presence of mind to open Moshe's letters containing the flyers only added to the confusion, for many were fresh immigrants from Eastern Europe who didn't speak English. They considered any letter that bore a typed address some kind of government notice that meant immediate shipment of you, your family, your dog, and your green stamps back to the old country, where the Russian soldiers awaited with a special gift for your part in the murder of the czar's son, who, of course, the Russians had killed themselves and poked his eyes out to boot, but who's asking? So the flyers were tossed.

Moreover, Moshe sent the wrong flyers to the wrong congregations. The Yiddish flyers went to German-speaking congregations. The German flyers were sent to Yiddish shuls who despised the German-loving snobs. The Hebrew ads went to Hungarians who everybody knew pretended they couldn't read English unless it referred to Jews as "American Israelites"—in Hebrew. Two English ads went to a Polish congregation in Maine that had vanished, the greenhorns up there likely having frozen their tuchuses off and dropped into the ice somewhere. One Baltimore merchant even accidentally forwarded his Yiddish flyer to the advertising department of the *Baltimore Sun*, which caused a ruckus, the advertising executive being under the impression that the Jewish clothing-store merchant from East Baltimore's Jewtown who regularly advertised in the *Sun* intended it for Yiddish-speaking customers only. In actuality, the kind merchant was translating the flyer from Yiddish to English in the back of his store when an argument between two customers broke out in the front of the store. When he stepped out to quell the fuss, his Yiddish-speaking wife wandered into the back storeroom, recognized the words "*Baltimore Sun*" among the papers on her husband's crowded desk, stuffed the half-translated flyer into an envelope along with their weekly advertising check, and mailed it to the paper. The ad executive who received it was too dumb to know the difference between advertising and editorial, and forwarded it to the city desk with a note saying, "Run this tomorrow because the Jew always pays," whereupon the night city editor, a devout well-meaning Catholic, handed it to a new nineteen-year-old Hungarian copy clerk—hired, in part, because he claimed he could speak Yiddish. The kid

sent the whole badly translated mess back to advertising with a note saying, "This is an ad." The advertising department placed it in a large font on page B-4 on a Saturday on the last day of Sukkot, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the gathering of the harvest and the miraculous protection the Lord provided for the children of Israel. The result was a disaster. Moshe's original flyer read, in Yiddish:

"Come see the great Mickey Katz. Once-in-a-lifetime event. Family fun and Jewish memories. Red-hot klezmer like you've never heard before."

The translated ad read, in English:

"Mickey Katz is coming. Once a life, always a life. Watch the Jews burn and dance and have fun."

The ad caused panic and fury in East Baltimore's Jewtown, as many of its residents still remembered how the town's first rabbi, David Einhorn, spoke out against slavery during the Civil War and was run out of town, his house burned to the ground. They demanded that the merchant close his store and quit the city.

Moshe nearly fainted when he got word of the disaster. He sped to Baltimore and spent four hundred dollars straightening out matters with the good-natured merchant, who kindly helped him write a second, better ad. But it was too late. The first ad was too much for Baltimore's Jews. It was simply too good to be true. A klezmer dance? With the great Mickey Katz? Why would a star like Katz play for poor salesmen and tailors in the freezing hills of eastern Pennsylvania? In an American theater? Owned by a fudgeyer, a Romanian? Fudgeyers don't own theaters! They wander around and sing songs and get the crap beat out of them by the czar's soldiers. Where is Pottstown anyway? Were there any Jews there at all? Impossible! It was a trap!

The result was that only four Jewish couples from Baltimore bought advance tickets to see the great Katz, and Moshe had been counting on Baltimore's Jewish community in big numbers.

Five weeks before the concert, \$1,700 in the hole to his cousin Isaac in Philadelphia, from whom he borrowed the theater rental and deposit money, and feeling lower than he felt when his father died, Moshe dropped to his knees, prayed to G-d for spiritual renewal, felt none, and found himself moping around the back storeroom of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, the sole Jewish grocery in Chicken Hill. The owner, a rabbi named Yakov Flohr, felt sorry for the young Romanian and offered to let Moshe study Hebrew from his Talmud, which he kept in the same storeroom where his youngest daughter Chona toiled. She was crippled from polio, with one leg shorter than the other, requiring her to wear a boot with a sole four inches thick. Chona spent her days sorting vegetables and making butter by stirring yellow dye into creamed milk stored in barrels.

Knowing he was up to his balls in hock and needing G-d, Moshe took the rabbi up on the offer and spent several afternoons glumly poring through the text, thinking of his late father and peeking at Chona, whom he dimly remembered as a quiet, mousey young thing as a child but who now, at age seventeen, had developed into quite a package. Despite her foot and limp, she was a quiet beauty, with a gorgeous nose and sweet lips, ample breasts, a sizable derriere that poked against the drab, loose-fitting woolen skirt, and eyes that shone with gaiety and mirth. Moshe, at twenty-one, in full bloom himself, found himself looking up several times from his Hebrew studies to gawk at Chona's rear end as she stirred the butter on

those cold Pennsylvania nights, the swish of her hips moving with the promise of the coal stove in the far corner that heated only half the room. She turned out to be a spirited soul, full of wry humor and glad to have company, and after a few days of easy conversation, regaling him with warm jokes and smiling with her bright gay eyes, young Moshe finally confessed his problem: the upcoming concert, the massive debts, the money already spent, the wrong ads, the demands of a difficult star. “I’m going to lose everything,” he said.

It was there, in the back of the rabbi’s store, standing over the butter barrel, a churn in her hand, that Chona reminded him of the story of Moses and the burning coals.

She put down her churn, glanced at the door to make sure no one was watching, went to the desk where he sat, lifted her father’s dusty, weathered Talmud—which they both knew she was forbidden to touch—grasped the Midrash Rabbah beneath it, and placed the Talmud back down. Then she opened the Midrash Rabbah, which contained the five books of Moses, and flipped to the story of Moses and the burning coals. She was a student of religion, she confided, and the story of Moses always brought her solace.

It was there—the collapse of his theater imminent, peering at the holy Midrash Rabbah with one eye and the lovely hand of the beauty Chona with the other, his heart throbbing from the first flush of love—that Moshe first came upon the story of Moses and the burning coals, which Chona read to him in Hebrew, of which he understood every fourth word.

Pharaoh placed a plate of burning coals on one side of the infant Moses and a plate of sparkling coins and jewelry on the other. If the infant was intelligent, he would be attracted to the sparkling gold and jewelry, and would be killed as a threat to the pharaoh’s heir. If he touched the black coals, he would be perceived as too stupid to be a threat and allowed to live. Moses started to reach for the coins, but as he did, an angel appeared and deftly moved his hand to the hot coals, burning his fingers. The child put his fingers in his mouth, stinging his tongue and giving him a life-long speech impediment. Moses spoke with a defect for the rest of his life, but the life of the leader and most important teacher of the Jewish people was saved.

Moshe listened in rapturous silence, and when she was done, he found himself bathed in the light of love only heaven can deliver. He returned to the storeroom for several days, filling himself with words of the Midrash Rabbah, about which he had been previously ambivalent, and the young flower who led him to words of holy purpose. At the end of the third week of Midrash Rabbah lessons, Moshe asked Chona to marry him, and to his amazement, she agreed.

The next week Moshe deposited \$140 in Yakov’s bank account as a gift, then approached Yakov and his wife with his marriage proposal for their daughter. The parents, both Bulgarian, were so overjoyed that someone other than a cyclops was willing to marry their disabled daughter—so what if he was Romanian?—they readily agreed. “Why not next week?” Moshe asked. “Why not?” they said. The modest wedding was held at Ahavat Achim, the tiny shul that serviced Pottstown’s seventeen Jewish families. It was attended by Moshe’s cousin Isaac from Philadelphia, Chona’s deliriously happy parents, and a few local Yids Yakov had drummed up to create the necessary minyan of ten Jews to say the seven wedding blessings. Two of them were Polish workers from the Pennsylvania Railroad train yard who had hustled up to Chicken Hill to grab a kosher bite. The two agreed to attend the wedding but demanded four dollars apiece for cab fare to Reading, where they were expected

to report to work the next morning. Yakov refused, but Moshe was happy to pay. It was a small price for marrying the woman who brought him more happiness than he ever dreamed possible.

So inspired was he by his new love that he forgot all about the \$1,700 he'd spent. He sold his car for \$350, borrowed another \$1,200 from Isaac, and spent the money on ads, this time properly placed, then watched in amazement as ticket sales zoomed. More than four hundred tickets were sold.

For four nights Mickey Katz and his magical musicians poured forth the most rousing, glorious klezmer music that eastern Pennsylvania had ever heard. Four nights of wild, low-down, dance-till-you-can't Jewish revelry. Moshe sold out of everything—drinks, food, eggs, fish. He even put up twenty exhausted New Yorkers in his theater's second-floor balcony, normally reserved for Negroes. The four couples from Tennessee who had threatened to leave stayed the entire weekend, as did the Hasid dancer who swore he would dance with no woman. It was a rousing success.

The morning after the festivities ended, Moshe was sweeping the sidewalk in front of his theater when he saw the dancing Hasid hurrying toward the train station.

Gone was the fur hat. In its place was a fedora. The caftan had been cut into a sportcoat-length jacket. Moshe barely recognized him. As the young man approached, Moshe spoke out. "Where are you from?" he asked. But the man was fast and silent and already moving down the sidewalk past him. Moshe called to his back, "Wherever you live, it's home to the greatest dancer in the world, that's for sure."

That did it. The Hasid stopped, reached into his gunny sack, and without a word, walked several steps back to Moshe, handed him a bottle of slivovitz (plum brandy), then turned and continued down the sidewalk moving fast.

Moshe called out cheerfully to his back, "Did you find a wife?"

"I don't need a wife," he said, waving a hand without looking back. "I'm a twart of love."

"A what?"

"A sponge cake," he said. "Don't you Romanians know anything?" Before Moshe could reply, a distinct pop was heard—a tiny explosion like the sound of a cork popping but louder. Both men froze. They looked up at the tiny tangle of houses on Chicken Hill behind Moshe's theater. A small puff of black smoke wafted into the air, apparently from one of the scruffy homes, the smoke vanishing into the sky.

"That's a bad sign," the Hasid said, then rushed off.

Moshe called out, "What's your name?"

But the Hasid was gone.

Twelve

The day after the Hasid left, Moshe walked to his theater to find Nate hard at work out front, manning a long-handled grabber, carefully pulling the letters off the theater facade.

“Did you hear that pop yesterday?” Moshe asked. “It sounded like something blew up on the Hill.”

Nate shrugged, looking up at the facade. “Ain’t nothing blowing up there except hard times. Plenty of that.”

Moshe laughed. He was still in a glorious mood from the wonderful windfall Katz had brought him and his recent wedding, so he reached in his pocket, counted off fifteen dollars. “For you,” he said.

Nate, looking up at the facade, glanced down at the money, then shook his head.

“You don’t like my money?” Moshe asked.

Nate leaned on the long pole. He was a tall, light-skinned man with smooth skin and sinewed, muscled arms from some kind of outdoor work, Moshe guessed.

“I likes it fine,” Nate said. “But I like my job more. How I’m gonna keep a job if you keep giving away your last dime, Mr. Moshe? I ain’t seen a dance like that since Erskine Hawkins come through Anna Morse’s place in Linfield. I used to make good coin over there.”

Moshe faintly recalled Anna Morse, a well-dressed Negro woman who drove a Packard. He also knew her building, a tiny brick structure on a back road outside Linfield, a farming community about seven miles away. “Isn’t that a funeral home?” he said.

“It was a colored dance hall,” Nate said. “But Anna’s making more money now from dead bodies than live ones. Shame, too. Coloreds got to go all the way to Chambersburg to find a place to dance. Unless you wanna go to a jook joint and get all shot up.”

Moshe nodded, but his mind began to churn. Later that night, he took the matter to Chona. “What if I open my theater to the colored?”

“So?”

“The goyim won’t like that.”

Chona was standing at the stove cooking dinner, her back to him. She laughed and raised her spoon in the air, spinning it in a circle. That was her gift. Not an ounce of bitterness or shred of shame. Unlike Moshe, Chona was an American. She had been born in Pottstown. She was a familiar sight in Chicken Hill in her worn woolen dress, old sweater, and wearing her special-soled boot that cost a fortune, laughing and joking with neighbors. She seemed to know every family. When Moshe came home for lunch and even late at night, he often found

his wife standing in front of the store laughing with one of the local Negroes. "That woman," his cousin Isaac once grumbled, "is a real Bulgarian. Whenever they feel like working, they sit and wait till the feeling passes. They can't pour a glass of water without making a party of it." But Isaac was a sourpuss whom Moshe had long ago learned to ignore on certain matters.

Standing at her stove, Chona said in Yiddish, "Me ken dem yam mit a kendel nit ois' shepen." (You can't ride in all directions at once.) "What does it matter what they think? The coloreds' money spends just like ours."

Four weeks later, Moshe booked Chick Webb, the colored entertainer.

The night of Webb's show, Pottstown's Negroes slipped into Moshe's All-American Dance Hall and Theater like ghosts. They entered silent and somber; the men in sober suits and ties, the pretty women in flowered dresses and large handsome hats. Some were clearly nervous. Others seemed agitated. A few looked outright terrified. Downtown Pottstown was off-limits to Negroes unless they came to work as janitors, maids, or to use a public faucet when the tap water on Chicken Hill mysteriously vanished, which was frequently.

But once Chick Webb's band struck up, the silent, reticent Negroes of Pottstown transformed: they became a leaping mass of wild, dancing humanity. They frolicked and laughed, dancing as if they were birds enjoying flight for the first time. Webb's band played like wizards, four sets of gorgeous, stomping, low-down, rip-roaring, heart-racing jazz. The result was an outrageously joyous event, matched in intensity only by the great Mickey Katz affairs.

Moshe watched spellbound from the wings as Webb, a tiny man with a curved spine clad in a white suit, roared with laughter and enthusiasm as he played, egging his band on from the rear with his masterful drumming, the thunderous band shaking the floor with rip-roaring waves of gorgeous sound. That man, Moshe decided, was a joymaker. And Moshe could not help but notice that Webb, like his lovely Chona, had a physical disability. Though he was a hunchback of some kind, he moved with a certain feeling of joy, a lightness, as if every moment were precious.

Cripples, Moshe thought, have brought me fortune: Moses, Chona, and Chick.

It was then that Moshe began to have dreams about Moses. They came in twelves. Twelve different visions. Twelve different nights. Moses walking through twelve different gates. Twelve different cities. Moses on Mount Sinai, staring at twelve different peaks below. He began to see everything about him as a function of twelve. Twelve bands in twelve months. Twelve hundred dollars invested in twelve different stocks, bringing fantastic returns. Even the home he purchased, a tiny brick affair in Chicken Hill, was located in a neighborhood that comprised twelve blocks in one square mile.

Moshe told no one about his dreams, not even his wife. Instead, he followed the visions, investing first a few pennies in twelve different stocks, then more as the stocks grew, and in his theater, bringing in twelve different Negro bands in twelve months, including Webb again, who came back four times. The dances drew Negroes from far and wide, and over the next twelve months, his fortunes grew.

As they did, the response of the town's rival theater owners evolved from grumbles to murmured complaints to roaring outrage. Negroes were crawling all over downtown, they howled, to a Jewish theater! Everybody knows the Jews bake their matzahs with Christian blood!

The response was swift. First, the city building inspector arrived at the theater and told Moshe his pipes were bad and that his plaster was peeling, and fined him. The owner of the theater building complained about the litter. The fire commissioner cited him for creaky doorways and missing emergency exits. Even his own synagogue fined him five dollars.

Moshe fought back. He paid off the building inspector. He presented the fire chief, a drunk, with four bottles of scotch and a new fishing rod. He had the ever-faithful Nate and a crew of Negroes sweep the front of every single store on the block, then he approached the landlord and promised to pay him \$150 for every Negro act he booked, offering to buy the building at a substantial price in a year's time if the landlord kept quiet about the Negroes. The landlord agreed.

To address the synagogue, Isaac traveled up from Philadelphia and met with the chevry, the men's group that had fined Moshe. Isaac was a grim, forbidding soul, four years older, who'd been Moshe's protector since their shared childhood in Europe. Isaac walked into the meeting, laid a silver dollar on the table, and said, "I'll give ten of those to any man in this room who can prove he was at the Mickey Katz dance with his wife." Not a soul moved. That ended the conversation about Moshe's fine.

With the profits from the Negro dances, Moshe bought his theater outright within two years, and then later a second theater two blocks off. Over the next five years, he expanded and made real money—enough to buy his mother a warm house in Romania and provide Chona with a comfortable apartment above the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, which he bought from Yakov after Chona's mother passed and Yakov moved on to run a bigger temple in Reading. Moshe planned on demolishing the store but Chona wouldn't allow it.

"How can you sell Heaven and Earth?" She laughed.

Moshe did not see the humor. "You don't have to spend your life selling kosher cow meat and onions to coloreds. Let's close the store. The Jews are leaving the Hill. Let's follow them."

"Where?"

"Down the hill to town. Where the Americans are."

"Which Americans?"

"Chona, don't be difficult."

"I'll run the store."

"How will that look? My wife selling cheese and biscuits while I run one of the best theaters in town? We have plenty now."

Chona's exuberant smile molded into a smirk. "So I'm to sit home all day while you have fun at your theater full of music?"

Moshe gave in.

It gave the Jewish housewives of Pottstown much to talk about. What kind of husband would let his wife run his business? Why didn't they move off the Hill like the other Jews? Her father had moved to Reading after her mother passed; why hadn't Chona made her husband move there to help her father? What's more important than family?

But Chona's years of stirring butter, sorting vegetables, and reading in the back room of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store had given her time to consider. She read everything as a child: comics, detective books, dime novels; and by the time she became a young wife, she'd evolved into reading about socialism and unions. She subscribed to Jewish newspapers,