

Chapter 13: Cowboy

Chapter 13: Cowboy introduces Moshe, who finds himself at the Ringing Rocks skating rink, grappling with the complex emotions that have consumed his life. As he leans against the pavilion railing, he watches the teenage skaters below, feeling an overwhelming sense of detachment from their carefree laughter and warmth. His thoughts drift to the nearby rocks, an unusual tourist attraction that serves as a temporary escape from the turmoil engulfing his family. With his wife, Chona, lying in a coma and their adopted son now in state custody, Moshe is left to wrestle with feelings of despair and confusion. He questions how everything in his life has spiraled so far out of control and wonders if things will ever return to a semblance of normalcy.

Moshe recalls a time when Chona insisted on visiting the skating rink, a stark contrast to her current absence. He remembers how she never allowed their son to skate, believing that he should instead enjoy the vibrations of the ancient rocks nearby. This memory stirs a sense of bitterness in Moshe, as he reflects on Chona's ideas of "helpfulness" during their most difficult times. He feels a growing resentment towards her approach to life and their family's struggles, wondering if her unconventional methods contributed to their current predicament. As winter snow begins to gently fall around him, Moshe takes out a pen and paper to write a letter to his old friend, Malachi. In his letter, Moshe expresses his deepening struggles in the theater business and laments how the audience's tastes have shifted. He reflects on the decline of Yiddish culture and the rise of American cowboy ideals, a shift that frustrates him as he feels increasingly disconnected from the art form he once loved.

The tension at the theater that evening becomes another burden for Moshe, who arrives late due to his wife's hospitalization. As he enters the theater, a clash between Lionel Hampton's band and Machito's Afro-Cubans is already escalating over their performance order. Trapped in the middle of the confrontation, Moshe finds himself

struggling to mediate the growing tensions, desperately wishing to avoid such conflicts. He recalls how Chona used to guide him through these types of situations with her calm demeanor and sharp understanding. Her absence in these moments becomes even more apparent, as Moshe now finds himself floundering without her support and guidance. The chaos in the theater symbolizes the greater unrest in his life, where he feels lost and unsure of his next move.

The chapter culminates in Moshe's realization that the cultural landscape around him is changing. The diverse sounds of music emerging in America are forcing him to reconsider his own understanding of identity and art. These shifts challenge his long-held beliefs and push him to question the role he plays in both the theater world and the larger cultural conversation. Despite the personal and professional turmoil, Moshe receives a humorous package from Malachi: infant-sized cowboy pants. This gift, which seems so trivial yet deeply symbolic, prompts Moshe to reflect on the direction his life is headed. The cowboy, a symbol of rugged independence and a changing America, represents the new path that may lie ahead for him. This moment sparks introspection, as Moshe wonders if he should embrace these changes, despite the uncertainties they bring.

As the chapter draws to a close, Moshe is left contemplating the complexities of his identity. He recognizes that his life, much like the cultural shifts around him, is in a state of flux. The cowboy symbol, representing a new, uncharted territory, stands as a metaphor for the changes he must face both personally and professionally. At the same time, he reflects on the crisis his family is experiencing and how it intertwines with his own struggles. In these moments of reflection, Moshe contemplates whether embracing a new path, symbolized by the cowboy, will provide the resolution he desperately needs. This chapter speaks to the universal theme of adaptation—how one must navigate a changing world, balancing personal history and cultural shifts, while simultaneously confronting the challenges that life throws their way.