

Chapter 20: The Antes House

Chapter 20: The Antes House introduces Gus Plitzka, the chairman of the Pottstown city council, who has a deep-seated aversion to Memorial Day. This holiday, which includes the John Antes Historical Society's Cornet Marching Band, brings with it a series of events that Gus dreads each year. These events involve a council meeting, followed by a band performance, a breakfast of German sausages, and a parade where council members dress as Revolutionary soldiers to honor John Antes, a composer with a controversial life. Gus is particularly displeased by the celebration, as it not only highlights the mixed legacy of Antes, but also brings the town's complex history to the forefront in ways that make him uncomfortable. For Gus, this annual gathering represents a forced celebration of both tradition and a past that he feels should remain buried.

The celebration culminates at the Antes House, a dilapidated historical site that serves as a haven for the town's unsavory characters for most of the year. The house, neglected and rundown, attracts a diverse crowd—runaways, troublemakers, and revelers alike. However, just before Memorial Day, these people vanish, leaving the house to be cleaned and refurbished in preparation for the event. The building, a symbol of Pottstown's history, is a contradictory place; it serves as a refuge for the town's more marginalized individuals, while also representing the town's connection to its past and its struggle to reconcile history with the present. In a town where people and their stories are often swept under the rug, the Antes House stands as a reminder of the complexities of Pottstown's identity.

As the chapter unfolds, Plitzka reflects on his role as the new owner of Clover Dairy, a position that has not brought him the success he hoped for. Instead, he is burdened by a significant debt to a mobster named Nig Rosen, which has become a source of constant stress and anxiety. The loan, which he once viewed as a means of advancing

his life and career, has become a crippling weight that he cannot escape. His participation as a parade marshal during the Memorial Day event does little to alleviate his financial struggles, and he spends much of the time consumed by thoughts of how to resolve his mounting debt. This underlying tension between his outward role as a respected town figure and his internal financial turmoil speaks to the larger struggles that many in Pottstown face, where appearances often mask deeper issues.

In the midst of the Memorial Day celebrations, Gus Plitzka seeks help from Doc Roberts, a fellow council member and a member of the marching band, to address his physical ailment—a painful toe. Their interaction reveals a strained relationship, with both men harboring past grievances against one another. These issues stem not only from personal differences but also from the larger class and political divides that define their interactions. Plitzka, who is burdened by his role in the council and his financial obligations, looks to Doc for assistance, but their exchange is far from friendly. Their shared history of conflict makes even simple interactions charged with underlying animosity, adding complexity to their relationship.

As the two men continue their conversation, the topic shifts to the growing presence of Black residents in Pottstown. This change in the community creates uncomfortable tensions and highlights underlying racial discrimination. Plitzka, whose views are colored by prejudice, makes disparaging remarks about the Black community, while Doc, though more reserved, expresses his discontent with the difficult conditions they face. This discussion brings to light the racial divides that exist within the town, reflecting the broader societal issues that affect their lives. The conversation serves as a window into the racial dynamics of the town, showing how deeply ingrained biases shape the attitudes and behavior of those in positions of power.

Amidst their bitter exchanges, the characters reveal more about their roles within the town and their respective political motivations. Their personal struggles—Plitzka's financial woes, Doc's physical discomfort, and both men's simmering racial prejudices—are woven into the larger fabric of small-town politics. The chapter delves

into the ethical and moral dilemmas they face, offering a glimpse into the intricacies of their personal and political lives. The tensions between them, both personal and political, set the stage for larger themes of power, race, and class to unfold. As the chapter progresses, it becomes clear that these themes are not only relevant to the characters' interactions but also to the community as a whole, where divisions run deep and affect every aspect of daily life.

The chapter ultimately paints a picture of a town on the brink of change, where old divisions are being challenged by new realities. The interactions between Gus, Doc, and the other characters highlight the tensions between tradition and progress, as well as the personal struggles that define their lives. Through their exchanges, the reader is introduced to the complex web of small-town politics, where personal grievances, racial tensions, and economic struggles intersect. The themes of power, race, and class that emerge in this chapter set the stage for deeper explorations into the lives of the townspeople, suggesting that their individual battles are part of a larger fight for identity and survival in a rapidly changing world.