

NATAN ALTERMAN

IT HAPPENED ON CHANUKAH

TRANSLATED BY
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It happened on Chanukah, so it is said,
When all of the children had gone up to bed,
The classroom was empty, and everything still,
The first candle flickered alone on the sill.

Silence and darkness and no one around,
Just household utensils alone on the ground.
They trembled together, a little from cold,
And a little from fear, so the story is told.



And each one was thinking: "What's that? Did you hear?
The wind whispered something, just now, in my ear.
Why does the floor seem to crackle and spark?
And what's crawling toward me from out of the dark?"

"Who whistled? It wasn't a cricket, I know.
The sound was so strange, and it frightened me so.
A terrible something will happen tonight...
You'll see before sunrise, I'm perfectly right."
The table was shaking—it really was scared.
The chair would have yelled out for help if it dared.
An old, wornout broom standing up at the wall
Was even afraid to be frightened at all.
The puppy among them, too small yet to growl,
Almost fainted each time that he heard the wind howl.

It ended when suddenly, out of the gloom,
In a voice made of iron and sounding like doom,
The clock on the shelf gathered courage and spoke.

"What's going on? Is this some kind of joke?
This one is trembling and that one is tense,
The third one is moody—it doesn't make sense.
What are you anyway? Honored utensils
Or tatters and dishrags and old pointless pencils?"

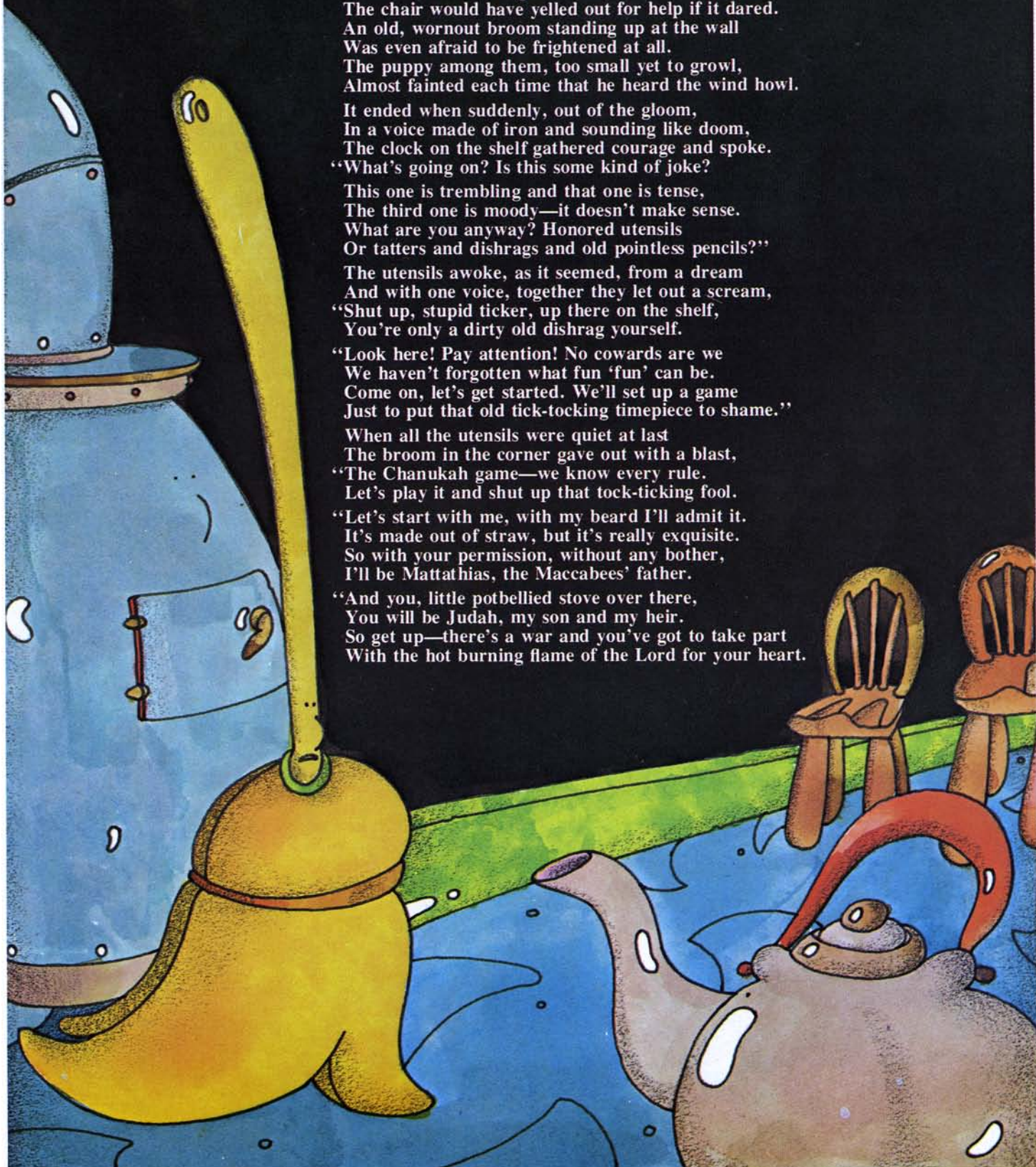
The utensils awoke, as it seemed, from a dream
And with one voice, together they let out a scream,
"Shut up, stupid ticker, up there on the shelf,
You're only a dirty old dishrag yourself.

"Look here! Pay attention! No cowards are we
We haven't forgotten what fun 'fun' can be.
Come on, let's get started. We'll set up a game
Just to put that old tick-tocking timepiece to shame."

When all the utensils were quiet at last
The broom in the corner gave out with a blast,
"The Chanukah game—we know every rule.
Let's play it and shut up that tock-ticking fool.

"Let's start with me, with my beard I'll admit it.
It's made out of straw, but it's really exquisite.
So with your permission, without any bother,
I'll be Mattathias, the Maccabees' father.

"And you, little potbellied stove over there,
You will be Judah, my son and my heir.
So get up—there's a war and you've got to take part
With the hot burning flame of the Lord for your heart.



"What we need now are some brothers for you.
And for these parts, I think that the cacti will do.
Into battle we're going, you brave fighting flowers
Your spikes must be sharpened for hours and hours."

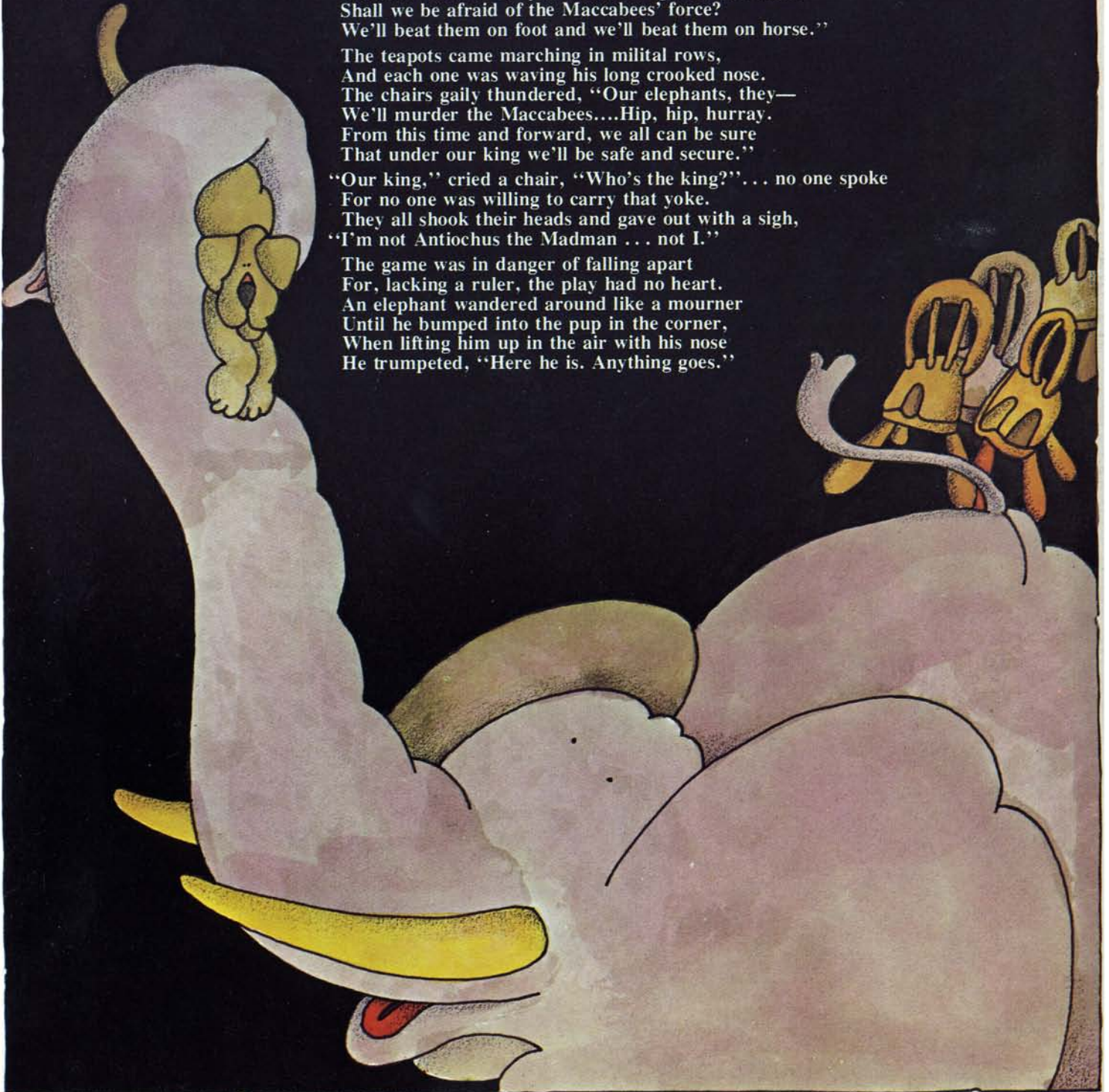
The broom kept on giving out parts to his men
Till he came to the Syrian soldiers. And then
He grew quiet. Nobody grabbed for the part
And each of them wanted to cry in his heart.
For they knew very well, and it wasn't a mystery,
Syria lost in the pages of history.

The chairs got together and quickly decided
And then, to the rest, their decision confided,
"We'll be the Syrians, worry no more.
We're twice the men you are, our legs number four.
Shall we be afraid of the Maccabees' force?
We'll beat them on foot and we'll beat them on horse."

The teapots came marching in milital rows,
And each one was waving his long crooked nose.
The chairs gaily thundered, "Our elephants, they—
We'll murder the Maccabees....Hip, hip, hurray.
From this time and forward, we all can be sure
That under our king we'll be safe and secure."

"Our king," cried a chair, "Who's the king?"... no one spoke
For no one was willing to carry that yoke.
They all shook their heads and gave out with a sigh,
"I'm not Antiochus the Madman ... not I."

The game was in danger of falling apart
For, lacking a ruler, the play had no heart.
An elephant wandered around like a mourner
Until he bumped into the pup in the corner,
When lifting him up in the air with his nose
He trumpeted, "Here he is. Anything goes."



The poor little puppy, he cried and he whined,
He squirmed and he twisted—went out of his mind,
He scratched and he bit, oh, how bravely he fought
But nothing could help him...the puppy was caught.

When they saw his reluctance, the elephant said,
"Shut up and be king. You're our chief and our head.
If you try to escape—and you'd better not dare—
If you do, you'll be captured and tied to a chair."

With everything ready the game could begin
And Judah yelled loudly, his face in a grin,
"Take care, Antiochus, watch out what you're doing.
My anger is boiling and cooking and stewing.

"My city, Jerusalem, leave it alone,
Or I'll beat you so hard that I break every bone.
When I've finished, your moldy old corpse I'll bequeath
To the birds of the sky and the beasts underneath."

The puppy cried out to his mother in fright,
"Mommy, why does this potbellied stove want to fight?
I'm not the king of the Syrian host.
I'm just a poor puppy who'll soon be a ghost."

The little pup's cries didn't help anymore,
For suddenly—whack—the beginning of war,
And before he could find a dark corner to hide in,
A big chair fell over and half crushed his side in.

The sounds of the battle rose up from the floor
From cellar to rafters and on out the door,
The shouts of the brave and the cries of the weak,
The laugh of the mighty, the moans of the meek.

The brave Judah Maccabee lowered his sword,
And swung it with joy at the Syrian horde,
His flying locks burned as the sword rose and fell,
And he looked like a devil come straight out of hell.



The broom, Mattathias, yelled out from the side,
"You're a warrior. Son, full of courage and pride.
Let's go forward, you Maccabees, let your swords ring
Till we capture the Madman, the Syrian king.

"That's the way, that's the way—forward we go."
Then in charge the elephants, straight in a row.
Come on, wake up, boys, we're really in trouble.
The elephants must be turned back—on the double."

And chaos arose, and a dreadful confusion,
It looked like a terrible nightmare illusion.
Head against head and chest against chest,
And hand against hand, without any rest.
The dreidel alone, being calm and serene,
Whirled forward and backward, surveying the scene.
Being brilliant and clever, he's making a test,
To discover which army will come out the best.

For, being quite clever, and being quite wise,
And wanting to know who would take home the prize,
"I'll wait till the end of the battle," he thought,
"And I'll know how to choose once the battle's been fought."

But wait just a moment! The Syrian men
Are retreating....The Maccabees conquer again.
And Judah cries, "Yippee! Hurrah!...Look and see,
We've won freedom and light with our great victory."

The dreidel stopped spinning and fell on his side
He stretched out on the floor and he happily cried.
"Victory, victory, do you all hear?
A wonderful miracle happened right here."

