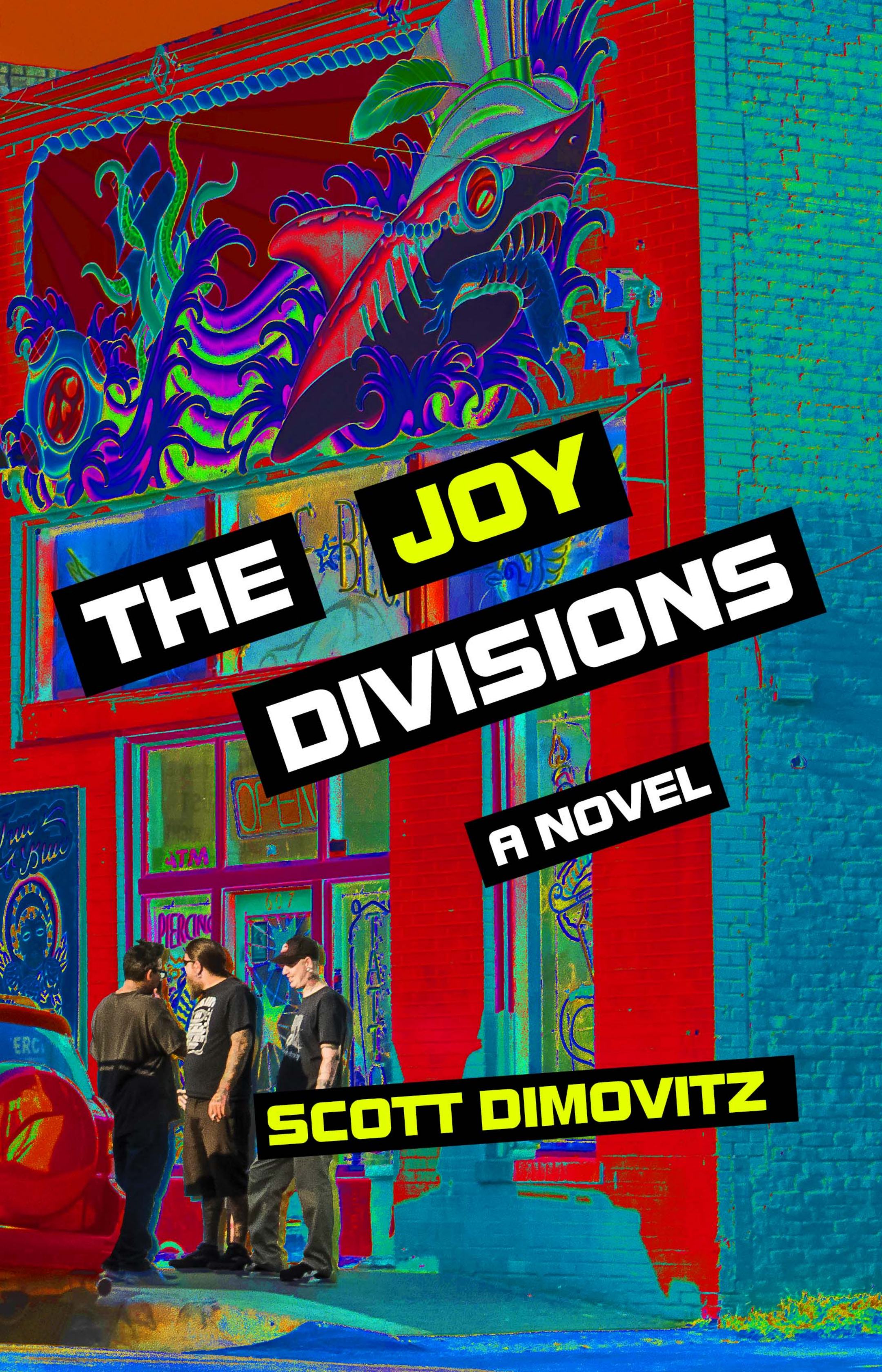
THE JOY DIVISIONS
A NOVEL
SCOTT DIMOVITZ

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Some buildings carry history. Some buildings are part of history. Some buildings are masterworks of literature, every word planned and programmed down to the last semicolon. Some buildings are strips of newspaper type, tossed up and taped down in random configurations like a William Burroughs cut-up poem. Most buildings try to be masterworks but end up needing heavy revisions as time goes on and the gaping holes become evident. The Hess Brothers building was the text of America. The history of the rise and transformation of American entrepreneurialism could be seen for those who had eyes to see.

"It doesn't look that spectacular from the outside," said Ed. "Just your basic 1930s Art Moderne architecture."

True, said Philos, but look at your average person on the street. That woman over there. If you were to describe her in a novel, you'd be hard pressed to find the right adjectives. Most of us don't get dressed up for a South Street gothic parade. Most of us don't wear easy-to-interpret cultural signifiers like Manolo Blahniks or Chuck Taylors to give away some aspect of who we are, where the outside reveals the inside. The most you could say about that woman is that she is Hispanic, and she is wearing a brownish dress. And yet you know there's a history there. You know that she's been through things that you can't even imagine. Probably has a vocabulary that you could not even interpret—and I don't mean Spanish. The average building, too, is not usually such an iconic,

ostentatious display as the PP&L building over there. In fact, there's a theory of architecture that suggests that the best architecture is the kind that blends in with the rest of the neighborhood organically, like an unassuming realist short story. Perhaps.

Hess's is not quite that realist narrative. In fact, the building you see now is really a facade of Indiana limestone added later to give it the illusion of being one thing, which, I suppose, suggests something else about the history of American entrepreneurialism as well. The original building, surrounded by nothing but a Hersh Hardware store and the lumberyards that would eventually help to construct this part of town, was built at 835 Hamilton Street in 1868 as the Black Bear Hotel, run by a bunch of white guys with thick handlebar mustaches, so I'm guessing that the potential Native American symbolism was inadvertent. The most logical reason for the name was that they wanted it to sound like some badass wild animal, but I like to think of the fact that the bear was the oldest worshiped deity in the world, perhaps going back to the Paleolithic period. They've found an original cave bear skull which had its own femurs stuck through its eye sockets, probably to ward off the evil eye. Seems like a nicely symbolic place to start our narrative. Of course, this was America, the land of lighting out for the territories and rechristening yourself whenever you've screwed up too much back home, so by 1890, perhaps to get past the butch patriarchal bluster, they were already rebranding the Black Bear Hotel to become the *Grand Central Hotel*. By an act of naming, they pulled the lines of force right around themselves. This was Allentown's Centrality, the vortex around which everything else would now define itself. And for the next one hundred years, that is pretty close to the truth.

In 1896, a thirty-two-year-old Jewish peddler from Perth Amboy, New Jersey with a slight hunchback, named Max Hess, attended a volunteer firefighter's convention in Easton, and he decided to follow up with a trip to Allentown, walking down this undeveloped part of Hamilton Street in the rather decidedly non-Jewish part of America occupied by the Pennsylvania

Dutch—not "Dutch" as in from the Netherlands, mind you, but Dutch as in the German word for Germans, the *Deutsch*. Hess had grown up in Germany, and he knew what he was dealing with; let's just say that Hitler didn't invent anti-Semitism. He had the primal vision that this would be the perfect place to offer honest dry goods at an evenhanded rate for a reasonable profit, and he went back to bring his brother Charles along for this endeavor. Charles resisted at first. He wanted to explore the promises of the grander theatrical potential offered in Atlantic City, which was just hitting its boom period, but he finally agreed to go along with his brother and their business partner, Solomon Hoffman. Unpack the symbolism of that name, if you like; it is one of those strange facts of history that reality sometimes writes a novel that is almost too obvious.

In February 1897, the brothers opened their fifty- by-one-hundred-and-twenty-five-foot store, Hess Brothers, in the Grand Central with anything but a small opening. The Allentown Band played John Philip Sousa's "Washington Post March," which was still as popular as when it was first introduced eight years earlier; you'd know it if you heard it. McKinley was in the White House, presiding over the recovery from the Panic of 1893, and people

were ready to spend again. Hess knew something about American business even then, and the size of advertising in the local papers was a demand and a promise—you offer us your loyalty, and we will offer an experience that goes beyond what buying a sack of flour would seem to warrant. This was one thing that America did not invent, but certainly perfected—the concept that the perceived value of the thing could outweigh the actual value, and as long as the customer was happy with that mysterious addition, life would seem so much richer in the end—so much more *fun*. It was one thing the Soviets never got, and the Catholic Church certainly did: Spectacle feeds the gaps opened at the limits of civilization. With the massive success of Allentown industrialization in the silk mills, Bethlehem Steel, and Mack trucks, twentieth-century America gave Allentownians more free time, more pocket money, and more estrangement from the agrarian roots of the founding Dutch. When you are not forced to labor your entire adult life, the freedom of the extra time paradoxically limits the freedom of your fantasy life, and something has to fill those holes of meaning. Spectacle goes a long way.

Within two weeks, a large swath of Allentown's 35,000 residents visited the store, which hired a dozen more staff to its twenty-three salesmen, two office workers, window decorator, and night watchman. In three years, at the dawn of the twentieth century, they did what has become the centerpiece of American commerce in our era: They expanded. In 1900, they bought up the second floor and basement, installing an elevator along the way. In two more years, they swallowed the rest of the Grand Central Hotel, and the Hess Brothers department store was born. At the beginning of World War I, they bought up most of the neighboring properties to take up an entire city block. Soon the store employed over eight hundred people and expanded to two, then four hundred thousand square feet in the 1940s. The strange hybridity of the store was both a negative and a bit of its uniqueness. Because Hess Brothers slowly annexed the neighboring stores rather than starting off with one master plan, the store had

a kind of hodge-podge quality rather than some grand vision. Adjoining buildings had walls hollowed out to allow customers to flow between them, making the store seem like it stretched for miles, with little grottos and oxbow discoveries to be found throughout the maze. The main showroom housed under its massive ceilings a forest of crystal chandeliers that dazzled the factory, mill, and mine workers with a bit of Manhattan splendor; the other parts of the store hinted at the mysteries that could not be contained in a single orderly plan.

The Hess brothers were as masterful at self-promotion as they were at spectacle. Max was the workhorse, who ran the day-to-day. Charles was a bit of a dandy, to put it mildly, and he channeled that desire for the glamor of Atlantic City into long trips across the pond to scope out the latest fashion trends on the Bois de Boulogne, sending back dispatches of desire that were dutifully published on the front page of the *Morning Call*. The French Room, Charles' creation, was an orgy of effete fantasies coming out of young men in the early twentieth century, and his communiqués from his trips through France read like some gossipy Vogue editor catering to a preposterous notion of beauty that was more a function of words than of the fashions themselves.

In 1922 the fifty-eight-year-old Max Hess, Sr. died suddenly, leaving his wife and son, Max Hess, Jr., suddenly without their ship's captain. The locals were shocked. Hess's department store had helped to put Allentown on the map, it was often asserted, and Max Hess was beloved by most of the community. As a resident of the area, Max Hess and Allentown were intimately symbiotic. They gave him millions, and he gave back a portion of the same, contributing greatly to the prosperity of your burgeoning little ol' hometown. He helped start the Jewish Community Center, the Allentown Public Library, and the first Reformed Jewish Temple, in addition to giving generously to hospitals and local charities. The *Morning Call*'s editorial obituary provided the hagiography: "His life is a romance of American opportunity and achievement. But it is more than that. It is an inspiration to good works. Max Hess performed to the utmost of his ability . . . His life is a model for community builders and Allentown can ill afford his loss." Hess embodied that early American ethos of the *noblesse oblige*, and the people loved him for it. Of course, unlike other nobles of the time like John Rockefeller, John Jacob Astor, and others paying at least mild obeisance to Andrew Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth," he had the benefit of not having to scrape off his shoes the blood of those he had trod upon to get that money, so he could be so oblige-y. But that's another story.

Unlike some inheritors, Max Jr. synthesized the pragmatic business acumen of his father with the flamboyant theatricality of his uncle. He was the business world's P.T. Barnum, and he helped grow the company into one of the most famous department stores in America. From the time he became president in 1935 until he sold the company for $17 million cash in 1968, Max Jr. helped develop some of the most spectacular consumer experiences in the history of marketing. His merchandising motto was "Be the first, be the best, be entertaining." This drive was partly ambition, but he already was rich, famous, and beloved. It was also because, like his father, he believed in the community, not just as a place to excavate riches, although it was certainly that too. "There's gold

downtown, waiting to be dug up," he reportedly said in 1965. "Nothing—absolutely nothing—pays like the heart of a city." He modernized the facade of the building to give it that unified look, adding the iconic eight-ton HESS sign with seven-foot-high letters blazing with 2,250 light bulbs and neon tubing that everyone

flocked to see. The store was known for its annual flower show, where flowers burst onto every free surface in the area and people like Zsa Zsa Gabor introduced the festivities, and its fashion show, where Hess would bring the biggest celebrities at the time to walk through the racks of merchandise and surprise the happy consumers with their auras. George Reeves (the original Superman), Johnny Carson, Rock Hudson, and a seven-year-old child star, Donny Osmond, all thrilled the working-class laborers and farm hands from the local and surrounding areas, and if you talk to any of the seniors around here like I have, they all get unironically misty about the glamor that Hess's brought to the area, which is odd to listen to in our postmodern times. I've heard stories about the year that Santa Claus arrived in a helicopter at Hamilton Street

during the Christmas celebration, while giant electric angels spread across the facade. I love this one: Apparently, Hess would send a fashion caravan with models and other displays to the area farms, factories, and mills because he wanted the local breadwinning men to know what their wives were bringing home, ostensibly, I assume, so that they would be more accommodating of the larger price tags. Nothing like that pre-feminist era thinking, don't you think? Speaking of nostalgia, you should hear the locals talk about the restaurant, the Patio, with its strawberry pie. It seems like everyone in the area either had a confirmation, graduation, or some special event there that might as well have been the witnessing of a UFO or someone being raised from the dead.

And yet it worked, like just about everything else Hess did. He was one of the first to do "clearance sales" to remove stale merchandise from last season. Hess's was the first store in America to import clothes from Russia and Japan, helping to feed the desire not only for the global, but for the "exotic," god help me for saying. But they also had their own shipping and receiving department, so they could send things beyond Allentown if they needed to. And, of course, there were the wily-but-not-so-nefarious tactics. I like this one. One person talked about how Hess used to send employees into competitors' stores, when they had a great sale on an item, with thousands of dollars to buy up all the bargains. Sounds counterintuitive, right? Why give them the business? But if those items were the lure, people would get angry at the store and go elsewhere—like Hess's, where he would just resell the merchandise at a higher rate anyway. There's a genius to that, somehow, that doesn't have the strong-arm tactics of other business leaders, like Bill Gates. At its height, the store's motto seemed hubristic, yet plausible: "You'll find the best of everything at Hess's." I like the way it does not even try to qualify that claim with the ineffable—literature, music, spirituality. No doubt, Hess thought, if it was something important, he would carry the best of it.

And, of course, the text continues. This great novel of America

reached its peripeteia in 1968, when Max Hess, Jr. convinced a local developer and art collector, Philip I. Berman, to pay $17 million in cash to buy out his single, well-loved store. They say it took the Federal Reserve three days to drum up that much money in cash. Why exactly he sold the family business is a bit hazy. Did he know that he was sick and was going to die six months later, a year younger than his father? Did he want to leave a legacy to a family he knew was not as interested in developing the store to be the first, the best, and the most entertaining? Did he look at the absurdity of the offer, about $70 million today, realizing that while he loved nothing more than building the business his father and uncle had started into one of the most beloved institutions on the East Coast, he could not refuse cash in hand that outweighed the value of the thing itself? But why did Berman spend such an ungodly amount of money, when he did not seem to care in the least about retail merchandise?

Because Philip Berman had no intention of merely polishing the lovely object he had bought. He had plans for growth way beyond what the Hess brothers had envisioned. And this is one of the things I find most fascinating about their story. Max and Charles grew their business; Max Jr. thought it was enough. After they expanded to the full city block and added an eight-story annex, they concentrated on making the space the best it could be—for themselves, for their employees, and for their customers. You should hear how the people who worked for Hess talk about him—like he had been responsible for getting them out of Egypt. He told *Forbes* magazine in the fifties that he had a principle: "Strive for a specific goal." And unlike modern corporations, that goal was not merely growth as an end in itself to maximize profit. They had enough profit every year, so that was not the issue. There was a kind of steady state economy to the whole endeavor, where Hess realized that any other expansion would dilute what the family had achieved. Even when the suburban malls started to spring up, Hess did not want to expand, because if he did, he would have to cede control to the banks. Hess preferred to be the

master of his own contribution to society.

Berman, however, wanted the brand, the name that he could exploit into a massive expansion. He immediately took out the "Brothers" and renamed the brand "Hess's," which is a weird possessive, if you think about it. Most of the older locals still call it Hess Brothers. The Hamilton Street building now was just one store in the empire Berman envisioned, and he had no emotional attachment to it or the community the way the Hesses had. He quickly removed the iconic sign during another downtown redevelopment deal, when he put up these horrid glass canopies that were meant to mimic an indoor mall but only ended up blocking out the light. He canceled the annual flower and fashion shows and the celebrity appearances, which were costly expenses not immediately on the black side of the books. Hess's primary function became expansion—buying up other chains and converting them to Hess's, including a hostile takeover of the Miller's Department Store chain based in Knoxville, Tennessee. Within a few years Berman expanded the brand into the ballooning suburban mall development, helping to bankrupt the local merchants as it spread into a thirty-eight-store multistate chain.

But, of course, that is never the end of such an expansion. In 1979, Allentown received its own imperial marker, Crown American, a developer of hotels and malls which bought Berman's chain unceremoniously and relegated it to a wholly-owned subsidiary of a company that saw the stores as just one of the many other assets it owned, and one which had better turn a massive consistent profit. By 1990, the chain had ballooned to seventy-nine stores, each of which was just one more cog in the grinding expansion of business. Of course, as with every empire before it, it had expanded so thin, like gold to airy thinness beat, that the merest breeze would shatter it. Just last year, the recession pushed them into the red just a little too much, so Crown American sold off forty-three of the stores. Rumor has it that the last thirty stores are about to be sold off, including this one, which is supposed to go to Bon-Ton, another corporate behemoth that oddly enough

started with a couple of Jewish dry goods merchants a year after Max and Charles Hess started their little dry goods store. But that's another story. Some people are hopeful that Bon-Ton will save the flagship store, since they've been so successful in expanding their little operation over the last decade or so.

"What do you think?"

"I think that there's a point in every structure where once you've destroyed some aspect of its fundamental core, there's no going back to revise it."