

DAVID KOULACK

The Surgeon

“ARE YOU THE SON?”
Dimitri nodded.

A long bony finger beckoned.

Dimitri turned and followed the stranger. An automatic door silently swung open and the two men stepped into a small room with a pine box as its centerpiece.

“Get the cheapest, Dimitri,” his mother’s neighbour Sonja had admonished. “For what do you need expensive? It’s only going into the ground.”

“I’m going to open it now,” the stranger said.

“Why?”

“It’s New York State law. We have to verify the body in the coffin. Wouldn’t want there to be any mistakes, would we?”

Dimitri shook his head and forced himself to look down at Itzak’s powdered face. It was the first time that Dimitri had seen death. It wasn’t exactly what he expected. Never in life had Itzak looked so splendid.

With the black pinstriped suit moulded to his body and free of dandruff, the white shirt with the never-before-worn silver cuff links (a birthday present from his wife), the Harvard crimson tie (a twenty-fifth reunion memento) and the highly polished black shoes—Itzak was more a work of art than a corpse.

And somehow they’d managed to make him look younger. The long, white, usually dishevelled hair was slicked down and combed back over the bald pate; the network of furrows that ran across his forehead had vanished thanks to the mortician’s ministrations; and the liver spots that covered his thin wrists and long, bony hands were powdered over. The only incongruous note were the reading glasses placed over Itzak’s closed and sightless eyes.

“That’s him.”

The man nodded.

It was still early. There were only a few mourners in the main hall. The Rabbi approached Dimitri, handed him a yarmulke and pinned a black ribbon on his lapel. "Do you want to say a few words?"

"A few words?"

"Yes, a few words about your father."

"What are you talking about?"

The Rabbi readjusted the ribbon and brushed a speck of dust from Dimitri's jacket. "You know—a eulogy, fond memories. Who better to say such things than an only son, the direct descendent?"

"I don't think you get it, Rabbi. I didn't like my father."

"Ssshhh," the Rabbi said taking Dimitri by the elbow and steering him back to the room that held his father's coffin. The lid was still open and the two men faced each other over the corpse.

"What does it matter how you felt?" the Rabbi asked with a sardonic smile. "They want to hear a good story. They want a happy ending out there and you can give it to them."

"There is no happy ending and they know that already."

"What are you talking about?"

"Long ago I told them the story."

"What story?"

"That I was a pack of lies, Rabbi, a figment of my parents' imagination."

The Rabbi picked his nose reflectively. "How's that?"

"First they told people I was doing well in school when I wasn't."

"It's normal for parents," the Rabbi said, "to brag about their children."

"There was nothing to brag about, believe me."

"But look here," the Rabbi said, pulling a sheaf of papers out of his jacket pocket. "I've got all this information about you—Bastion School for Boys, then Dean's List at Canard College, Triborough Medical Center followed by an internship and surgery residency and currently doing research at Massachusetts General Hospital."

"Where'd you get that?"

"From your mother."

"Not exactly a reliable source, Rabbi."

"It's good enough for me, Soany Boy."

"Wanna know the truth?"

"The truth? Why the truth? I'm going tell them what they want to hear out there and that's what I'm giving you a chance to do."

The Rabbi reached across the coffin and massaged Dimitri's jacket. "Where'd you get this?"

"Filene's basement, where I work."

"No, no, Dimitri, you work in Mass General. You're a researcher. A famous surgeon, yet."

"Hey Rabbi, you sound like him," Dimitri said pointing to his father's corpse. "Anyway, spouting that line won't do any good. I set the record straight long ago."

"Record straight?" The Rabbi smiled, exposing a rack of gold fillings. "What are you talking about, Sonny Boy? I've got the record right here in my hand," he said, sticking the sheaf of papers under Dimitri's nose.

"And the bribe?"

"What bribe?" The Rabbi's tone was incredulous.

"You shocked, Rabbi? That's what my father did. To get me into Bastion, he promised to make a contribution to a building fund for an athletic facility and to make sure that it was named the Humboldt Athletic Center after the headmaster himself."

"That's hardly a bribe, Sonny Boy. It's a donation—the kind of stuff that keeps private institutions going."

"Like yours, Rabbi?"

"Sure nothing wrong with that. It's a *mitzvah* for the generous donor. And it's not one-sided. They get value for their money just like your father did. When I give a service—*Bar Mitzvah*, wedding, funeral, you name it—it's top of the line. I don't skimp with the words, believe me."

"So nothing wrong then? Or in the scholarship fund my father set up at Canard College shortly after I applied?"

"Nothing at all. More of the same good works, the same *quid pro quo*."

"And the high-priced dinner and the present of two boxes of ultra-expensive Havana Cigars to my father's old classmate, Avrum Posner, who just happened to be Dean of Admissions at Triborough Medical Centre—no problem for you?"

"Of course not, Sonny boy," the Rabbi said with that leering tone in his voice. "Just normal stuff. Happens all the time."

"Well it doesn't happen all the time that a little *yiddel* gets kicked out of medical school, does it, Rabbi?"

"Kicked out?"

"You heard me. Gotcha there ..."

"Why kicked out? Obviously they made a mistake."

"No mistake. They didn't think I was fit. And you know something?"

They were right. But that didn't stop my parents. They wanted to get a lawyer and get me back in to Triborough."

"See, what did I tell you? Your father knew what to do."

"No he didn't. I wasn't going to go back there to fail again."

"So you lay around and did nothing?"

"Not nothing, Rabbi, I drank—lots. It's not as easy as you think, to wake up and drink until you sleep again."

"Well that explains it, Sonny Boy."

"Explains what?"

"Why your parents kept your career going. They didn't want you to be embarrassed."

The cantor appeared and motioned to the Rabbi.

"Excuse me, Sonny Boy," the Rabbi said turning away. "I've got to go make my living."

"No!" Dimitri shouted. "It was themselves they didn't want to embarrass."

"Ssshhh, they'll hear you out there," the cantor said.

"I don't care," said Dimitri, but in a whisper. He hated himself for the whisper.

The pews in the main hall had filled up but Dimitri was able to slide into a vacant spot in the front row between his mother and his Aunt Bess. The Rabbi climbed the steps to the podium. A brilliant sophist, Dimitri admitted with grudging admiration, it didn't take much imagination to see how the Rabbi, if given half the chance, would assault the truth but still he would not be able to convince his parents' friends.

Eight years ago Dimitri had taken a bus to New York and walked down Tenth Avenue until he found a cheap hotel. A week's rent in advance bought him a third floor room with an unobstructed view of an airshaft. The room had everything Dimitri needed. A bed, a night table, a lamp, a phone, a New York City telephone book and a glass whose home was an indentation on the sink that was just inside the door. A toilet and shower were at the end of the third floor corridor.

Dimitri filled the glass from the first of four whiskey bottles lined up on the night table. Then he propped himself up on the bed with the telephone book on his lap and the phone at his side. He took quick but copious sips of the whiskey all the while reflecting on what he'd tell his parents' friends. By the time he made his first phone call, he had his spiel down pat.

Surprisingly none of his parents' friends had said anything. They took his self-disclosure in silence, politely thanked him and hung up.

Sitting in the front pew, with his mother's and his aunt's fragrant bodies pressing against him, Dimitri reflected that in all this time there had been no repercussions. Not once in those eight years had his mother phoned to tell him he'd broken his father's heart—at least not on account of disclosing their lies.



The Rabbi's words broke into Dimitri's reverie.

"It's so sad that the *shema maidel* is still in the hospital. Marsha wanted so much to be here at the side of her Dimitri."

He's given me a wife, Dimitri realized. This isn't simply an assault on the truth—it's absolute mayhem.

"But I am happy to report that by the grace of God, not to mention the connections of her surgeon-husband (the Rabbi smiled down at Dimitri and waited for the appreciative titter from the audience to die down) they expect a complete recovery."

I can't believe the *chutzpah*, Dimitri thought. Next thing, he'll be giving me children. He's gotta know that he can't get away with this. Furious, Dimitri glanced at his mother. She was smiling at the Rabbi, basking in her son's fictitious success.



By the time they reached the cemetery, Mrs. Fishman had stopped smiling. And at the end of the Rabbi's interment service over the coffin containing the remains of her mate of almost fifty years, the overwrought and overweight Mrs. Fishman took a few faltering steps towards his grave as if it were her intention to join him there.

Fearing the worst, the eighty-two-year-old Jack Bernstein launched himself at Mrs. Fishman's knees. Bernstein's technique, learned from watching thousands of professional football games on television, was impeccable. He blindsided Mrs. Fishman and she crumpled to her knees at the edge of her husband's grave.

The Rabbi took advantage of the ensuing commotion to take Dimitri aside. "Walk me to my car, Sonny Boy," he murmured.

"What's the story, Rabbi?" Dimitri asked as soon as they were out of earshot of the others. "I've never heard so much claptrap as the shit you spewed out in the funeral home."

"No story. I told you. Nothing wrong with making people feel good. But there's a corollary ..."

"What's that—that you can fool some of the people some of the time?"

"The corollary, Sonny Boy, is that sometimes telling people what they want to hear is a *mitzvah*."

The Rabbi paused for a moment to cut the end off an ultra-expensive Cuban cigar before lighting it with a wooden match that materialized from his jacket pocket.

"Nice cigar, get that from one of your flock?" Dimitri asked.

The Rabbi slid onto the leather seat of his pale blue Mercedes. "Think about what I said, Sonny Boy. It's never too late to learn."

The Rabbi revved up the engine, rolled down the window and exhaled a plume of smoke. "See you back at the apartment," he said. And then, with a regal wave of his hand, the Rabbi laid rubber along the cemetery lane that ran from the Fishman family plot.



Dimitri returned to the gravesite in time to see Jack Bernstein being helped into the passenger side of his car. His jacket was off and his right arm was in a makeshift sling constructed from someone's *tallis*.

"He should be in a crazy house, doing a stunt like that at his age," Mrs. Bernstein was saying to no one in particular. "He could have killed himself as well as Helen."

But aside from a dazed look, a slightly bruised knee and a torn stocking, Helen Fishman looked none the worse for wear. Dimitri approached her warily. Would it hurt, he wondered, to play out the filial devotion bit?

Dimitri put an arm around his mother's shoulders and guided her toward the limo. He helped her into the backseat and as Helen settled herself alongside her sister she turned and rewarded Dimitri with, as he would reflect later, a look of unmitigated gratitude.

The long silent ride on the expressway gave Dimitri a chance to reflect on the lessons of the Rabbi. Not a chance he could be right, Dimitri thought. Even if he wanted to please his mother, earn another one of those looks, it was too late. He'd let the cat out of the bag years ago.

It was easy to imagine the inevitable questions soon to come from his parents' friends and neighbours. "Dimitri, so good to see you. What have you been doing with yourself since I heard from you last?" (Followed by a knowing look, a wink?)

He'd certainly look like a fool going along with the Rabbi and repudiating the truth. "I've got a job in Filene's basement in Boston," he would have to say. "Been at it for the last three years. I really like it."

"My father wouldn't have understood that. As far as he was concerned, I was nothing if I wasn't a doctor. Trouble is that not everyone's cut out to be a doctor."

"A regular job, that's wonderful. But how did you get over your ... er ... problem?"

"You mean the alcoholism? Believe me, it wasn't easy. Luckily I had a big support system through AA—sort of a second family. I got plenty of encouragement and after a while I actually began to feel good about myself.

"Just imagine, I haven't touched a drop in six years."



The limousine pulled up in front of the drab grey-brick building in the West Bronx. Dimitri helped his mother and aunt out of the back seat of the car, up the building's steps and into the waiting elevator. As the doors slid open on the fifteenth floor, they could hear the murmur of voices coming from the far end of the corridor.

The Fishman apartment was already crowded with relatives, friends and former patients of Dimitri's father. They were stuffing themselves with the food the neighbours had provided for the occasion: roasted chickens, plates of cold meats, several loaves of rye and pumpernickel bread, dill pickles, coleslaw, potato salad, knishes, hardboiled eggs and for dessert cookies, fudge brownies, fruit and little tartlets—all the while extolling the virtues of and telling anecdotes about the late Itzak Fishman.

In the living room, on a gateleg table, there were bottles of whiskey, vodka and rum, a bucket of ice and cans of coke. That was where Dimitri found the Rabbi, glass in hand, holding forth.

"Hey, there he is. Come over here, Sonny Boy. Have a drink—I mean a coke." And then to no one in particular, "You know this *mensch* stopped drinking because of his responsibilities as a surgeon."

Mrs. Bernstein approached, wiping some chicken grease from her chin. "How's your husband?" Dimitri asked her.

"Would you take a look at him? My cousin, the GP, said he'd be fine, just a bruised collar bone, but it's always good to get a second opinion."

"Well, I don't know ..."

"Dimitri, even though bones aren't your business, take a look, why don't you," the Rabbi said.

Dimitri gently prodded at the old man's shoulder. "How's it feel?" he asked.

"It hurts but I'll live."

"I think you will, too." And then remembering his father's panacea, "What you need is ice. To keep the swelling down."

"Ice, Jack," Mrs. Bernstein said, reaching into the bucket on the table with the drinks. "Thank you, Dimitri," she said wrapping the ice in a handkerchief she pulled from her husband's jacket pocket.

"It's nothing," he said.

Sipping the cola that the Rabbi had handed him, Dimitri had the eerie feeling that he was being watched. He turned and saw a stooped, reed-thin man standing on the threshold of the living room. He made no attempt to conceal the fact that he was staring at Dimitri.

The man seemed to come to some sort of decision and started to slowly make his way across the room.

"You've got to be Dimitri Fishman," the man said. "Yes, but who are you?"

"My name's Avrum Posner. I used to be your father's classmate. You and I met once years ago. You wouldn't remember. It was just before you started medical school."

It was coming back to Dimitri now, the dinner in the fancy restaurant with Posner his father and mother—a celebration of his arranged acceptance into medical school. Now Dimitri remembered the timbre of the voice and the piercing blue eyes. Of course there had been a full head of hair then, not the bald pate surrounded by a halo of scraggly white hair. And the lips had not been cyanotic.

Posner grabbed Dimitri's free hand in both of his. "Of course you don't recognize me. I'm an old man now. But I knew it had to be you, Dimitri, you look just like Itzak did at your age."

Posner's loud and surprisingly robust voice rose above the muted conversations in the room. Dimitri noticed with embarrassment that people were turning to listen and that Posner, obviously cut from the same cloth as the Rabbi, was happily playing to the crowd.

"Your father talked about you often," Posner continued. "Not only following in my footsteps, he'd say, 'that would have been good enough. But even better is when the son outdoes the father. And that's what my Dimitri, the famous surgeon has done. It is more than I could have ever hoped for.'"

"Yes, but ..."

"There are no buts about it, Dimitri. You gave your father, the greatest gift a son could give. You gave him *nochis*. He was very proud of your accomplishments and so might I add am I and so too are all of your parents' friends."

"Well spoken, Dr. Posner," the Rabbi interjected before Dimitri could protest again. "You know, all of us have hopes and desires. But it's the lucky man who has at least some of those hopes fulfilled. Your father, Dimitri, was a lucky man."

The room grew still. All eyes were focused on the Rabbi and Dimitri understood that right now, not at the funeral home, nor at the gravesite, but right now, here in his mothers' apartment, the Rabbi was about to earn his money.

"Itzak Fishman had a long and bountiful life. He was unique in his profession. He was not just a healer of the body's ills, not just a mere dispenser of medicine, he was also an adviser, confidant and friend to his patients.

"Indeed, many of Itzak's patients are here today, some coming from as far away as Florida, to pay their last respects to him and to bear witness to his importance in their lives.

"But Itzak's riches extended beyond his friends to include the *witzsh* of a life-long, loving partner in his wife, Helen, and a son of extraordinary accomplishments."

What, no mention of the adoring, non-existent daughter-in-law, my sickly wife, Marsha? Dimitri put his hand to his mouth in an attempt to suppress a snicker. The gesture was not lost on the Rabbi.

"Yes, Dimitri," the Rabbi said, grasping Dimitri's arm in a vice-like grip. "As Dr. Posner said, your father was extremely proud of you. He saw you as his legacy to the world, as the bearer of the Fishman torch after he was gone."

Dimitri was surprised by the Rabbi's strength as he tightened his grip on Dimitri's arm. "And now that he's gone, you have a duty, not only to memory of your father, but a duty to the living—to your mother and to all of these good people here today—to honour that legacy, to give your father's vision a life of its own."

"He's a wonderful doctor, that *boychick*," Jack Bernstein chimed in. "My collar bone feels a million times better since he treated it. Look at how I can move my arm."

"You could have killed yourself, Jack."

"Never mind about that, Myrna. How about a toast to the *boychick*?"

The Rabbi leaned in closer to Dimitri and tightened his grip a notch. Dimitri winced under the pressure of the Rabbi's fingers. "Do you understand what I'm saying, sonny boy?" he hissed. "It's their story now. Don't try to change it."