

Fishele's Death

Here's how Fishele died. Vomiting bright red blood over his leather-wrapped steering wheel of his pearl-white BMW with gold trim on the way to his restaurant.

Exanguinating, he pulled over on Monroe Avenue in Brighton and called 911. DOA in the ER. Forty years old and bloodless.

Here's how Fishele died. At the restaurant his parents bought him (after prison for drug running, after he bankrupt the grocery store they bought him), Fishele was his best customer for drinks. A socializer, a kibitzer, a good drinking buddy, he wouldn't let his customers drink alone. Chivas was his favorite. He liked the bottle's shape, the kingly crown, the velvet robe, the hassles like testicles dangling from its neck.

From this, he shrunk his liver, cirrhotic; on autopsy, the cross section looked like the grated face of nutmeg. From this, he developed esophageal varices, bubbled venous pathways his blood sought to bypass liver obstructions.

Here's *how* Fishele died. At eighteen, he returned from Thailand and was caught at SFO with several kilos of heroin in his baggage. His father, my Uncle Avrum, flew to San Francisco to bail him out, spent tens of thousands on lawyers. *En route*, Uncle Avrum stopped in O'Hare to meet me before my upcoming marriage. Avrum was surprised that I would be the first of the cousins to marry: I was the nerd, the nebbish, the *naif*, the intellectual, "intelekshuval!" he hollared in Yinglish, his forefinger stabbing the sky. What did I know of such matters as love or marriage (the two being separate matters for Avrum.)? He was ashamed that he was traveling to San Francisco to bail out Fishele. But this was familiar turf for him: Fishele in jail, in court, in rehab. Also with the heroin, I learned, Fishele was his best customer. From the heroin he eventually got ailments that muddled his body, his liver, squeezed his innards hard.

Here's how Fishele *died*. When Avrum was fifteen, he was sent by the SS to Auschwitz. En route, he was told to dig graves for Jews who had been shot *en mass* in his little town of Zdünskawola. A town where goats and sheep walked the muddy roads; where Polish woman with broad skirts and no underwear would squat in the road to piss. The squat, followed by the slowly spreading pool from beneath their slightly up-gathered hems. The women to clean their nostrils, pressed one side closed and aimed for the gutter. Then pressed the other nostril and aimed to the left. When someone paused in front of you, you gave a wide lateral berth should they be *khocking* up something from the nostrils or the throat. In Zdunskawola, to ease the packing of live bodies into cattle cars, the Germans lined up the overly old, overly young at the edge of mass graves, shot them and ordered the abler bodied Jews to shovel dirt on the still or still writhing bodies; the younger ones, the children some were too short to get shot. Buried alive. Avrum looking at the corpses of his mother, father and siblings, refused. A Nazi took Avrum's shovel, whacked him on the brow. Avrum, stunned, stood...then shoveled. And that is how he began his education from the SS.

Beginning between his eyes, branching on his forehead and coursing over his receding hairline, Avrum had a branching "Y" of a vein. When he spoke—he hollered—this vein would expand, pulse with each exclamation. I once asked my mother why Avrum was always angry. She said, "He's not angry. That's just how he is. Like this he talks." But, to a nine year old, he appeared always angry. When Fishele was young, this beloved cousin protected me from the bullies at sandlot baseball. Avrum always hollered at him, the vein pulsing dangerously. Then, as a boy, I thought that such pulsing caused strokes. Of which Avrum later died, but only after burying his Fishele.

How Fishele died—so the autopsy report would read, clinically, professionally—was from exsanguinating, from cirrhosis leading to esophageal aneurysms, possibly exacerbated by heroin use leading to Hep C and what we once called in the ER, “piss-poor-protoplasm.” He’d been on ribavirin, when the cure rate was 50%. He wasn’t in the cure cohort. Or maybe the cirrhosis was from being his best drinking customer.

Why he died? From Avrum at fifteen burying his family and neighbors?

Why he died. At the wedding of Avrum and Chaya, the three families, ripped remnants who had survived Camp, left the Displaced Persons Camp to celebrate at a restaurant after the rabbi made the wedding. Jewish weddings are short, austere affairs, at least legally. After the groom signs the legal agreement to support the bride, after he says only one line, “*Harei mikudeshet li*,” “Here you are blessed to me,” plants a ring, he lifts the veil. Now this veil-lifting is from biblical Jacob and Leah and Rachel. For, Jacob was cheated into marrying Leah rather than his promised Rachel. He didn’t notice until the next morning. From this, Jewish men want to see the goods before the deed is done. So, after this ceremony, off to a restaurant, which Avrum could ill afford. Blackmarketing ham and coffee sent by the Red Cross was a major source of income. The Germans were desperate for ham and coffee. From this, Avrum could afford a ring, the rabbi’s fee and a restaurant. Everyone ordered modestly, pasta, soup. Chaya, his bride, insisted on chicken marsala (Although from where a German restaurant could get chicken in 1946 is a question. More likely a pigeon, at best, squab.) Avrum, incensed, his vein throbbing, says nothing at first. When the marsala is served, he lifts the plate and serves it on his bride’s curls. From this died Fishele?

While Avrum railed at Fishele, and everyone, *Tante* Chaya adored, worshipped him. “Like a Chollywood movie star he looks! Such dark wavy hair, the eyes dreamy, a nose from a Roman sculpture. And tall, bigger than his father. “ Of Fishele’s older brother, quiet, sweet, hard-working Simcha you’ve heard nothing so far, nor did he hear anything from her. “Like a Sal Mineo (pronounced like the French *Se/ Mineo*), not Frank Sinatra (pronounced *Frenk*). More a Marlon Brando (“*Brendo*”)! He should be in pictures.”

A looker Fishele was. Before the ascites, trim, tall, broad shouldered. A face sculpted in the Roman style, with wavy hair swept back and pomaded. The eyes were Avrum’s: dark, pupils hidden within the irises, a bruised look around the lids, eyebrows tufted. A voice baritone, but soft-spoken unlike Avrum’s. Three wives he had, none Jewish, five children. All left him.

When last I saw Fishele. He invited me to his office. He sold high-end cars. Special order from him: the brand, the color, the specs. After a few days, he would deliver this car to you. No car lot. Everything he handled from an office. From a phone. A “girl” at the front was a looker. I thought of Bialystok and Bloom’s receptionist when I spotted her.

Fishele asked me in. “Tutush (my nickname), Tutush! What can I do for you? A high end car, a Mercedes, a Cadillac, a BMW. Tell me what you want and I have it for you in a few days. Cheap.” I demurred, owning a red Fiat 128, no radio, no heater, soon to blow its engine in the Chicago winter.

“Tutush, Tutush, you escaped, you’re the only one to escape Rochester. The rest of us. Well, we stayed. What do you remember Tutush from our playing?”

I remember, Fishele (The Yiddish for Little Phil, as one cousin was Big Phil), I remember well. When I came to your neighborhood. Only once a year we came on *Pesach* because our parents, wretched Aushwitz survivors, managed to battle amongst themselves over the years. We? We only wanted to play. I remember you and Leibel and Big Phil and Simcha took me to the sand lot to play. The other kids picked players for their sides. No one wanted me. I looked like a nebbish, not a *gibor*, heroic, with shoulders, like you guys. You picked me. Put me on second base, as you knew that Big Phil was pitching and he would field all the hits towards me. Then, when we kept losing (yes, I did keep striking out), the other side had an inning that kept going and going and going. Five, six homers. Until one guy lofted a ball far afield and slowly loped from home to first, gave the finger to Big Phil on the mound, thumbed his nose at you and headed towards second. I couldn't stand a nose-thumber at my cousins. So as he loped slowly rounding second, I stuck out my foot; he tripped and ate dirt. Bouncing up, a mouth full of sod, he came for me, fists a flying. But, he never touched me. Why?

You, Fishele, and Big Phil, and Simcha and Leibele raced in towards second, surrounded me and husbanded me off the field. One of you pulled me by the belt, the others, facing out, felled the oncomers. I felt like the President surrounded by Secret Service.

Officially, Fishele, we lost that day. But in the heart, Fishele, I won. You don't remember that Fishele? You should remember how wonderful it was for me to have you as cousins. I yearned to see you.

Fishele, you shouldn't have died his slow, slow death. From the time of Uncle Avrum's death shoveling, to the wedding night of marsala to Avrum's throbbing vein and the heroin, and the alcohol and the business of getting high end cars to order and three ex-wives and mourning children, you had been dying, Fishele.

And I miss you.

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