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Getting That Meal Ticket

Chapter 12

Home Life

As memory is an imaginative faculty akin to the composition of an opera, the prolonged effort involved in the reconstruction of my college career (which despite its store of ungrateful revelations, tedium, monotony and crushing impalatability, I have deemed necessary), has quite worn me out. My diagnosis is one of acute university fatigue; many are my colleagues in misery. Like one who delays the urge to take a piss almost beyond the point of no return, the obligation to take a break now commands my full attention. Enough of college life! The time has come to say something about my family relations in this period.

There was much in my growth to maturity between the ages of 13 and 22 that had nothing to do with the cultivation of the intellect. Not that there weren't connections between them: life off campus life could also be seen as a banquet of many courses, some sweet some sour, to be digested on the run come what may.

My father has always despised me as a person and admired me as a mind. With my mother it's the other way round: she will forever hold my intellectual abilities in contempt. She was not at all impressed when I was enrolled in Zelosophic U at the tender age of 13. Her general attitude towards intellectual activity is that most of it is silly and useless. She only respects the practical skills of the manual trades. That I will never wash dishes properly, or hammer a nail without crucifying myself, that I always manage to be short-changed at the grocery and still can't drive a car, are

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reasons enough to convince her that she'd engendered a thorough clod.

The cultural divide separating them is enough in itself to guarantee that Mom and Dad will never agree about anything. It does not belabor the obvious to state that my mother is the daughter of my grandfather. Her father was a coal miner, indeed a somewhat disagreeable one. Pushed into chronic unemployment by oil, strip mining and automation, he might have preserved his dignity had he devoted himself to the cultivation of the role of "noble impotence in the face of greed triumphant". This was most unlikely, given that he would have needed to unearth the dignity before attempting to preserve it.

Just talking about him requires that I break a silence inherited over three generations of denial. He could never have hooked up with any circle of polite society, let alone the Academy. Speaking truthfully he only came into his own in a saloon. In 1943, after the family moved from Freewash to Philadelphia, Mom forbade us, Dad included, to visit him. I tried to look him up shortly after my 16th birthday and learned that he'd recently died of complications from a broken hip.

I think of him, the only grandfather I've ever known, as the whiskey-soaked obscenity-spouting old boozier who, far from alienating me, aroused all my sympathy and affection. A musty atmosphere of encroaching dirtiness cloaked him like an 18th century greatcoat. Before my mind's eye stands the image of a dumpy middle-aged man, unshaven most of the time, sitting for

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afternoons at a stretch in the living-room of our home in Freewash, either in the easy chair or on the arm of the sofa.

An old Navy pea-jacket and a woolen cap is all I remember him wearing. His body odor, which rarely knew the benefits of a bath, combining alcohol, unwashed clothing and general neglect, was penetrating as that of a pile of rotting potato skins . Between nips from a bottle he cursed out my father with a flow of obscenities I dare not reproduce.

He disliked and distrusted my father; Granddad feared anyone with even a little bit of knowledge. To credit him with the small amount of justice on his side, he identified my civil engineer father with the forces that had put him out of work. Then, my father's ethnicity was not likely to arouse his enthusiasm. Basically they just didn't like each other.

My mother's feeling towards her father might be described as a pure concentrate of disgust with no admixture of tolerance. Her reaction against him was extreme to the point of fanaticism. One consequence of this is her maddening compulsion for cleanliness. The scrubbing instinct is fully developed in her: when my father met my mother for the first time she worked as a scrubwoman at the steelworks. A pinprick of soot on anything to which she can remotely claim possession drives her into a passion of self-pity. The ostentatious display of energy with which she will rub it off sends the clear message that the human race will never come up to her standards.

Much like the booze odor that served as an advanced signal to the arrival of my grandfather there is always a smell of

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dishwater about her. Her monomania horrifies even my father who is, like myself, a bit lazy. Cleaning up in the kitchen can keep her busy until 10 or 11 at night, (though rarely beyond, for she always stops to watch the *Late Late Show* before going to bed. However, on a day combining loads of laundry and house-cleaning, she may not turn in until 2 in the morning). The way she curses and frets over her work might lead one to believe that she lives a very hard life, one of constant toil and abject misery. In fact, to twist the phrase of Sessue Hayakawa in *Bridge Over The River Kwai*, she is only happy in her misery.

I no longer live there, but I know that she will still, every Monday morning after breakfast, chase everyone out of the house so that she can do the cleaning. We were constantly being accused of being lazy bums. So convinced was she that none of us had the brains to do a decent job at anything that we were only allowed to do the most menial chores. Dad in particular is never allowed to set foot into the kitchen when she's working there. It was my job to empty the trash in the dumpsters out in back. Mom could routinely be depended upon to come running after me to lecture me on my ungrateful habit of strewing garbage all over the place.

Nobody appreciates her: that's the gist of it. It is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to appreciate her. Appreciation isn't difficult up to a point, but after that it becomes a burden. And it isn't that which causes her to kill herself with overwork. In my opinion she works like a dog only in order to earn the right to *not*

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have to appreciate anybody else . From what I know of her, the burden of even a little bit of appreciation is too much for her.

Which is why I've always had the feeling that nobody appreciates

me ! They may have made me into a superstar at Zelosophic U. at 13. The vogue wore off by the time I was 16, yet some of the glitter was still clinging to me in 1957, when I was let off with a B.Sc. and allowed to enter graduate school. To this day, the Aleph Cantor myth continues to pursue a life of its own in some quarters.

Yet I wouldn't call that appreciation. The Roman Empire turned Christ into a god, but that doesn't mean it appreciated him. In our own time there is a long catalogue of people, starting with Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe and continuing through to Mobutu, who receive far more appreciation than I ever have , although they inspire no envy in me. Quite the contrary.

I'm like my mother, really: nothing anyone can do will ever make me feel I'm loved or appreciated. If only it were possible to point to some routine task , like house-cleaning, and say : "*There! You see that? That's what you don't appreciate!* ". In my case it's not a matter of some specific talent or accomplishment that isn't being appreciated. There is that intangible *me* that nobody else will ever be able to understand. One can well imagine what it was like having two persons like my mother and myself under the same roof.

My dealings with my father are simpler: we just hate each other and forget about it. As for my sister and two brothers, our relations have always been characterized by a frigid aloofness.

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They invariably side with my parents against me in every dispute, no matter how petty.

Take the following incident from the early 40's. It was a day in early September. Mom, Dad and I had gone to Haverford to bring me back to the Agape Institute. Not far from the train station we passed an ice-cream vendor. It was unusually hot for an autumn day, and we were all thirsty. Dad examined the change in his pockets and discovered that he only had enough money for one ice-cream cone.

My mother insisted that she get the cone. She was knocked out. She was the oldest among us. She'd worked all of her life without a word of thanks from anyone. Besides, in case we were inclined to forget it, she was a woman, right? Obviously the cone should go to her. I kicked up a row. Why shouldn't I get the cone? What right did they have to burden me with their problems? If it weren't for me we wouldn't be in Haverford in the first place. Consider how much more it would be costing them to send me to a private school, when they could have me served up as a guinea pig for next to nothing!

Cashing in on a long tradition Mom threw a temper tantrum: she ploughed into Dad for being so absent-minded as to go on a trip without any money in his pockets. I waited for her the appropriate moment of respite before asking, in all innocence, if they were aware of the impression Mom was making on strangers, fighting with a 7-year old over an ice-cream cone.

To his credit my father did the intelligent thing. He simply dumped the two of us and started walking back to the train

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station. Mom had to take me the rest of the way to the Agape Institute by herself. Neither of us got the cone.

My father is nothing if not sensible. Commonsense is cobordantly his most prominent virtue and his most outstanding fault. He is if anything too sensible. If there's a dispute, both sides are right, and if you point out that both can't be right, then you're right, too. It's impossible to argue with him. If ever you manage to get him with his back against the wall he just walks away, leaving you empty-handed and gnashing your teeth. In some subtle way he always makes you feel you've lost. Indeed, there's no way anyone can get around him. He crawls into his shell and waits until the storm is over. At the same time he's probably the only person living who can handle my mother.

Just picture him if you will in his study, where he's been sitting alone minding his business for the last hour, being suddenly interrupted by my mother. Here she comes, rushing in with bucket and mop, screaming about how much respect she deserves and how little she gets. With her right hand she shakes off the soapy water into his face, with her left she holds her nose against the pipe odor filling the room.

Dad can't get a word in edgewise, even though she's doing everything she can to provoke him to the limit. Already she is reveling in the supreme satisfaction she hopes to derive from crushing his resistance.

What does he do? How does Abe Cantor, civil engineer, bread-winner, long-suffering and much imposed upon husband and father of four, deal with the situation? Not as one might expect

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from normally constituted human beings; yet his basic strategy is all the same remarkably successful. He doesn't make a big show of emptying his ashtrays on the floor at her feet. He doesn't yell something like , "Shut up, bitch!" She would love it if he did: it would supply the much needed provocation for getting worked up all over again. Above all he avoids the cardinal mistake of trying to persuade her that she *is* appreciated , which would be like ladling out chicken fat on a blazing fire. Nor does he heckle her, or make fun of her, or treat her like a crazy person, or any of my own self-defeating strategies for dealing with troublesome people.

He doesn't do any of these things. Following a blank stare which may be prolonged anywhere from a second to a few minutes - in which one can read astonishment but little else - Dad stands up and walks into another room. If she follows him in there he walks into yet another room. If she follows him in there he walks out of the house. If she's really persistent he jumps into his car and drives off. By the time he returns it's over. Like most people addicted to bouts of hysteria, Mom never retains any memory of her crises.

Yet even my parents were caught off-guard when the hurricane of my adolescence engulfed the Cantor demesne . It happened in the middle of the second term of my sophomore year. The date stands out in my mind: March 18, 1950. It was early morning. Mom was in the bedroom on the second floor, sitting before the mirror , engaged in pulling tufts of hair out by the roots and examining them. It's another one of her odd habits: from the

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community in which she'd grown up she'd picked up a belief that most diseases come in through the scalp. Dad was in his study, taking long draughts on his pipe and thinking about nothing . Well, I take that back: he was thinking about something , but I didn't figure out what it was until much later .

I'm asking myself if there was anyone else in the house. I know my siblings weren't there, because they had to be in school. Oh yes! There was someone: Aunt Rachel, Dad's sister, a daffy yet pleasant elderly lady. She was in the kitchen washing the dishes. I wasn't expected home on that day, so when I threw open the front door and stormed into the house everyone was taken by surprise. Even Dad, who'd fallen asleep in his study, could hear me shouting as I demanded " my patrimony" !

There was a commotion in the kitchen. Aunt Margaret had just dropped about \$30 worth of dishes: no doubt this would have to be subtracted from my hypothetical patrimony. Mom came running to the head of the stairs. She was dressed in her bathrobe, her face covered with some sort of facial lotion resembling whipped cream, her hands grasping clumps of hair.

"What's all the ruckus about?"

I'd been unnerved by my own audacity. My hands shook and I began stuttering. Determined all the same to hold my ground , I repeated my demands: I wanted to go out on my own. My reading of 19th century novels had informed me that fathers are supposed to give their sons a share of the "estate" when they feel ready to leave the home and establish themselves in the world.

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Throwing back her head Mom, giving full utterance to her contempt , exploded into loud laughter. How did little Aleph intend to hold his own in a dog-eat-dog world when he'd never done a stitch of work in his life and didn't know the business end of a hammer from its claw? Whatever money they gave me would be gone in a week on books and other useless things, and it wouldn't be a pretty sight either to see me coming back to the house weeping and crestfallen, with my tail between my legs like a beaten dog , asking to be let back in after robbing them of every penny.

Mark you, she wasn't lacking in sympathy for my pitiful state . It was really my father's fault that I'd never learned anything that could be used to earn my bread and butter. *Her* father , whatever else one might say about him, was dead right when he swore that Abraham Cantor was always putting on airs , but without half a man between his feet and his ears! Like father, like son as they say: and she laughed some more.

I was in no mood to argue with her. The urge to tell her to cut the crap was strong, however that was no way to speak to a mother. All the same my emotions got the better of me: instead of reciting from the long list of job possibilities that in fact were open to me, I began screaming that part of the money would be spent on the airplane that would put as much distance as possible between myself and them, because I hated everybody in the house, her most of all. That's when Mom started screaming also :
" *Help! Abe! Help!* " .

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The situation had gone out of control. I picked up the nearest object in my vicinity, a vase, and smashed it on the floor. Still half asleep and rubbing his eyes, visibly annoyed because he couldn't avoid involving himself in a family quarrel, Dad shambled into the room :

"So? Nu? What'sa matter?" It was evident that he was angling for his cue to walk out of the house. My mother came down the staircase into the living-room. Standing at the foot of the landing with her hands on her hips, she mocked me:

" Our little unweaned puppy is already talking about setting himself up on his own, and Abe, can you believe it, he'd like to take all our money to do it! I'd like to see him ironing clothes and scrubbing steps, getting up at 5 in the morning to start the Monday wash, or scouring pots and pans until after 11 at night, wearing your knuckles to the bone so you're an old woman by 40! And never getting a penny for it, neither, all for a pack of brats and a lazy, pipe-smoking husband who's too 'intellectual' to pick up after himself! "

Dad turned back as if readying himself to leave:

" I want my independence!" I raged, " I want to get out!"

He turned around to faced me: "So leave! What's stopping you?"

" You can't send me away with nothing!"

" You've always been a difficult child, Aleph. Why don't you wait until you're twenty-one? Why don't you get a job first, get married, settle down? You've got a long life ahead of you. In the

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meantime you'd better be thinking of some way to pay back the cost of that vase you just broke."

" Take it out of the money you owe me." I fumed.

" Owe you?" His eyes narrowed. I felt some sense of relief that he was getting angry for once :

" What do *I* owe *you* ? *I* don't owe *you* anything! When was the last time you paid my doctor's bills? Why don't you pay me back for the time when your younger brother, Knut, was born and I had to take on night work to keep the household running? Why don't you return the many thousands of dollars I've paid out on insurance premiums to take care of Helen and you and the other if, God forbid, something should happen to me? What about all the clothes you've gotten, all the meals you've eaten, and every time you need a book, and every time you want car fare ? " - he wasn't going to forget a thing - "And when you learn to drive I suppose you'll expect me to pay for the gas. And what if you do leave: who's going to pay the extra taxes for one less dependent? And who pays the taxes that help support your university? And the depreciation on the furniture, to which you've contributed as much as anyone? And the property taxes? And that famous ice-cream cone: who was expected to pay for that? So don't talk to me about who owes who money!" - I wisely refrained from pointing out that the proper grammatical construction was probably 'whom' - "You ought to be thinking about bringing a little money *into* the house by now, instead of taking money *out* of it all the time!!" With that he returned back into his study and slammed the door.

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My father, you see, is avaricious. I could never understand what he was doing sitting all alone in his study those long hours, never cracking a book or writing anything down on paper. I finally realized that he was spending the time worrying about where all his money was going. He's informed me everso many times that every penny ever spent on me was money down the drain. I've had little contact with them over the past decade but I can still imagine him sitting there behind his cumbersome black paneled desk in that gloomy room calculating and recalculating how much I owe him.

In this regard my sympathies are entirely with him: between his four children, his wife, his relations and most of hers , Abe Cantor has got enough *tsuris* over squandered money to last him the rest of his days. My father's avarice should not be held against him since it is one of the things that make him what he is. It's not as if he's chosen this character trait: Dad had to drop out of school at the age of 14 to go to work to help support a large immigrant family of 10 brothers and sisters. He picked up a diploma later, then put himself through engineering school by working days and going to night school. By way of contrast his son, yours truly, has consistently thrown away every opportunity, (several of which *have* knocked more than once) , yet doesn't appear to be ashamed of himself in the least ! It's never been claimed that Dad doesn't have grounds for his grievances towards me .

Yet whenever anyone asks me to describe my father, the first thing that springs to mind is his avarice. Even Mom, who's rather fond herself of lingering over every penny, finds this trait

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aggravating. The price he pays for his meanness in terms of the amount of ridicule he has to put up with no doubt justifies himself in his own eyes. Ever since his induction into the battalions of labor he's never worked less than 24 hours a day: each hour dedicated to earning money is matched by two hours of worrying about how to spend it. To this day he judges everything by 1930's prices, and even by that standard he appears stingy.

Before leaving for work in the morning he weighs the cost of taking the bus against the wear on his shoes, depreciated over the number of days remaining before he has to buy a new pair, combined with another small calculation involving the amount of money he could be making (at his current wages) during the time wasted in walking. He has never once in his life taken a taxi. Because of the one occasion when I hired a cab to take me from the dorms to home for the weekend, he deducted the amount of the fare from my monthly allowance.

He walks around the house looking for discarded pencil stubs. He will tear a room apart to find a dime that's rolled into a crack in the floor.

Were you to go into their basement you would discover the piles of old newspapers he's stored there. They date back decades and are never likely to be consulted. He reasons that since he bought them they're his. Mom has to harass him to get a new suit. I'm convinced he's not been promoted in 20 years from his position at the company he works for, because his clothes make him look like a beggar just in off the streets. The way he gravitates around the

house , picking up after everyone, is sheer torture for all its inhabitants.

It had to wait until my sophomore year at Zelosophic U., before I suspected that my parents might be a source of embarrassment to friends coming by to visit. Dad would follow them around the house like a starving ant-eater, picking up what they threw away, scraps of paper, little unused bits of food, pieces of string, thumbtacks, Scotch tape. Following that Mom would be right on top of them accusing them of defiling her handiwork with invisible bits of dirt.

I'll never forget the afternoon Dr. Mungenlehre stopped over for a social call. Mom opened the door to let him in . It was raining heavily. Quite without noticing it, as he walked into the vestibule he left a trail of mud on the rug. Mom was horrified. His greetings were ignored as she ran into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of rug cleaner. The smell of ammonia that came pouring out sent us running into the living-room. Affecting a level of fury that might almost be considered comical, muttering curses under her breath, she got down on her knees and began scrubbing the rug.

Hans didn't seem terribly put out. Ever the mathematician , his grey matter was too steeped in calculations for him to pay much attention to her. This was a big mistake: he didn't know Betty McNaughton Cantor. Hans and I sat down opposite one another in armchairs and began engaging in shop talk.

Enter Abraham Cantor. He'd been washing up in the second floor bathroom. Walking to the head of the stairs he saw the two of us sitting together. Hans had brought with him a copy of the

day's newspaper. As he was sitting down he dropped it onto the coffee table. It caught Dad's eye. Descending quickly to the ground level he strode impatiently across the living-room floor and swiped the newspaper without so much as a thank you. Either in too much of a hurry to say hello or not thinking it worth his while, he disappeared into his study.

Hans glanced up at me in perplexity as I squeezed myself deeper into the couch cushions, begging for some divine agency to rescue me. It was at that moment that Mom re-entered the room holding a feather duster. She was hopping mad because her little skit had aroused no reaction from its audience. Without preamble she began vigorously beating the easy chair on which Dr. Mengenlehre was seated. Profuse in apologies he jumped to his feet; her manner indicated that these were insufficient to restore him to her good graces. In desperation I suggested to Hans that we go into the kitchen where we could talk over a pot of coffee.

Hans sat down at the far end of the Formica kitchen table as I rummaged about in the cupboards for the accouterments of coffee-making. Prompt on his cue, Dad charged in to see to it that we didn't waste any coffee. He was joined soon afterwards by Mom. Together they stood glaring at us like a single four-eyed creature, daring us to make a mess around the kitchen sink. The acute agony of observing the coffee pot in its percolation was equitably distributed among the 4 participants. Once the coffee was brewed and poured I suggested to Hans that we might best continue our conversation in my room. My proposal was eagerly acted upon,

particularly in the face of Mom's spontaneous decision that it was also her day for cleaning the kitchen.

Once in my room we were granted a brief respite of about a quarter of an hour. My parents would have been pleased to learn that Hans had made the trip of about a hour by car from the campus to tell me that a part-time job as teaching assistant had just opened up in the department. Another grad student was taking a leave of absence and the post was available immediately. He wanted me to have first crack at it. I accepted the job at once but neglected to inform Dad of it for several months afterwards. Why should I give him the pleasure of cutting off my allowance?

There was a brusque movement at the door. The doorknob twirled to the right as Mom stepped into the room, livid face over crossed arms.

By following the direction of her gaze one could read her conviction that Hans or myself had spilled a few drops of coffee on the bedspread or were predestined to do so. She didn't give a damn who this Mengerlehre person was. Armed with her broom she chased us out of this room as well.

After we reached the ground floor Hans asked me to come to his office the next morning to sign some forms. Then he waited in the living-room while I went to get his coat. To pass the time he absently picked up a textbook on bridge construction buried among half a dozen books reclining in the alcove beside the couch. Curiosity about absolutely everything is one of the more positive traits of most mathematicians.

I don't know by what gift of second sight Dad divined that some stranger was looking over one of his books. It was most unlikely that he'd opened it once in the past twenty years, but he was all over Hans in a flash. I returned to the living-room with his coat under my arm to confront the intimidating spectacle of Dr. Mengenlehre being squeezed into a corner of the living-room, with Dad glowering at him at a distance of a few feet. The moment he looked up to catch Dad's eye the textbook was snatched out of his hands and ostentatiously returned to the bookcase.

There were no more incidents in the three minutes remaining before Hans said good-bye and left the house. Once he was gone I threw a classic scene. It remains in my mind, although it could not have been much different from others that were typical to that period. Leaving for the dorms the next morning I slammed the door behind me. It would be a long time before my return, though I'm getting slightly ahead of my story.

The uproar over my patrimony died away with its eruption. I must have been a bit mad to imagine it was possible to get anything out of Dad in this way, or indeed in any way. That night over dinner he mumbled something about setting up a bank account in my name into which he would transfer a bit of money at a time until I came of age. Then, as was to be expected, he completely forgot about it.



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