

## Chapter 21

### Homecoming

During the winter break of 1964-65 I closed down my rooms in the graduate dorms and moved back to my parents' house in the suburbs. A long and difficult process of reconciliation had eased relations between us. Now they felt comfortable with having me at home for a few months, while I re-established myself in a professional career. Mom promised to treat me like an adult and Dad agreed to stop brow-beating me about how much good money was being wasted on me. These commitments weren't intended to be taken seriously, but they did mean something as gestures.

I'd already been engaged to teach mathematics at Colorado University's Metro campus in downtown Denver. The post was temporary, not tenure track, as it was expected that I would start looking immediately for something better. If Aleph McNaughton Cantor was anywhere near as good as the claims being made about him, he would be setting his sights for a research fellowship with the Biomathematics Group at the University of Ann Arbor, or senior researcher in the Theoretical Biology and Biophysics division at Los Alamos. Applications and letters of inquiry had already been sent out to similar programs at UCLA and the University of Texas.

Graduation ceremonies for the class of '64 were scheduled for the end of January, 1965. Given the novelty of my academic situation there would also be a public defense of my doctoral dissertation on January 17th. Initially it was planned that my lecture would be held in the same auditorium where I'd defended

my research on the moons of Jupiter back in 1948. The earlier talk however had been a relatively private affair, its audience self-selected by virtue of its subject matter. Most of its the participants had been mathematicians, or astronomers and physicists familiar with higher mathematical methods. The volume of inquiries coming in over the telephone or through the mail indicated that this time the attendance to would be in the hundreds. Its venue was accordingly moved to one of the large auditoriums in the campus theater complex . With a seating capacity of over 500, a balcony that could be opened to hold another hundred, and a comparable amount of standing room, as many as 700 persons could be accommodated.

With my sister and two brothers out of the house, there was room enough at first for my parents and myself to move about in it without getting in each other's hair. Then my sister Agatha and her husband arrived around the 7th of January, while her twin brother came in from Dallas on the day of my talk.

Agatha Cantor- Dunlap, 24, was working as an administrative secretary at Bentley Business College in Boston. Ralph Dunlap, her husband, was an insurance agent. Two years out of high school my other brother, Knut, had organized his own rock band. He was traveling the basic circuit through Kentucky and Tennessee and would not be able to make it to my lecture.

The day after the arrival of the Dunlaps I received a letter from the Office of the President. In it President Jameson Hardball announced that, at a special session of the Academic Advisory Committee it had been decided that I should be granted my Ph.D.

immediately, without waiting for the public defense of my thesis. The lecture was still scheduled as planned, but could be looked upon as a mere formality. The vote had been unanimous: it was the very least that Zelosophic U. could do to rectify the long history of misunderstandings between us, etc., etc. I, or anyone from the family was encouraged to come into the President's Office in College Hall to pick up my diploma at our earliest convenience.

I passed the letter along to my mother at the breakfast table. As she read it aloud she became hysterical with excitement. The rest of the meal was forgotten as she ran up to the attic and dug out an old hat from a trunk that hadn't been opened since her wedding. From the moment she came back downstairs she bullied all of us, Dad, myself, Agatha and Ralph, to hurry up and get ready to go downtown. Then she regimented the lot of us out the door.

After stuffing Aga, her husband and myself between them in the back of the car she got in behind the steering wheel with Dad on her right. In a flash we were tearing down the 20 miles of highway that separated us from Philadelphia's city limits.

It's dangerous to be in a car with Mom behind the wheel; at that time more than ever, given the state she was in. It was with some relief to the rest of us that she soon turned the driving over to Dad, leaving herself free to fuss over me. My Dad is a very good driver, one of the advantages of never allowing anything to upset his equilibrium.

Over and over again like a Hari Krishna mantra, Mom kept calling me her "little doctor". Reaching into the back seat she tickled me under the chin as she used to do when I was three and

planted a big smooch on my nose. Playfully Aga passed her right hand through my hair. Ralph used his long waxey fingers to stroke the backs of my hands as he whispered : "You've made it, chum. You've really made it." Ralph was of a cadaverous cast with pale complexion, spoke little and thought less, and he soon fell back into that state of morose brooding for which Aga had probably married him.

Mom took out a comb and parted my hair:

" You know, Aleph: maybe you need a haircut before going to the President's Office! It wouldn't look good in front of all them officials if you came in asking for your diploma without a good haircut."

With her free hand she vigorously brushed down my suit jacket, " I don't think you remember, Aleph, you must have been too young, but when you were 8 we used to take you to the *Aygap* school ! It was a special school just for bright boys! Why, even then they thought you were smart! It had a director whose name is - Krumpelhauer? Pumperknickel? I don't remember, although I did copy out his name from an old address book and sent him an invitation through Haverford College, to attend your lecture!

" Well, that Mister Pumperknickel wrote me back the nicest letter you can imagine, saying you was the brightest kid in the whole school! I'm sure he says that to all us mothers, but it made me so proud of you!

" I can't begin to imagine all the people who are going to show up. And you can bet that Professor Mengeleary is going to be there! He must have been born in a pigsty! He seemed to think you

was so wonderful, like a wizard at mathematics! Then you disappointed everyone, because I knew all along that you weren't anything special , only that you were clever enough to pull the wool over everybody's eyes!

"But now you're a doctor: *Aleph, my son the doctor!* Hey, Abe! Did you hear that : *Aleph, my son the doctor!!* "Mom slammed him on the right shoulder.

" *I'm listening! I'm listening!* " The car swerved within a few inches of flying off the highway.

" No, you ain't listening! *Aleph my son the doctor !* " she shouted with gusto in his right ear. Once more she turned back to me:

" Now you'll be able to get a job at a good college, I read in the papers they need algebra teachers in them places . After that you can settle down. Now Aleph, I never expect you to show any consideration for your own mother and father, but you have to promise you'll let us visit you when the baby is born! Aleph, do you hear me? You got to make me a grandmar'm, because you're my oldest and favorite!"

It was the first time I've heard her express anything remotely resembling such sentiments in 30 years. Dad chimed in:

" Aleph! Make sure you marry a good Jewish girl! Don't go fooling around with *shiksés* !"

Mom landed him a clout on the head that once more sent the car spinning all over the highway.

" Of all the nerve! And what d'ya think he's been married to all these years?? Ain't I one of them *shaksés* ? Hm! My father

never trusted Jews. He never met one before Abe showed up, but he knew a thing or two. He was a stinking drunk with less education than a sewer rat, but he wasn't no dumb bell."

The car had veered back into a stable trajectory. I begged Mom and Dad not to quarrel at a moment like this one, the culmination of 17 years of struggle and desperation . Mom stopped talking, though she continued to sulk peevishly in a corner of her seat. Aga tried to take some of the pressure off me:

" We're all very proud of you, Aleph." Her crystal-blue eyes gazed up at me , every bit the younger sister awestruck by her brother's accomplishments. What conversation there was for the rest of the trip consisted of Ralph's monotonous sales-pitch as he tried to unload insurance on us at bargain prices.

The car pulled up before the door of one of the three barber shops adjacent to the campus. Mom hustled me into the shop and plumped me into a vacant chair. Throughout the ritual circumcision she kept up a continuous stream of chatter. I knew the barber very well. He could out-talk the best of them but bowed out for the occasion before superior competition:

" Don't take too much off the top; he's lost enough up there. I want you to get all that stuff in the back" - one might think that it was she who was getting the haircut - "we don't want him people mistaking him for like some kind of beatnik, God forbid!

" Aleph, do you know something ? You're losing your hair! It doesn't look so bad, because you're a doctor now. You *ought* to look more distinguished. Although it's a darn shame , if you ask me , that you ain't got a girl yet. Aleph, listen to me - I'm your

mother - Once you've got the marriage license and there's some kids on the way , go ahead! You can lose all the hair you want!

" I know what I'm talking about; life's taught me lots of hard lessons. Why - look at Abe! Who would have believed it that Abe would turn into this awful thing! He was sensible. He really was; and crafty too. He married me when he was still handsome. I mean, he never was handsome really, but at least he didn't look like something the dog brought in after the rain! Opportunity only knocks once , Aleph! I would'uh been an old maid all my life if Abe hadn't married me when he did.

" Being married didn't make me happy. Happiness don't exist Aleph, you get what you can out of life and hang the rest! But at least I ain't abnormal, like them spinsters sittin' in the kitchen in every other house in Freewash...."

She jumped up and barked at the barber: "Hey! Take off them sideburns! He may be Jewish but he don't have to advertise it! Aleph we've planned a little party for you after you give that lecture. Invite anybody you want . Well, I'm not sure I want that Mengeleary person there. We asked all the neighbors. The Wilsons, you know them, down the block, they promised to bring along their 19 year old daughter, Judy. She's a real sweetheart, Aleph ! I know you don't know nothin' about girls, Aleph, but at least you can be nice.

" Aleph, please don't make your talk too long - okay? We got to get you back to the house on time! Why , you're the guest of honor! Surprise ! - I got you a new suit, you can throw away the old bag you're wearing. Anyway you got to wear one of them medical

doctor smocks over your new suit. You don't want it all covered with chalk..."

With Mom nagging him all the way to the end the barber finished the job. With some reluctance Dad paid the bill; it wasn't his hair that was being cut. Then we all got back in the car again to drive the remaining three blocks to the Zelosophic campus.

