

Chapter 22

Tempest in a teapot

As the family walked through the swinging glass doors of the President's Office on the 3rd floor of College Hall, stirring rounds of applause erupted from secretaries, clerks and other minor administrators, about two dozen in all. Doris, President Hardball's private secretary, went into his office to let him know we'd arrived. Very soon afterwards he emerged and came forward to greet us.

Over the years of his ascension from Provost to President, Jameson Hardball had become sleek, his jowls more pronounced and his glasses thicker. He'd never had much hair, now he had none. Deep-seated concern furrowed his brow like the ripples in raked topsoil, but that came with the territory. His face beamed approval like a lighthouse beacon cutting through pea soup fog. He wanted me to think that he'd known all along that I would make the grade. I've no doubt he was preparing himself mentally to eliminate all the derogatory comments he'd written on my Undergraduate Transcript. Like an obstetrician announcing the birth of twins he strode across the floor, gripped me by the shoulders and planted a wet kiss on both cheeks.

"Aleph!", he cried "I swear you haven't changed a day!" My right hand was crushed in a cruel vice.

Mom burst into tears. Hardball motioned to his staff and a chair appeared. At first Mom made a show of not wanting to sit in it:

" No ... No ... " she reached around desperately; someone produced a box of Kleenex: "I been sittin' all day.. No, I really prefer to stand .. my son don't want me to sit down .. Well, okay". By the simplest of means she'd succeeded in getting everyone's attention away from me and onto herself. Aga and Ralph took chairs against the wall, while Dad paced about, restless and annoyed. Glowering with benevolence President Hardball, held Mom's right hand in his like a pearl contained between the two valves of an oyster's shell:

" This must be a wonderful moment for you, Mrs. Cantor."

" Oh, it is ...! It is! Tell me", she asked, regaining her composure and pulling herself erect against the back of the chair: " What's it made of?"

Hardball's face fell, his jowls dropping like the ears of a basset hound: " What's it made of? What are you talking about, Mrs. Cantor? "

" That diploma. Will I be able to frame it? Abe's - he's my husband - ", she indicated Dad in the corner, " Abe keeps his in a strongbox in his study . Maybe I should put it in a dry place. Will the moths eat it, do you think ? Is there some kind of stuff I can rub into it to protect it? Do they really make them of sheep's skins? Abe's diploma is just a piece of paper from some little engineering college, but Aleph's - Aleph has a doctor's degree from a big university! Say: maybe we ought to get some insurance! What kinda insurance should we take out, d'ya think?"

" Well .. Mrs. Cantor. Ahem!!" Jameson Hardball cleared his throat, his hands still recumbent and limp over Mom's:

" The diploma is, after all, just a document. It is not so important for what it is as for what it represents: Aleph's successful completion of his program of graduate study at one of America's most prestigious and venerable institutions of higher learning! Why, Mrs. Cantor : if he loses it, we'll just give him another one!"

" Uh -huh!", Mom snapped , "*Just like I lose a thousand bucks I can go to the bank and get it all back again!* "

" No, Mrs. Cantor. It doesn't quite work the same way." Taken aback, Hardball was reduced to stammering : "Perhaps I ought to show it to you." He disengaged himself to quickly hurry across the room and disappear into his office. My mother continued to carp, raising the tone of her voice. She was furious:

" What does he mean, it ain't important? My son slaved like a dirty dog for twenty years to get that shingle! Nobody's going to tell me it ain't money in the bank! Why don't you ask Abe to drop his paycheck on the street, so's every Tom, Dick and Harry can cash in on it? I'm a coal-miner's daughter. The people I come from don't know nothin'! Half of them can't even sign their names, let alone read a book! But you don't need to be a high-educated professor to know that nowadays the Ph.D. diploma is your Meal Ticket if you don't want to be a bum all your life!

" Ask Abe! Abe knows! Abe's got less man in him than anyone I've ever met, but that engineer's degree of his is been bringin' home the bacon for more'n 30 years! Like I said: I wasn't born yesterday! I ain't giving Aleph's diploma to some dishwasher as a Christmas present! It's stayin' in the house, under lock and key.

And if somebody wants to see it he can make a damn appointment!

" Hey, you'd think there was doctors hanging out on every bush and tree! I came here to get that diploma and I'm not leaving until I get it! Ain't that right, Abe? *Abe? Abe?* "

She looked wildly around. Someone went to look for him, then came back soon afterwards to say he'd stepped out for a walk.

"Well!", Mom huffed, "I never expected to hear that. A new diploma , my eye!"

President Hardball whirled out of his office, flustered and dripping sweat. His hands were empty:

"*Where is it?* " he gasped : "*I can't find it anywhere !*" He turned to his secretary:" Doris, have you seen Aleph's diploma? "

"*Sure , sure - see what I mean ?*" My mother's triumph was complete. One could imagine she was actually happy to learn that the diploma couldn't be found. Under Hardball's direction the staff turned both the inner and outer rooms of the office upside down. Within a short time a chaos of files and papers lay across 5 desks. Trash cans were emptied out onto the floor as some of the clerks got down on all fours to pick through the rubbish.

" Mrs. Cantor", President Hardball seemed utterly shattered. He'd removed his jacket and his shirt-sleeves were rolled up. " Mrs. Cantor , there's been some mistake, but honestly there's no cause for alarm."

" You're telling me there ain't !" She stood up, trembling in every muscle , " I've a mind to take this to the police!"

" Mrs. Cantor - that's utterly ridiculous! Your son's graduated! He's already a doctor! I assure you, the diploma's only a formality."

" *So , now it's a formality, is it?* " She was shouting, almost screaming , though I'm sure she didn't realize it:

" Now you listen to me, Mr. Hardballs! There's something at the bottom of this! I wouldn't be surprised to learn there was some political shenanigans goin' on behind my back. *Twenty years! Poor little Aleph sweated for twenty years so you could give his diploma to some God-damned no-good nephew of yours!*

" I heard of worse things in my day! It ain't the first time my unhappy son's been shoved up the ass by you people. " Mom only swore when she was worked up:

" Years ago you tried to stop him from getting that Bachelor's degree by locking him up in the nuthouse! It's the same stunt all over again. Like I keep sayin', I wasn't born yesterday. Shit! I'm gettin' myself a lawyer, Mr. Hardballs: we'll see if Aleph ain't gettin' that diploma or what!"

Closing her ears to President Jameson Hardball's useless pleading she rounded up the gang and rushed us out the door.

Early the next morning I left the house, boarded a bus and went into town alone. President Hardball and I conferred in private. Evidently the diploma had been misplaced; it was bound to turn up before the day was over. He promised me that in case it were really lost he would contact the Printing Office to have a new one made up in time for my public lecture. That was okay by me, but I wasn't sure it would satisfy my mother. Finally we worked out a solution. Hardball agreed to be standing at the main door to

the Kresge theater building on the afternoon of my lecture, so that he could personally hand the diploma over to Mom as she went in.

The better part of two weeks was needed to persuade Mom that the university was not trying to pull a fast one . To a certain extent she was play-acting. Eventually she relented and she agreed to put aside her suspicions, save in one particular: both before and during the lecture there would be a lawyer at her side, just to guard against any last minute funny business.

