

How Fischele Died
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Here's how Fischele died. Vomiting bright red blood over his tan, leather-wrapped steering wheel of his pearl-white BMW with gold trim on the way to his restaurant. Exsanguinating, he pulled over on Monroe Avenue in Brighton and called 911. DOA in the ER. Forty years old and bloodless, four liters short.

Here's how Fischele died. At the restaurant his parents bought him (after prison for drug running, after he bankrupt the grocery store they bought him), Fischele was his best customer for drinks. A socializer, a kibitzer, a good drinking buddy, he wouldn't let his customers drink alone. Chivas 25-year from Spayside was his favorite. He liked the bottle's slope-shouldered shape, the embossed kingly crowned heart: he clothed it in a velvet robe, with tassels like testicles dangling from its neck. He strolled table to table, pouring, toasting customers.

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 his stony, shrunken liver.

Here's *how* Fischele died. At eighteen, he returned from Thailand and was caught at SFO with several kilos of heroin in his baggage. After '69, Nixon closed the Southern border route for drugs—"Operation Intercept"; Fischele and others went Oriental, opened routes from Thailand, Nepal, Laos. 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,

“inte/ekshuval!” he hollared in Yinglish, his forefinger stabbing the Heavens. 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 and jailed again. 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 masse* 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. They squat, then followed a 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 this Zdünskawola, to ease the packing of live bodies into cattle cars, the Germans lined 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 began his education from the SS.

Beginning between his eyes, branching on his forehead and coursing over his receded hairline, Avrum had a branching “Y” of a vein. When he spoke—he hollared—

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 Avrum always hollered at. The vein pulsed dangerously. Then, as a boy, I thought the Nazi bang on his forehead made the wandering “Y” vein. Then, as a boy, I thought that such vein pulsing caused strokes. Of which Avrum later died, but only after burying his Fishele.

Here’s how Avrum identified himself to his sister, my mother, after the War in Zdünskawola. Fifteen when he left for Camp and she for the Russian border, now nineteen, he, painfully thin but tall and hair lost in the Camps. She refused to recognize him. Desperate, he kicked off his wooden shoes from Camp to show her his birth anomaly—that his second and third toes were fused at the base and separate at the end: they made Y’s on each foot. As a boy, I wondered if the “Y” of his toes were connected to the Y of his bulging, pulsing, purple forehead vein. Or the “Y” of my mother’s double uvula. As a kid, I wondered these things.

How Fishele died—so the autopsy report would read, clinically, professionally, no dramatics—was from exsanguinating, from cirrhosis leading to esophageal varices or 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, you ask? 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 on a forefinger, 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, but not eaten by Jews, 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, said nothing at first. When the marsala was served, he lifted the plate and served it on his bride's curls. From this died Fischele?

While Avrum railed at Fischele, and everyone, *Tante* Chaya, Fischele's mother, 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 Fischele's older brother, quiet, sweet, hard-working Simcha you've heard nothing so far, nor did he hear anything from her. "Fischele! 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 torso like an inverted triangle. A face sculpted in the Roman style, with wavy hair swept back and pomaded, in the Eastern European style of men; a hint of widow's peak (as he would soon make for his ex-wives). From Avrum he had eyes: dark, pupils hidden within the irises, eyebrows tufted, a bruised look around the lids. Bruised by his life. A voice baritone, but soft-spoken, velvet fog, unlike Avrum's. Three wives he had, none Jewish, five children. All left him. Then, he ascended from this veil of sorrows.

When last I saw Fishele. He invited me to his office. High-end cars he sold. 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 handled from an office. From a phone, the kind that he could press a button for "speaker" and push other buttons. Clean leather-trimmed desk top with gold edging. A "girl" at the front was a looker, a bimbo. I thought of Bialystok and Bloom's receptionist. He's on the line, standing as I enter; I hear his last phone words: "New Jersey you found one? Fine. How soon you can get it here? The color you can change. A 2002i he wants. Not an "i"? Switch out the logo plate to a 2002i. He won't know the difference. Of course, cash. No leather? Switch out the seats: find Recanatis. Pull them out of that Alfa Romeo Spider. "

Fishele waved me in. "Tutush! (my nickname, from *Naftuleh*), 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. Give me the specs, color, sound system,

spoilers, souped-up engine.” I demurred, owning a red Fiat 128, a beater: no radio, no heater, soon to blow its engine in the Chicago winter.

Fishele couldn't take a “no” for help. He ganders at me top to bottom. “Tutush, like this you dress for a Rochester winter? Four feet snow we got! For this snow they would cancel school, when it topped our heads as kids. Here!.” He flings from his desk his own pair of Fratelli Orsini lined driving gloves. I catch each. Of butter-soft Napa leather, lined with rabbit fur, a leather-wrapped button on the back by the opening. One seam down the center above the mid finger was embroidered leather. The fingers' seams were sewn tucked inside so that no threads showed. “This, this you should wear with your red Italian tin can.”

“Fishele, what about your hands, your drive home?”

“Motek (sweetie my little cousin calls me), I order these by the dozen. Also I have a heated steering wheel, tan leather-wrapped.

“And drop the Russian *Ushanka* with the tied up ear flaps. You're not a cossack, you Yiddishe *bocher*. Here, here!” From his hatrack he disengages a charcoal Black Borcelino, sends it sailing like a Frisbee. It is Angora fur felt, Grosgrain ribboned, leather sweat band. The crown is creased, the sides softly dented. A multi-colored feather—possibly from a Kukaberra or Great Hornbill—perks up the ribbon. “This is good not just for Chicago winters, but also should crown your intellectual *kopf*.” It lands, a ringer, on my outstretched hand.

And the *schmattes* hanging off you! What, they're off-the-rack from the Men's Warehouse? If you could stay a few days, I'd have my Hickey-Freeman guy do a made-to-measure, cuffs breaking 3/4 inch off the heel; sleeves gracing your elbow; a

cut to straighten your crooked shoulders. I would get you a fine Merino wool 150's thread count. Hickey-Freeman orders from Australia, where Coco Chanel got her wool. Merino sheep he ancient Romans brought to Spain, then brought to South Africa, finally Australia. I would get you the best. Hickey-Freeman you remember? You remember Tutush? Where Uncle Shloimovich worked. Told them off the boat that he was a tailor and nabbed the job. Tailor! He couldn't cut bread straight. Remember the slices? But they put him on attaching YKK zippers, best quality. Sometimes, I think for spite, he put them on upside down. When caught, he played *putzevat*, "Vat I should know?" You could catch your *schlong* in the contraption.

Fishele, always concerned for me, picks up where his father Avrum left two decades ago in Chicago O'Hare Airport.

"That witch's tit you married left you out in the cold, I heard. The divorce. I get information, Tutush, information I get. Before she dumped you, she had you sign over the house; said that should you die, then the house wouldn't have to go through probate; the kids would be protected. Such a *shmuck* you are Professor *Intelekshuval*, my father called you. Not a *shmuck*, a *shmeckele*. My information found out that before she tossed you like shit off a shovel, she had taken out a hundred thousand life insurance policy on you. Then hired a hit man for five K. But, no one hires a hit man without my finding out, even in Chicago. For seven K, he let you alone. My father tried to ring your bell in O'Hare, like a clapper in a cracked Liberty Bell; tried to warn you about this *tzatzke*. You? You were cracked-up in love, couldn't hear him. *Nu*, it's done. You drive a Fiat, wear an *Ushanka* like a cossack, wear polyester and fly economy squeeze on Agony airlines to visit freezing Rochester. You didn't get frozen enough

from her witch's tit? You know she married an undertaker. He would have cremated you, I gather. Your kids? They're fine, well as fine as can be living with an undertaker and the Wicked Witch of the Best."

I took this on the chin from my beloved cousin, Fishele. He meant well. Tried to wisen me up.

"Tutush, Tutush, you escaped, you're the only one to escape Rochester! The rest of us. Well, we stayed, we got stuck. What do you remember Tutush from our playing?"

I remember, dear Fishele (Little Phil), I remember well. Remembering is my avocation. When I came to your neighborhood. To the northside you and my cousins moved. Amongst the *goyim*, *lakhudraks*, my mother called them, street bums. An oval park in the street. You four cousins lived within two blocks of each other, which I yearned for. Only once a year we came on *Pesach* because our parents, wretched Aushwitz survivors, (they didn't survive, they lasted) managed to battle amongst themselves over the years. We? We only wanted to play. I remember you and Yossel (Big Joe) and Yossele ("Little Joe," like in "Bonanza") and Moishe took me to the sand lot to play. Across the oval green island in your street, through back yards, to an open sand lot. We planted sticks for bases. The other kids picked players for their sides. No one wanted me. I looked like a *nebbish*, not a *gibor*, heroic, with such shoulders, like you guys. You picked me. Put me on second base, as you knew that Yossel was pitching and he would field all the line drives towards me, he'd shield me. Then, when we kept losing (yes, I kept striking out), the other side had an inning, the third, 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 Yossel on the mound, thumbed his nose at you as he rounded first and headed towards second. I couldn't stand a nose-thumber at my cousins. So as he loped slowly approaching 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, Fischele, and Yossel, and Yossele and Moishe raced in towards second, surrounded me and husbanded me off the field. We shifted from baseball to rugby scrum. 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, Fischele, we lost that day. But in the heart, Fischele, I won. You don't remember that Fischele? You should remember how wonderful it was for me to have you as cousins. I yearned to see you.

Fischele, 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, Fischele.

And I miss you.

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