

# My Father's Club

by Michael Libling

"When I die," my father once said to me, "I'll try to do it when you're in town, so you won't have to make a special trip for the funeral."

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It was the last week in November. I was up in Toronto for a shoot, a commercial for some lame carpet deodorizer that reminded me of dog dipped in amaretto; I know, because I once had a dog dipped in amaretto for a booze spot I was producing. Anyhow, these things can go slow for any number of reasons. Last session, for instance, the actress we'd hired to tout the virtues of a geriatric laxative for women couldn't coordinate her eyes with her smile, and it took upwards of seventy takes before we got a sincere look of relief out of her. But this time the budget was extra tight and we wrapped on schedule. We just needed the carpets to look alternately smelly and unsmelly, and we had plenty of shots that tufted right.

To con the client into thinking his business was a bigger deal than it really was, the agency decided to cap the day with a sushi feast cross town, and though I've a soft spot for sake and yellowtail, I felt it best to pass in favor of a visit with my dad. For years, I had been mending my relationship with him in twenty-minute snatches. I hadn't seen him since before Labor Day and knew it would be a stretch before I'd get another chance. With the job in New York, the agency booming and all, squeezing in trips back home was no easy feat.

I grabbed a cab outside the studio and headed up Yonge toward Sheppard. I never like to drop in anywhere empty-handed (a trait picked up from Dad, incidentally), so I had the driver let me off at the Chinese take-out on the corner. A hot wok and a short block later, I stood before the elevators in my father's building, two bags of his favorites cradled in my arms. Truth be told, everything on every menu ranked among Dad's favorites. Egg rolls. Shrimp toast. Hunan dumplings with peanut sauce. Cantonese chow mein. General Tao's chicken. Orange beef. Honey garlic spareribs. Shrimp in lobster sauce ... I ordered in keeping with the Saugus family credo: *It ain't eating unless it's overeating.*

The high-rise was pretty much like every other in Toronto, eighteen stories of Architecture 101—straight angles of glass, bricks, and steel, and an aftertaste of pesticide in the lobby. If I didn't look too close, the place came off clean, almost sterile. But I always looked too close. A wad of bloodied gauze swept into a corner. Cheesy crumbs and patches of dried vomit on sills and furniture. A gallery of Rorschach stains on carpets and walls.

The elevators weren't just slow in coming, they were as close to stationary as anything in motion could be, mirroring the gait of the building's residents, I guess. Scratches, scuffs, pocks, and pits scarred the metal doors, wounds born of impatience rather than acts of random vandalism—dealt by keys and canes and heels and arthritic toes, Dad's included. "The guy turning the crank must be on his supper hour," I quipped, but the woman and two men waiting with me didn't get it, and I wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

"It's after seven," the shorter man piped up, skin like bleached jerky, cotton-ball eyebrows the only hair on his head. He tapped his watch. "Supper time's done."

"Yeah, well, I didn't really mean—"

The woman cut me off. "And who are you going to visit today, young man?" Her eyes were bright, blue, and a jarring lot younger than the rest of her, except for her Nikes. I towered above her, yet she managed somehow to stoop down to me as she spoke. Last anyone addressed me in quite this way was nursery school.

"My father," I said. "He lives on three."

"On three?" Her enthusiasm dissipated to dread. "Oh."

I nodded, psyche torn between curiosity and anxiety. The overhead display indicated the elevators were taking an extended breather on the fifth.

"Three is a bad floor," she continued. "Evil dwells on three."

"Hell, Esther, tell me one floor where you don't find evil in this hellhole." The second man rattled his walker off the wall and hammered the UP button with his thumb. "Come on, damn you." Then to me: "You know why they stick old people all in one place?"

I shook my head.

"So Death doesn't have to look too far. Seniors' buildings—bullshit. Wal-Mart for the Grim Reaper is what they are."

Watch-guy gave them both a dismissive wave. "Who's your father?" he asked.

"Saugus," I said, annoyed with myself for being so willing to supply the information. "Ben Saugus." Yeah, I'm a sucker for authority, even when the interrogator has no authority.

"I knew it," Walker-guy cried out, "you're the spitting image." I do not look anything like my father, never have. The elevator on the left had made it to the fourth.

"Ben Saugus, eh?" Watch-guy looked me up and down, as if evaluating a tweed of uncertain origin. "So, you're here for the funeral then, are you?"

"What?"

"Well, he's dead, isn't he?"

My heart parked up against my rib cage. "No, I just spoke to him ... yesterday morning ..." I'd called to tell him I was in Toronto and I'd visit first chance I got; he sounded weak, short of breath maybe, but no worse than usual. "No, my dad's fine. Fine."

"Told you," the woman said to no one in particular. "Three."

Watch-guy plucked a toothpick from between his teeth and steered it round the rim of his ear. "Haven't seen Saugus in ages. He used to play poker with us, but he was a lousy loser. Always fighting. Just as well he stopped coming. Your father wasn't an easy man, always called us cheaters."

"But Saugus was right, Howard, you are a cheater."

"Shut your mouth, Greenberg, or I'll wrap your goddamn walker round your neck."

"Like hell, you will."

"Like hell, I will."

Grease and black bean sauce seeped hot against my palms. "Please," I said, "did you hear something—that something happened to my father?"

"Of course, something happened to him." The woman stooped down to me once more. "He made the mistake we all made—lived too long."

Walker-guy beat his fists against the elevator doors. "Goddamn it, we should all be dead for the goddamn waiting we do around here." And just like that, the doors stuttered apart, as if the elevator had been hiding there all along. But I couldn't get in. I tore for the stairs.

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For years, I expected every visit with Dad to be my last. He did nothing to dispel the notion, hacking, gasping, and clutching head, heart, and furniture as if he were Death's flagship franchise. He hadn't seen the outside of his apartment since falling down and banging up his shoulder and head pretty bad. "Just like that, I get dizzy," he explained. According to the conversations I'd had with his doctors, his kidneys were failing, and, in all likelihood, he had suffered a series of small heart attacks. But if he wasn't going to tell me on his own, I wasn't going to let on I knew. He was given a walker, but pride kept it stored in the hall closet. Instead, he got into bed one day with a supply of batteries for the TV remote, a box of Ritz Crackers and a jar of peanut butter, and never got out. Not finding him home was about as likely as finding a restaurant open in Toronto after midnight.

"*I'll take European Capitals for two hundred, Alex.*" As I headed down the hall, it seemed every TV on the floor was tuned to *Jeopardy*, blaring at top volume from behind closed doors. "*Civil War Generals for one hundred, please, Alex.*" The program was coming through my father's door, too, and my relief was immediate. Best of my knowledge, game shows didn't draw a lot of dead people, not even in Toronto.

Arms occupied with the Chinese, I elbowed the lever down and let myself in. He never kept the door locked anyhow. "Old people fall and die and nobody finds them until their bodies stink," he once told me. "I don't want to be half-rotted when they find me. Better a burglar gets me than bugs."

The apartment was small. Narrow galley to the left. Storage closet to the right. And one big room straight ahead—the dininglivingbedroom. Off that, the bathroom and shower.

"Hey, Dad, it's me," I announced from the kitchen, shouting over the TV. "Hope you haven't eaten. I brought Chinese." Not that his having eaten would have mattered. Food was sport. I set the containers on the counter and peeked out.

His bed was empty, the covers tossed aside. My body sagged. I turned. The bathroom. "Dad?"

I wasn't sure what a cadaver smelled like, but sensed it wasn't aftershave—and aftershave was all I smelled, egg rolls excepted. Odd, seeing how last time I saw him, he'd given free rein to a salt-and-pepper shock of steel wool that sprawled from chin to chest. "I'm the poor man's version of Howard Hughes," he said, not without pride.

I nudged the door ajar. "Dad?" I expected the worst, him lying there with his pants down, a fetid Elvis. But he wasn't in the bathroom, either.

Again, I examined the bed, fearing I had somehow overlooked him, a possibility akin to missing a melon on a doily. Even looked under the bed. But the only trace of Ben Saugus was his pajamas scattered among the sheets. Pajamas were all he wore anymore. (On the upside, of course, his limited wardrobe made deciding what to buy him for Father's Day and birthdays a snap.)

*"Now, players, it's time for Double Jeopardy ... where dollar values double ..."*

I slumped into the La-Z-Boy, and a weight more oppressive than any I had ever known descended upon me—a veil of gray obscuring all color, the room my death shroud. "Dad," I called out, and felt shame at the fear in my voice, the frequency of my pitch. Shamed. And foolish.

What next? Should I call the hospitals? The police? His landlord? City morgue? The delicatessen in the strip mall across the street? Or home to Paige to fill her in on my latest visit?

My gaze shifted from Alex Trebek to the dusty paperbacks stacked under the TV. *The Kitchen God's Wife. Jews, God and History. Alias Grace. Iacocca. The Zone Diet. Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. Gorky Park.* That was it. *Gorky Park.* I shook off the gravity and was on my feet and down the corridor before another contestant could toady up to Alex.

Now, this was one of those government-subsidized towers that used to set Toronto apart on the civility side of life. Residents paid what they could afford and the government picked up the balance. My father's neighbors were mostly seniors like himself, with a few middle-aged welfare recipients and newly arrived Canadians—generally Russian—mixed in to confuse the demographers. That's how Fedor fit the picture. If anyone would know what had happened to my father, Fred, as Dad called him, would be the guy.

Fedor's eye filled the peephole, punctuated by a cautious "Da?"

"It's me, Matt Saugus, Ben's son. I'm looking for my father."

Nurses, social workers, and assorted do-gooders checked in on Dad on a regular basis. But it was Fedor who had become my father's link to the outside, running errands, shopping and banking, and, in recent months, cooking for him, too. As Dad explained, "Fred was a very important man of science over there—had the best of everything—but here he's a nobody like the rest of us. So I speak a little Russian, him a little English, and we both like our coffee black and bitter."

I knocked a second time. "Do you know where my father is? Did something happen?"

A loud sigh from the inside, and Fedor opened the door a crack, squeezed through, and shut it behind him. It was obvious he had something to hide, beyond the apparent fact that his was the only TV not tuned to *Jeopardy*. Either that or the volume was down. "Your papa go," he said flatly.

I wasn't sure I wanted clarification, but pursued it anyhow. "What do you mean? Gone where?"

He took his time getting to the answer, not sure what to say, finally addressing the floor rather than me. "To club," he said, trolling for my reaction.

"What?" Odds were high I hadn't heard him right. His accent was thicker than the borscht my father raved about; Fedor made it for him by the bucketful.

"Da, your papa at club."

"How can my father—?"

"Mount—Mount Pella—Pellatch—Pelluck ..."

"The Mount Pellatt?" I laughed. "Maybe you didn't understand. I'm talking about Ben Saugus—you know, 301?"

"Da." He raised his head. "You are son. I know. Papa at club."

"But he doesn't belong to a club, least of all the Pellatt. Cripes, the man can hardly walk ..."

Fedor shrugged, the rounds of his shoulders crushing his cheeks. "You love Papa, da?"

It was a funny question to ask. I nodded, an ambivalent bob of the head.

"Papa love you too."

I smiled, exuded patience. "That's why I want to find him. C'mon, you know as well as I he doesn't belong to any club."

"He belongs," he said, as if he had finally convinced himself. "You see."

"But—"

"Apéritif five-thirty, dinner six-thirty, cognac, cigar seven-thirty ... You see."

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I started to dial home, but stopped at the area code. If it turned out Dad was okay, I'd only panic Paige and the kids. If something had happened, letting the family know a few hours late wouldn't make much difference.

It was strange to be in the apartment alone, all too easy to picture him lying there, remote extended as he flipped through the channels.

I reheated the Chinese food and settled into the La-Z-Boy, attempting to fend off the gloom with *Entertainment Tonight*. Despite Fedor's claim, there had to be a more plausible explanation for my father's disappearance. An uneasy feeling perked in my gut, along with the General Tao's. I don't handle MSG all that well. How would I handle the loss of my remaining parent?

The Mount Pellatt. Yeah. Right. A bulwark of Toronto's exclusionary past and delusionary present, the MPC had been founded and preserved on the principle of the three W's: WASP, Wealth, and Well-connected. "My club away from my club," was how Prince Philip described the Pellatt on a 1959 visit; with that, it came to symbolize the Empire's last bastion in Upper Canada. Indeed, within those hallowed walls, *Ontario* was seldom uttered aloud; *Upper Canada* was anachronistically de rigueur. No elderly, overweight, unkempt and accented Polish Jew, long-retired from the snack bar business and needle trade, had ever managed an aperitif in the establishment, let alone membership. I sniggered, amused by the possibility. *Wouldn't that shake things up!*

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I could recall neither falling asleep nor sleeping. One minute I am flirting with Mary Hart, next I am awakening to Letterman into his monologue, garlic sauce on my neck, and gargling from the bathroom. "Dad?"

He emerged, head swaddled in a hot towel, gray chest bare, skinny white legs sprouting from paisley boxer shorts. "Son," he said, his baritone muted by a mouthful of cotton.

"What's going on? Where you been?" I tried to remember the last time I had seen him standing without support.

"At the Club," he said, as if I should be pleased by the news.

"What are you talking about?" Had Fedor been on the level?

He dismissed my doubt with a snort and unwound the towel from his face. "The Mount Pellatt Club of Upper Canada," he said. This was the first time in my life I had heard him speak with satisfaction about anything other than a good meal. What's more, he was clean-shaven.

"But how? How can you be a member of the Mount Pellatt?"

"Because I've always wanted to be, that's how." He pulled on his pajama top. "You think your father isn't good enough for the Mount Pellatt?"

"No, Dad, you know it's not that. It's just that—"

He shut the bathroom door behind him.

I brought my plate to the kitchen and sponged the sauce from my neck. I called to him: "You want me to heat up some Chinese? I brought a ton." I took a bite of a cold egg roll.

"No," he called back, "I'm stuffed. I had a big dinner and one too many cognacs."

I sat on his bed, faced the bathroom door. "I had a chat with Fedor."

"Fred's a good man."

"Yeah. I figured you'd be home earlier." I decided I might as well play along. "Fedor said cigar and cognac would be at seven-thirty."

"Sometimes seven-thirty. Sometimes not."

"So how come you got back so late?"

"I had business to take care of."

"Business?"

"You don't think your father can have business to take care of, Matthew?"

"Jesus, Dad, I don't know what to think. You don't step out of your apartment for a year, you piss in empty juice bottles because you can't walk three feet to the toilet, I don't see you since last September, and now you tell me you're a member of the MPC with business to take care of? What the hell's going on?"

He flushed. The door opened. A charcoal gray suit swayed from the shower rod.

"You think your father isn't good enough for the Mount Pellatt?" he said again. "Then what's this?" He turned my hand about and dropped a gold lapel pin onto my palm. I angled it to the light: *Mount Pellatt Club of Upper Canada* about the circumference, *Toronto* at the base, and *Life Member* at the center.

"It's—uh—really nice," I said, more baffled than impressed by the most recent of my father's chronic scavengings.

He read my mind. "No, I did not find it in the street."

"I didn't think you did," I lied.

"I had a busy night. I want to go to bed." Now I had reason to worry, for here we were on course for a major brawl, and he wasn't stepping into the ring with me. It was a level of restraint I had never seen in him before, and I felt an unfamiliar shame at my eagerness to bait him.

I straightened the top-sheet and aligned it with the comforter. "You want me to leave?"

He folded his glasses onto the night table. "I'm eighty-one years old," he said. "But I want you to know, I'm not tired of living. Not for a moment have I ever been tired of living. No, I'm tired of being a nobody."

I swallowed, squeezed his hand. "You're not a nobody, Dad. You've never been a nobody."

He laughed, nailing my Pollyanna mind-set to the wall. "Well, at least, I'm not now," he said.

I deposited his pin on the night table. He shook his head. "You keep it."

"But—"

"It's yours, Matthew. I'm giving it to you."

It held no meaning for me, no more significant than the key chains, bottle openers, shoehorns, and other doodads he had foisted on me over the years, but I wasn't going to argue. Not now. I dropped it into my pocket. *My inheritance*, I thought, and hated myself for belittling his gesture.

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A message from Paige awaited me at the hotel. *Call as soon as you get in, no matter how late.*

"What's wrong? Are the kids okay?"

"Of course." She seemed surprised they would be my first concern. "But what about you, Matt?"

"Tired," I said. "It's been a strange day."

"I can imagine." Her empathy was excessive, inexplicable. "I called my sister. She'll come stay with the kids until we get back. I managed to get a flight out tomorrow morning. It lands at Pearson just before

ten. Do you know when the funeral will be?"

"What?"

"The funeral. My God, don't tell me you haven't heard? I thought by now—I mean, you said you were planning on seeing him ..."

"Heard what, Paige? What?" *As if I didn't know what was coming.*

She spoke, organizing her thoughts between the syllables. "They called late this afternoon. I tried to reach you at the studio, but you'd left, and when I tried your father's, the phone just rang and rang. Really, you've got to start carrying a cell phone. Or at least a pager. Matt, your father—he—he passed away."

"Huh?"

"On Monday. They said he died on Monday, but they had trouble locating us."

"I spoke to him on Monday."

"It must have happened after ..."

"I don't think so, Paige."

"What do you mean? Are you okay?"

"Look, I don't know what's going on exactly, and I don't know who called ..."

"She said she was his social worker."

"... but I was with him not twenty minutes ago. My father's fine, Paige. Honest."

"I can't believe you're telling me this."

"More than that. He looks better than he has in years."

"But the phone call. They said ..."

"His building is full of cranks. And you know how he gets. He had some argument over poker or something. I suspect it's one of his cronies trying to get back at him."

"What a nasty thing to do."

"To say the least. Anyhow, I'm going back in the morning. I want to get to the bottom of this. There's some other weird stuff going on, too, but I'll tell you about it later."

"I can't imagine anyone being so vicious—upsetting the family like this. Thank God, I didn't tell the kids."

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I couldn't sleep. Gave up trying. Watched TV a bit and then headed out. Caught a cab outside the Royal York. I settled into my father's La-Z-Boy just as morning began to break,



He snored at peace, saliva bubbles popping on his lips. Comforted by the rhythm, palpable evidence of life, I dozed off.

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He kissed me on the head and whispered, "I'm off to the Club." My nostrils twitched from his aftershave.

"What?" I spoke before my eyes had opened. Bob Barker was asking for bids on *The Price is Right*.

"A lunchtime meeting at the Club. I love you, Son."

I was still groping my way from dream to reality when he headed out the door. "Hey, I'm coming, too." I scrambled over the armrest and raced into the corridor, but he was gone. Like that. Gone.

Fedor stood watching, arms folded. "Did you see where my Dad went?" I asked. He shook his head, but I wasn't buying. I marched right at the guy and barged past him into his flat. "Dad?"

A screensaver gurgled pastel bubbles across a computer monitor, but the rest of the place was regurgitated Dickens. Drab. Dowdy. Threadbare. No wonder his was the only apartment not blasting *Jeopardy*: The guy didn't own a TV, for Christ's sake.

"I tell you, Papa no here."

"Yeah, what's in there then?" A ratty old table in the corner was pushed up against a door, a fat, bronze padlock begging the question of what was inside.

"Storage."

"Open it."

"You think I hide papa? Papa is where he wants to be, not where Fedor make him to be."

"Open it."

"If I show you, you tell to nobody. Da?"

"Open it."

"You want I open, I open."

Jesus greeted me, his arms nailed to the horizontal, dried blood on his palms, his ankles bound to the vertical. A dirty, jaundiced Jesus on a cross taller than me and a case of Diet Sprite at his feet. He looked nothing like Dad.

"See, Fedor tell you: No papa."

And next to the first Jesus, another Jesus. And another and another. Too many to count, in fact. Virgin Mary, too—a dozen, at least—in every shape, size, and wardrobe imaginable. Crosses, crucifixes, paintings, and religious artifacts for which I had no name. Gold. Silver, Bronze. Wood. Plus a broom. A bucket. A mop. And an end-aisle display of canned beets, though there was no aisle to end.

I couldn't have cared less what he was up to—shady or otherwise—but he felt obliged to explain. "A fellow has to make money for what to eat. And Church has plenty crosses—more than they know with what to do. One missing here, one there—so they buy another. No big deal. Church has plenty money. I get objects from Old Country, I sell in New Country. You know eBay?"

"Sorry, I thought for sure ..."

"Not to worry." He pushed the table back up against the door and snapped the padlock shut. "You like borscht? Come. Sit. I give you borscht. Black bread. Vodka. You like vodka?" His v's were w's.

Fifteen, twenty minutes. I didn't stay long, but it seemed like forever. Dad might've loved the stuff, but I could barely get the chunky red down. After the epiphany of Fedor's storage room, all I saw was a bottomless bowl of coagulated blood, Jesus-style. Thank God for the bread and the vodka. Especially the vodka. I never drink before noon, but in this case I made an exception. It sure felt good going down. Killed the taste of the beets, anyhow.

"I should go to the club, see if it's true. It's all so weird. Nothing seems to add up."

"Go. You go to club. You add up."

"You think so? You think I should?"

"You want to go, Matthew Saugus, you go. You feel good about papa, you feel good about self. But first, you take Fedor's advice, da?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Put on shoes."

I glanced at my socks. "Da."

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Some days, I'd travel the hour from home to office and, on arrival, not recall a moment or detail of the drive. Not a street. Not a sight. Not a turn. Not another car on the road. Nothing from the moment I stepped into the Saab to the moment I stepped out. So it went for me that day. One second I am in my father's La-Z-Boy, lacing up my shoes, next I am in a cab, asking the driver to take me to the Mount Pellatt Club—with no recollection of the in-between.

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First glance, the Pellatt is pretty much how I remembered it. When I was a kid, my father would point it out every time we passed the place. Neo-Gothic fieldstone with the works. A matronly, turn-of-the-century survivor amidst the frigid steel and unblinking glass of Bay Street. Archways, circular

butresses, and a smorgasbord of Victorian indulgence that would have dazed the Queen herself. Limp on the flagstaffs: a Red Ensign, a Red Maple Leaf, a trusty Union Jack.

"May I help you, sir?" the doorman asks, leaning in every direction but toward the door.

I mutter something about wanting to see a member, struggling not to run the other way.

"And who might this member be, sir?"

"Now, I could be mistaken. I mean, I could have the wrong club."

"This is the Mount Pellatt Club of Upper Canada you are calling on, sir, lest there be any confusion."

I withdraw a step, prepared now for a full retreat. I cringe as I blurt my father's name, but the doorman doesn't hear me. He frowns, his eyebrows misaligned by years of righteous skepticism. I repeat: "Ben Saugus."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Saugus, of course. Right this way, sir." Suddenly, I am Ali Baba at the den of thieves, my *Open Sesame* my father's name. *Ben Saugus of Snackbars and Inseams*. And the doors of the Pellatt part.

I am given a jacket and tie and led to a somber antechamber to wait. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, framed in gilt, peer down from dark paneled walls. I smile uneasily, seeking approval, but the royal couple remains unfazed.

The major-domo returns, scrutinizes the fit of the borrowed jacket, the knot of the borrowed tie—an awkward Windsor—and summons me to follow.

I pass through room after room, some large, some small, but the theme is unchanging: burnished brass, antiquarian mahogany, and timeless leather. "The Mackenzie—a smoking room," he announces, and I cross the portal solo.

Ben Saugus is holding court. I stop, unsure as to whether I should be amused or stunned. He rules from within a huge, wine-colored armchair, bronze upholstery studs running parallel to his arms and legs, not dissimilar, I think, to the gilt frames observed in the antechamber. In his right hand, a cigar smolders. In his left, a glass, the liquid a rich amber.

He is talking, grinning, winking, and the four men who form the semicircle before him are doing the same, paying reverent heed to whatever my father is telling them. Ben Saugus chuckles, and the suits chuckle, too. Ben Saugus nods knowingly, and the suits nod knowingly, too.

It is wholly implausible, yet it is not a moment I choose to shatter. I slink toward the portal, eager to make good my escape unseen, and just when I think I am in the clear, my father calls my name.

He introduces me to his friends, an Alastair, a Craig, a Timothy, and a Graham, three with hyphenated surnames, the fourth with a III suffix. They joke about my borrowed jacket and tie. A glass with ice and something brown is delivered to me.

A Murray joins us. He looks to be my father's age. The gold pin in his lapel is identical to the one Dad gave to me. Again, they joke about my borrowed jacket and tie. I decline the cigar, but they insist, and so I take it, surrendering it to an ashtray at the first opportunity.

We chat. I tell them about my work, the commercials I've been shooting. My life in advertising. But there is no genuine interest in what I have to say, their attentiveness a courtesy to my father. I mention one of

my clients in passing—a big pharma outfit—and this triggers their escape to a protracted discussion of the market. Presently, Timothy says, "And where do you see this heading, Ben, strategically speaking, naturally? Undoubtedly, we live in interesting times, not the least of which were yesterday's comments from the Federal Reserve Board Chairman and developments in Southeast Asia. The conflicting responses of the Dow and the TSE were particularly baffling."

I brace for embarrassment. Heat colors my cheeks and ears. My poor father has been put on the spot and I share his certain shame. But he holds his own; they are listening to him, hanging on to his every word. My mouth agape, I raise my glass to compensate. I sip, then gulp.

"As always, Saugus, you crystallize the complex. Outstanding, man, outstanding."

"Pithy, Ben, pithy."

"Daring, yes, but so very compelling. Devious, indeed, Saugus, you old devil, you."

"Exactly what I was thinking, Ben."

They like him. All pompousness aside, they sincerely like him, and my father basks in the attention. He glances my way and I cannot help but grin, glad I have witnessed his glory.

"Your father's a very special man," they tell me. "Always full of surprises."

"Yes, he is," I say, without a word of lie.

We eat a simple lunch, roast beef sandwiches on crusty rolls. Pickle and coleslaw on the side. The conversations ebb and flow, and always my father the catalyst, the one they turn to, adhere to for the final word. My father, a man reborn, content for perhaps the first time in his life. A sight to behold. A sight I never thought I'd see. In an instant, a lifetime of disappointment washed away. I struggle to keep my emotions in check, to keep myself from embarrassing him.

*Ben Saugus at the Pellatt.* I cannot fathom how it has come to be, but I am more than willing to accept it.

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In the cab, on the return to his apartment, I let it out: "I'm so happy for you, Dad."

He pats me on the knee. We drive in silence, and then I add: "I can't get over it, you a member of the MPC."

"What's not to get over?" he says. "It comes with the territory."

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I had planned to stick around with him until evening, but he was tired and wanted to nap. "I'll come back around six," I told him. "I'll bring dinner."

"I'm sorry, Son," he said, head propped on double pillows, "but I'll be returning to the Club tonight. I'd take you too, but ..."

I laughed. What else could I do? At last, my father is too busy for me.

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On my way to the elevator, Fedor poked his head out as I passed. "You see Papa?"

"Of course. But never like this, Fred. Never."

"Is good, da?"

"Must be your borscht," I said.

"No," he said, "it is you."

.....

At the hotel, there was a fresh message from Paige. She had received another one of those calls.

"Same as before," she said. "They need a member of the family to start making arrangements or else the authorities will step in."

"This is nuts."

"I don't know what to tell you, Matt, but the woman who called wasn't kidding. She gave me her number. You better call."

"I'll bet they've confused Dad with someone else. I'll bet you that's it."

"Well, get it straightened out. This whole thing is giving me the creeps."

I phoned the number. Got a machine. Left a message.

.....

I awoke late. Showered. Shaved. Hell, I felt terrific. Best night of sleep in memory. It had never dawned on me before the extent to which my happiness depended on my father's.

I gave him a call, thinking it best to get a fix on his plans for the day, before I dropped in on him. I laughed; there was a real possibility he wouldn't have time for me. *A miracle it was. A goddamn miracle.* Wasn't surprised a bit when he didn't answer. Felt pretty good about it, in fact.

. . . . .

It was close to lunch. I had no plans to stay or even announce my presence at the Pellatt; I only wanted to make sure Dad was there and then be on my way. I suppose I could have called the Club, but fact was, I was hoping to see him in action with his big-shot buddies one more time.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" I said to the driver. The Pellatt's back on Bay.

"You kidding me, pal? Hasn't been on Bay for a good twenty-five, thirty years. About as long as I've been hacking. Trust me, buddy, I know."

I wasn't going to argue. I'd just make sure he switched off his meter when he had to backtrack.

We drove by the Casa Loma, turned a couple of corners onto a wooded boulevard, and pulled up at the curb of an English country house built of Cotswold stone. It stood imposing and faultless upon a manicured terrace of yellow grass. "There's your Pellatt," the cabby said. "Any questions?"

I had no questions. *I had no answers.* "Wait for me," I said, eyes fixed on the plaque at the wrought iron gate.

## **The Mount Pellatt Club of Upper Canada**

**Established by Royal Charter 1848**

### **Members Only**

"Not without a deposit, pal." I wouldn't have trusted me, either, considering the way I must have looked to him at that moment. I handed him forty—both bills American. He liked that.

The doorman observed every step of my approach. A security guard hung back in the shadows. I asked for my father, but the doorman could not recall the name. He disappeared inside and returned with a career functionary in a tedious brown suit. "Is that Ben as in Bennett or Ben as in Benjamin?"

"Benjamin," I said, succumbing yet again to that sucker-for-authority hang-up of mine.

The security guard hitched up his pants, fists at the ready. The doorman nudged the peak of his cap lower, but the effect was more woodpecker than menace. Brown-suit stiffened, cheeks sucked hollow. "I am afraid we have no record of any member named Benjamin Songas."

"Saugus," I corrected, spelling it out. "Ben Saugus."

"None whatsoever," he said, meticulous in his finality.

Still, I pushed ahead, more desperate than rational. "Is this the only Mount Pellatt?"

"Indeed," he sniffed, his patience depleted.

Hands in pockets, I moped down to the cab.

. . . . .

I had the driver take me up Bay to the area I recalled from the day before—and, with my dad, from all those years before. We retraced the route and scoured the cross-streets, but wherever I had been was no more.

Late afternoon, his shift coming to a close, he offered to drop me at a hospital—"My sister is a psychologist and a damn fine one, too. No telling how many loonies she's helped."—but I declined, opting instead for Dad's building.

. . . . .

I cannot say what I expected to find in my father's apartment that afternoon. I was frightened, worried. Frightened something was happening to me. Worried something had happened to him.

He lay in his bed, his sleep deep. Perhaps too deep. Ears cocked, I stared at his chest, alert to signs of life. A snore ripped across his tonsils and revved his lips. I lowered my guard, relieved.

I sunk into the La-Z-Boy and relinquished myself to Oprah, her guest, and a life-affirming story of inestimable value. I figured I'd have my explanation soon enough, though I could not imagine what it might be.

. . . . .

*"I'll take Team Nicknames for five hundred, Alex ..."*

As had become my habit of late, I fell asleep. So I'm not sure how long he'd been calling me before I heard.

"Can I get you something, Dad? A drink? A bite to eat? There's leftover Chinese ..."

He bid me closer. "I can't make it to the Club tonight." His voice was hoarse, his breathing a distant turbine on the fritz.

"Your asthma?"

"They miss me when I don't go. That's what they say, they miss me." He spoke with pleasure, not regret, and I was grateful for it.

I tried to return the favor. "I'll bet they do." His forehead was wet, cold. "Maybe I should call the doctor ..."

Again, he shook his head. "I was never tired of living, you understand. I was never tired of living. Not for a moment ..."

"I know, Dad. I know." The guilt I felt was of my own manufacture. Because I had been told some believed him to be dead, had I become the agent of their reality? Nausea cut to the quick.

"It's just that I was tired—tired of being a nobody. You understand, don't you, Matthew?"

"You're not a nobody, Dad. Not you," I assured him. "You're a member of the MPC."

"Don't you forget it." He smiled, gripped my hand as best he could. "Remember me not as I was, Matthew, but as I wanted to be."

"Yes, Daddy." *Daddy? Jesus, when was the last time I'd called him that?*

"I love you, Son."

"I love you, too," I said, as if the words could somehow preserve him from the brink. "I love you, too."

I did not move for a long while, observing, hoping, but I knew it was over. Since I was a kid, I had always wondered how this moment would be, and he had always done his best to keep me apprised of its impending arrival. *How would I react? Would I beat the walls? Tear my hair? Blubber like some sappy wuss? Wander the world with fatherless tattooed to my soul or, at the very least, my forehead?* My eyes were moist, but there were no tears. If there was a good way to go, my father had chosen it.

I took comfort in his warmth one final time and withdrew my hand from his.

I surveyed the apartment, the keepsakes and the clutter. The framed photographs of Paige and the kids. Not one of me; but then, I'd never given him one. Spied his suit hanging from the shower rod. Again, I tried to cry. Wanted to. But couldn't. He had died happy. I could not ask for more.

Until this week, his apartment was not a place I would remember with any fondness. But this week changed everything.

*"Now, players, it's time for Double Jeopardy ... where dollar values double ..."*



. . . . .

I broke the news to Fedor. Hand on my shoulder, he escorted me to a rickety chair, spindles missing from the back, stretchers loose at the legs.

"Vodka?" His reaction was not what I expected.

"No thanks."

"You say goodbye to Papa, da?"

"Yeah."

"Good," he said. "It is good."

I agreed.

"You see him die happy man, da?"

"I did. I tell you, Fred, I never expected to, but I did."

"Is what he wanted. Good. Is good."

"Yeah. You don't know how good. You really don't."

"I make coffee."

"No, I can't stay. I've got to make arrangements, let some people know."

"Know? About your papa?"

I nodded.

He shrugged, surprised by my answer. "They know already, Matthew."

"Pardon me?"

He shifted his chair square with mine, rested his elbows upon his knees. It was like he was getting set to tell me about the birds and bees, but instead he said, "Your papa die Monday, Matthew."

I sputtered, not sure whether to laugh or gape. *Jesus, the guy wasn't kidding.* "What are you talking about? I've been with him since Tuesday ... He died five minutes ago."

"Your papa, always he tell me he wish to die when Matthew is in town. So when you call Monday, say you are at Toronto, Papa tell Fedor it good time to die."

I couldn't believe the bull this guy was spewing. "Are you saying that he—that he—that he killed himself because I was in town?" No way I was going to sit still for this crap. My chair toppled to the floor behind me.

"No. No. Not kill himself. Just go. Go."

"What kind of bullshit is this? You think I'm an idiot? His body isn't cold and you dare to talk to me like this? You are one sick son of a bitch, let me tell you." I made for the door, eager to escape this whack-job.

"Matthew, please. I with Papa when he go."

I simmered at the door, my knuckles flexing white.

"I don't want to leave,' Papa say to me. 'I want to see son, to say goodbye.' So I tell him, 'You stay, Ben Saugus. You stay and see son. Then you go.' But he shakes his head. 'No,' he say, 'I am going to club now, Fred. Tell Matthew I go to Mount Pellatt Club. Apéritif five-thirty, dinner six-thirty, cognac, cigar seven-thirty ... When my son comes, you tell him I go to club.'"

"Oh, I see. So I've just spent the last three days with a ghost. Is that it, Fred? Is that what you're telling me?"

"I was there when they come for Papa's body. I am sorry, Matthew. I am very, very sorry. He was good man."

"You know, Fedor," I said, the edge in my voice aimed at his throat, "maybe you've been spending too much time with all that religious junk in your closet."

He winced, hurt, but held his ground, his voice rising, emphatic. "It is true what I tell you, Matthew. It is true."

"Yeah. Maybe in your head, Fred." I headed into the corridor and back to 301.

.....

I hesitated, hand on the door. Listened.

"*Now, players, it's time for Final Jeopardy ...*"

His bed was bare.

.....

Paige flew in early Friday morning. She didn't ask for an explanation and I never offered any. If I couldn't explain it to myself, how could I explain it to her? What would I say—my father pulled *A Christmas Carol* on me, paid me a visit as *The Ghost of a Life that Never Was*?

The turnout for the funeral was about what I expected. Us. A freelance rabbi. My father's social worker

and a co-worker who had driven her. Fedor paid his respects as well, but kept his distance, wary of my feelings toward him, uncertain if I believed any or all of what he had told me. I had theories, of course, but the only one that added up saw me being fitted for a straightjacket.

I started the car, ready to leave the cemetery, when Fedor tapped on my window. "You are feeling better now, da?"

"You running some sort of scam, is that it? How did you do it?"

"No scam." He looked hurt. "You and Papa do it. Not Fedor."

"How? Just answer the question. Please." I fought the urge to raise the window on his neck.

He appealed to Paige. "He see his papa die happy. Now he is happy, da?" She shrugged, smiled wanly, her eyes imploring his profound indulgence.

"No, not 'da,' damn it. Not 'da.' I am not happy, for Christ's sake." I kicked down on the accelerator.

"You really need to see somebody, Matt. You've got to promise me you'll see somebody about this."

"About what? See somebody about what?"

"Your grief, Matthew. Your grief."

\* \* \*

We caught an evening flight out. By next morning, I felt I'd managed to sort most of it through. Even felt bad about the way I'd treated Fedor, considering all he'd done for Dad. Common sense told me I'd either dreamed or hallucinated the course of events, trauma triggered by news of my father's death—probably starting in the lobby when Watch-guy let word slip; I'm pretty sure *Reader's Digest* is full of stories like that. Then again, it could have been the MSG in the Chinese food; I'm pretty sure *Reader's Digest* is full of stories like that, too. Could've even been Fedor's borscht. Yeah, magic borscht—that'd do it, all right. Hell, for all I knew, it might have even been Jesus pulling strings from Fedor's storage room. Wouldn't surprise me if the guy was already selling tickets to it. *Lourdes on the third floor*. I could see Watch-guy, Walker-guy, and the woman they called Esther lining up at this very moment, each shelling out a crisp twenty for the Russian to resurrect their dead.

Or maybe, just maybe, it was simply a case of my father wanting something so bad, for so long, I wanted it for him, too. I don't know. I really don't.

Anyhow, I survived the weekend and the rest of the week—even got Paige to back off on the therapist thing—and Monday morning, two weeks to the day my father passed away, I was set to get back to work. I was on my way to the car when I realized I'd need change for the tolls. Dipped into my pocket. Came up with some dimes, three quarters, three pennies, and the pin from my father's club.

The End

**Author Biography and Bibliography**

Michael Libling grew up in the small Ontario town of Trenton on the shores of Lake Ontario. He lives in Montreal with his wife, Pat, a writer of children's books and the founder of the [www.PatsyPie.com](http://www.PatsyPie.com) baking empire. (Well, maybe it's not an empire just yet, but Michael thought this was an effective way of squeezing in a plug, boosting sales, and making the Liblings independently wealthy.) Michael has three bright and beautiful daughters and very warm feet, thanks to a neurotic mutt named Woody who lies under Michael's desk whenever the Mac chimes to life.

In addition to his fiction, Michael has been a radio talk-show host, newspaper columnist and feature writer, speech writer, and composer of 35,000 multiple-choice trivia questions for an arcade game that can be found in better bars across the continent.

His short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *On Spec*, *Amazing Stories* and anthologies that include *Destination Unknown* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*.

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