

David Bezmozgis
"Roman Berman, Massage Therapist"

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT for more than a year, my father tortured himself with medical texts and dictionaries. After a long day at the chocolate bar factory he would come home and turn on the lamp in the bedroom. He would eat his soup with us in the kitchen, but he'd take the main course into the bedroom, resting his plate on a rickety Soviet stool. The work was difficult. He was approaching fifty, and the English language was more an enemy than an instrument. In Latvia, after resigning from the Ministry of Sport, my father had made a living as a masseur in the sanatoriums along the Baltic coast. He'd needed no accreditation, only some minimal training and the strength of his connections. But in the new country, to get his certificate, he was forced to memorize complex medical terminology and to write an eight-hour exam in a foreign language.

Getting his license would mean that he could start his own business. At the time, aside from the chocolate bar factory, he also worked at the Italian Community Center, where he massaged mobsters and manufacturers and trained seven amateur weightlifters. The money was lousy, but he was making contacts. He was certain he could take some of the Italians with him if he started his own practice. And if he got his office in just the right location, the old Polish Jews would surely follow. This was 1983, and as Russian Jews, recent immigrants, and political refugees, we were still a cause. We had good PR. We could trade on our history.

The morning my father was to write the exam, my mother made an omelette and quartered a tomato. He ate quickly, downing his tea. His bare feet set a steady rhythm going in and out, in and out of his slippers. I told him about tryouts for indoor soccer. I described the fuzzy yellow ball. Midway through the omelette, he got up and retched into the sink.

He left the apartment stolidly, as if he were going off to war. In a rare moment of overt affection, my mother gave him a kiss. My parents hugged in the hallway, because it is bad luck to kiss someone at the threshold.

At the window, I watched as he backed the massive green Pontiac out of the parking lot. It was the end of March and still cold. The heater in the car didn't work, and as my mother joined me at the window, we could see the long streams of my father's condensed breathing as he turned onto Finch Avenue.

"God willing, God willing," my mother said.

Three weeks later we received the letter from the Board of Directors of Masseurs. A certificate would follow shortly, the sort of thing my father would frame and hang in his office. We celebrated the news by going to the Pizza Patio restaurant in a strip mall not far from our apartment building. I spoke for the family and ordered a large pepperoni and mushroom pizza. We toasted to our future with fountain Cokes.

The next weekend my father signed a lease for a one-room office at the Sunnybrook Plaza, where we bought our groceries and I got my hair cut. For eighty dollars, Yuri from Smolensk built a sturdy massage table wrapped in burgundy Naugahyde and secured with shiny brass rivets. My father paid half that for a desk at a consignment shop in the East End, and ten bucks apiece for two used office chairs for the waiting area. On the recommendation of someone at the Italian Community Center, he also took out a one-year subscription to

Reader's Digest. And to create the impression of clinical privacy, we drove to Starkman's Medical Supply on Davenport where my father bought a green three-paneled room divider. The final touches were made by my mother, who purchased a sheet of adhesive letters from the hardware store and carefully spelled on the door: Roman Berman, Massage Therapist, BA, RMT.

After the initial excitement subsided, the reality of the situation asserted itself. Aside from the handful of Italians at the Community Center and some of my parents' Russian friends, nobody else knew that Roman's Therapeutic Massage existed. Boris Krasnansky from Tashkent, whose employer offered a modest benefits package, was my father's first patient. He went for as long as his benefits held out and insisted that my father kick back a third of the money since he was doing him a favor. Joe Galatti, a dry goods wholesaler, showed up each time with a bottle of homemade wine and told my father about his troubles with his son. Joe had a heavy Italian accent and my father's English was improving only slowly. The session would end only when the bottle was empty. Sal, a semi-retired contractor, came with his wife's cousin, who had arrived from Naples and fallen off a scaffold after his first week on the job. The cousin spoke no English and couldn't drive a car. Sal felt guilty and drove the cousin over on Saturday afternoons to give his wife a break. My father would massage the cousin, and Sal would sit outside the partition with a *Reader's Digest*. Guys like Joe and Sal had good intentions, and they liked my father. But after a few visits, they stopped coming. The Community Center, with the sauna and the familiar comradery, exerted its influence. Another Russian masseur had taken over my father's position and, although they swore he was "no Roman," it didn't help. After a short time, incon-

venience superseded loyalty, and my father found himself staring at the walls.

Fearing just this sort of thing, my father had held on to his job at the chocolate bar factory. It was driving him crazy, but what was the alternative? To move from this factory job to another was pointless, and reapplying for welfare was out of the question. It had taken my parents two years to get on their feet and they were not prepared to face the implications of regression. So my father resolved to work five days at the factory and go to the office on weekends. As soon as he felt secure enough at the office he would abandon the factory and focus all of his attention on the business. The discussion was ongoing. To quit or not to quit. But as the original patients started to disappear, my father began to despair of ever being able to get out of the factory. None of this information, none of these discussions, were concealed from me. It seemed as though my parents had no secrets. I was nine, and there were many things I did not tell them, but there was nothing they would not openly discuss in front of me, often even soliciting my opinion. They were strangers in the country, and they recognized that the place was less strange to me, even though I was only a boy.

With the business grinding down to a state of terminal inertia, my father took the advice of some friends and went to seek the help of a certain rabbi. Others had gone to him before: Felix when he needed a job, Oleg for a good deal on a used car, and Robik and Eda for someone to cosign a loan. The rabbi was supposed to be particularly sympathetic to the plight of the Russian Jews. To improve his chances, my father brought me along.

To make me presentable to the rabbi, my mother ironed a pair of pants and put me into a clean golf shirt. My father and

I wore yarmulkes and walked hand in hand to the synagogue not far from his office. It was rare for me to have this sort of time with my father, as he was usually either working or agonizing about not working. As we walked, I filled the silence with the affairs of the third grade and my plans to make the Selects team in the summer soccer league. It was a warm Sunday in June. To most of the people on the street—men on their lawns, women with shopping bags, pensioners floating by in their Buicks—we must have made a fine image. Father and Son. Sunday stroll.

Seated across the table from the rabbi, my father wrestled language and dignity to express need. I sat quietly beside him, looking appropriately forlorn. I was sufficiently aware of our predicament to feel the various permutations of shame: shame for my father, shame for my shame, and even shame for the rabbi, who seemed to be a decent guy. He was younger than my father, and as if to compensate for his youth, he affected a posture of liturgical gravity.

My father told the rabbi about his qualifications. He told him about the years of training Olympic athletes to hoist almost inconceivable amounts of weight. He told him about working as a masseur in the best sanatoriums along the Baltic Sea. He told him about the months of study, his certificate from the Board of Directors of Masseurs, the chocolate bar factory, the one-room office, and the hard, hard work he was willing to do. He also told him about Hebrew school and what a good student I was. He encouraged the rabbi to speak to me to see how well I'd learned the language. Slightly uncomfortable, the rabbi engaged me in a conversation in rudimentary Hebrew.

—Do you like school?

—Yes, I like school.

—Do you like Canada?

—Yes, I like Canada.

My father, who could not follow the conversation, interrupted and told the rabbi that I could also sing Hebrew songs. The rabbi didn't seem particularly interested, but my father encouraged me out of my chair.

In the middle of the rabbi's office I stood and sang "Jerusalem of Gold." Halfway through the song I noticed the rabbi's attention flagging and I responded by trying to bring the song to a premature conclusion. The rabbi, visibly relieved, started to bring his hands together to create the first clap only to be reassured by my father that I was capable of singing more. To prove his point, my father poked me in the back, and I picked up the song where I'd happily abandoned it. The rabbi leaned forward, seemingly much more interested in my performance the second time around. When I was finally done, the rabbi gave me a five-dollar bill. For my father, he promised to spread the word about the business to his congregants. He also offered a word of advice: advertise.

Fifteen minutes after going in, we were back out on the street, hand in hand, and on our way home. For our trouble we had five dollars and the business card of a man who would print my father's flyers at cost.

The following week my father, mother, and I gathered around the kitchen table to compose the ideal advertisement for Roman's Therapeutic Massage. I was given the pen and assigned the responsibility of translating and transcribing my parents' concept for the flyer. My father wanted a strong emphasis placed on his experience with Olympic athletes, as it would provide prestige and imply familiarity with the human anatomy at the highest level. My mother, on the other hand, believed that his strongest selling point was his status as a So-

viet refugee. The most important appeal, she said, was to guilt and empathy. That would get them in the door. Once they were in the door, then my father could impress them with his skill. In the end they agreed on a combination of the two. For my part, I contributed a list of familiar advertising superlatives.

Best New Therapeutic Massage Office!

Roman Berman, Soviet Olympic coach and refugee from Communist regime, provides Quality Therapeutic Massage Service!

Many years of experience in Special European techniques!

For all joint and muscle pain. Car accidents, work accidents, pregnancy, and general good physical conditioning.

Registered Massage Therapist. Office in convenient location and also visits to your house.

Satisfaction Guaranteed!

After the box of flyers arrived, my father and I loaded it into the trunk of the Pontiac and targeted the houses near the office. I took one side of the street, and my father took the other. To counteract my embarrassment, I made it a race: I would be the first to finish. I ran from house to house stuffing the flyers into mailboxes or handing them to people without making eye contact. Every now and again I would look across the street to gauge my father's progress. He was in no hurry. He wandered from house to house, going up the walkways,

never stepping on the lawns. Whereas I tried to avoid people, my father lingered, passing deliberately in front of windows. Heeding my mother's instructions, he tried to be particularly conspicuous in front of homes with mezuzahs on the doorposts, hoping to catch sight of someone, to engage them in conversation. Most people weren't interested—except for one man who wanted to know how his own son could get a job delivering flyers.

With the flyers all gone, a new phase of waiting began. Now with every ring of the phone there was the potential for salvation. The phone existed like a new thing. From the moment we came home we were acutely conscious of it. It was either with us or against us. My father talked to it. As a sign of solidarity, I talked to it as well. When it was silent, my father would plead with it, curse it, threaten it. But when it rang, he would leap. He would come flying from the dinner table, the couch, the toilet. The phone would ring and he would leap. My mother would leap after him—her ear millimeters away from his exposed ear, listening, as if my father's head was itself the telephone. She listened as friends called, other friends called, my aunt called and called. Everybody called to see whether anybody had called.

By the time Dr. Kornblum called, an interminable week had passed. It was in the early afternoon and I was home alone. My mother would not be home for another hour, my father later still. When the phone rang I was already seated on the parquet floor in front of the television: I had a Hungarian salami sandwich on my lap as well as the plastic wrappers from a half dozen chocolate-covered prunes.

Kornblum told me I should call him Harvey. He was a doctor, he said, and he'd received my father's flyer and wanted to meet him. In fact, he wanted to meet the whole family.

How many of us were there—it didn't matter. We were all invited to his house for Friday night dinner. I should tell my parents that he would not take no for an answer. Kornblum with a K. Blum as in rhymes with room. As in there's plenty of room for everybody. Did I get all that? He gave me his phone number and told me to make sure my father gave him a call.

By the time my mother came home I was barely able to contain myself. I shared the good news and she overlooked the fact that I'd eaten the half dozen chocolate-covered prunes. I gave her the sheet of paper with Kornblum's name and telephone number and she quickly started dialing. My aunt was certain she had heard of this Kornblum before. When Victor Guttman's father slipped on the ice, wasn't it a Kornblum that did the operation? That Kornblum was very nice. Also very rich. It could be the same one. My mother called others. Sophatchka was studying to pass her medical boards and was familiar with many doctors. Did she know Kornblum? Kornblum the family physician or Kornblum the orthopedic surgeon? Not that it made a difference, they were both very successful. If either one referred even a small fraction of his patients our troubles would be over.

After washing his hands and changing out of his work jeans, my father crossed the room toward the phone. Merely crossing the room, he assumed a professional demeanor. With utmost solemnity he dialed Kornblum's number. My mother and I sat on the sofa and watched. She had already coached him on what to say. The goal was not to stray too far from the prepared script and to keep the phone call short and polite. God forbid he should say something wrong and upset Kornblum and then what would we do? My father dialed and all three of us waited as it rang. When someone answered, my father asked to speak with Dr. Kornblum. He waited again, appar-

ently, for Kornblum to come to the phone. In the intervening silence my mother mouthed yet another reminder about how to behave. In response, my father turned his back on her and faced the wall. Moments passed before my father said that he was Roman Berman, massage therapist, and that he was returning Dr. Kornblum's call. Then he said, "Yes, okay, *Harvey*."

Before Stalin, my great-grandmother lit the candles and made an apple cake every Friday night. In my grandfather's recollections of prewar Jewish Latvia, the candles and apple cakes feature prominently. When my mother was a girl, Stalin was already in charge, and although there was still apple cake, there were no more candles. By the time I was born, there were neither candles nor apple cake, though in my mother's mind, apple cake still meant Jewish. With this in mind, she retrieved the apple cake recipe and went to the expensive supermarket for the ingredients. And that Friday afternoon, she pleaded illness and left work early, coming home to bake so that the apple cake would be fresh for the Kornblums.

My father also left work early and drove to my school to pick me up. When we arrived home the apartment was redolent with the scent of apple cake. My mother hustled my father and me into the shower together so as not to waste time. I hadn't showered with my father in years and I didn't know where to look. My father, however, seemed oblivious to both his and my nudity. He soaped me up, rinsed me off, and put me into a towel. I stood on the bath mat watching through the glazed shower door as he hurriedly soaped his bald head and washed under his armpits. When he stepped out he looked surprised to find me still standing there.

Kornblum's turned out to be only a few streets away from my father's office. The house was on the left side of the street,

which meant I had delivered Kornblum's flyer, but I didn't remember it. My mother noted the size of the house. Maybe three thousand square feet with a big yard. Also, it was fully detached. This was two substantial steps beyond our means. Between our apartment and a fully detached house loomed the intermediate town house and the semidetached house. A fully detached house was the ultimate accomplishment. Nobody we knew had even moved up to town house, though recently there had been plans and speculations.

Three abreast, we went up Kornblum's walk. My father was dressed in his blue Hungarian suit—veteran of international weightlifting competitions from Tallinn to Sochi. I had been put into a pair of gray trousers and a pressed white cotton shirt, with a silver Star of David on a silver chain not under but over the shirt. My mother wore a green wool dress that went nicely with her amber necklace, bracelet, and earrings. We were a sophisticated family—professional people with their straight-A-student son, future doctor or lawyer. With feigned confidence we strode up Kornblum's nicely trimmed walk: three refugees and a warm apple cake.

My father rang the bell. We heard footsteps. Then a man in slacks and a yellow sweater opened the door. The sweater had a little green alligator emblem on it. This was Kornblum. He was smiling broadly. He put a hand on my father's shoulder and told us who we must be. My father must be Roman, my mother must be Bella, and I must be little Mark. He ushered us into the house. We followed him through the foyer and into the living room, where a table had been set. Six people were already seated around the table; three of the people were smiling like Kornblum. One of the smiling people was a woman who hustled over to my mother. Kornblum said this was his wife, Rhonda. Rhonda told us how nice it was that we

could make it and relieved my mother of the apple cake. She told my mother she shouldn't have and took the apple cake into the kitchen.

Kornblum then introduced us to his good friends, the other two smiling people, Jerry Kogen and his wife, Shirley. Jerry and Shirley told us how wonderful it was to meet us. My mother said it was wonderful to meet them, too. My father nodded his head, smiled, and said thank you. He did this while glancing at the other three people at the table, the people who were not smiling like Kornblum, Rhonda, and their friends. A man, a woman, and a boy. Like us, they were overdressed.

As Rhonda returned from the kitchen, Kornblum started to introduce us to the other family. Genady and Freda and their son, Simon, from Kharkov, wasn't that right? Genady said it was right. His English was a little better than my father's, but he had more gold teeth. In English, my mother told them how nice it was to meet them. In English, Freda thanked my mother. We were seated opposite them, and Jerry announced that Freda was also a medical professional—in Russia she had been a dentist. He himself was an eye doctor. Going around the table, they had most of the body covered. Eyes, teeth, Harvey with the bones, and Roman taking care of the muscles. What did that leave? Kornblum laughed and said he could think of a thing or two. Jerry laughed and Rhonda laughed and told Kornblum that he was too much. Genady and Freda laughed more than they needed to and so did my parents—though maybe a little less. Then Rhonda said a prayer and lit the candles.

Over roast chicken Kornblum told my parents and Genady and Freda what an honor it was to have them at his house. He could only imagine what they had gone through.

For years he and Rhonda had been involved with trying to help the Russian Jews. If it wasn't too personal, he wanted to know how bad it really was. My mother said it was bad, that the anti-Semitism was very bad. Jerry said that Genady and Freda had been refuseniks, he wanted to know if we had also been refuseniks. My mother hesitated a moment and then admitted that we had not been refuseniks. She knew some refuseniks, and we were almost refuseniks, but we were not refuseniks. Everyone agreed that this was very good, and then Freda and Genady told their story of being refuseniks. Midway through the story, the part where they have been evicted from their apartment and have to share a room with three other families, Genady lifted up his shirt to show everyone the place where he had been stabbed by former coworkers. He had a large scar below his ribs. Walking down the street one night, he stumbled upon some drunken comrades from the factory. They called him a filthy Jew traitor and the foreman went after him with a knife.

After Genady finished his story and tucked his shirt back into his pants, Jerry and Rhonda wiped tears from their eyes. They couldn't believe it was so horrible. My parents had to agree it was horrible. Kornblum said those Russian bastards and then asked if Simon and I wanted to go down to the basement and play. Kornblum's children, a boy and a girl, were away at sleepover camp. That was too bad. They would have been so excited to meet us. Downstairs in the basement was a Ping-Pong table, a pool table, a hockey net, and some other toys. As we went down, Freda was telling a story about her mother, who was stuck all alone in Kharkov. My parents weren't saying anything.

Aside from the Ping-Pong and pool tables, Kornblum's basement also had a big-screen television and a wall unit full

of board games and books. In the corner, one of his kids had assembled the complete Star Wars Death Star. All the Star Wars figures were there including Ewoks. I went over to the Ping-Pong table. A paddle lay on top of a ball. I picked up the paddle and looked over at Simon. Simon didn't appear interested in Ping-Pong. He was inspecting the Death Star. In Russian, I asked him if all that stuff his father had said really happened. Are you calling my father a liar? he said, and picked up an R2-D2 doll. He picked up another toy and stuffed them both down his pants. What doesn't this rich bastard have, he said.

When I returned to the table everyone was there except my father and Rhonda. Shirley was sitting beside my mother admiring her amber necklace. Kornblum had a photo album out and was showing Genady and Freda pictures of his grandfather in Poland. Jerry also had a pile of old photographs on the table. On his father's side, his family was from Minsk. All the dinner plates had been cleared and there were now some pastries on the table and a pot of coffee. I had to go to the washroom and Kornblum said there was one downstairs and three upstairs, take your pick. He then turned a page in the album and pointed out everyone the Nazis had killed.

I went back through the foyer and looked for the washroom. The stairway leading up to the second floor was there so I climbed it. There was one bathroom in the hall but I heard voices from behind a door. The door led into the master bedroom, and the voices were coming from behind the door leading to the washroom. The door was partly open. Inside, Rhonda was sitting on a stool in front of the mirror, her blouse was undone and gathered at her waist. She was leaning forward on the bathroom counter in her bra and my father was massaging her neck. As I retreated, she called out and

pushed the door open with her foot. She said it was wonderful, my father was a magician, if only she could bottle his hands and sell them. I mumbled that I had only been looking for the washroom and she said that they were already finished. She turned toward me and started doing up her blouse. Her heavy breasts bulged over the top of her bra. She told me not to worry, I should go ahead and do my business. Downstairs Harvey was probably waiting for her to make more coffee.

As my father washed the Vaseline lotion from his hands, I stood in front of the toilet with my pants undone. He dried his hands on the decorator towels and waited for me to pee. After a while he asked if I wanted him to wait outside. After a little while longer he left and waited in the bedroom. When I came out my father was sitting on Kornblum's bed. Above him was a large family portrait taken for Kornblum's daughter's bat mitzvah. The Kornblums, formally dressed, were seated on the grass under a large tree. My father wasn't looking at the portrait. He said, Tell me, what am I supposed to do? Then he got up, took my hand, and we went back downstairs.

At the table everyone was eating pastries. Shirley was still sitting beside my mother. She was trying on my mother's amber bracelet. As my father came in she shuffled over to make room for us. Rhonda announced that my father was a miracle worker. Her neck had never felt better. She made Kornblum promise to send him some of his patients. Kornblum said it would be an honor. Kornblum said my father would get a call Monday morning. Before he knew it, he would be out of the chocolate bar factory. Kornblum would spread the word. A chocolate bar factory was no place for a man like my father. Jerry said that my father could count on him to help in any way.

On our way out Kornblum shook hands with my father,

and with me, and then he kissed my mother on the cheek. It had been a very special evening for him and Rhonda. Rhonda came out of the kitchen carrying my mother's apple cake. She didn't want it to go to waste. Even though they sometimes took the kids to McDonald's, they kept kosher at home. So although it smelled wonderful, unfortunately they couldn't keep it.

As we walked back to the Pontiac it was unclear whether nothing or everything had changed. We returned much as we came, the only tangible evidence of the passage of time was the cold apple cake. Before us was the Pontiac, as green and ugly as ever. Behind us was Kornblum's fully detached house. We walked slowly, in no hurry to reach our destination. Somewhere between Kornblum's and the Pontiac was our fate. It floated above us like an ether, ambiguous and perceptible.

My father stopped walking. He contemplated my mother and the apple cake.

—Why are you still carrying it?

—What am I supposed to do?

—Throw it away.

—Throw it away? It's a shame to waste it.

—Throw it away. It's bad luck.

Something in the way my mother balked confirmed my own suspicion. There were countless superstitions, numberless ways of inviting calamity, but I had never heard anything about disposing of an unwanted cake. Also, my mother had worked hard on the cake. The ingredients had cost money, and she abhorred the idea of wasting food. Still, she didn't argue. Nothing was certain. We needed luck and were susceptible to the wildest irrationality. Rightly or wrongly, the cake was now tainted. My mother handed it to me and pointed down the street toward a Dumpster.

She did not need to say run.