

Dad's Estate by Anthony Fagin

1

Only when the Jumbo had shuddered to a halt did Mark feel the full impact of his father's death. Always on previous visits from London, his father's bear-hug had welcomed him; now everything was full of his father's absence.

Harry Kaplan, who'd had cancer for five months, had collapsed on Thursday night, just over two days previously. Queenie, Mark's mother, had found him lying on the floor, bleeding from the face. On Friday evening, Mark got a call from his sister Rochelle telling him things were bad. In the early hours of Saturday morning, the dreaded call came: 'Mark, Dad...Dad went about three hours ago. They called us but we got to the hospital too late.' Mark managed to get a flight to Cape Town leaving Heathrow that evening.

Clustered round Arrivals was his family: his mother, her mouth set in a scowl; his sister and her husband Claude, both in dark sunglasses; his nephews, Darren, eleven, with unfurling tendrils of intelligence, and Howard, a cute freckle of a six-year-old. The boys folded about his legs as he patted them. But the pecks Mark got from the adults made him more aware of his father not being there.

'A fine mess your father has left me in, Mark!' exclaimed Queenie as they drove from the airport. A bankrupt estate! He has made no provision for me whatsoever!

'Come on now, Mom.' Claude clutched the steering-wheel. 'We'll see the bond on the flat is paid each month and you don't starve.'

'Harry was completely irresponsible, just lived for the day. Mark, you've got to help me sort out the mess...'

'Mom!' Rochelle warned over her shoulder, 'Mark doesn't want to hear all this, he didn't sleep a wink on the plane.'

Queenie lived in Chelmsford, an old mansion block on High Level Road. She'd bought the flat just before Harry got ill. 'It's a lovely flat, Mom,' Mark said after a brief tour. 'A bit smaller than the old one but an excellent investment. I read the Peninsula's going to become the Riviera of South Africa.'

The family settled in the living-room.

'Keeping this luxury flat going means me giving up every Sunday for the next ten years to run that shmutzedicke stall at the flea-market,' groused Rochelle.

'What d'you want me to do?' snapped Queenie. 'Go into Highlands House? Nice! I'm only sixty-eight and my family can't wait to bundle me into an old-age home! All the staff there steal the old people's last few possessions.'

'Mom please!' begged Mark. Let's discuss the future *after* the funeral.'

Later Mark went into his father's room: a pungent, antiseptic smell lingered. On the bedside table was a pair of rubber surgical gloves with the fingers missing. A worn, dark-blue anorak was hunched over a clothes-horse. Hitched on to the coat's right shoulder was a woolly balaclava. Mark opened the wardrobe and seeing the suits and shirts with their smell of his father made the tears come.

'Your Dad was a good guy, Mark.' Claude had come into the room. 'Ignore what Mom says: she's furious he's gone and died on her. I didn't get on with my own Dad; your Dad was a real father to me. He was amazingly brave, he kept on working till he literally dropped. I was the last member of the family to see him alive. I held his hand. He couldn't speak, he barely managed to ask for a Grapetiser. Here Mark, this is for you: it's Dad's.' It was an old silver wrist-watch. 'Needs a new battery.' Mark looked at it: Seiko, quartz, blank: no date, no time.

2

Three days after the funeral Mark visited his aunt Dora, his father's older sister. 'Of course, my darling: I'm here for you' had been her response on the phone.

'Let's talk a bit, then have lunch.' Dora lowered herself onto the sofa and patted it for Mark to sit close beside her. 'Mark darling,' she said, opening an album of family photos, 'I'm going to have a copy of this one made for you.' He looked at his father as a fresh-faced young man of about twenty, with freckles and a thin moustache. 'This was taken just before the War, about the time your Dad won the 'Stars of Tomorrow' talent contest at the old Alhambra cinema. He was famous for his impersonations, you know, especially of Hitler and Churchill and film stars.'

'Yeah, when I was young and I told grown-ups my name, they used to ask: 'Are you Harry Kaplan's son?''

'Ja, he was very well-known in Cape Town. And he was also very good at jokes and puns. There's a clipping somewhere here that was printed in The Argus a few years ago.' She searched through the album. 'Ah, here it is: 'Daffynitions' by Harry Kaplan. D'you want to read them?'

Mark read aloud: 'An ignorant musician – one who doesn't know his brass from his oboe. Italian dog food – Kenneloni. Innuendo – many a true word spoken in suggest.' They chuckled. 'A domineering female canary – one who has her mate at her peck and call. A successful artist – one who has plenty of hang-ups.'

'Harry was so witty.'

'Pity he didn't use his talents more. He could've been a successful copywriter.'

'Yes, but he wasn't ambitious, you know. A bit of a dreamer, your Dad was.'

'Like me.'

After lunch Mark showed his aunt some papers on which he'd typed up extracts from letters his father had written to him in London over the years. 'Dad's letters were very supportive. I had a tough time.'

Dora put on her reading glasses:

'7th May 1977.

....It must be mental telepathy but I've been thinking a lot about you, missing you. The other night there was an excellent Tom Jones programme on TV. One song he did particularly well was 'I Did It My Way', which made me think of you. You left us, gave up a comfortable home to make your own life. You must've experienced plenty of hardships and had virtually nobody to turn to. It has matured you and strengthened your character and given you a new set of values. The political situation here is bad: there is really no future in this country for young people.

'Perhaps the two greatest moments in my life were receiving the news that I'd won the fabulous trip to the Far East in the Sony Slogan competition, and that memorable night you made your confession to me as we strolled along Camps Bay beach in the wind. You might think it strange that a father should enumerate the confession that his son is homosexual as one of the great moments of his life, but I mean it in all sincerity that when you blurted out your confession, I was filled with compassion, as was indicated by my holding your shoulders reassuringly. A secret you'd kept for so long, with nobody close to turn to, was now out and suddenly I felt so close to you. It took twenty-six years to break down the barrier that existed between us and I have not lost that feeling of warmth and understanding I have towards you.....'

'This is amazing!' Dora exclaimed.

'The night Dad died, I couldn't sleep. Rochelle had phoned to say things were very bad. So I just kept reading through these, over and over. I must've been reading them at the very moment Dad..... slipped away. So although I was thousands of miles away, I felt I was somehow *with* him.'

'You were, my dear, you *were*.'

3

Going through the chaos of his father's papers, Mark was most upset by the medical reports, riddled with terrifying words like 'oedema', 'melanosis' and 'carcinoma'. There were chemists' bills, hospital appointment cards, bank statements, more bills, two insurance policies, car documents, permits for running the flea-market stall, and a sheaf of order forms and invoices related to his father's work as a commercial traveller for C.J.Danziger & Sons. He had to decide which of these he and his mother needed to take to the lawyer's the following day.

'How's it going?' Queenie had appeared in the doorway.

'Almost finished.' Mark shifted his position on the floor to ease his stiff back.

‘You’ve done a good job. Why don’t you stay the night here? You can make up Dad’s bed.’

‘No Mom, I have to get back. I need to get my jacket and tie for the lawyer’s tomorrow.’

After explaining which papers he thought the lawyer would find relevant, Mark handed his mother three slightly crumpled slips from a receipt-book. ‘I can’t make these out.’

Queenie studied them. Apart from a different date on each – February, March and May 1992 – they read:

‘IOU

I, Queenie Joffe, promise to pay Lenny Danziger the sum of R220.

Queenie Kaplan’

‘These are payments to your wonderful father’s illegitimate child.’

‘What?’

‘I am telling you! Your father was a bloody rubbish: he had eyes for every skirt in this town. YOUR FATHER HAD AN ILLEGITIMATE CHILD!!’

‘But these slips were signed by *you*! It’s *your* signature on them!!’

‘The girl’s bitch of a mother *forged* my signature! Can’t you see the rest of the writing is not mine.’

‘This is psychotic, it’s past twelve, I’m exhausted, I want to get to bed. Who the hell is Queenie Joffe?’

‘Your father’s illegitimate daughter by one of his whore customers.’

‘If he had a bastard daughter, do you seriously think he would name her after *you*? I’m going.’
Grabbing the basket of torn-up papers, he deeply regretted showing his mother the IOUs. He could so easily have scrunched them up into the basket.

‘You seem determined to block your ears to the truth about your father.’ Queenie was following him to the front door.

‘I’ll pick you up at one: be ready ‘cause our appointment with Heatherington-Reid is at two. I’m going now, Mom, else I’ll burst a blood vessel.’

Cursing, Mark cranked the gears as he sped back to Camps Bay along deserted streets in the rain.

4

Andrew Heatherington-Reid’s office was stylishly postmodern, overlooking a giant palm tree splaying its fronds up into the vast, sunlit spaces of a glass atrium. He was the son of the founder of Heatherington-Reid, van Schalkwyk and Shlomowitz, the largest legal firm in Cape Town. Broad-

shouldered in his expensive suit, ensconced behind a massive desk, he had the sandy-blond authority of a man who could once have been the Head Prefect at the exclusive Diocesan College.

Queenie sat in a chair next to her son. From a black briefcase she'd unloaded onto the desk a sheaf of papers. 'Selwyn Shlomowitz used to take care of all my affairs. How's he getting on in Perth?'

'Fine,' grunted Heatherington-Reid without looking up. 'These two life insurance policies are no longer valid. This one with Sun Assurance has been cancelled and the last monthly payment on that one was made in October 1982.'

'Oh my God, no!'

'And I'm afraid to say, going through your late husband's bank statements, it doesn't look as if there's much there either. Last statement, May 1992, 1457 Rand credit, but I doubt if there'll be anything left after the bills have been paid. I'm afraid, Mrs Kaplan, your husband has left what amounts to a bankrupt estate.'

'I don't *believe* it!'

'But Mom, surely you didn't expect much.....'

'Yes but I thought there'd be SOMETHING! I can't tell you how humiliating this is. I doubt if any Jewish widow in this town has been left by her husband in such a plight. Mr Heatherington-Reid, what do I do?'

'Your husband's will has to be registered with the Master of the Supreme Court. I have a form here which you can fill in. I would make an appointment to go into the Trust Bank to close your husband's account: the balance will then accrue to you as the sole heir. Ah, but to do that, you will need to produce a death certificate.'

'Where do I get that from?'

'From the *Chevra Kadisha*.' He enunciated the Hebrew words as if they were a province in India during the days of the Raj.

'Can you do that for me, please Mr Heatherington-Reid, I'm on the verge of total collapse.'

'Right, I'll give them a buzz,' he said curtly. The *Chevra Kadisha* passed him on to the Cape Town Reform Congregation who referred him to the office of the Great Synagogue. The lawyer persevered through the three calls with icy calm. 'You will be able to get the death certificate, Mrs Kaplan, at the Great Synagogue's offices in Hatfield Street: they are open until three-thirty. I would have at least half-a-dozen copies made.'

'Oh my God, what a mess that man has left me in!'

Heatherington-Reid blinked unemotionally.

'Come Mom,' Mark rose from his chair, 'we'd better get up to Hatfield Street before they close.'

'Mr Heatherington-Reid, tell me: what's the procedure for suing someone for extortion?' Queenie had burrowed in her briefcase and extracted the three mysterious IOU slips.

'Oh no Mom please!' Mark moved towards her chair to get her up. 'Nothing can be proved: it's all supposition and paranoia on your part.'

'I am *not* paranoid!' Queenie shrugged off her son's hand. 'The Joffe bitch was *blackmailing* your father!'

'Suing someone, Mrs Kaplan, is an extremely costly and time-consuming procedure, I can assure you.' Heatherington-Reid's measured, legalistic tone seemed set on staunching the brimming hysteria.

'Mom, come now, nothing can be proved. We'll ask Lenny Danziger what these slips are all about.' He coaxed his mother to the door. 'We've already taken up enough of Mr Heatherington-Reid's time.'

The lawyer ushered them out. 'I'm afraid my fees are 300 Rand an hour, which alone could gobble up what remains of your late father's estate.' In his pasted-on smile there seemed to be a glimmer of disdain, which Mark read as: Thank the Lord, I am finally ridding myself of this potty Jewess and her poofter son.

5

Passers-by were turning to look at Mark and Queenie as she exclaimed: 'Your father has left me *destitute*! What am I going to do? Financially you can barely keep your head above water in London, which leaves me completely at the mercy of Rochelle and Claude.' They were crossing Greenmarket Square. 'There's Namaqua House where my late father's offices used to be. Nice! What a fate! The daughter of Bernard Segal of Scarborough Estates reduced to being dependent on her daughter to run a dirty flea-market stall! I dread to think what's to become of me. All I've got is the Messiah. Every day I pray to Him: He alone can help me.'

'What are you talking about? What 'Messiah'?'

'I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Messiah. I have become a Hebrew Christian. You've got no idea what a time I've been through in the last few months with your father. As he deteriorated, he used to swear and abuse me. I used to go to the Hebrew Christians in tears and *they* used to comfort me. *Not* your Jews: not *one* of our relatives, all too wrapped up in themselves, nor the Sisterhood at Temple Israel. The Hebrew Christians have been my salvation!'

'Bloody hell!' Mark cursed as he ripped a parking ticket from the window of his hired Volkswagen.

'Please Mark, can't you stay just another week?'

'No I can't, my return ticket is booked for this Friday.' He was perspiring with the effort of negotiating the one-way labyrinth round the Houses of Parliament. 'Tomorrow we can go into the Trust Bank and in the evening I'll sort out Dad's clothes.' By chance he hit on Hatfield Street.

'You know what should be done with your father's clothes? They should be burnt in a big bonfire on the mountain! ESPECIALLY THE TROUSERS!!' Queenie slammed the car door and stalked off with her black briefcase towards the Great Synagogue, its neo-Moorish domes glistening in the mid-afternoon sun.

Mark locked the doors and hurried to catch up with her. 'Mom, *please* stop this.....'

'Even Cynthia, the maid, said she'd never seen trousers in such a state.'

'But he was a very ill man.'

'This was from before he got ill. He was always a *filthy* man, your father was: he used to slaver at the sight of every *bitch* in this town!'

They went through the gates into the grounds of the Great Synagogue where, on a summer's day in December 1948, Queenie and Harry Kaplan had been married.

After getting six copies of the death certificate, they got sucked into the early rush-hour traffic.

'Mom, I don't know where I'm going. Please let me concentrate, else I'll have a crash. How do I get onto the Paarden Island road?'

'Dunno. Ach, go down Adderley Street to the Foreshore.'

They were going to C.J.Danziger and Sons. Queenie had collected together some of her husband's unpaid invoices. 'It's highly unlikely I'll get a penny from Lenny, he's such a shnorrer. Your father was their faithful slave for twenty-five years; he let them walk all over him. And look at the *result!*' Her torrent of abusive accusations continued unabated. 'Your father has left me destitute and you have absolutely NO sympathy for me!'

Mark had missed the Paarden Island turn-off and landed in a lane with traffic hurtling towards them. 'Jesus Christ, I'm going to have a fucking accident and KILL US BOTH!!!' In the nick of time he managed to swerve the car off onto the grass verge. 'I've had ENOUGH!!!' he screamed, bashing the steering-wheel with his fists. 'You have *no* respect whatsoever for *my* feelings, for the fact that I HAVE LOST MY FATHER!!! Yes, Dad *was* irresponsible. Yes, he *was* a lecherous bastard. Yes, he *should've* made provision for you. I'm *trying* to sympathize with your situation but you keep losing my sympathy by going on and on and *on!*'

'Everything you blame *me* for.'

Cars were shooting past.

'I blame YOU-AND-HIM for never getting it together in the forty-four bloody years you were married, for not having the sense to buy yourselves a house or a flat when Grandpa was one of the top estate-agents in Cape Town. Instead you spent all your time at each other's throats. I couldn't leave home soon enough. And all the time you were at me, trying to get me on your side, chiselling into my brain what a terrible man Dad was: no wonder I'm *gay!*'

'You blame me for that too. In your eyes your father is completely blameless.....'

'No, but at least he *accepted* me AS I AM, which is more than you will ever do. Never once have you bothered to ask me how I am, about my job, about my life in London, about Gary.....'

'Who's Gary?'

'You see: you don't even know who Gary is.' He clenched his fists. 'Gary happens to be the man I've been living with for the past seven years.'

'Come on, we'd better get going, Danzigers closes at five. Mark, you've got to stop being so bitter. We've got to put the past behind us. *All* families have problems: look at Prince Charles and Princess Diana. You're too sensitive, you take everything to heart.'

6

In his hail-fellow-well-met manner, Lenny Danziger led them into his office. He had a wide smear of a mouth and, having had polio as a child, manoeuvred himself like a crab scuttling sideways.

'Your Dad adored you, Mark, I want you to know that. He would come in with his face lit up on days he got a letter from you. He was so proud of you, of your poetry-writing, though he confessed to me he didn't really understand your poems, me neither, but my boy, you must know you gave your Dad a lot of pleasure. There's his parking bay through the window.'

From his seat in front of Lenny's cluttered desk, Mark peered between the slats of the venetian blinds: CA26754, his father's marked parking bay, in the late-afternoon sun, empty.

'Nearly every day for the last twenty years your Dad and I used to have lunch at this desk: Provita, cottage cheese, herring, haimische cucumbers.'

Sitting next to Mark, Queenie handed Lenny the small pile of unpaid invoices. 'A fine mess Harry has left me in. We just been to the lawyer's: Harry's left me with a bankrupt estate. I won't get a bean.'

'Ach Queenie man, you'll be alright.' Lenny flapped his hands. 'With your inheritance from your father you must be a rich woman.'

'You're joking. It's all frittered away with inflation.' From her briefcase she dug out the three contentious IOUs and thrust them across the desk towards Lenny. 'Can you kindly tell me, Lenny, what *these* are? Mark came across them among Harry's papers.'

One by one Lenny squinted at them. 'Ach man, they were some advance payments to you, I think, while Harry was ill, to buy some.....groceries, and so on.'

'Ohhh ja, now I remember. Crikey, I think Alzheimer's is setting in prematurely,' she giggled. 'But Lenny, why did you put them in Queenie *Joffe's* name?'

'Ach I dunno, they were....advance payments we were making to Harry.....on her behalf so they wouldn't be tax-deductible. Or something like that.'

Mark failed to follow the logic of this. What then about his father's 'illegitimate daughter'? As he watched his mother tear up the IOUs and toss the pieces into the wastepaper basket, he concluded that, to whip him up, she had fabricated the whole story.

7

It was an earth-coloured tortoise, skilfully made of glazed clay in the arts-and-crafts at school. Accurately observed: the small head; the fragile, scaly neck; the markings on its shell; the limbs. His elder nephew Darren had given it to him as a farewell gift at the airport.

From the breast pocket of his shirt, Mark took out a photo of himself with his father, taken almost ten years before. Seated on a sofa, smiling, with an arm round each other. Long he looked into his father's face.

He found it thrilling, being high over Africa, the plane tearing through the night.

After dinner he swallowed a sleeping tablet. The cabin lights were switched off and the passengers settled for sleep.

As he drifted off, he imagined his father's face, now, in the coffin, under the ground.

Before the funeral, in a candlelit vestibule, he had looked down at his father's dead face. In the coffin, the shroud like a shawl about his head. The face had the look of a cosmeticized waxworks dummy.

With a visceral, scarcely bearable awareness that he would *never* see his father again, he felt precariously poised over the pit of death. ('How many spadefuls?' he had turned to Jack Marks, the chairman of Temple Israel, by his side. 'Three.') The buffer of his father had collapsed. Yet there was a giddy anticipation of the rest of his life and a sense that his father, by dying, was granting him the gift of validation to live it fully.

His mind went to the night, fifteen years before, when he and his father had strolled along Camps Bay beach in the wind. If there was to be any meaningful future contact, he had determined to tell his father that he was gay. But the words wouldn't come out. The moments of postponement squeezed out dribbles of inconsequential chat.

Finally, Mark came out with it.

'Yes, Mom and I guessed it was either that or you're a drug addict 'cause ever since you arrived, you've had a glazed, withdrawn look in your eyes.....'

Feeling shaky, Mark stopped and turned to face his father. The wind was tugging the remaining wisps of his father's hair to their extremities.

'It's OK.' Harry Kaplan held out his arms to steady his son and, taking him firmly by the shoulders, repeated: 'It's OK. Whatever you choose to be or do is OK because you are my son.'

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