

*Kasanov's Bakery*

Max Weiss

The Saturday that I began to love my father was a week before my Bar Mitzvah.

I'd decided to feign sickness that morning when my grandfather's feet on the stairs below woke me. The darkness pressed in upon me as I waited, gathering wetness in my throat, preparing to produce a convincing, lubricated cough. Grandfather would see right through a dry one.

I heard the apartment's front door open, and his footsteps as they neared my room. The door handle turned, and I shut my eyes tightly, calming my breathing. I rarely tried to deceive grandfather; no one did.

He walked over to me, and shook me. I stirred, then coughed a perfect, glorious, wet cough. I sat up in bed and did my best to look miserable. Which, as the sun had yet to rise, didn't take much effort.

I loved my grandfather, but I fucking hated having to get up at four every morning to cook that goddamn bread.

My family and I lived over on Beacon Street – you know, the big thoroughfare that runs straight through Boston. We lived above my grandfather's bakery, the original Kasanov's. He had started it himself 40 years before I was born, and grown it into a massive chain of bread stores. There had to have been at least 30 different Kasanov's Bakeries all over Massachusetts by the time I was 13 in 1948, each and every one of them following my grandfather's original recipes.

The bread was Kosher, of course, and so most of Kasanov's customers were Jewish. But goys frequented my grandfather's bakery, too, even though they knew he was Jewish.

My mother Polly, my father Nathan, and I lived above the original Kasanov's in a small, neat apartment that my grandfather rented out to us for cheap. My grandfather didn't live with us. He lived over on Beacon Hill, in a much roomier apartment with down mattresses. But he still had a key to the apartment, and every morning before school – and before schul on Saturdays – he'd climb the creaky wooden stairs to our apartment, unlock the door with his key, come into my bedroom, and shake me rather harshly to wake me up.

Grandfather glowered down at me now, disbelief etched into every line of his leathered face. I was reminded of the old baseball mitt I used to play catch with down by the park, when I was skipping studying.

"What? You sick or somethin'?" he rasped at me. His voice had gone years ago – too many thousands of pounds of flour and ash had crammed their way down into the alveoli of his lungs – but it was still powerful. For just a split second more I thought about continuing the lie. But, then,

"No, sir."

"Then get out of your pajamas and put some fuckin' clothes on. I already got the ovens on."

Then, for good measure, he paused and added, "Lazy son of a bitch." No amount of flour or dust or any of God's work could take Boston out of Jacob Berger's voice.

I did as I was told. When I'd put on my slacks, my grandfather wordlessly proceeded back out of my room and into the small living room of my apartment. My father wouldn't be up for hours, the diamonds he sold in his small jewelry store a couple of blocks away not in need of a fresh baking.

My grandfather opened the loose-hinged front door and proceeded down the creaking wooden stairs. I followed, shivering slightly in the morning cold. At least the ovens would be warm.

At the landing grandfather walked through another door, one that led into the back of the bakery. He flipped the lights on.

Like I said, baking that bread was a daily pain in my ass. The flour made me cough, and I had calluses from kneading the dough. Rachel Goldberg told me last time we were fooling around behind the school that she didn't like the way they felt on her skin, and made me stop. And I was always exhausted before I even got to school, which fucked me in all kinds of different ways. Rabbi Stern had even told me last week that if he got wind of me falling asleep in first period Talmud one more time, I'd have to do Kaddish in front of the entire schul for a couple of Fridays.

Still, once I was out of bed, I couldn't help but appreciate the back room of the bakery. With the lights on, everything had a white glow to it, a sheen, cast from the years and years of buildup of flour that none of my scrubbing had ever rid the surfaces of. The brick ovens, already blazing, heated the room to the ideal temperature to outlast the shitty Boston winter. All my grandfather's tools – knives, rolling pins, pots, pans – hung above the massive oak center table.

My grandfather threw me a white apron and then tossed one over his own head, tying the knot behind his back himself. Then we baked.

My grandfather made the dough and I did the kneading and braiding of the challah. I did the kneading because my grandfather had terrible arthritis from too many years of doing it himself. His fingers were thick, gnarled, and tough, like the roots of an aged tree. Besides what kneading did to the skin on my hands I actually enjoyed the process of crafting dough. Even if I didn't love it, I was good at it – even grandfather said so – and there was something about it that made me feel powerful, in control.

Sometimes, when there were leftover scraps of dough, I liked to play God and shape it into little figures that I pretended looked like me.

This morning, we finished a little early, which meant I'd have time to shower before schul. Sometimes I arrived late, flour still on my face and hands, which always aggravated my father in the worst type of way. Not that I cared much about that, and not that he ever managed much more than a disapproving look.

As I hung up my apron, my grandfather clasped me on my shoulder, turning me around to face him.

"Bar Mitzvah's comin' up," he grated out. His eyes were hard, as they always were. Already I was almost as tall as him.

"Yeah."

"Jus' wanted to make sure you're ready." This, and the hand on my shoulder, was the closest my grandfather ever got to expressing affection. It was how he showed

me I was his favorite. My Bar Mitzvah was of the utmost importance to him, even though I never really understood why. After all, he hadn't been to services in years.

"I'm ready, Pa."

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Schul was boring as Hell. I made eyes at Julia Feinstein all through it. As usual, Rabbi talked about how someone asked a question in the Talmud and 10 different dead rabbis who probably didn't even exist had 20 different answers. Jews love to not know things.

At the end, Rabbi reminded everyone that my Bar Mitzvah was next weekend. The congregation, dressed in neat, starched clothing, turned towards me and clapped, but they might as well have been applauding my grandfather. Grandfather, who never went to schul but was still the most respected man in the community. Everyone knew him, everyone feared him, and everyone was excited by the prospect of Jacob Berger actually coming to temple for once.

After services, when everyone was filing out the ornate doors that fronted the synagogue, my father came up to check on my attendance. He looked nothing like his father. Where my grandfather was short, broad, and stocky, my father was tall and lanky. My father had soft, gentle, deep eyes, whereas my grandfather's were proud and hard and fierce as diamonds. My grandfather had *seen* things. I never knew what my father saw.

I hated that I had inherited almost all of my looks from my father, from his soft long-limbed figure to his downy blonde hair to his spider-like fingers, but thanked God that I'd at least been granted my grandfather's penetrating eyes.

"I need you to work in the shop Monday. Receipts." The tension was in my father's voice, written all over his prematurely lined face. He knew the request would bring him into direct conflict with his father. Besides, things had been especially fraught between the two of us lately. He removed his kippa and twirled it in his long fingers. Around us the congregation streamed loudly out the wide double doors to the street beyond. My mother disentangled herself from the socialite, gossipy Jewish wives whom I hated and came to join our conversation

I was cagey.

"Pa told me he needed me all day Monday in the bakery." I paused to leave room for a response, but my father didn't say anything at all. His thin lips pursed and his eyes narrowed slightly, but he kept quiet. I remained defiant. "You're gonna have to talk to him if you want me somewhere else. You know how he gets when I don't show up."

His brow furrowed, deepening the lines that were already almost as pronounced as grandfather's. Even by this time he was worn down. Worn by time, by fruitless work, by his wife's nagging, by the expectations he would never fulfill, by a father he'd never please.

As usual, my mother spoke for him.

"You're going to do this for your father and I," she mandated. She had a hawkish, severe face, caked with rouge, and it matched her personality perfectly. I loved her

because she was my mother, but I could not understand how my father could have married her. “We’re so close to having enough to move out from the apartment. All of us need to pitch in.”

I nodded noncommittally at my mother. I’d heard her and my father discuss plans to “move out,” or “away from,” or “leave” the bakery’s overhead apartment for years now, and every time we were “close” to having enough money, something went wrong. It was always quite predictably vague, the reason, and I’d learned not to ask for details. I gathered it had something to do with my grandfather.

“I’ll speak with Jacob,” said my father, quite unexpectedly. He always called his father by first name. Then he looked at me, his eyes uncharacteristically tough. “Let’s go.” He began to walk towards the door with my mother. I hurried to catch up with him.

“Now?”

“Yes, now.” He continued walking, out the doors, moving through the crowd that had stopped to talk outside on the steps of the schul. It was a bright, gray morning, one of those mornings covered in so many clouds that there appeared to be only one, and my stomach was suddenly roiling.

“And you want me to come?”

My father didn’t answer, but continued walking down the steps, onto Beacon Street, off in the direction of my father’s shop. My mother, a strange look on her face, disengaged herself from my father, and, waving goodbye to me, returned to her gossip.

I walked beside my father in silence for a while, struggling to keep up with his strides despite my own long legs. He stared straight ahead, jaw clenched and working.

Men and women returning home from synagogue raised hands in salute, but he merely nodded.

He'd been uncharacteristically agitated for the past several weeks now, and I was fairly certain that I was the reason.

I thought back to our last real conversation, the one where I'd told him that I didn't want to be a jeweler.

We'd been in his ugly, cramped, dust-coated jewelry store, him in the front inspecting stones, me in the back pouring over receipts. I did the receipts because I happened to be good at math; it was the one subject in school I didn't shirk from. There was something about the way a problem always had an answer that appealed to me.

I was double-checking my numbers when he looked up from the small diamond he was examining, removed his magnifying eyepiece, and called me over to him.

I stopped my work and went over to his desk, where he fixed me with a stare. His eyes weren't like they were now, as we walked down the street – hard, determined – but rather soft and pool-like, like the cheap sapphires that lay on the table before him. It was a far different, less-powerful stare than his father's, and I feel he must have known it could not compare, for after a moment he broke off eye contact and looked around the room.

“Your Bar Mitzvah is very soon.”

“Yes, father.” The street outside was buzzing vaguely with activity. Some were returning home from work, others had gone out to do the afternoon's shopping.



“You’re ready?” Through the store’s front window, I saw a passerby dressed in a gray suit and hat stop in front of the store, and peer in, examining the front display. My father’s eyes stared at the man without seeing him.

“I think so.”

“That’s not what I heard,” accused my father quietly. Everything he said was quiet, as opposed to his wife – who was as loud and boisterous as the other ladies on Beacon Street – and unlike his father, whose voice emanated strength despite the fact that its volume had been taken by time. “I heard from Rabbi Stern,” he continued, “That you haven’t been studying as hard as you can. In fact, I heard that exact complaint from your teachers at school, as well.”

Bitterness welled inside me, starting with a burning in my feet and surging upwards. My father didn’t actually care about my grades, my Bar Mitzvah, any of this. He had never asked after them before I began baking with grandfather. He was merely trying to exercise control over me any way he still could, out of fear of loss. But he wasn’t my grandfather, his father. He acted, he spoke out of fear; he could never cause fear.

One time, when I was 8 years old, I saw my grandfather almost kill a trucker from the union who tried to extort him. He was threatening a strike if my grandfather wouldn’t pay more. He was twice my grandfather’s size, and my grandfather used a rolling pin.

Words alone would never compel anyone, least of all me, without the history of fear to give them strength. And I wasn’t afraid of my father.

“So?” I looked my father full in the face, looked him right there with my eyes. And for him it must have been like looking into his father, looking into the depths of every doubt that he’d had to swallow.

His voice was quiet, still. “You’re almost a man, now. Don’t you want to do anything with your life?”

“Like you?” I shot back. “Like become a jeweler?”

My father didn’t say anything at all. He looked down at his long hands, flexing his fingers out so that his long digits spread out over the table.

“And you’d rather be a baker?”

He was afraid. Afraid I didn’t want anything to do with him, afraid I didn’t respect him, afraid I was turning out, despite he and I’s physical similarities, to be more and more like the man whom everybody else respected, the man whom he hated and who despised him in turn.

And now, walking down the street, we were alone – really alone – for the first time since that day. I kept waiting for him to ask me about something, anything – my Bar Mitzvah, the jewelry store, why I’d skipped school last week – but he still didn’t say anything. He just kept walking, nodding, walking. We passed The Green Bag market, where sawdust coated the ground inside, and Lipsky’s Deli, where the raw meat hung on hooks.

Scenes from my childhood.

“Do you know why we’ve never moved from the apartment above your grandfather’s shop?” My father’s voice was steady. “After all these years?”

I looked up at him. "Because we don't have enough money," I said. It was an accusation, of a sort. I was waiting for him to admit, finally, that he had failed, that working in jewelry was weak, that he was no good, that our family was no good for it.

"Because your grandfather threatened to disown me if I moved you away from him." He continued walking, but he no longer waved or nodded at those who saluted us with cries of "Shabbat Shalom" as we walked on by. My father had reached into me, past my stomach, and grabbed my spine and wrenched it.

We were almost at the bakery. I could see the sign and red brick exterior from here.

"You're lying," I said automatically.

Then my father did something he'd never done before, something I never thought he'd have the courage to do.

He struck me.

He had stopped walking suddenly, when I called him a liar. He swung the back of his right hand at my head, at my face, until it connected and sent me sprawling to the ground.

The blow knocked everything from me. I was blank, weightless and dumbfounded, like a man who has just discovered that the map he has been following all this time has been all wrong. I couldn't feel the smarting of my face.

My father, tall and monstrous against the gray monolithic sky, stood over me and looked down upon me as I looked up at him. Around us people had stopped to look

on in concern. He stooped down over me, blocking the sky, and with surprising strength, lifted me off the ground for the first time in years.

He set me on my feet gently, and with those delicate long fingers brushed something unseen off my right shoulder.

“I’m not lying,” he said. The quietness in his voice was back, and I saw that his eyes had become sapphires again. “When I was younger, I used to work in your grandfather’s bakery. Back then, it was still the only one, and the only customers were Jews.”

My father sat down on the curb of the sidewalk, his long legs bowed out at right angles in front of him. He took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. I sat down next to him wordlessly.

“I did the same job as you,” he continued, inhaling and then slowly exhaling a thin stream of fumes. “I did it all – I woke up at four, kneaded the bread, tended the ovens. And I helped in the front, actually selling the bread.”

He looked desolate, now, more wretched than I’d ever seen him. There was a shadow over his face far darker than the one that often hung there. But the bile that usually rose up in my throat at his fear didn’t come this time.

“Your grandfather wanted me to follow his path. And that was always my plan. Until one day, when I was a couple of years older than you and the bakery was just beginning to take off, I decided ... that I didn’t want to.” He took a long pull from his cigarette, and blew into the street.

It was difficult to look at my father.

“Why not?” This was the first time we had ever talked about my father’s past. It was disconcerting to think of him as a boy my own age, and even more so when I realized that he must have looked very much like myself.

“I didn’t enjoy it,” he said simply, dropping his cigarette on the street and crushing it with his foot. “I wanted to do something that I loved. Your grandfather ... loves baking. For him, that’s all there is. He just could never understand that I didn’t – I couldn’t – love what he loved.”

“And you loved working with jewels?”

“In a way,” he sighed slightly, and his long body caved in on itself slightly as we sat there on the sidewalk’s edge. “Certainly more so than baking. There was an old goldsmith – not too far from here, he’s long dead now – that used to teach me about metal.” He smiled slightly, and his eyes focused on something I couldn’t see. “I liked how malleable gold was, how it could change and shift in form but still not lose any of its properties. It wasn’t unyielding like steel, but I saw that it was just as strong, once I began to work with it.”

He stretched out his legs in front of him. “But that was a long, long time ago,” he said.

“But if you didn’t love it,” I asked, “Why did you become a jeweler?”

My father turned and looked at me, and I saw that he was smiling sadly, and that those eyes of his were shining, and that the creases around them had deepened into crevasses that threatened to swallow us.

“I loved working with numbers, a little bit like yourself. I wanted to be a scientist of some sort. I never exactly worked out what type.”

“And what happened?” The sky was finally beginning to clear a bit, and I could begin to see the sun through the gray.

“I got scared,” he said. “After I told my father I didn’t want to work in the bakery, he told me to leave. So I left, and tried to put myself through school. But the more school I went through, the more I saw how difficult it was going to get.” He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “So I quit, and one day I got a job in a jewelry store.” He opened his eyes and sat up straight.

“And that was it?”

“That was it.” We sat there for a while in silence, our journey to the bakery forgotten. For the first time in a long time, I understood my father.

“You don’t want me to be a jeweler, do you?” I didn’t look at my father, and he didn’t look at me. We both stared straight ahead, watching an old Jewish man sweep the street in front of his flower shop.

Then my father laughed. It was bizarre but wonderful, and it gave me the feeling of hearing an old favorite song, one that I’d forgotten I used to love. It filled my chest and lungs and heart.

“It’s not what I want,” he said as he rose to his feet, dusting himself off and offering me a hand, “that’s important.” I took the hand and was pulled to my feet, where I smoothed my suit. “Let’s go speak to your grandfather.”

My stomach churned now, bubbling up into my throat, as I recalled what my father had said about grandfather. I knew my father hadn't been lying. Grandfather had indeed been keeping us above him so as not to lose me as he'd lost father.

But I followed my father as he walked the last two blocks down Beacon Street to Kasanov's Bakery. We entered through the worn, white wooden door, chipped with age.

The front room of the bakery was empty. Pastries and challah lay in glass cases by the walls. My father headed to the back room, where the ovens were.

When we pushed through the door that led there, we found my grandfather kneading dough, a grimace on his weathered face as arthritis shot spasms up his fingers and arms. When he saw my father and I he stopped his work and dropped the dough, staring at us.

"We came to bake," I said.

And as clear as if it were my own memory I could see my father as a 13 year old a week before his Bar Mitzvah, tall and awkward and gangly, with downy blonde hair like my own and eyes as deep and pooled as sapphires, standing next to my grandfather, helping him knead and twist.