

Chapter 33: From Milwaukee to New York (1995)

How naïve I was: thinking that because I had trained in South Africa, could perform a large range of operations, had ample clinical experience and had published over a hundred papers, that because of all these reasons I would be a hot commodity for all potential hospitals in the United States. Initially, I responded to all advertisements, for any surgical vacancy published in surgical journals; I sent numerous copies of my CV each week: California, New York, Florida, Texas—no reply. I mailed my CV to remote spots in Alaska—surely they would appreciate my experience—no reply. I frantically FAXed my CV to Maine and North Dakota, even Wyoming—*nada*.

Then one day I got a phone call from Seattle: “Dr. Schein, thanks for sending your CV, listen, I’m familiar with many of your publications, you’re a famous guy”—he sounded very enthusiastic, but then, when I started talking, I detected a change in his tone, as if the candle of his gusto was blown away by a gush of wind. I immediately understood: *it is my accent*—until that moment I was a “famous” surgeon he read in the American Journal of Surgery, now I was just another foreigner. “Let me talk to my partners about you, Dr, Schein, I’ll call again.” I knew he wouldn’t and he didn’t. From then on I started using Jessica for preliminary calls in recruiting hospitals or licensing bodies. But why was I surprised and upset? What had been my reaction to phone calls by black sounding voices in South Africa, or to the Russians’ heavily accented Hebrew in Israel? Local accents are soothing to local ears—foreign accents are irritating to many.

Guilelessly, I had assumed that my “thick” CV, which I had mailed around like Christmas cards, was alluring. But academic positions tend to be filled “from inside” or through a network of chairmen; academic positions are advertised but most jobs go eventually to in-house trained surgeons or those directly referred to the Chairman by his buddies around the nation. Today, with 400 publications, published books, and a past full professorship, I know better: when applying to positions in the community all such academic

accomplishments constitute only a burden and raise suspicion— what does this “academician” (almost a derogative term, like a “liberal”) want among us? *We* do not write but work. Or: he probably spent all his time writing and not operating.

Roughly, this was the taxonomy, as perceived by me, to delineate, unofficially, Americans surgeons:

Local geniuses: this is the crème de la crème who follow a predictable path: top colleges, scholarships, ivy league medical schools, residency in leading ivory towers, fellowships of their choice under well known masters; positions, “academic” or “private” —the distinction between the two has blurred over recent decades—in the hospitals of their choice. Many of them eventually land up in leadership positions. Included in this category are members of minority groups, and born in the USA children of immigrants —when they talk like Americans they are Americans!—in fact, being a bright American Chinese or Latino or black is a plus. Females included in this group have a huge advantage.

Local average guys: this is the majority group, dispersed in the community and “academia” across the nation. They have the priority for jobs: when a vacancy opens in an academic teaching department the tendency is to give it to “one of our own graduates”, irrespective how “academic” he is, or plans to be. Occasionally, a *local average guy* would be imported from elsewhere, but in general the tendency is not to contaminate the atmosphere with some “otherness”.

Locally trained international medical graduates (IMG): with the declining numbers of US graduates seeking a surgical career, more and more IMG’s (the leading source for them being India) find their ways to US surgical residencies, mostly not in the ivory towers but in community based teaching hospitals. Wherever they come from, the US residency makes them board eligible or certified “American surgeons”. After completing US training, IMG’s tend to practice in inner cities’ enclaves, where they dominate some hospitals; many are forced into rural under-serviced areas, which are shunned by American graduates.

Not belonging to any of the above groups, I had to find my own way.

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May 1995. It was late afternoon when the taxi dropped me off in front of the University Club at the corner of 54th street and the Fifth Avenue. I remember the soft cool wind, the mellow rays of the sun on the dust stained pink walls of the building, and the budding trees of the sidewalks. In Milwaukee it was still winter but here in Manhattan it was early spring. I paid the driver, took a receipt, and entered into the majestic all marble lobby of the University Club. A uniformed valet checked my name in his registry, another valet showed me to my room—a Spartan, vast, high ceiling space, on the fifth floor. I showered, changed into my only dark suit, white shirt and tie, and took the ancient elevator back to the grand, hushed and dimly lit lobby. I was awaiting the man who had invited me down to New York for a job interview, and the posh venue he had chosen for this banal occasion was characteristic to that man, as I found out in the ensuing years.

At the reception desk I was approached by a tall trim man in a well-tailored, stylish three-piece suit: "Hello, you must be Dr. Schein? Moshe?" I noticed his shiny black shoes and the white handkerchief peeping from the breast pocket of his suit.

"Hi, nice to meet you." I offered him my hand.

"I'm Jim, Jim Rusk, I'm working for Dr. Winestone, responsible for the residents' education, the Boss will be late, he's coming from Long Island, rush hour, you know, New York rush hour." He had a pleasant educated American accent, definitely not the typical Brooklynese. "Meanwhile, let me show you around the club, yes, I'm a member, on the squash team."

He led me across the lobby. "The club was built in 1899, modeled after British, London clubs; you could say that this is New York's grandest clubhouse. With its deep rustication, grand proportions and superb craftsmanship, it is the city's finest Italian Renaissance palazzo-style structure."

"Really!" Renaissance or palazzo, my mind was focused on the expected arrival of Dr. Winestone; this was to be my first and only job interview. I knew that I must do well. Or else we are doomed.

"Come and see", continued Jim enthusiastically, like a professional tour guide, leading me into a giant hall: "This is *our* reading room, impressive, eh? Do note the rich marble, gilded columns, and fine wood, the windows open onto fifth avenue." I saw a few suited elderly gentlemen reading the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* or slumbering in one of the deep antique easy chairs.

"Ok, it's six o'clock, let's have a drink," Jim said. We rode up the elevator to a cozy wood paneled bar room. A few men stood at the bar, we sat at a table. Portraits of old members decorated the walls. "Are you a Scotch drinker? Yes? Great. Tom, "Jim addressed the bartender, "two of the usual, make it double please, yeah, on the rocks."

Two crystal glasses arrived, almost full with ice and yellowish liquid. This is my usual, it's Laphroaig, single malt, taste how smoky it is? Cheers."

We drank. I had tasted Laphroaig before, it was too smoky and unusual for my taste. "Can I smoke here?"

"Oh sure, whatever you like, now let me tell you more about the club, perhaps you wish to know that women were admitted only in 1987, not to this bar, but only to the dining room."

I was listening to Jim, sipping from my whiskey and puffing on a cigarillo. Jim seemed a nice guy, and the venue was very impressive. Now we had to survive the encounter with the Boss. I started to enjoy New York. "Oh here he is," exclaimed Jim excitedly. He jumped to his legs, rushed toward the bar's doors, and led the Boss towards our table.

"Dr. Winestone, this is Moshe. Moshe, this is Dr. Winestone, our chairman," Jim tried to be formal. And indeed formal he *was*, as I learned during the next five years.

I stood up. "Nice to meet you Dr. Winestone," I said, suddenly feeling the pleasant warmth of the single malt rushing in my veins.

"Leslie Winestone," the Boss mumbled and offered me a soft hand for a brief and weak handshake.

"What will you drink, Dr. Winestone?" Jim asked.

"As a matter of fact, I will drink nothing," he remained standing, "in fact, I'm very hungry." He spoke with the same marked mid European accent I had noticed during that breast meeting a few years ago.

"Great, let's eat," said Jim, and louder to the barman, "Tom, bill it on me, will ya add five bucks for yourself."

"Thanks Doc," nodded the bartender. Five bucks! Gee, those New York guys are generous, I thought.

In the corridor, while Jim continued lecturing me about the glorious history of the Club, I silently observed the Chairman: in his mid sixties, about 5'5", corpulent, pudgy, big cheeked face, thick Semitic lips, a pudgy nose burdened with an oversized pair of glasses, thinning gray hair, and short neck. But he was immaculately dressed in a dark, expensive looking suit, white silk shirt, with pearled sleeve cuffs peeping below the suit's sleeves. These guys dress well—I'll have to buy myself a few suits, I made a mental note to myself.

From the elevator we entered the magnificent third-floor triple-height dining room that stretched the length of the building's side street frontage. Again: wood paneling, heavy chandeliers hanging from the decorated ceilings, ancient portraits of long dead club members looking from the walls—the good old world at its best. The vast dining space, which could easily accommodate a few hundreds diners, was virtually empty: a group of three business looking men in one corner; at the other, an old man dinning alone, reading a novel.

We were seated. Jim maintained a steady pace of small talk, the chairman said almost nothing, immersing himself in the study of the leather-framed menu—he held it an inch away from his inch thick lenses. "What will you drink, gentlemen?" asked the sommelier.

Jim looked quizzically at his Boss, "Dr. Winestone?"

"Oh let us have a bottle of red." To me he added: "You drink red wine, don't you?"

"Of course."

Dr. Winestone looked up above his glasses at the sommelier: "Get us a bottle of Bordeaux, yes, the St. Julien." To us he said: "As a matter of fact, 1978 was a good vintage."

Jim appeared satisfied with that astute decision but considered it his duty to warn the Boss: "Do you know how much it costs?"

Dr. Winestone ignored such trivial comments and focused his attention on a freshly baked roll, which he carefully halved, smeared with a thick layer of butter and stuffed in his mouth.

The wine arrived. The Boss allocated the task of sampling it to Jim. Food was served, Jim elegantly dissected his Fillet Mignon and maintained the flow of small talk: for example, that the pink Milford granite used to construct the building had come from Maine. Dr. Winestone slurped noisily, and with great gusto, his bouillabaisse, brining his mouth to the plate rather than the spoon to his mouth. He maintained silence, short of a few isolated questions to me: "you served in the Israeli Army, uh?" or "how is my friend Bob doing?" Bob was REC, the recently evicted Chairman in Milwaukee who had connected Winestone and I.

A little Italian waiter appeared pushing a desert cart, loaded with mouth watering cakes, tarts, torts, mousses, fruits and ice creams. I saw Winestone's eyes sparkle with delight: "As a matter of fact, I had enough, so please let me have some fresh strawberries, a spoon of cream, um, add a tiny sliver of the *Kirschtort*, and a double espresso, thank you very much," he ordered the waiter. To me he added: "I need the coffee, we live in Long Island, you see, a 45 minutes drive, this is New York, not Milwaukee. As a matter of fact I used to live in the Midwest, we stayed a few years in St. Louis, the Barnes Jewish Hospital, I couldn't endure that town and the Midwest, New York is the place to live, as you will probably find out."

"Dr. Winestone, a small cognac?" suggested Jim. "Moshe?"

"Sure," I replied enthusiastically. I predicted that the cognac would not be American or Spanish —I started to realize that when Jim ordered and the Boss paid, the products were magnificent. After a few seconds of pondering the Boss said: "Jim, as a matter of fact, I changed my mind, I won't be driving to the Island, I'll sleep in my flat, it is just around the corner, the Trump Tower, you know, in fact, Moshe, I'll be able to pick you up tomorrow morning and drive you to the hospital. Jim, would you please cancel the limousine. Listen, didn't we once have a wonderful Armagnac, it was 1968, I think, yes, let's have it."

After dinner Jim made us stroll through the enormous, two level, vaulted library —a large Churchill's portrait hanged on one wall—an accurate copy of 19th century libraries in Oxford or Cambridge. We descended into the lobby where both gentlemen collected their light trench coats, Jim's black and smooth, Winestone's gray, baggy and crumpled; Jim carried a black umbrella in his hand and a 1940's model top hat on his head —he looked like a British diplomat. Winestone shook my hand, "Good night. I'll pick you up tomorrow 6.30, please wait here on the stairs, I'll be in a white Mercedes sport." He then rolled down into the street; like Mr. Smiley from Le Carre's novels, I thought. A Jewish, central European Smiley.

I do not remember which model of Mercedes it was for in the successive five years Winestone frequently changed his sport cars: Jaguar, Porsche, Lamborgini, a Benz again—often keeping a few of them simultaneously. But now, early in the morning, after an evening of drinking, he looked amazingly fresh and well groomed, his sparse black hair still wet and positioned in the attempt to cover his bald spot. Henceforward, I would be repeatedly impressed at how resilient this elderly man was: late to bed, early to rise, a busy surgical career constantly intermingled with social events, and hence, a steady but never excessive consumption of alcohol, and he—always rested, tidy and spruced and in a good mood. He seemed like a man who always enjoyed himself, which probably he did, and this was one of the secrets of his success.

I buckled myself as we merged into the FDR, southbound. "Are you going to buckle up?" I asked him.

"No," said Winestone, "I never do, this is an accident-proof Benz." Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge we drove directly on to Ocean Avenue. This was my first glimpse of Brooklyn and I looked at the colorful and confused shabbiness with interest, it reminded me of the southern part of Tel Aviv. Winestone navigated his car at sixty miles per hour, right turn on to Fourth Avenue, left turn on Fifth Street and here we were, at the doctors' parking lot of the New York Methodist Hospital (NYMH).

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What do I remember from this spring day 13 years ago?

I remember a clean midsize hospital, a hybrid of 19th century red bricks and modern concrete, in the heart of Park Slope, a block away from Prospect Park. I remember Winestone showing me a spacious, high ceiling empty room on the sixth floor: "this will be your office." I looked out of the wooden framed window: blue sky, New York waterways, ferries leaving a long wake, and directly ahead the Statue of Liberty. An office with a view of the Statue of Liberty—isn't this the American Dream? I was in awe. Only later I learned about the surgeon who was fired by Winestone to vacate the position and office for me.

I remember the tour with Jim around the hospital. In the operating room's scheduling office, near the coffee machine, we came across a short surgeon in full scrubs. He was leaning against a Xerox machine, a polyester cup of coffee in his hands. "Moshe, please meet, Dr. Ilkhani," Jim introduced us in his habitual formal fashion, "Rahman Ilkhani is our Chief of Vascular Surgery." We shook hands—yet another spongy handshake.

Ilkhani studied me with a pair of amused dark eyes and said to Jim: "so this is the professor recruited by Winestone"? To my sensitive ears the "professor" sounded sarcastic. This was the first hint to the low-key war of attrition being conducted between the local Iranian surgical mafia and Chairman Winestone.

Next, I recall, Jim took me to the roof of the hospital for a prolonged topographical lecture, describing accurately the vistas to the east, west, north and south. To the south he pointed to the Verrazzano Bridge glistening in the midday sun. "What is that green hill?" I asked.

"This is Staten Island, Todd Hill, many of our surgeons live there."

This is how and why we landed up living in Staten Island.

Late afternoon, after a teaching session with the residents, Winestone took me into his elegant corner office. His personal secretary—I forgot who she was, for so many were replaced over the ensuing years—served us tea from decorated porcelain cups, and Italian dry cookies. Winestone sat himself at my side on the black leather sofa and squeezed my left elbow: "Moshe, do you have any questions, before you leave? The Taxi should be taking you to LaGuardia in thirty minutes."

"Well, what, um, are my chances to get the job?"

"As a matter of fact, it appears to me that the job is yours. I spoke at length with Bob, and I trust Bob very much, he's a friend," —which probably meant to him a good *goy* and not an anti-Semite—"and we did our own homework,"—a smile—"we have our own resources overseas as well."

"What about my Visa, you know I am on H1B, and my New York license would require permanent residence, you know, a Green Card?"

"Leave this to us, we'll organize something, I'll talk to the hospital lawyers to transfer the H1B to our hospital, meanwhile you have to apply for license and a Green Card. It may take some time, but, as a matter of fact, meanwhile you can start functioning on a temporary license."

"I'm very happy and flattered but in what ways would I be contributing to this department?"

Winestone pondered for a few seconds: "When two years ago I took over the department it was in shambles. I had to fire a few full time attendings. I'm changing the culture, which before I arrived, how I should say it, was definitely non-academic. I need you to help me shape up the residency program, and I need somebody I can trust. As a matter of fact, you know, there is a small dispute going on here with some elements that

don't welcome any of the changes I brought with me. I need an ally and from what I hear from Bob- you seem to be suitable."

Money. Ask about money. This is the time. "And how much would the pay be?"

"As a matter of fact, I talked yesterday with hospital president Howard who has agreed to pay you a base salary of \$ 150,000; in addition, like the others, you will be billing your patients and getting forty percent of the income—twenty goes to the Departmental fund, your books, meetings, and so on— forty goes to the hospital.

I could not hide my satisfaction; to me, currently earning 25,000 per year, the 150,000 seemed an immense sum—unbelievable: the end to our miseries and tribulations. And Winestone sensed it, adding smugly: "It wasn't so simple to obtain such a generous sum from Mr. Howard."

"Thank you Dr. Winestone, it's a very generous offer." I replied. I didn't know of course that Jim Rusk's basic salary was already \$ 185,000, and that Winestone's own salary was astronomic and, in addition, he kept 100 percent of his billings.

Winestone accompanied me through the long corridor of the department of surgery; grabbing my left elbow with his right hand, he guided me into the elevator. Over the subsequent years he would prove to be the most agreeable and humane Boss I ever had— almost until the bitter end.

My mood was elated when the Midwest Express airliner approached Milwaukee's General Mitchell Airport. Light rain was falling on the dismal pre-spring expanses, I saw a few patches of old snow, but in my mind I still felt the exciting air of spring in Manhattan—yes, New York is where I wanted to be, New York is where we were going to, the Statue of Liberty—our own liberation, finally—New York, we were coming!

Heidi picked me up in her minivan. Driving back home I recounted, enthusiastically and excitingly, like a child returning from his first visit in Disneyland, my New York adventures: the University Club, Brooklyn —the numerous ethnic restaurants surrounding the hospital, how nice Winestone

is, and of course, the financial offer. At home I told her about the encounter with the vascular surgeon in the OR and his sarcastic comment.

"So that Wiseman or whatever his name is has opposition, how secure is his own position? Heidi asked. I told her what Jim Rusk had explained to me, that a small group of old timers, private surgeons, mostly of Iranian extraction, who previously had dominated the scene, were not satisfied with Winestone and were opposing him, but Winestone was a shrewd politician and very well connected and he knew how to deal with them and, in fact, that he was winning.

"Didn't you have enough political wars in Israel? Is this what you need now? Do you know what they'll say? A Jew bringing another Jew to fight against the Iranians."

"But Heidi, what other options do we have? This is the only real offer I got during a six months search. Without a Green Card, I'm a lame duck. Politics or not, it is either back to South Africa or Israel, or forward to New York and Brooklyn, and hundred an fifty thousand dollars."

"And where would we live?"

"Well, either in Brooklyn or Staten Island."

"Who is living in those places?"

"I don't know, we'll find out."

"I'm not going to live in Brooklyn. When I told you to take the job in Switzerland in 1985, you should have listened to me."

"Sure."

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January, the second, 1996. On the way from Milwaukee to New York. Me with Pimpush, our South African Dachshund, leading the convoy, in the rattling Dodge hatchback; Heidi, behind, in her leased Voyager with the boys and two cats. On the frozen interstate approaching Cleveland, a stone flying from under a passing semi trailer shattered Heidi's windshield; we stopped for the night, dining on a family size serving of Kentucky Fried Chicken and mashed potatoes. The following day, a tremendous rainstorm accompanied us throughout Pennsylvania into New Jersey. A snowstorm was gathering

when we settled for the night at a roadside motel; the distant horizon to the east was bright, illuminated by the great city. In the morning we crossed the Hudson and entered our promised land.

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New York University Club

More pictures below



Chairman Leslie Winestone



New York Methodist Hospital, Park slope, Brooklyn, NY