

UNCLE MENDEL, THE TROUBLE SHOOTER

by

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Something definitely had to be done.

Two lines of antagonistic biology had converged into the obese physical person of Elliot Cavendish. Now he was 40 years old. It seemed there was nothing he could do. It seemed he would be permanently unemployed.

Rachel, Elliot's mother, summoned her brother, Uncle Mendel, a successful businessman, a no-nonsense realist. He was the man for the job. Out of everybody in the world, he'd know exactly what to do.

From his father's biology, Elliot had inherited a tendency to melancholy. Spells of melancholy would last as long as three weeks and they could be alleviated only by a sudden trauma, such as the one this morning. For some reason, Rachel had dry cleaned Uncle Mendel's genuine \$2,500 Rolex wristwatch.

Rachel's biology had contributed to Elliot a relentless necessity to keep busy. In fact he was now in the midst of a self-improvement program - "Teach Yourself a New Career" - that he'd found on the internet and purchased, charging the \$100.00

monthly payments to his father's credit card. Today, as he plunged more and more deeply into his new career, Rachel needed 15 pounds of clothing for her first venture at the new self-service dry cleaner. When she heard the sound of the bathroom shower, she looked over and saw a pair of trousers hanging on the knob of the door. It was an opportunity she could not resist, but it was Uncle Mendel's misfortune that his new Rolex was in his pocket and that he had neglected to lock the door.

At Uncle Mendel's invitation, Elliot was in the bathroom with him and witnessed the whole trauma as it unfolded. At breakfast, as Elliot was explaining the wonderful discovery he'd made, namely, that his new career would coincide perfectly with his philosophy of life, Uncle Mendel had become challenged by the enormous bulge of fat under Elliot's chin. Uncle Mendel interrupted him. "Come with me," he said. "You don't need a philosophy. You need a *schvitz*. I'll take a steaming hot shower. You'll sit there You'll have a Turkish bath. I guarantee you'll lose 10 pounds."

Elliot came in, raised the lid and squirmed onto the toilet seat. "I'll just sit right here. That's all. I'm only making myself comfortable." He watched as the water beat against the curtain and as Uncle Mendel explained the importance of having realistic goals. Periodically Uncle Mendel's soapy hand shot out to emphasize a point. Then, suddenly, in the hot vapors at the

door, Elliot's mother's arm appeared, shrouded like a ghost. It snatched Uncle Mendel's trousers and disappeared as Elliot tried to grab them.

The event dominated everything that day. Elliot's father, Rabbi Abraham Cavendish, emerged from his two week long melancholy and at dinner

Uncle Mendel had managed to open the back of the Rolex with a dinner knife and now was manipulating the mechanism with the tine of his fork. "I'm surprised at God," he said. "Why didn't He advise Rachel that a watch like this you have to take to a professional dry cleaner?"

"Without question, God's will," Rabbi Cavendish said. "Martin Buber, our great philosopher, informs us that the signs of life speak to us. We have but to listen. Yes, I think I will use this episode in my sermon tomorrow night."

Uncle Mendel smoothed his mustache and leaned over to Elliot. "I want you to notice this, Elliot. For two weeks your father contemplates his navel. All of a sudden, tonight, my watch is conversing with him."

Elliot's mother, Rachel, was entering from the kitchen. She froze with a dish of peas in one hand and a plate of boiled potatoes in the other. "I recommend you pay attention to your brother-in-law. Had you locked the door, the entire course of events would be different."

As Uncle Mendel snorted, Rabbi Cavendish seized the pearl-handled carving knife and the serving fork. He attacked the turkey. "What does it mean?" he asked the turkey, prying back a flap of its breast. "A brother-in-law comes to visit. From the time of Abraham the tents of our people have been open to wayfarers. It is a *mitzvah* - it is more than a *mitzvah* - to provide a bed for the weary, food to the hungry, wine to the thirsty. And now, after two full weeks, the wayfarer's watch stops running. I am going to entitle my sermon 'The Warning'."

Uncle Mendel's lips curled. "I am going to puke," he announced. Then, turning to Elliot, he added in a confidential tone, "Please pass the salad dressing."

Rabbi Cavendish was struggling with the drumstick. When he wrenched it free, he held it aloft like a scepter. "Today we are witnessing a miracle." His voice rattled the windows on the sun porch. "It is as if we have a new commandment. Thou shalt feed the wayfarer, but he, the wayfarer, shalt not *schnor*."

Rachel peeked anxiously at Uncle Mendel. She ladled peas onto his plate, smothered them with quivering cranberry mold, speared an oval of white meat and swung it to him across the table in a huge arc. She added an inch of ice water to his glass. She collected the salt, pepper and sugar and set them before him. She stretched out for the pumpernickel.

Uncle Mendel was sitting back, observing. With his arms crossed over his maroon sport shirt, he continued to preside as Rachel shoveled chunks of cauliflower onto his dish and covered his portions with a generous oozing of gold-tinted gravy.

At last he spoke. "Who can eat under conditions like this? Nothing for me, please, Rachel. Heartburn I don't need."

Rachel reached across to insert a fork into his fist, and for a moment he let it waver there. Then he bent forward and harpooned a peach half from his salad. "All right," he mumbled, "since it's here already, I'll eat. But, beginning tomorrow, I take my meals at Korngold's Delicatessen. An angel of mercy I am. A *schnorrer* I am not. In fact, you can look me up in Dun & Bradstreet. I don't notice anybody else in there. Maybe one or two Cohens. Certainly nobody named Cavendish."

Now Elliot began to rise. He clutched one chair arm with both hands and slowly hoisted his right buttock up and over the other arm. It was an awesome process. Rabbi Cavendish gaped at him, a piece of turkey skin protruding from his open mouth. Uncle Mendel stared and made a whistling sound as he vacuumed a line of peas from his knife. Even Rachel paused to watch. There was a perilous instant as Elliot's center of gravity hung far to the left. Quickly he flipped his left buttock. His chair toppled backwards, but he was on his feet. He stood erect, adjusted his necktie and said, "I am alarmed and saddened. The

hostility at this table is juvenile. Since it is apparent that the hostility is directed at me, I shall be in my room. Those of you who care to confer with me may do so there."

Although his voice had the same window-rattling timbre as his father's, it did not have the vestiges of east-European accent. It was a voice of natural quality that had been cultivated further by two years of speech training.

As now Elliot turned and waddled to the doorway, Uncle Mendel was awestruck. "Rachel," he said, "your son's ass! It's not believable."

Rachel was immobile, but only for an instant. Leaning forward with her elbows on the table, she covered her face with her hands. "Mendel, why aren't you doing something?"

Rabbi Cavendish arched his white eyebrows and elaborately cleansed himself with the paper napkin. As he relaxed his facial muscles, webs of defeated wrinkles radiated from his mouth and eyes. His lips formed a word. He sighed, and from the lips a word blew out. It was "Fingerprints."

Instantly Uncle Mendel was on his feet, hurling his napkin onto the table. "What's wrong with fingerprints? When, God forbid, your time comes, who's going to support him?"

Rabbi Cavendish made a gesture he often employed at the synagogue during his sermons. He raised his face to heaven. Fastening his gaze on the metal hemisphere that held the

chandelier to the ceiling, he said, "Lord, I am convinced there is a lesson here someplace. For two weeks I open my house to a man who calls himself a trouble shooter. What does he accomplish? He wants my son to become a fingerprint expert."

Uncle Mendel sat down and gave himself over to a rare moment of silent meditation. At last he said, "He takes it into his head to answer a magazine ad. Encourage him? Of course I encourage him. What else is there to do?"

Rachel struck both hands flat onto the table. Glowering at Rabbi Cavendish, she said, "You're the rabbi here. What is the Lord's answer?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I was thinking maybe he could do something with the vacuum cleaners."

Rachel slapped her forehead. "I can't get into our basement locker. Thirty-eight vacuum cleaners. If I live a thousand years more, God willing, I won't need a vacuum cleaner."

Uncle Mendel nodded authoritatively. "A salesman he isn't."

Suddenly Rabbi Cavendish became apprehensive. He was noticing Rachel's face. It was illuminated. She was having a revelation. Slouched in her chair she sat, staring at nothing. After five minutes, without moving her lips, she spoke. "All right, I know." The statement issued from the cavern of her half-opened mouth. Then she added, "Dentistry."

Uncle Mendel gasped. "This is realistic? With that belly how could he even get into the same room with a patient?"

Hunching forward anxiously, Rabbi Cavendish was recognizing the symptoms. Fifteen years ago, while Rachel was sending Elliot to school to become a television anchor person, she had emerged from exactly the same sort of trance and the very next day had commenced a series of mysterious trips downtown.

He remembered it clearly. At dinner one night she had made her pronouncement. "A star is born," she said. From her purse she produced a large manila envelope, and from the envelope she produced a set of legal documents. She waved a batch of papers at Elliot. "What does a television personality need?" she asked.

"A name," she answered. "What kind of name is Eliezer Cohen? It's an ancient and honorable name. Is it sexy? No, it is not sexy. Therefore you, my son, here you are, you are now Elliot Cavendish. By order of court!"

Elliot sat mutely, staring at the papers in his hand.

Rachel turned to her husband and handed him some documents.

"And you," she said, "you are now Rabbi Abraham Cavendish."

Not only Rachel's victims but, much more troublesome, Rabbi Cavendish's congregation, all had been astounded at the abrupt transition from Cohen to Cavendish. Yet only once in the next 15 years had Rabbi Cavendish dared to question her wisdom. It was immediately after it happened. The congregation's board of

trustees was meeting in emergency session to vote on his dismissal. The night before, as he lay in bed praying, he had cried out, "All right. Him, I can understand, a stage name. That I can accept. But why did You let her do it to me?"

A wrathful voice had answered him. He could hear it even today. It had come from her side of the bed. It had said, "Cavendishes always stick together."

And now Rachel was stirring at the dinner table, emerging from the trance. She began gathering the dinnerware. She grabbed Uncle Mendel's plate and his water glass and even his forkful of potato before he got it to his mouth. She went to the kitchen and came back with a steaming apple pie. Cutting it into halves, quarters and eighths, she shoved a piece to Uncle Mendel.

She said, "Mendel, it's all settled. He is going to become a dentist. You will persuade him."

The assignment terrified Uncle Mendel. As Rachel returned to the kitchen, he pleaded with Rabbi Cavendish. "Talk sense to her, Abe. Even if somehow I convince him to go to dental school, he'll be 50 years old before he finishes."

In Rabbi Cavendish's mouth a piece of turkey was annoying him. It lay wedged between his gold tooth and his bridge or between the gold tooth and the tooth behind it. He was poking at it with his fork. He looked upward and inquired of the chandelier, "Could this be a sign?"

"I'm going to puke," Uncle Mendel warned, but Rachel came to the door and pointed to Elliot's room. Uncle Mendel rose, tucked in his sport shirt and headed down the hallway.

Elliot was lying on his side on the bed, the seat of his trousers a sheer and craggy cliff that rose majestically over the white tufted spread. Uncle Mendel walked around and eased himself onto the stool by the window. Elliot had his \$28 magnifying glass to his eye, and he was examining his fingerprint cards.

Uncle Mendel said, "Tell me. How did you happen to get so interested in fingers?"

"Citizenship," Elliot replied. "Crime is a national scandal."

Uncle Mendel did not answer. A light summer breeze was wafting in from the window, evaporating the perspiration from his brow.

Elliot said, "I am not unselfish in this. Scientific crime detection will be a very lucrative field for me."

Uncle Mendel said, "Does it absolutely have to be fingers? Isn't there anything else - like teeth, for instance - that interests you?"

"Oh, yes. I'm glad you understand me, Uncle Mendel. A scientific knowledge of teeth has solved many crimes. As I

progress, I will also study physiology, chemistry, osteology - in fact, many, many disciplines."

"Osteology?" Uncle Mendel asked.

"The science of bones," Elliot answered.

"Bones," Uncle Mendel said, feeling fresh buds of perspiration erupting on his head. "Please enlighten me. How long will all this take?"

"Five to seven years."

"Your father is an old man, Elliot. He won't be able to support you in something as unrealistic as this."

Elliot's triple chins, hanging lopsidedly to the bed, started to quiver. He said, "I admit I've made a number of false starts. I was hoping this time I was on the right track. I had thought you were encouraging me."

Uncle Mendel sighed. "No," he said.

Elliot let the magnifying glass fall from his hand. He shoved the fingerprint cards onto the floor. Then, like a whale in death throes on a beach, he flopped over onto his back. For 15 minutes he lay with his fat arm across his eyes, his only sign of life the heaving of his stomach.

Uncle Mendel spent the 15 minutes blowing into his Rolex. At last he said, "You've got to learn a trade." In another five minutes, he rose, went to the bedside and planted the watch in

Elliot's stubby fingers. "Here," he said. "Maybe you can do something with this."

He went down the hall and found Rabbi Cavendish reclining in the easy chair in the living room. Although at first Rabbi Cavendish appeared to be sleeping or contemplating, he was, in fact, energetically working on his mouth with a toothpick. Uncle Mendel sat on the sofa opposite him.

He could hear Rachel in the kitchen. The water was running, and dishes were clanking. "Face it," he called out to her. "Somehow he needs to start all over again. There's no choice. It's beyond me."

After a few minutes he turned on the television. As the set warmed, he closed his eyes and in a half sleep visualized a narrow storefront. Customers were lined up for blocks, clamoring to get in. Painted in big gold letters on the window was the sign "ELIEZER COHEN - WATCH REPAIRS."