

# **A CURE FOR ACNE**

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Much of what I have learned about life, business, love and even sex, I owe to my grandmother.

The summer I was fifteen, Pressman, the pharmacist, hired me to be his delivery boy. It was the choice job in the neighborhood. The summer of fifty six was one of the hottest in Brooklyn history and Pressman's Pharmacy was the first shop in the neighborhood to get air conditioning. It was the size of an elevator car and stood midway down the Kentile floor off to one side, with long silver ducts running out across the ceiling. People would come in and browse for laxatives, hair nets, chewing gum, shaving cream or rubbing alcohol just to get out of the heat. Word was that he paid well and his customers tipped above average. His surprise offer came to me out of nowhere, but not, as I later learned, by pure chance. I was chosen.

I had been delivering orders for Pincus the butcher, around the corner. With my father gone, my brother in the Air Force, and my mother struggling to make mortgage payments, I had

to earn my own allowance and also kick in at home. My mother, who had been my father's secretary before they married, had returned to work, riding the hot subways to and from Manhattan and taking in some extra typing at home on the kitchen table in the evenings. Her mother, my grandmother Rose, had moved in with us to help out.

Delivering for Pincus was the first of many full and part-time jobs I would hold through high school and college. My ambition at the time was to be a major league baseball player or a tap dancer. My grandmother said working would keep me out of trouble.

What kind of trouble? Normie Gottlieb broke a window in the elementary school and a police sergeant took his name. Sheldon Krantz got thirty-two stitches from a broken bottle on vacant lot. Stevie The Fish Fishbein got into a fight with some Italian kids, got a hole in the head from a rock as he was running away and forgot who he was for nearly a year and a half.

Working for Pincus meant sitting through long hot afternoons on the bench facing his chopping block waiting for the orders to be ready. Pincus mumbled to himself as he worked. He wore a blood-smeared apron, greasy, crooked spectacles, had a stubbly white beard. He shuffled, stoop-shouldered, back and forth across the sawdust behind the counter in his bedroom slippers, and he had what they called a heavy thumb at the scale.

I watched him chop up the orders, weigh them, and then trim off the fat, wrap them in heavy brown paper and slip them into the number eight, ten or twelve brown paper bags for me to carry out, with the bill, written in pencil, Scotch Taped to the bag. The ceiling fan hummed above, lifting the few long strands of gray hair that Pincus had tried to paste across his shiny

scalp. Only the occasional twang and snap of the screen door and dealing with a walk-in customer would interrupt this pattern. I daydreamed that armed robbers would burst through that screen door, force Pincus into the freezer, riddle the tin ceiling with a tommy gun, empty the register and speed off in a black sedan with me in the back seat as a witness too risky to leave behind. And then my life would begin.

But robbers never burst into Pincus' or any other shop in the neighborhood that summer. The most exciting thing that happened was when Crazy Harold shot a loose rat in the gutter with his M-One after a big rainstorm. But that's another story.

Next door to Pincus was the brothers Manny and Danny's Grocery. Pickle barrels; sour, half-sour, fresh sauerkraut, chocolate grahams by the pound, with or without jelly. Store cheese and Halvah. My mother loved the halvah. She would have a slice every Sunday morning with coffee and a cigarette after breakfast while reading the newspapers. But she sometimes complained that it tasted a little on the edges of cheese.

Manny's and Danny's delivery boy made more money than I did, but he had to schlep heavier orders, pedaling their bulky wagon, sometimes down dirt roads. It looked like a foot-locker mounted onto a tricycle.

For part time work after school or in summer, it didn't get lower than butcher boy. The leap up to the Pharmacy, bypassing such intermediate positions as luncheonette busboy, grocery boy or hardware helper was something like jumping from your school team to triple-A pro ball.

Kids whose families had money spent summers out in the Rockaways or at some

mountain resort upstate, or at camp. After Labor Day they returned with suntans, lanyards, pot-holders, lopsided ash trays and tales of hikes and horseback riding, berry-picking, swimming holes and skinny-dipping with girls. A few of us stayed in Brooklyn, kept up with the major league standings, delivered the orders and played handball or stickball in the schoolyard when it wasn't too hot after work and before supper.

Pressman was a widower. He had asked my mother out on a date some time after my father died. He was a successful businessman, respected in the community. But he was shorter than she was, round as a bowling ball, had a shiny horseshoe of hair, a thin, sinister mustache, and he smoked cigars. She wasn't interested. He was, but soon after I started working in his store, I saw that it wasn't just my mother that he was after.

At that time, attracting a member of the opposite sex was arguably the most important challenge on the mind of almost every adolescent in America, certainly in my neighborhood. It likely still is. How you looked mattered. Your weight, your posture, your complexion. And my Grandmother, this illiterate refugee from a shtetl not listed in any atlas, had discovered, conjured, created, concocted, whatever, one of the great miracle drugs of all time, a cure for acne. Like all her recipes, however, it existed only inside her head and she shared its secrets with no one. Few outside the family even knew of its existence. But Pressman had found out about it, and he was determined to get it.

One afternoon, as I was playing with the sawdust on Pincus' floor with my PF sneaker

and he was whacking away at some shoulder steaks, he suddenly slammed down his cleaver, looked up and called to me.

"Boy."

That was the way he always called to me.

"Boy."

"Yes, Mr. Pincus."

"Here. Go to Pressman's, get me a Bromo."

He handed me a dollar. It had blood on it.

"A Bromo," I repeated.

"Ask him for a Bromo, tell him it's for Pincus, he'll know what you mean."

I knew what he meant. I took the dollar down to the corner and asked Pressman the pharmacist for a Bromo for Pincus the butcher.

"What does he pay you, Pincus?"

"How much?"

"How much?"

I told him it was a dollar and a half a day plus tips. You could make as much as five dollars in tips on Thursdays, which was when the housewives in the neighborhood put in their orders for the weekend. The rest of the week much less, of course.

"I need a boy, my boy just left. I'll pay you seventy-five cents an hour, what do you say?"

"I don't have a bike," I said.

"You don't need one. The orders are small. Prescriptions."

"I don't know."

"All right," he said. "A dollar. But don't tell anyone. You're a smart boy, you can help in the shop too. Think about it, but not too long. I can't go long without a boy."

I learned later that he had fired his former delivery boy for punching holes with a pin or a needle through the foil-wrapped condoms in the drawer behind the counter. A man came in later after I had started working there complaining that his bride had gotten pregnant on their honeymoon even though he had used the rubbers he bought at Pressman's. The druggist convinced the man that even prophylactics are not foolproof, especially when worn by well-endowed, exceptionally vigorous men. The man did not argue further.

I told my grandmother when I got home that afternoon.

Pressman was a goniff (a thief) she said. But then again so was Pincus. A dollar an hour at my age and with practically no experience was something that couldn't be taken lightly. Take it, she said. It's an opportunity.

Pincus took it badly. Pressman had the corner location, Pressman had a new Packard, Pressman took a two week vacation every December in Florida, Pressman didn't have a wife nagging him on the phone ten times a day, Pressman had air conditioning and now Pressman was taking his boy.

"I send him for a Bromo, he brings me back a headache worse than before. Go," he said.

I offered to finish out the week, but he told me not to do him any favors. He mumbled a

Yiddish curse as I left, that I should grow like an onion, with my head in the dirt and my feet up in the air.

"Gay cocken auf dem yahm," I called back just before the screen door swung shut. It means "go take a shit in the ocean."

I saw him as I walked past his window: Frozen in place, cleaver still raised, jaw dropped open and long strands of gray hair dancing upward toward the fan as a big, fat horse-fly circled his head.

The pharmacy was much more interesting than the butcher shop. There was no question but that I had made a wise decision. It was clean and cool and stocked with a great variety of fascinating merchandise. One wall was filled with antique bottles and jars of deep blue or green, with labels bearing the Latin names of chemicals I had only begun to learn about in school. There was a separate cosmetics section and a sundries island in the middle, but no soda fountain, as that had long been the province of the Cozy Corner Luncheonette across the street. Pressman sold greeting cards, gift sets of perfume and toilet water, shaving cream and after shave, Gillette blue-blades that brought you the Fight of the Week, Schick injector blades ("Push-pull, click-click") and cigarettes. He also had a mini post office in the store and he was the neighborhood notary.

Pressman worked mostly behind a high counter at the rear of the shop and you could see the top of his suntanned bald head through the glass pane at the top. A kind of smug professional in a working class neighborhood, a college graduate whose customers called him "doctor," he had enough sense not to sweep it across the way Pincus did. Pressman always wore a white shirt and

tie to work. His suit jacket was draped on a hanger on the back of the cellar door, his perforated summer shoes were always polished. Every day he wore a freshly starched white pharmacist's jacket that buttoned across one shoulder.

Being a pharmacist looked easier than butchering and certainly not as messy. Mostly he took pills or capsules from large bottles, counted them out on a marble slab with a butter knife and put them into small vials as a doctor prescribed them. Then he typed up the labels. The hard part seemed to be reading the doctors' writing. Pressman would sometimes have to call a doctor to ask what he had written. He used the pay phone and he had a trick to get his nickel back. Sometimes he had to mix the preparations himself, using a scale with brass balance weights, a mortar and a pestle.

The delivery boy's dream is that on arrival he will be beckoned to her perfumed back bedroom by a beautiful woman who will be wearing practically nothing. Soft white curtains would billow into the room. She would require the help of a strong young man with something; move a piece of furniture, reach something that had fallen under or behind. Our moist bodies would graze each other. The heat, the scents, the closeness of the room, the stillness of the afternoon, hormones and blood and flesh would all conspire to arouse both of us beyond all bounds to a wild and feverish sexual frenzy.

It never happened. Almost all of the customers to whom I delivered were, of course, sick, often bed-ridden. The packages were, as promised, smaller than those from Pincus; a vial of pills, a bottle of syrup, sometimes also a box of Kleenex or sanitary napkins, a bottle of Milk of

Magnesia or rubbing alcohol. I would ring the bell and they would shout, from a distance; "Wait. I'm coming. Just a minute. Don't go away." When they opened the door, sweaty-faced and feverish, wrapped in a soiled or rumpled flannel or terry-cloth bathrobe, they would be sneezing, coughing, shaking with fever, or spitting phlegm into a tightly-clenched handkerchief.

When I got home each day from work, I gargled for two full minutes with Listerine to ward off the various unnamed diseases to which I had been exposed.

When not delivering prescriptions, I would dust and tidy the shelves and bring up stock. Everything that was upstairs was downstairs, in cartons stacked on ceiling-high metal shelves in the cellar. Shaving cream, tooth paste, talcum powder, after shave and rubbing alcohol moved daily. So did Kotex and Modess, which the women generally preferred to purchase directly from Pressman, with whom they could kibitz and from whom they would usually get an impish smile or a little joke to make them laugh as he rang up their purchase.

Despite his overweight, bald-headed unattractiveness, some women, for reasons I could not fathom at the time, would come to Pressman to discuss various personal problems; matters or situations which, for whatever reasons, they did not wish to reveal to their doctors.

They would come in and linger and, when all the other customers were gone, ask to speak with him in private. He would send me down to the front of the shop to check on the bathing caps. We had enough bathing caps for all the Olympic teams in the world combined and he knew it, but he would send me down to check on them anyway. Then he would take the woman behind

the counter and examine her.

I would immediately slip back to stand in front of the high counter with the locked glass showcase that contained the shelves of vitamin and mineral capsules. Pressman and his customer were on one side of the counter and I was on the other. We were three feet apart. He was short and I was short and so, usually, was she. They talked. I listened.

Mostly they spoke in Yiddish, which my grandmother had taught me as she resisted the English I had been trying to teach her. I was becoming a linguist and nobody knew.

"Ehr farshteit?" she would ask. "Does he understand?"

"Farshteit gornischt," he would respond. "He doesn't understand a word."

"I don't know what it is," she would say. "It's probably nothing, it doesn't pay to go to the doctor, but I thought someone should take a look."

"I'll have a look," he would say.

My legs would tingle and my heart would pound. Every fluid in my body rushed to my groin.

I would hear the snap of a garter, stockings being peeled down, a zipper, or the spring of elastic at the unhooking of a brassiere.

"Are you watching the front?" he would call out to me.

I would slide down to the bathing caps and call back to him;

"Yes, Mr. Pressman" and then make my way back to my listening post.

"There," she would say, "can you see it?"

"Where, here? . . . here? You mean this?"

Sometimes they would go further back, behind the wall to the little lavatory, "where the light is better."

"Watch the front," he would call as they moved around the partition.

I watched the front but my ears were trained to the back, where only an occasional sigh or the run of a faucet might be heard as I struggled to contain my imagination and excitement. How could a butcher shop compare?

The women did not seem to be bothered by his unattractiveness, or his cigar breath. Indeed, they themselves were usually far from pretty; homely housewives most of them, a bit past their prime and either widowed like him or married to tired, hardworking men who themselves lacked even the suggestion of the worldliness conferred on "Dr." Pressman by his professional position and by his prominently displayed diploma from the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy.

Once, after one of his "patients" had left, I found a pair of panties tucked into a shelf behind the counter near the paregoric. They were of a large size, I seem to recall, but newer and silkier and fancier than one might have expected from the housewife who had worn them. The discovery at first aroused me, then made me feel sad; sad for her and even sad for him. I wasn't sure why, but I found myself both envying him and feeling sorry for both of them all at the same time. Still, I thought pharmacist might not be such a bad job after all... if I didn't make it to the majors or become a star like Gene Kelly. That something could be both exciting and depressing at the same time puzzled me.

About two weeks after I came to work for Pressman, he began asking me questions about the acne cream, about which he had heard and whose results he could now observe up close. He asked me how she made it, what was in it. I said I didn't know. He asked me if I could find out.

When I asked my Grandmother that evening, she told me to tell Pressman to go to hell. I reported to him that it was a secret she preferred not to let out of the family.

What is a pharmacist? More than a mere shopkeeper, yet not quite a physician or a chemist, knowing some Latin and less Greek, and schooled enough to decipher and fill our practitioners' prescriptions. He inhabits, for all this, a lonely middle-ground in the neighborhood professional pecking order—a notch or two above the other shopkeepers, but not quite in the same league with the anointed ones, the true wizards, The Doctors. He can, in a sense, become a pretty dependable piano player, but he will always be fingering someone else's arrangement.

If a delivery boy's dream is to be seduced by a horny woman on a hot afternoon, the druggist's is to discover a cure. Pressman had tried. He had concoctions on his shelves for warts, rheumatism and psoriasis. None of them worked. He had been pushing his psoriasis cream in particular the past couple of years and some customers, in fact, swore by it. But there are people, I have since discovered, who will swear by almost anything. The sad truth was that Pressman's Psorex was a dud. It just covered the scales. They were still there, underneath. He knew this and he knew that if he ever tried to go national with it, the Feds would be on him in no time for false advertising.

One of the key ingredients for my grandmother's acne cream, flowers of sulfur, came from Pressman's shop, as did the small, porcelain jars into which she scooped it. But all anyone knew of it was that it was made from sulfur, cold cream, and some herbs and powders she kept hidden away in little bags without labels. The proportions were known only to her. Graduates, beakers, balance scales, pipettes and retorts were alien to her. "A little of this, a shake of that and some of that" was as specific as she would ever be about anything. And when she was fixing a fresh batch, the kitchen was off limits.

It was unquestionably a miracle drug. You could take your Clearasil or Blistex or whatever and fly to the moon and back with it and it wasn't worth the price of its container compared to my grandmother's acne cream. You would dab some on at night before bed and by morning you could pose for an Ivory soap ad.

The only drawback was the stink. The sulfur would react with your sweat and release rotten-egg hydrogen sulfide gas.

"Tell her I could take care of the smell," Pressman said. "We'll make a partnership, tell her. Fifty-fifty."

I told her. She said to tell him she wasn't worried about the smell. She wasn't in the perfume business.

"It's an important discovery she's made," he pleaded. "Think of all the people she can help. She could be another Madame Curie. Tell her."

She had never heard of Madame Curie. There would never be a serious outbreak of acne, she said. No one, so far as she knew, had ever died of it, and the rest of America could take care

of its own pimples. She cared only about her own children and her grandchildren.

"We could make a fortune. Doesn't she realize that? You could be set up for life. Tell her."

People who had too much money, she told me, went crazy and committed suicide. The newspapers from which I read to her, it was true, were filled with many such tragic accounts.

"People who have a lot of money in this country," she would say, "never have enough. We don't have a lot, but we have enough. It's better that way. We don't need a fortune."

He had me dial her number from the pharmacy's pay phone.

"So who is it?" she said when she picked it up.

"It's me, Grandma," I said. "Pressman wants to speak with you."

She hung up on me. Pressman grabbed the receiver, did something with the cradle, got his nickel back and stormed back behind his counter. I asked him if he could show me how to get a nickel back;

"Get me the formula," he said, "and I'll show you."

I couldn't, she wouldn't, and he never did. Early that fall he let me go.

I was in college when she died. I was majoring in speech and drama. Acting classes are filled with beautiful young women. I was a passable actor. And of course I had an unblemished complexion.

I remember how, when she lay in her hospital bed during those last weeks, muted and paralyzed by her stroke, my grandmother would look up at me with her liquid blue eyes, her warm, still hand in mine, admiring, I would imagine, her handiwork.

"Pressman called," I told her on one of my last visits. "He wanted to know if we had any left."

She blinked.

"I told him no. I told him it was all gone."

Another blink.

"He said it was a shame. We could have made a fortune, he said."

Blink.

"I told him it was too late. He sends his regards."

Her eyes widened, ever so slightly. Her hand felt briefly more alive as I clutched it.

She had, through determination and strength of will, escaped from Czarist persecution, journeyed nearly half-way around the world with tiny children in tow, and succeeded on her own terms in a new land, without being able to read or write. She took care of herself and she took care of her own. She wasn't interested in making a fortune.

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