

THE PHILOSOPHER

Serge Liberman

Pinchas Altshul, restaurateur and free-thinker, would not let himself be saved.

"The sentence has been passed," he wheezed through an ironic smile as he watched me adjust the settings of the ventilator beside his bed, "and somewhere the judge is handing over to the executioner."

"We are morbid, aren't we?" I answered, laughing as if to deny any such thing as I tested the apparatus. "You'll be well again yet."

The murky waters of his wintry-grey eyes called me "liar!" but his blue swollen lips said something else. "I respect you. You are a medical man... a doctor, young as you are. So... so let's be honest, hm?"

He was a biggish man with a large head and thinned-down hair combed to a side, with shoulders broad and sturdily square and an expanded torso that heaved wheezily with his every laborious indrawn breath. He'd been brought in during the previous night and the yellowish morning rain-threatened light falling upon him from the window beside him gave his complexion a purple hue.

"Why... why I'm in hospital at all, I don't know," he said with the flourish of a hand. "It... It only lands you with more work and throws the economy deeper in debt. And for what? All just to keep a useless wreck alive."

"Come now," I replied, "no man is useless."

He threw open his arms as if with a gesture of welcome.

"Ah, the doctor is a philosopher, too," he said. "Now that is good to see." Complicating his asthma, Altshul had suffered two coronaries within a month and had been reduced from a man passably fit, if overweight, to a dusky hulk for whom more than moderate movement was an effort and ordeal. He did not, however, afford himself the privilege of self-pity but quoted Scripture instead. "To every thing there is a season," he said, and added, "a time to pluck and a time to be plucked up."

He winked as though he had let me in to some special secret. Then he reached for a pad and pen that lay on his night-table and, arching low and with his brow tightly furrowed, scribbled something hurriedly.

Then the task completed, he sat upright, tore off the sheet of paper and handed it to me.

"S... Spoken words vanish like the wind," he said wheezily, "but the written word can be eternal. Here, keep this."

In jagged script, he had written, "In this world, a man can know but one sure truth. He is born, lives, procreates and dies. All else is invention." Altshul looked satisfied. He scratched his chin with a florid gesture and said, "Pure birds-and-bees stuff. Apart from that, maybe the devil, he knows." The next day, while conducting my ward round, Pinchas Altshul was away having X-rays taken. But, on passing by his bed, I saw an envelope addressed to me attached to the bull-clip of his chart. I took the note, but did not read it until I'd completed the round and some other more immediately pressing essential tasks. I got to read his message just as Altshul was being wheeled back to the ward. Through the sisters' station window, I could sense his gaze from the other side - a gaze that was fixed, palpable, intense.

"In this world," I read, "a man has only one blessed duty. To be human to his neighbour. All else is commentary."

"He's a funny fellow, isn't he?" said Sister Mason who, standing beside me, chanced to read the note over my arm.

Altshul, sitting on the edge of the bed, attached to oxygen tubing and breathing shallow breaths, was beaming. His face seemed to be folded in some private delight. He beckoned to me.

Having missed him during the round, I examined him now and entered my findings in his file. When I finished, he leaned over and asked in a soft almost secretive voice, "You read my note?"

"Yes," I answered, scanning his large cyanotic face.

"And I'm right, aren't I? After all, all that we have in this world are one another, no?"

"Some would say," I ventured, "on whether or not you're a believer." "A believer! You are a philosopher! Listen. My father, may his memory be blessed, he was a learned man. And I nearly became a rabbi. Indeed, I would have become a rabbi had I only possessed the gall to be false to myself." He paused, drew breath, then puffed a sibilant flow of air through his swollen lips. "And once, I was a believer, believe me. I could be nothing else. But Zyklon proved more mighty than God. It suffocated Him before my eyes while the ovens reduced His bones to ashes. And ashes, my friend, I could not worship. - I lost all belief then." "Ashes?"

"Ashes. The ashes of my wife, my twins, my parents, sprinkled and trampled into the slush and excrement of Auschwitz. My God died with them. You are too young to understand. For myself, I survived. I was among the liberated and I survived. Though sometimes I wonder why. And so I lived on. And here, in Melbourne, I married again. A Bialystok girl, a widow herself whose family too had perished in Europe. A common enough story. I'll spare you the details. We had no children, but after Auschwitz we asked for little and we were sufficiently content. I worked as a cleaner, then a porter, a waiter, accumulated some money and opened a restaurant. I even prospered a little. But what good has it done me? After six years, my wife - she was only thirty-five - she died of a brain tumour. So... " - he raised his eyes upwards towards his brow - "So, if you have a friend up there, good luck to you. I haven't. To be a survivor and still remain sane, one has to kill one's faith." He paused, sighed, nodded, and then said, "Yes, in this world, all we can really have is each other."

I became conscious of the smell of ether and disinfectant in the air. A beam of violet dust streamed through the window and I could taste, truly taste, the smoke spiralling from the hospital chimney. Altshul was smiling, as on the previous day an ironic smile. Then, without preamble, he bent closer towards me and said in a voice that carried well across the ward, "I don't have long to live, do I?" The other patients looked around and then, embarrassed, turned away. Caught unawares, I responded on impulse, denying through thwarting laughter what, in fact, was true.

"No matter," he said, "no matter. I know. The laws of birds and bees cannot be denied. Why should I be different?"

He laid a hand on my forearm.

"Doctor," he said. "Don't let me hold you up. Go. The living. They need you." Back at the sisters' station, I said to Sister Mason, "Altshul's really a very unhappy man. He troubles me."

She ticked a list of drugs on the inventory she was just then perusing, said "Mmm" without particular interest and pushed a requisition form towards me for signing. Two days later, Pinchas Altshul took a turn for the worse. He became acutely breathless and spat up blood. A clot had travelled to his lungs; he was blue and in distress. The oxygen bubbled in the flask on the wall and hissed through the tubing to his nose.

"This... this... is... it... , Doctor... , isn't it?" he gasped between short rapid breaths as I inserted a heparin infusion.

"A temporary setback," I said, and "You'll be fine," and "All that's needed is to get the treatment started."

I was, of course, as the saying goes, lying through my teeth.

Both I knew it and he knew it.

He shook his head.

"Please!... Doctor... Be honest!"

"Honest," I said.

He clenched his fists, shook his head again.

"Doctor!" His tone changed to an appeal. "No!... Let's... Let's get it over with!... Give me... Look... , give me... just... just one large dose of morphine... Do it!... Just one... Once and for all... Because I have... I have nothing... nothing to live for... nor anyone... anyone to live for!..."

"Nonsense!" I said, adjusting the infusion rate, thereby for the present not having to face him.

"Have pity!" he said.

I still did not face him square-on, but did venture a glance. His face, though large and formidable, was now also tight about the edges. The veins of his neck bulged, the muscles between his ribs retracted with every breath. "You'll be all right," I parried.

Altshul, for his part, however, was not yet done.

"Doctor... Doctor," he persisted. "My friend... In this world... - when you have the opportunity... , write this down... - in this world... a man can have only one sacred hope... Not to have to suffer... Only that... All else is fantasy." "Believe me," I said, aware even against my better will of the sharp edge that had crept into my voice. "In a short time, you'll be more at ease, just bear with this for the moment. Everything's under control..." Altshul was sitting upright, propped on four pillows. The grey hairs of his chest spiralled in a multitude of coils. He was gasping. The oxygen hissed. His brow was clammy, his lips purple.

"Doctor... ," he said, "Before you go... Just one thing more... What... What do you know of... What do you know of freedom... ?"

"Freedom?" I replied with feigned frowning, yet, given the circumstances, distinctly bemused. "Here we are getting your lungs in order and we keep coming back to philosophy."

He shook his head yet again. This time vigorously, urgently.

"Doctor, it's not philosophy... !" he said. "It's life!" I gathered up the swabs, adhesive tape, tourniquet, syringe. I had other tasks needing to be done and the morning was slipping by.

"Then we'll discuss life maybe this afternoon, maybe tomorrow," I said. "When you're better. Meanwhile, there's treatment to be given, during which you'll soon become more comfortable."

He wheezed through his laboured speech.

"Comfort, Doctor... ?" he said, "Comfort... In the next world maybe... But in this... " A weakly raised palm waved from side to side took the place of words. I was setting to draw away.

"Listen!... " he called after me. "Doctor!... "

The tone was importuning.

"I'll be back later," I said. "Later this afternoon to see how you're getting on."

"Doctor!... "

Having returned to the sisters' station, there to revise orders for his treatment, I watched Pinchas Altshul through the screen. Bolt upright, breathless, his eyes large and grey like an owl's, he looked right and left, up and down around the ward. I recalled what he had told me about his past, his losses and his solitude and, in that moment, was assailed by such a swell of pity compounded by guilt for having been so harsh. I pushed back my chair in readiness to return to him and to hear out whatever else he had wanted to say, when Sister Mason walked in, saying, "Nurse Johnson is dressing Frank Fitzgerald's ulcer, do you want to see it?" I went and for the moment put Pinchas Altshul on hold. That afternoon, while in Outpatients, Sister Mason called me. Her voice over the telephone shook with agitation.

"It's Altshul! Go to the quadrangle! They want you quickly! He's thrown himself over the balcony!"

When I reached him, a cluster of staff had already gathered there - another doctor, a technician or two, students who had been passing through and a nurse. Altshul was blue but still warm. His breathing had virtually ceased and, probing his neck, I felt the flicker of a pulse, slow and faint but not yet altogether hopeless. "Call cardiac arrest!" I ordered as I knelt over Altshul and, bending back his neck, I sealed my lips over his and breathed my breath into him. His chest heaved and fell; his eyes were caves, the pupils were enlarging. His hair, such as it was, was in disarray.

My call of cardiac arrest was superfluous, for, the alarm had already been sounded, bringing on the run a welter of doctors, nurses, porters bringing trolleys, bottles, air-masks, the usual equipment.

Tumult mounted.

"Had heart disease... "

"Has he broken anything?... "

"Don't they supervise them up there?... "

"His right leg's turned outwards... "

"And looks like he's mangled his pelvis all round... "

The details are scarcely important.. After barely five minutes, the resuscitation attempt was abandoned. All dispersed, save for two nurses and a porter who remained to prepare him for taking away. Altshul lay on the asphalt, blue and immobile, his pyjamas parted down to the crotch, his right leg broken, his mouth open, his eyes glazed over. A fly buzzed about his head.

The nurses wrapped him in a sheet and with the porter hoisted his broken body on to a trolley. He was then taken inside. Turning up towards the balcony from which he had thrown himself, I saw the heads of a dozen or so patients who had been looking on. Later, back in the ward, Sister Mason handed me an envelope.

"It was on his night-table," she said, "and is for you." And as she proceeded to tell me how badly she felt about the whole affair - "Matron is sure to blame me, though how could I have known?" - I opened the envelope and took out a note.

The paper was crumpled, as though it might have been subjected to second thoughts - at first screwed up to be thrown away, but then smoothed out again. The script was spindly and more jagged still than in his earlier ones. The note read: "In this world, a man has only one true, inalienable freedom - while living, to choose the timing of his death. All else is pretence." Through the partition at the sisters' station, I looked at Altshul's bed, now empty but already covered with fresh sheets. A yellow-grey light speckled with flickering dust fell across it. I wondered whenever he might yet have been saved.