

ANSWER MAN

CHAPTER ONE

The heart attack

March, 1981

George Grossman was inspecting a rack of newly-arrived men's top coats with Keith Killburn, the manager of Men's Clothing at J.P. Sterling & Sons department store, when, without warning, Killburn clutched his chest and cried out in pain. Moments later, his eyes shot up to the ceiling as if they had been unhinged, and he hit the floor with a heavy crunch, the ancient, worn carpet providing a dubious measure of comfort for the stricken man. Minutes before the ambulance arrived, Killburn was pronounced dead by a doctor shopping with his wife in Furniture.

The unexpectedness of the event stunned George. Killburn was only forty-five, a jogger, a racquetball player, and, in his own way, a missionary bent on converting the world to a diet of salads and fruits. George had thought Killburn would live to be a hundred, and George would never have another chance to become the manager of the department.

At the funeral, the priest described Killburn as a loving husband, the devoted father of two wonderful teen-age girls, and an outstanding community leader. The priest, whom George later discovered hardly knew Killburn, couldn't have been expected to know that Killburn's community leadership consisted of weekly meetings at the downtown Newark Lions Club, where his

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reputation for egocentricity and spreading malicious gossip was well known. As for being a family man, did adultery count?

What mystified George was the priest's assertion that Killburn had been a generous boss, "*a friend of the working man, loved by all who were lucky enough to have known and labored for him.*"

On more than one occasion, George had witnessed Killburn firing an employee in the department arbitrarily, and without as much as a day's notice. When he had axed old Samuel Teitlebaum, a month after Samuel's recovery from prostate surgery, George protested, and almost lost his own job. It was Leon Torchik, the head man himself, who had intervened, the same Torchik who had chosen Killburn instead of George to become manager of the department eight years before.

As the priest droned on, George's mind wandered. Last month he had read in his *1981 New York Times Almanac* that more than half of all Americans died from cardio-vascular disease. According to insurance stats, Killburn could have expected to live at least another thirty years. We worry about the fear of a slow, agonizing death, such as cancer, thought George, but was dropping dead from a heart attack any better? Life to be blotted out without warning, without even a chance to say goodbye to those you loved, was not the way he would like his own life to end.

He observed Killburn's wife and two teenage daughters sitting in the front, handkerchiefs in hand. Did Killburn's wife suspect how often her faithful, beloved husband had entertained Felicia Mangiapani on his office couch during lunch breaks?

Priests, ministers and rabbis glorified the dead, often without the faintest notion of their true character. Wasn't there a middle-of-the-road sermon that managed to extol

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virtues modestly, and still allow the bereaved family to feel that their beloved had been decently eulogized? When George's father, Isaac, had died two years ago, George's sister, Henrietta, insisted that George bury their father according to Jewish law and tradition, though Isaac was a renowned iconoclast and atheist.

Bowing to her pleas, George had hired a retired rabbi who had never known Isaac a day in his life. In a tremulous voice, the old rabbi intertwined fact and fantasy for almost an hour before a packed hall of friends and relatives. By the time he started on God and family, the mourners were sobbing uncontrollably.

And Keith Killburn? Had he actually believed in Catholicism or did he go to church on Sunday mornings to exorcise his weekly crimes against family, friends and colleagues? At least Isaac Grossman was a man you could respect and love.

George searched about the church for other mourners. To his far left sat Leon Torchik, the look on the old man's face characteristically impassive. George suspected that for Torchik a funeral on the first Monday of the month was bad timing, particularly when the person who died had been one of his key personnel.

Directly behind Torchik was Brian Smasen, another clothing salesman and second to George in seniority. Now and then George noted Smasen leaning over and whispering into Torchik's ear.

In the rear, Felicia Mangiapani, head cashier of the department, perched on the edge of the bench, a handkerchief in hand to wipe eyes and a nose that seemed to be dripping non-stop. George worried that Felicia might create a scene, if not at the viewing, then at the church, but Felicia had stoically maintained a low profile, and sat as far from Killburn's wife and children as possible.

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Later, outside the church, Smasen cornered George as George was fumbling for the key to his Datsun. “Too bad about Killburn,” Smasen said. “I guess you never can tell about the old ticker.” Smasen, a thin wisp of a man in his late thirties, tugged on his goatee, which was neatly trimmed for the occasion. Dressed in a sharp, navy blue Dacron suit, currently on sale for \$49.95 at Sterling’s, he looked unusually presentable. “I always say, ‘Here today, gone tomorrow.’ So give it your best shot.”

For the moment, Smasen’s best shot was his third wife, a Cuban émigré’. Maria Louisa, some fifteen years younger than Smasen, danced nightly at a Go-Go club in Hoboken. Now and then, she’d stop in at the store to have lunch with him. Tossing her long, dyed red hair from shoulder to shoulder, she’d strut about the store dressed in a flimsy silk blouse and mini skirt. More than once, George had found himself fantasizing about Maria Louise’s fleshy Latin thighs squeezing the bird-like hips of Brian Smasen into erotic submission.

“How old are you, George?” Smasen asked.

“Just turned fifty.” What about his own ticker, he wondered? His father had lived to eighty, but his mother died in her sixties. Over the years, he’d put on a little roll of flesh around his waist. He was 172 pounds the last time he had weighed himself. At five-eight, that put him about five pounds above the high norm as defined by the *World Almanac of 1981*. Now and then he considered buying one of those stationary bicycles that seemed to be perpetually on sale in the sports department. But how much extra life had daily exercise offered Killburn? Smasen’s fatalism had a ring of truth to it.

“I imagine they’ll be giving you Killburn’s job,” Smasen said.

“Anything is possible,” George said with a shrug.

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Twelve years ago, George had been promoted to assistant sales manager at the request of Harold Phillips, then acting head of the department. When Phillips retired four years later, Leon Torchik had disregarded George's seniority and experience and given the job to Killburn. George's wife, Estelle, had cried anti-Semitism, but George had pointed out to her that other Jews had reached jobs of importance at the store. In his opinion, Killburn, an aggressive salesman, had managed to impress Torchik at the right time.

"I don't give a damn who gets the job," Smasen said. "I don't plan on sticking around much longer in this graveyard. Ten years is enough for one lifetime." He winked. "I've got a few ideas. Big ones."

Smasen was famous for his big ideas. Last year, he was going to buy a horse farm near Freehold and breed pacers. The year before, he had talked about investing in rare stamps and coins. His latest brainstorm was to buy old cars, fix them up and sell them as antiques. His *if I only had this, I could do that* syndrome would sometimes get on George's nerves.

George, himself, had no such grandiose illusions. For the past twenty years he had been satisfied to work at Sterling's in a steady, if sometimes monotonous, job that required no pronounced measure of energy. His greatest satisfaction came from those customers who expressed gratitude at the way he patiently waited on them. Unlike Killburn, for example, George saw it as good business not to give a customer a hard sell. The best salesman always tried to find a way to accommodate a customer's pocketbook, while still giving him a decent piece of merchandise.

"If they don't give you the job, George, you ought to quit," Smasen said.

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George started up the engine and began to back up. “Out of the way, Brian,” he muttered. He suspected that Smasen, though not really a bad fellow, could, under special circumstances, turn into a determined opportunist, one who might well screw you if it was in his best self-interest. All that whispering into Leon Torchik’s ears. He pulled away from the curb without bothering to acknowledge Smasen’s phony little wave.

The day was overcast, the temperature a few degrees above freezing. A late February snowfall had all but melted, leaving only splotches of white on the grassy areas. George, noting the gray sky as he drove home, wondered if more snow might not be on its way. Precipitation in New Jersey was well below its yearly average of forty-four inches of rain and twelve inches of snow, continuing a 1980 trend. The reservoirs were precariously low. At the store, water conservation had become a way of life. In the washrooms, the walls were covered with reminders to shut off faucets immediately after using and to flush urinals only once. George suspected that even if it rained every day for the next two months and the reservoirs were overflowing, the conservation program would continue. Management at Sterling’s believed that cutting costs was the gilded road to profits.

Fifteen minutes later, George wheeled his Datsun into his driveway. The car bumped its way toward the garage and George reminded himself that on the first decent Sunday in April he’d repair the potholes. It was early March, so he still had a month to buy the asphalt and work up a little enthusiasm for the project.

His wife, Estelle, her hat and coat still on, was standing at the stove stirring soup when George entered.

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She registered mild surprise and said, "I thought you'd be going straight back to the store after the funeral."

"The store can wait an hour. I felt like being alone for a while." He had an almost manic desire to go directly into the den to look up "*Death Ceremonies*" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He had not anticipated that Estelle might come home during her lunch break.

"Today, the school cafeteria served hot dogs and baked beans." Estelle tapped the wooden spoon against the side of the kettle. "The last time I ate their hotdogs and baked beans, my stomach went spastic for a week."

"What was that?" George said, still thinking about what information he might find in the *Britannica*.

"Never mind. Have a little something before you go back." She sampled the vegetable soup. "Luckily, I made a little extra." She poured two bowls, and then removed her hat and coat before sitting down at the small, round kitchen table. Obediently, he sat down opposite her. "So, how was the funeral?" she asked.

"A funeral is a funeral."

"You don't think I should have been there?"

"Smassen didn't bring his wife. Neither did Torchik. Anyway, didn't you say you couldn't afford another sick day, that you wanted to save up for the trip to Israel?"

"If we ever go. I read that Reagan wants to sell F-15's to the Saudis. The sixty-four dollar question is: who will the Saudi's give them to? No Jew will ever vote for a Republican again. I think you should write to Mark and tell him to come home right away."

"There won't be any war. Our government could sell the Arabs a million planes and it wouldn't help them. They fight better with camels than with F-15's. Reagan is a smart businessman. He knows that if we don't sell them planes, the Russians will. So why shouldn't we make the profit?"

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“In the meantime, your son could get blown to bits.”

Last year their elder son, Mark, had quit Rutgers law school to live on a *kibbutz* in Israel. To Estelle’s great consternation, the ex-law student was now working in a *kibbutzim* factory making fire extinguishers. “Nothing will happen,” said George.

“You guarantee it.”

“Absolutely.”

Who could doubt that Mark Grossman was the grandson of Isaac Grossman? The boy possessed the same fanatical stubbornness, the same incurable idealism. Mark believed in Israel the way Isaac had believed in the workingman. Only a man like Isaac could have loved some ignorant coal miner in Pennsylvania more than his own family.

“Six years of education tossed down the pipe,” said Estelle. “And Benjy, is he any different? Already I see the signs of someone going nowhere.”

“Benjy’s a good boy. I have faith in him, just like I have in Mark.”

“Yesterday, I found an empty beer can underneath his bed.”

“So? He was experimenting a little.”

“At seventeen, you don’t need to experiment with alcohol.”

“It was only one beer.”

“That was all I found. What’s the use of complaining to you? For you, everything is always perfect. I have news for you, George: everything is not always perfect. We have problems with our children and we can barely pay our bills.”

“Everyone has problems. Why do we have to harp on them constantly?” George spooned a little soup. “Delicious,” he said.

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“Is it going to be enough? How about I make you a nice tuna sandwich?”

“I’m not that hungry.” He continued to sip the vegetable soup. “Killburn built walls around himself. For fifteen years, I could never figure out what the man was thinking about.”

“Are you any different, George?” She blew on the soup. “What about his job? Are you going to get it this time? We could use the extra money.”

“We were okay until we bought this house in Clark.” He was voicing a mild protest. The purchase had been a good investment, but in Hillside, he had lifelong friends and could be at the store in downtown Newark in fifteen minutes, whereas in Clark the commute was thirty, depending upon the traffic on the Garden State. But Estelle had felt threatened by the changing neighborhood and insisted they relocate. His father, Isaac, who had been living with them, stated that he would rent a room in Elizabeth rather than move to that “*red-neck*” Clark Township.” On the day Isaac suffered his fatal stroke, he was still checking ads in the *Star-Ledger*.

At the time, George remembered that Estelle hadn’t been the least bit interested in George or Isaac’s opinions. She had been a determined person, arguing about the increasing crime problem in Hillside. When Teddy Moscovitz, Benjy’s best friend, had been roughed up by several black kids on his way to school, George stopped quarreling with Estelle and agreed to put the house up for sale and move out to the suburbs.

Isaac had called Estelle a hypocrite. She had reminded him that, while he liked to shoot off his mouth, she was the one on the firing line, the one who taught black children at Rahway high school without complaint. She dared anyone to accuse her of being unfair to black

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people, especially her big shot father-in-law, Isaac Grossman.

George left the politics to his wife, his father before he died, and his sons. He voted for candidates who seemed to have some brains, regardless of their party affiliation. He never enjoyed the endless debates that went on in his house over political differences. His family accused him of being a coward because of his political indifference. The accusation never fazed him. George believed that social progress did not depend on the ups and downs of men who sought power; that over the centuries events occurred and morality changed, sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad, without any special rhyme or reason, no different than the variations of weather within a particular season. He wasn't sure whether the world was any better off today than it was five thousand years ago, human nature being what it was.

The Grossmans now lived on a well-graded third of an acre in an eight room bi-level house, which, except for the red front door, resembled every other eight room bi-level house on the block. The only blacks one saw in Clark were domestics and gardeners. Between increased taxes and mortgage interest payments, George and Estelle could barely afford to go to a movie on a Saturday night. To help out, Estelle had recently taken a job working after school and Saturdays as a receptionist for her brother, Harold, a periodontist, who practiced on South Avenue in Cranford.

George had protested when she told him of her decision. "It's going to be too much for you," he had said. "We'll figure out a way to manage."

"We're a root canal from the poor house," was her final word. The next day she went to work for Harold.

That was three weeks ago.

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Estelle went to the refrigerator. "I'm going to make myself a tuna sandwich. You sure you don't want one?"

"Positive." He marveled at her slim figure. She could eat all day and never gain a pound. "You look worn," he said.

"Sure I'm worn," she said indignantly after returning to the table with her sandwich. "After dealing with teenagers all day, I first come home and clean and cook. If we could afford a cleaning woman once a week, I wouldn't look like such a wreck."

"Who said you were a wreck?"

She had a beautiful, round face, her skin still perfectly clear, except for the wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and around her mouth that had deepened with age. This year she would be forty-nine. In June, they'd celebrate their twenty-sixth anniversary. The years had bludgeoned his memory. Sometimes he'd look at her and see a stranger and try to remember exactly when he had fallen in love with her and why he had married her.

"If I get Killburn's job, I want you to quit Harold."

"I'm not counting on it. You seem to be willing to get along on as little as possible."

"I'll find a part-time job."

"Doing what?"

"Alan Levy told me that last year he made over ten thousand selling real estate on weekends."

"You're going to sell real estate?" She made a twisted smile. "When would you have time to read the latest almanacs?"

George curbed his temper. He was tempted to remind her that when they had lived in Hillside they had managed quite nicely without either of them having to work a second job.

They lapsed into silence, deep in their own thoughts. He changed the subject. "I hadn't realized how beautiful

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Killburn's wife is," he said off-handedly. What kind of man would sneak away during lunch with a store employee, and, with the photograph of his wife and children staring at him from his office desk, commit adultery, and then later brag about it to his cronies?

"I'll never understand you, George," Estelle said. "Years ago, when they gave the job to Killburn, you refused to get angry. And if the same thing happens now, you'll say, 'I guess they had their reasons. Maybe next time. After all, it's not the end of the world.' It's always next time for you George. Torchik is a lousy anti-Semite and you know it."

"Not true, Estelle, not true." Torchik was tough, Torchik was arrogant, but he was no anti-Semite. "This is 1981, Estelle. We live in America, not Nazi Germany."

Estelle made *The Face*--lower lip curled above the upper, eyes squinting, the head tremulous, as if afflicted by a movement disorder.

George wanted to tell her that in America Jews were doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and executives in major corporations. Who knew more about the retail clothing business than Jews? If Macy didn't know, ask Gimbel. Estelle liked to dwell on a past of storm troopers knocking down doors in the middle of the night. George contended that if the Jews brooded forever over the Holocaust, they would go crazy as a people.

"Okay," he finally said, "I'll talk to Torchik. You'll see. Before the end of the week, I'll be the new manager of Men's Clothing."

"I'll believe it when it happens," she said.

George smacked a fist into the palm of his hand. "I guarantee it," he said. He looked at her for approval, but she remained silent. George finished his soup, deposited the bowl into the sink, and grabbed his hat and coat. "I'm off, Estelle. Get ready to celebrate."