



# Chop Shop

## *Prologue*

*University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, 1973*

**T**he young man set his glasses down beside the sink, then bent down and cupped handfuls of cold water against his face. He fumbled for a strip of coarse, brown paper towel, straightened, and studied himself in the mirror.

*You can do this, he said to himself. There's a first time for everybody. Come on, Julian, you did a PhD in bioethics at 25. You can do this.*

“Good morning!” he said aloud. “I’m Dr. Julian Zohar.”

*Too eager. For crying out loud, their daughter died thirty minutes ago!* He replaced his glasses and turned back to the mirror.

“I am Dr. Julian Zohar,” he said solemnly. “First of all, let me say how sorry I am—how very sorry I am—how *terribly* sorry I am to hear about little Angela—“

He picked up a file folder, flipped it open, and ran his finger down the page.

“—little *Angelita*. Nice work, Julian. At least get the kid’s name right.”

He took a deep breath, composed himself, and began again.

“I am an Organ Procurement Coordinator for the Center for Organ Procurement and Education. Man, what a mouthful.” He flipped open the file folder and scanned it again:

*Father: Tejano Juarez, age 31, landscape maintenance.*

*Mother: Belicia Juarez, age 26, domestic services.*

“I’m Dr. Julian Zohar,” he mumbled, “and you two are probably a couple of wetbacks who barely finished the sixth grade before you squeezed under a fence somewhere in west Texas. Organ Procurement Coordinator. Organ PRO-CURE-MENT. *Comprende* ‘procurement’? Sure you do.”

He tossed the folder beside the sink and began to pace back and forth in the restroom, gesturing in the air as he spoke.

“Well hello there! I’m Julian Zohar. I was just passing by, and—what’s that? Your four-year-old daughter drowned this morning in a drainage ditch? Say, that is a bit of bad news. But speaking of people who don’t need their vital organs anymore—can I have hers? Oh no, not all of them, just her kidneys. *Riñones*, I think you call them. I can? Well, that’s very big of you! Now, if you’ll just scratch your names here on this multi-page release form I’ll be on my way. And so sorry about Angie, or Amy, or whatever her name was.”

He stood silently in the center of the restroom for a moment, then turned back to the sink. He opened the spigot, plunged both hands under the stream, and watched the water run off. Minutes went by.

Finally, he looked up at his image once again, slowly leaned forward, and pointed at his own face.

“I am Dr. Julian Zohar,” he said deliberately. “I learned less than an hour ago about the tragic loss of your daughter. I cannot tell you how sorry I am. I have no way to comprehend your feelings of loss and grief. But I came here today to tell you that your daughter’s death does not have to be in vain. Even now, even in death, she has the ability to save another little girl’s life. Just a few miles away from here, over at Childrens Hospital of Pittsburgh, there is a little girl dying of end stage renal disease. Your daughter is the right size, the right blood type, and they are reasonably histocompatible. I am asking you to release your daughter’s kidneys for transplant. Without them, that other little girl will die—and you have the power to prevent it. One little girl died this morning. Please don’t let there be two.”

Just then the restroom door swung open with a pneumatic sigh. In stepped the figure of a priest.

“Please forgive the intrusion,” he said. “I’m looking for Julian Zohar.”

“You’ve found him.”

“I’m Father Anduhar,” he said, extending his hand. “I received a call this morning about the Juarez family—about their loss.”

“I didn’t call you,” Julian said.

“The Family Services Coordinator called. I understand that you’re preparing to approach the family about organ donation. In such cases, it’s often helpful if a member of the clergy is there to assist.”

“No thanks.” Julian stepped past the priest and pressed the hand blower with the butt of his palm.

“May I ask why not?” the priest said above the low roar.

“Sorry,” Julian said, rubbing his hands smoothly one over the other.

The priest waited patiently for the roar to subside. “Why not?” he said again.

Julian turned to him. “I’m about to ask a mother and father to allow a surgeon to cut out their daughter’s kidneys. Their daughter is dead. They *know* that, but they don’t *feel* it yet. Clinically speaking, there’s a very fine line between life and death; emotionally, there’s no line at all. The last thing I want is a priest talking to them about ‘the resurrection of the body unto life everlasting.’”

The priest shook his head. “You misunderstand. The Catholic Church wholeheartedly endorses organ donation—“

“It’s not what you endorse, it’s what you *represent*,” Julian said. “You tell the family, ‘Angelita lives on! She can hear you, she can see you. Talk to her, pray for her.’ *I* tell the family, ‘Angelita is *dead*. She cannot hear, she cannot feel—so give me her kidneys. Let someone use them who *is* alive. You encourage people to dwell on the dead; I want them to think about the living. No thank you.”

The priest shook his head. “If you fail to care for the dead, you fail to care for the living.”

Julian stepped toward the door. “You go ahead and sprinkle your water and wave your incense. Say your prayers for the dead—Me, I work with the living.”

The priest stared after him in astonishment. “Remarkable. You have no faith at all, do you?”

Julian turned back again. “Let me tell you what I have faith in,” he said. “One year ago, a Swiss biochemist named Jean Borel discovered an amazing immunosuppressant called *cyclosporine*. It’s made from a common soil fungus. Up until now transplants have been hit or miss, but when cyclosporine hits the market it’s going to revolutionize transplant technology. No more massive tissue rejection, no more 20% survival rates... Can you imagine? People living ten, twenty, thirty years longer; people surviving cancers and overcoming genetic defects; people extending the duration and quality of their lives because they can get *parts*. And not just kidneys and the occasional liver; I’m talking about intestines, lungs—even hearts. *Hearts!*”

“And when all this happens, Father whatever-your-name-is, you know what the greatest barrier to transplantation will be? People like you: people who encourage others to focus on the past instead of the future. Because even with all that wonderful technology, people will still have to be *willing* to give up their organs—and that has to change.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not all cultures are as individualistic as we are in the west. Here, we assume that each individual should possess sovereign rights over his own body—even after death. In more communal cultures—more *enlightened* cultures, in my view—they believe that the community should assume the rights to your body at the moment of death, and the community should then be free to use your body for the greater good.”

“That’s frightening.”

“You think so? What frightens me is the idea that the dead should have power over the living. That’s your world, not mine. I want to make people understand that it’s not just a privilege to donate an organ, it’s an obligation.”

“You’re going to tell this family that they’re *obligated* to surrender their daughter’s kidneys?”

“I’m going to tell them whatever it takes,” Julian said.

“That is immoral and unethical.”

Julian smiled. “I have a PhD in bioethics,” he said. “You want to talk ethics? What’s the greater good here: that a family should be allowed, through ignorance or selfishness or superstition, to allow perfectly good organs to perish, or that those organs should be used to save another human being’s life? What do you think, Father? Should one little girl die today or two?”

The priest said nothing. Julian turned and pulled open the door.

“I think you are a very great fool,” said the priest.

“I am the future. You are the past. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a life to save.”

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Julian peered through the waiting room window at the grieving Juarez family. There were six of them huddled loosely around an orange vinyl sofa in a *tableau vivant*; Julian studied the setting the way a painter would analyze the composition of a painting.

Seated in the center was a grey-haired woman; she held her head in her hands and bobbed back and forth, wiping at the corners of her eyes with the tips of her fingers.

*Grandmother. The beloved matriarch. The tent peg of the family, the one with the strongest sense of loyalty and tradition. She can turn the whole family if she wants to.*

A younger woman sat stroking the old woman's back, reaching across to pat the face of a crying sibling, stopping only to cover her own face and let out a shuddering sob.

*Mother. The backbone of the family, the one who holds everyone else together. No matter what she feels, she'll do what she thinks is best for the rest of them. She's the lever, the one who can move them all.*

Three children orbited the grieving women like little satellites. The oldest, a girl, stood weeping beside her mother. Her younger brother cried more gently, grieving more over his mother's pain than over a death he could not yet comprehend. On the floor, an even younger boy sat blissfully flipping through the pages of an activity book.

*Daughter. The only one of the three who's really a player. She's the catalyst, she holds the family's heart. If she trusts me, the rest will follow. I can reach them all through the daughter.*

To the left, standing at a distance and facing away from the rest of the family, stood a small, sinewy man with a copper face and a tangled moustache. He was dressed in work clothes: sagging denims that hung down over mottled grey boots, and a faded grey T-shirt with a gaping collar. He stood with his hands jammed deep in his pockets, pacing back and forth in quick steps like a stallion that wants to bolt but has nowhere to run. His eyes alternated between confusion, grief, and rage—but rage was winning out.

*Father. The alpha male. He has all the anger, he's the wild bull. I can ride him or he can trample me. He has the ego, he's the one to stroke.*

Julian took a deep breath, tucked the file folder under his arm, and rapped on the glass.

“Good morning,” he said as evenly as possible, “I'm Dr. Zohar.”

The father stopped and looked at him, his eyes brightening.

“There is news?” he said excitedly. “Something has changed?”

Suddenly, the entire tableau broke apart before Julian’s eyes. The mother sprang to her feet and rushed toward him, grasping Julian’s forearm with both hands. The children swept in behind her like flotsam in the wake of a boat. The father charged forward and then halted, staring in wide-eyed anticipation.

And then, worst of all, Julian saw the grandmother struggle painfully to her feet and shuffle forward. He had made the old woman rise—and for nothing.

A terrible moment of silence followed.

“No—there’s no change. Angelita is still... I mean, I’m not that kind of doctor.”

Julian felt the mother squeeze his arm again, and then release. He saw three pairs of youthful eyes turn to her for explanation. He watched the older woman’s shoulders round and her body sag as though she might drop right where she stood. Worst of all, he saw the rage returning to the father’s eyes. Julian bit his lip. By raising their hopes, even for an instant, he had caused them to look backward. Now his job would be twice as hard.

“Then what do you want?” the father growled. “Leave us!”

“I just stopped by... to see if... if there’s anything I can do,” Julian stumbled.

“What can you do? You can bring my little Angelita back to life. Can you do this? No? But you are not that kind of doctor.”

The women had returned to the sofa now, weeping freshly and glancing resentfully back at Julian.

“I came to tell you that your daughter’s death does not have to be in vain.”

The father turned to his wife and shrugged. “¿*Qué quiere decir?* ‘In vain.’”

*“Inútil,”* she translated. “Useless.”

The father whipped around in a fury. “Angelita’s death was not *useless*. What do you want from us? Is this how you help?”

“No. I’m sorry. Please—let me explain.” He stepped to the sofa, smiled, and rested his hand on the little girl’s head. She ducked away and leaned against her mother.

“There is another little girl. She is very sick. She is in a hospital right now, not far from here. Angelita can help her.”

“Angelita can help no one. Angelita is dead.”

“She can still help. *A part* of her can help.”

The mother squinted at Julian in confusion—until a look of horrified recognition began to spread across her face like gangrene.

Julian saw it. Seconds were critical now; he plunged ahead.

“We want your permission to remove your daughter’s kidneys. The doctors want to transplant them—*place* them—into the little girl who is sick. This can save her life.”

The father turned again to his wife and mother. There was a flurry of Spanish between them: “*Angelita... los doctores... sus riñones... trasplante.*”

“*Madre de Dios,*” the old woman groaned.

The father stumbled back as though he had been punched in the gut.

“Is this why Angelita is dead?” he said. “Did the doctors even try to save her?”

“Mr. Juarez, of course they did. The doctors here did everything in their power to—“

The father charged forward, jerked the file folder from under Julian’s arm, and handed it back to him. “The girl in the hospital,” he said. “What color is she?”

“Mr. Juarez, it makes absolutely no difference—“

“*What color is she?*”

Julian fumbled open the folder and ran a finger down the first page, focusing on nothing at all. He knew the answer before he opened the folder.

“The little girl... this particular little girl... seems to be of Caucasian descent.”

“Anglo!” the father spluttered. “Angelita is dead so an Anglo can live!”

“Mr. Juarez, this has nothing to do with race—nothing whatsoever.” Julian listened to the sound of his own words. The harder he protested, the more hollow the words seemed to sound.

“Mr. Juarez, listen to me. Angelita is dead. She feels nothing.”

“*I feel! I feel!*”

“You have the power to save a little girl’s life.”

“And you! You had the power to save *my* little girl’s life!”

“Mr. Juarez, try to think of the other girl’s family.”

The father stared at Julian in amazement. “My Angelita is dead less than one hour. You come to me and say, ‘Please! Give me her *riñones!* We will cut her open! And then you ask me to think of *another* little girl? Get out! Get out of here!”

Julian turned silently to the door and stepped out. As it closed behind him, he looked one last time at the family of Angelita Juarez, a little girl whose perfect little kidneys, through a series of chemical changes, would soon be reduced to two lumps of decomposing waste.

*Waste.*

Angelita was dead—and so was the little girl across town.