

SUNDAY MORNING TIE MEN

by

Megan Vered

I am smearing cream cheese on my poppy seed bagel when there's a knock on the front door.

Who could that be on a Sunday morning? my sister asks.

My grandfather often wanders over on weekend mornings, but he never knocks.

I'll get it! I yell and bound down the hall toward the front door, tightening the belt of my robe as I go. I stand on tiptoe, turn the knob and open the grated metal peephole.

Hello? May I help you?

Good morning. I'm looking for Mr. Leonard Hesterman.

I grab ahold of the fat brass knob and pull the door toward me. A man in a suit and tie with pointy shoes and greased-back hair stands at the threshold. He holds a large manila envelope under his arm. He looks formal, out of place against the backdrop of Sunday morning pajamas. I look him over from head to toe, wondering what is in that envelope. *Just a minute please.*

I am familiar with these men. They always appear on Sunday mornings. But I've never been the one to answer the door, at least not by myself. Skipping back to the dining room, where on a day like today I can see past the Bay Bridge I say, *Daddy, one of those Sunday morning men is at the door. He asked to see you.*

Daddy shifts in his chair, pushes back the sleeves of his JC Penny's striped cotton pajamas. He turns to my oldest brother, who sits next to him. *Tell him I'm not home.*

The smell of toasted bagels and salty fish tempt me as I return to my chair. I aim my fork at a thin slice of pink lox. I kick my feet back and forth under the dining room table, and reach for the metal pedestal with my toes. Now that I am eight, I am getting closer to touching it. My brother gets up from the table, goes to the front door.

Who the hell do those sons of bitches think they are, disturbing my family on a Sunday morning? My father mutters at no one in particular. Then he gives me his serious face. I avoid looking him in the eye, glance at my mother. The fingers of her left hand curl into a fist, the way they get when she is feeling worried.

My father looks at me through the thick glasses that keep him from being almost blind. *When those men come to the door—who we don't know and aren't our friends—tell them I'm not home. They have papers they can only leave if I'm here to accept them. Papers I don't need. That means I'm not home. Understand?*

Rule following is not my best suit, but I know this one carries weight. I can see it in my father's finger, the one he uses for emphasis. I tell him I understand, nibble on my bagel and smile.

Later that day in the backyard I ask my brother, *Who are those Sunday men?*

He yanks my braids and tells me they're process servers.

Process what? I ask. *Processed cheese?*

Process servers. When they come we have to say Dad isn't home.

Why?

They have important papers. Legal stuff.

Is that bad?

He shrugs his shoulders. *Dunno. He just doesn't want to read them.*

I like to read, but can imagine that there are some papers that people might not want to see, like math homework. I think about my father's eyes and how, even with his bulky glasses, he has to hold the newspaper to his face to read it.

Maybe it's too hard for him to read that stuff?

My brother makes a hissing noise through his teeth. *He can read that stuff, Megan. He just doesn't want to!*

Another question pops into my head. *How do they know where we live if they're not our friends?*

Just then my other brother shows up with a football under his arm and within seconds the two of them are wrestling each other to the ground. I want to ask more questions like why our father doesn't want those legal papers and why the men come on Sundays in suits when we are in pajamas. And what exactly are legal papers? But I already know my brothers won't give me the answers I'm looking for. They're too busy and think I'm not old enough to understand.

What I come to understand as I get older -- is that my father uses his fancy mind to outwit everything and everybody, from the water and power company, to the loan officers at the bank, and the IRS. As a result, periodic power outages occur due to his failure to pay the bill. These mishaps mortify my no-hair-out-of-place mother, who discovers there is no power in the house the first and only time she invites the temple ladies for tea. Properties and cars are regularly repossessed. Business partners disappear

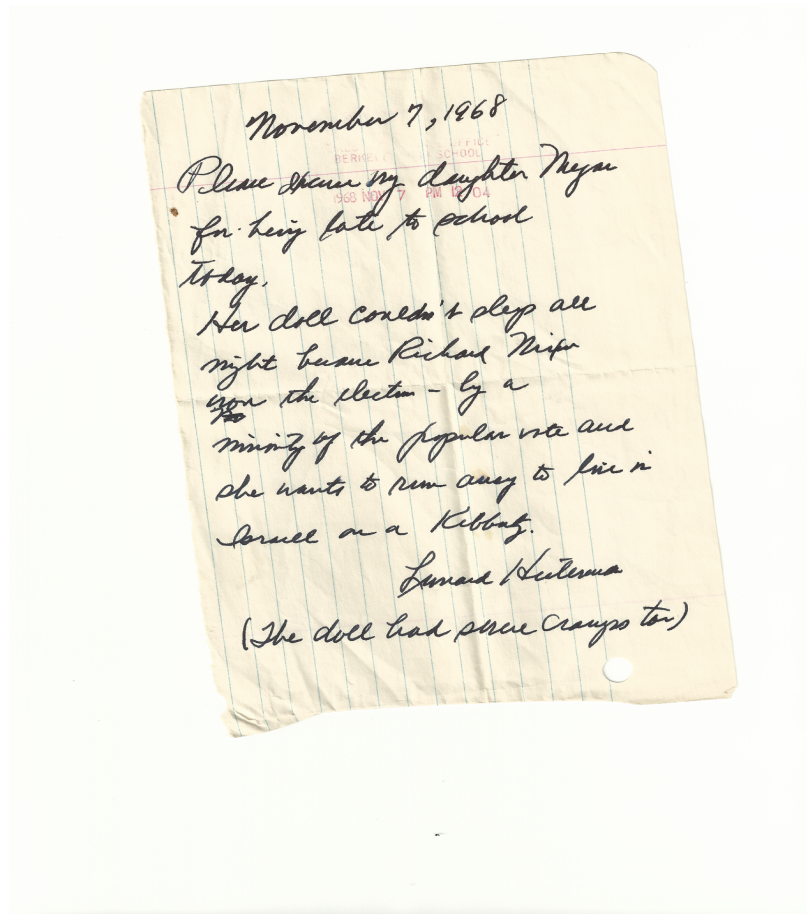
like vapor into the night and the Sunday morning tie men continue to show up at the front door. My father laughs it off every time. His best and recurrent line of defense is “clerical error.” It takes years before my siblings and I—all witness to this unrelenting high stakes chess game—come to recognize that we are complicit partners in our father’s masterful evasion plan.

Despite his astonishing ability to slip in and out of shadows, there are those who attempt to hold him accountable. My younger sister Eve is one. From the time she is old enough to hold a stubby pencil in her tiny hand and add numbers on paper, she keeps a logbook of the weekly allowances and lunch monies that are promised and fail to materialize. A pint-size journalist, she circulates among us asking what we are owed, presents him with her “spread sheet” and demands he pay up.

As I grow into my teen years, I admire my father’s unquenchable thirst for rule-breaking. In seventh grade, I steal a comb from the five and dime and—unlike most teens, who would only admit such an act to their locked diary—I march home and tell my father. I am positive he will be proud of me for beating the system. Instead, he gives me a half-hour lecture on how wrong it is to steal, which segues into a painfully long monologue on economic theory. He emphasizes that when I steal it upsets the economic equilibrium.

I am devastated and perplexed. What I learn from my father that day is that it is okay to lie to process servers and trick people out of their money in a business deal, but not okay to steal a comb.

A few years later, my father makes it up to me. I happen to be sick the day Nixon wins the presidential election. Here is the note he writes for me the following day, which makes the attendance lady's face turn sour.



After I graduate from high school two things happen that would bring most men to their knees. For my father they are grand *woohos*, dynamic fodder for the tall tales he loves to spin.

One afternoon an older woman from the neighborhood appears at our front door. I recognize her as the woman who lives up on Hilldale, with the German accent and gray hair pinned in a bun at the nape of her neck. A small purse dangles from one arm and she

holds a folded copy of the Berkeley Daily Gazette in her other hand. She turns the newspaper toward my mother, drawing my mother's attention to a small posting circled with black ink. She asks if she can tour the house. My mother gasps when she sees that our house is going up for public auction due to unpaid back taxes. In a restrained voice she tells the neighbor there must be a misunderstanding and politely ushers her out the door. When my father comes home that evening he brushes it off, saying, *It was all a big mistake. Papers were misfiled.* We never hear about it again.

Early that September, just before leaving for college, I arrive home early one morning after a sleep over at a friend's house to find my mother in high action mode. Fully dressed, she is slipping on heels. Then she grabs her purse and car keys.

Where are you going Mom? It's 7AM.

I'm going to pick up your father.

On a normal day at 7 AM my father is at the head of the dining room table ritualistically placing three saccharin tabs into his morning coffee.

Where is he? I ask, worried that he has lost his glasses and fallen into a ditch.

Alarmed, I repeat, *Where is he at 7 AM?*

If you must know... he's in jail.

In jail? What for?

She gazes into my face. *You know your father, honey.* My mother—the silent sufferer who combats my father's chaos by going underground with migraines—leaves in a flurry.

Internal landslide. Did a cop car with sirens pull up in front of the house? Did they handcuff him? Did they use force? When he got to the jail did they make him empty

his pockets? Was he in a cell by himself? Did they make him wear one of those orange jump suits? Did he get to call his lawyer? Did they take away his glasses, leaving him practically blind? Unlike many of my friends who consider being arrested a status symbol, I have never been to the Berkeley police station.

It is not long before my parents walk through the front door. My father looks perfectly normal. Like nothing happened. He makes a joke, hugs me, sits at the table and waits for his coffee to be served. I watch the saccharin drop into the steaming liquid and without even realizing it, chant *kerplink, kerplank, kerplunk*, as each one fizzes and dissolves. It's a game my younger sister and I have played with him at the breakfast table since we started talking.

Later, I hear him talking to one of his zillion attorney friends on the phone.

Stupid son of a bitch clerk. Another mistake.

I don't dare ask him what happened. Asking my father questions about high profile legal mishaps is like asking an alcoholic which bar he went to the night before. Anyway, if I were to ask him I would get his stock response, *Beware of the tight asses honey, they rule the world.*

Lying in bed later that evening, I count the boards in my ceiling. I know exactly how many there are, given that this is a nightly routine. The bass notes of my father's laughter filter up from the dining room, where I am sure he is in full spin, recounting yet another hilarious story. The shock of his arrest is already becoming diluted. Soon it will be just another piece in the collage of unrest that has defined my teenage years.

Demonstrations, sit-ins, tear gas, handcuffs, paddy wagons, Blue Meanies, Black Panthers and the National Guard.

Consumed with the recent turn of events in my love life, I turn to my diary. My current heartthrob, who I know is back from travelling in Europe, has not called.

i know he is back in town. why won't the phone ring? phone, please ring. i just want to hear him say, hello is megan there? phone, please ring. cardboard boxes are collapsing from the middle inward, roof after roof tumbling down, floating to the ground. its such a secret place...the land of tears.

It is not until years later, after my father's death, that I ponder the Sunday Morning Tie Men, the stolen comb and my younger sister's quest to make an honest man out of our father. Bounced checks, unpaid bills, tainted business deals, repossessed properties, tax evasion, and endless lawsuits. It has been over thirty years, and still, I hear his insistent voice in my ear, *Beware of the tight asses, honey, they rule the world.*

THE END