

Aaron Hauser

My Method Bleeds a Pickle

I tell Mother not to fear for me, and she talks over me.

We talk over breakfast in Sol's Deli. Mother talks over me about finding a husband. She looks away from me. She looks at the people at the tables around our booth. She looks at them and talks over me, and I talk under her. I talk under her about the blind date last night, the blind date she pushed on me. I love Mother. I take every blind date she pushes on me. The blind date last night, the one she pushed on me, was like the other men, smart, but not smart the way I like. The blind date last night had the education smarts, even the master's in business smarts, even the common sense smarts, just not the smarts I find attractive. I like a sharp mind, split-a-hair sharp, hair-split sharp, and twisted. I need a mind that takes months to figure out. Harry Cohn, that was the blind date's name, was simple smart.

"So he wasn't an Einstein," Mother says. Mother spreads cream cheese on her bagel. "I thought he was very intelligent. Smart enough to date my daughter."

"Yes, Mother," I say.

The smell of burnt coffee overwhelms my mushroom omelet. I push butter through the hole of my bagel to the flat side and scrape it against the edge. I spread the butter over the entire surface. Clean and covered. I drag the fork across the clean butter. The fork makes even straight lines across the butter. Even a bagel deserves a method. I come by my methods naturally, and my methods take time. Mother does not understand my methods. The lines on her face sink deeper into the recesses and pull down her dark brown eyes. Her wide lips form a strained crease.

"Sarah, darling, must you do it that way?" she asks. The ends of her wide lips have dropped. Her eyes wander to the other tables. Her face falls into a sagging weariness that ages her ten years. She fears for me, I can tell.

"How well did you really know Harry?" I ask. My shoulders tense and pull at my chest.

"Such mishigas with a bagel," she says.

"Mother. Harry?"

"I met him at a lecture," Mother says. She turns her head away. Her sharp white hair holds form even in motion. Her earrings are heavy silver tubes that pull on her lobes. The long silver tubes brush

against her shoulders. She wears a rust crepe blouse with wide pleats and sleeves that billow about her arms.

"You said he was the son of a close friend," I say. I bring my hand up and it brushes against the bottom of the table. The table is unstable and rocks up and down. Water sloshes out of my glass. A wet circle expands around the glass.

"What would you have said if you knew?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I just would've liked to have known all the information before agreeing to go out with him." I bite into my bagel. My bite creates a smooth line on the bagel. The butter is warm against the top of my mouth.

"Honey, you might as well live life to the fullest while . . ." She turns her head away, and the silver tubes of her earrings clink against each other. The clinks of her earrings split moments into microseconds. She fears for me, I can tell. Something about the jumbled voices of the diners around us calms her.

"Harry seemed like a nice, intelligent man," Mother says. "Don't you think you could learn to love a man like him?"



The blind date Harry Cohn split time by clinking his wine glass against mine. He clinked his glass against mine over and over as if we celebrated years together. The first few times, I held my wine glass up to his. I grew tired and stopped raising the glass. He clinked the glass whether I raised it or not. He angled his glass and spilled wine into my plate. Between toasts, Harry Cohn filled time with the only kind of time-fillers a financial analyst could manage. Numbers. Numbers are Harry Cohn's life, and evidently, he thought I should fill my time with numbers. His numbers. He sat across the table with his short flat hair and his conspicuous glasses. He sat across the table and took time away from me. He split my time between the clinks of wine glasses and visits from a tall waitress named Evelyn. The waitress Evelyn wore a black T-shirt with rolled sleeves and black gabardine pants. The waitress Evelyn looked at me with sympathy. The waitress Evelyn touched my arm once as if to say she had had her share of Harry Cohn blind dates.

I ended the date before darkness came.



The name tag says "Jean." The waitress Jean wears black pants and a crisp white shirt with an open collar. Around her waist is an apron

with pockets for her notepad, pencils, and tips. The waitress Jean has straight black hair with a split down the middle. Her straight black hair falls flat against the side of her head. Her face is chubby and dark as if the volume of her blood swells in her cheeks. The waitress Jean fills Mother's coffee mug, then mine. Smart how the waitress Jean pours it into the mug at an angle. No spill. She has a method to her pouring that rises to a quarter inch from the top. Clean and smart, her method. The waitress Jean hits the right measurement and leaves.

"You lied," I say.

The lines on Mother's face flatten. She holds her lips open for a few moments, silent. Her lips circle around the silence. The silent circle upon her lips grows and envelops our table.

"I wanted my beautiful daughter, who's become too thin, by the way, to go on a date, so I fudged a bit," she says. "If not Harry, what about Sol? He's smart, and very successful."

Mother points at the owner of the restaurant, Sol Lehrer, who sits behind the cash register. I love how her finger points at the owner Sol Lehrer. I love how her finger avoids notice. Her finger darts in the air and faints into a curve as if to make a point. I love how her finger points at the owner Sol Lehrer, because I have the same movement, when I point out men. I imagine my own finger in the same movement toward the owner Sol Lehrer.

The owner Sol Lehrer has black hair with a square flat face with small eyes and a short rounded nose. His shoulders are level lines from his thick neck. The owner Sol Lehrer holds his shoulders back. He pushes his chest forward and smiles at a customer. His hands dance. Sweat has soaked through his thin blue shirt.

Mother continues to point at the owner Sol Lehrer.

"Please stop, Mother," I say. I take another bite from the bagel. The second bite breaks the first. The third bite breaks the second. My method breaks a bagel smaller and smaller into nothingness.

"Such a successful man must be intelligent," Mother says. She gathers her fingers and points at the owner Sol Lehrer with less precision.

"Success might prove something," I say, "But he's really not my type."

"Why not?" Mother asks.

I rub my fingers against the seam of the vinyl cushion beneath me. The seam of the vinyl cushion is broken and the frame is a sharp

edge. The frame is sharp against my fingers. The sharp seam cuts against my fingers. My heart pulses. I roll the fork across the table.

Mother looks at the owner Sol Lehrer.

"I think he's a very attractive man," Mother says.

"In a restaurant owner sort of way," I say. My fingers are warm and raw against the seam.

"What does that mean?" Mother says. Her lines deepen. Her eyes drop. The skin tightens around her jowls.

I stab the pickle on my plate with my fork. I have a method for a pickle. I stab the pickle with my fork until holes line the pickle from end to end. The juice bleeds from the holes in the pickle. My method bleeds a pickle.

"I thought Sol was married," I say. My fingers press a raw pulsing line against the seam. I extend the line, and my fingers are hard against the sharp edge of the seam. The seam cuts a deep line across my fingers.

"His divorce was final last May," Mother says. "I'll call him over." Mother's finger is pointing at the owner Sol Lehrer again.

"Mother, no." The seam cuts a deep line into my fingers.

"Sol, honey . . ."

"Please don't do this, Mother," I say. My fingers stick to the seam. A deep crease in my fingers aches and my head swims in warm light. Mother's hand drops. She turns to look at the waitress Jean.

"Waitress," Mother says.

The waitress Jean approaches. She walks with precision. The waitress Jean walks as if lines were drawn between the tables. Lines like lines between neurons in the brain. She finds the lines and holds to them. The lines are guides. The waitress Jean follows a line and arrives at our table.

"Yes, ma'am, how may I help y'all?" the waitress Jean says.

"Could you fetch Sol for us, please?" Mother asks. "I would like to speak with him." Her chin is lifted. Mother is the queen of love. The queen of love makes a special request of her court.

"Ma'am, I'm not sure I can get him away from the cash register," the waitress Jean says.

"Tell him Doris Lichenor wants to see him," she says. "My lovely daughter Sarah too. He'll come. I'm sure of it."

The queen of love forgives the waitress's challenge. The queen of love insists the court bend to her will.

"Mother, this is ridiculous." I put my hand on Mother's arm. Her crepe blouse cools my fingers. "He's busy. You shouldn't bother."

"Nonsense," she says.

I remove my hand from her arm. My fingers stick and pull at Mother's blouse. A mark remains on her blouse. My heart pounds at the faint mark left on her rust blouse.

The owner Sol Lehrer approaches with straight hips, chest out, and shoulders back. His flat shoulders push his square head forward like a misshapen camera lens. His hair folds about his square head like a shag vest. The owner Sol Lehrer blunders through waitress Jean's lines. He walks as if he is going to throw his feet forward and slide under our table.

Mother shakes his hand.

"Sol, so good to see you," she says. She brings her hands in front of her and pushes her forefinger into her meaty palm. The mark from my hand dances in a circle on her shoulder. My heart beats against the circle.

"I hope all is well with your meal," the owner Sol Lehrer says. He puts his feet together.

"Everything was marvelous," she says. She looks down and points a finger at her plate. "My bagel was a bit dry, but we have more important things to discuss."

"We can't have that. I'll get you another." He looks to the waitress Jean and opens his mouth. Waitress Jean's lines bend into his mouth as if pulled into a vacuum.

"Sol, honey, don't go to any trouble," Mother says. She pushes her palm toward me. "Have you met my daughter, Sarah?"

The owner Sol Lehrer puts his hand forward. His hand is meaty and rough. The odor of chicken soup surrounds his hand. A chicken soup hand is not smart. I smile at the owner Sol Lehrer and want him to be another man, a smart man. I want a sharp man, not one that blunders through lines. I want a man that cuts through lines, cuts through obstructions.

Mother invites him to join us.

He sits next to her. His eyes are black dollops on porcelain. Kitchen grease shimmers on his flat cheeks.

"I've heard so much about you," the owner Sol Lehrer says. "You take pictures, right?"

"Not exactly," I say. I push my shoulders forward and press my arms against the table.

"Weddings and portraits?" He cocks his head and closes one eye.

I drag the back of the fork across my fingers. The fork sticks against my fingers, and the metal cools my skin.

"I'm a photojournalist," I say.

"How nice," the owner Sol Lehrer says. He puts his hands on the table and wraps a napkin around his middle finger. He grasps the ends of the napkin within his palm. "What is that? Sports, cat in the tree, that kind of thing?"

Mother places her hand on his forearm.

"Sol, honey. Sarah has the crime and justice beat for the *Morning News*," she says.

"I don't read the paper much," the owner Sol Lehrer says. He points his finger wrapped in the napkin beyond the table. "This place keeps me rolling. Hell of a place, ain't it? If you only knew . . ."

"If I only knew what?" I ask.

"Our people," he says. "I'll go to my grave from dealing with them. The complaints . . . we're a difficult people. Everyone's a damned prince, for Christ's sake. But, I guess that's my cross to bear."

I laugh. His smart is ugly. I can tell the owner Sol Lehrer has no idea how ugly his smart is.

Mother shows her nervous smile. I love her nervous smile. It pushes her eyes outward and stretches her nostrils. Her nervous smile gives her a temporary face lift. I have the same nervous smile. A nervous smile is a method to stop honesty in its tracks. Mother's method is effective. I see her nervous smile and say nothing.

The owner Sol Lehrer dips the edge of his mouth. His eyes grow larger.

"Did I say something funny?" the owner Sol Lehrer asks.

"You must have worked very hard to build such a clientele," Mother says.

"They love me," he says. "A smile goes a long way." The owner Sol Lehrer shows us the smile that goes a long way. It is a yellow smile. A simple, yellow smile. A yellow smile that is not smart.

I need a smile within a smile. I need a smile I have to work to discover.

"Sol, honey, what do you think of my daughter? Would you be interested in taking her out to dinner or on the town? Something nice," she says.

I twirl the fork and drive it into my fingers beneath the table. The prongs of the fork dig into my fingers.

The kitchen grease on his flat cheeks shimmers. Warm light breaks from the grease.

Mother's hair catches the light. Her hair turns gold. The glass of water breaks the light into a dim rainbow that spreads across the table. Light surrounds our table. We are surrounded by a golden fire.

"I think that's a wonderful idea," the owner Sol Lehrer says. The yellow, simple smile that goes a long way grows queer. "Sarah, would you—"

I hold my hand up to his face.

"Stop," I say. "No."

I rock my hand at the face that shimmers. I feel separated from my body. My head drops back. My shoulders lurch forward. My chest presses in. I can see the fire surrounding us darken and swell about us.

The owner Sol Lehrer's face fills with blood, and his eyes widen. He rises and stumbles to the floor. The table rocks and Mother's glass topples and clinks against mine. The lines bend to the owner Sol Lehrer's body, and waitress Jean follows her line to him. She offers her hand, and he refuses. The owner Sol Lehrer rises to his feet and stands over the table.

"What the . . . is something the matter with her?" the owner Sol Lehrer asks. His eyes are wide. Blood has filled his cheeks. "She some kind of diabetic or hemo something or other? Let me get some sugar or a candy bar?"

I laugh and turn my hand so that I can see what has made the owner Sol Lehrer think I am diabetic. Dried blood has formed a crusted mark across my fingers. The dried blood has grown from the deep cut across the middle of my fingers. The cut is a curved black line, and the blood shimmers on the skin around it like a grimy and malformed filter.

"Did I say something funny?" the owner Sol Lehrer asks.

Mother waves her hand at the owner Sol Lehrer.

The owner Sol Lehrer shrugs his flat shoulders and turns to walk away. He hesitates and turns back.

"I promise, Doris, no dry bagels again," the owner Sol Lehrer says. He returns to the cash register.

I hold my laughter in, and my chest heaves in fits. I shiver and my bones stretch. My bones whip against the table. The table shudders. The circle of water grows. The dark circle grows, and the lines swarm about me.



I am slumped. I straighten and regain the restaurant. I regain the table and my food. The windows are beat through by sunlight. The light softens the fire that surrounds us into a glowing ember.

Mother talks through her teeth. She turns her head to look around the restaurant. She dabs a napkin against my fingers. Blood stains the napkin. The lines on her face sink deeper into the recesses and pull down her eyes.

"Oh, darling," she says. "My beautiful darling. I want the best for you while you're still young. Is that so wrong?"

I open my mouth, and no voice comes. I need time to regain my voice.

The owner Sol Lehrer is at the cash register. His black hair is mussed. His level shoulders are forward, his chest sunken. He glances at me and dips the edge of his mouth. The yellow smile that goes a long way hides behind his tight lips and small disappearing eyes. The owner Sol Lehrer turns to a customer. His hands dance. The sweat stains have dried on his thin blue shirt. He fears for me, I can tell.

Mother dabs the napkin at my fingers.

I love Mother. I tell her smart is not always my kind of smart. I do love her. The blind dates. I see they are a method. She pushes the blind dates on me, and I take every one. I take the smart, the blind smart, not my smart, not smart like I need. I need sharp smart, split-a-hair sharp, cuts like a knife sharp. Sharp that can cut through lines. Cut them and leave blood that pulses beneath the skin. I tell Mother she needs a method. A sharp method. A method to cut through the blind smarts. She fears for me, I can tell. I do love her. I have a method to my love. I tell Mother, and she talks over me. She continues to talk over me, and I tell her again.