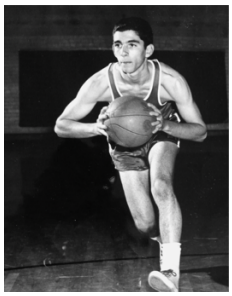
DENTED

Dallas, Texas, 1960

Saturday dinner at the Kagan walnut dining-room table was a weekly upgrade from meals at the kitchen table. The menu that Saturday was thin lamb chops with curled edges, flaccid olive-gray Birds Eye asparagus, and chewy spaghetti with my Bubbe Greenspan's red sauce. Dad sat at the head of the table, wearing casual gray slacks and a peach-colored Lacoste knit shirt. Mom, to his left, wore a pink dress with white polka dots, a wide ivory-colored patent leather belt, and cotton-candy-pink house slippers. Her gold flipped- bob hairdo swayed gently like the ones on Clairol TV commercials. My thirteen-year-old brother, Alan, sat next to Mom in a white Fruit of the Loom tee shirt, navy-blue Lee dungarees, and soiled white Converse hi-tops. Athletic and slender with a dark complexion, he always looked cool in his clothes. Nine-year-old me in blue dungarees, a white tee shirt, and coal-black PF Flyers sat across from Mom and next to Dad. Since I had recently kicked off an eating marathon that would last the ensuing nine years, my belly fat ballooned over the waistband of my pants.

In midchew, Dad asked, "Alan, how was basketball practice? Isn't there a game next week?"

In midchew, Alan sat straighter in his chair and squared his shoulders. "Coach decided I'm starting at point guard."



Alan at Hillcrest High. All-state point guard. I watched my hero at every home game.

Dad's head bobbed up and down from the weight of his pride-laden smile. "Way to go, Alan." A small chewed lamb-chop fragment dropped

from Dad's mouth onto the edge of his dinner plate. Alan loved basketball and dreamed about playing in college, which obviously made Dad very proud—it was one of few positive things they would ever share.

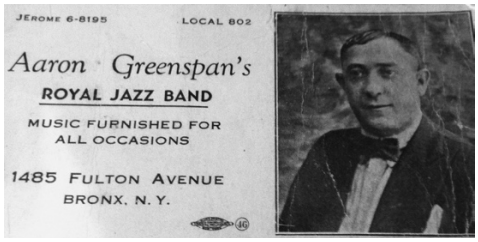
On any other night, I would have cheered for my big brother's basketball achievements. That Saturday, however, I was distracted by alternately closing my left and then right eye like a flashing signal at a railroad crossing.

"So, Brian, how are the clarinet lessons going in school?" Dad asked between chews, swallows, and targeting the next fork stab without looking up from his plate.

"Good," I replied, without missing a beat of blink cadence. "Mr. Kendrick is really impressed that I'm learning to play on a Buffet clarinet." Blink, blink, blink . . .

"It's a real special one," Dad boasted. "Your uncle Jack and I thought you should have a good one. Wood, not the newer plastic ones."

Blink, blink. "I'm going to be just like you, Dad, when you played in Grandpa Aaron's jazz band." I punctuated my comment with three more blinks.



Aaron Greenspan, my grandfather. Mom's dad, who died when she was fifteen, brought the family of six from Romania in 1921 to Ellis Island. His jazz band was a top choice for weddings, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and bris circumcisions—okay, not really for a bris, but it could be a new entertainment niche.

Here's my nineteen-year-old dad with his sax and licorice stick on the rooftop of his family's building in Brooklyn.

I have Dad's saxophone and my clarinet side by side on display in our home.

Dad looked up at me to respond. That was when he noticed my exaggerated blinks. "Brian, what's with the blinking? You're acting like a meshugganah."

"You're such a nudnik," Alan added.

In midchew, Mom looked up and noticed my puzzled frown and deliberate blinks.

"Brian, what are you doing? Stop with the winking and eat. Your food's getting cold." She returned to her plate, coiled spaghetti strings onto her fork, and twirled them into her mouth, slurping in one lagging noodly renegade. Oblivious to her chiding, I looked around the room and continued my one-eyed experiments.

Dad interjected. "Brian, your mother's talking to you."

"Murray, butt out, will you?"

I stopped and looked at Mom with my left eye squeezed tight. "Mom, I can't see anything out of my eye. It's all blurry."

Mom's head snapped up from her plate. Her flipped-bob hairdo, petrified with VO5 hair spray, wobbled from the sudden jolt. Face tensed and eyes wide, Mom responded, "Whaaaat?"

All chewing halted. No one moved as they turned and stared at me. "When I close my left eye, like this, all I see are fuzzy colors out of my other eye."

Mom's chair teetered on two back legs as she launched herself to attention and commanded, "Get over here."

It was useless to stall when Mom applied the "Do what I said *now* or you're finished" inflection. I complied. Having walked around the empty end of the table, I stopped at attention in front of her. I had now started blinking in double time.

"Let me see that eye," she demanded. "Which one is it? Stop blinking; you're making me crazy." She turned her head to look back and forth between my eyes, sort of like when a pitcher checks out the runners at first and second base before his next pitch.

"The right one," I said.

Mom pried open my right eye like a raw oyster. She leaned in and peered at the bulging orb, tilting her head at various angles for closer scrutiny. "Brian, tell me what happened!"

I sniffled. Tears began streaming down my face. "After the movie, me and Melvin were standing out- side, waiting for his mom to pick us up. This mean kid rode by on a black Stingray bike. He was dressed in all black with a black cape and a black mask." I wiped fresh nose dribble on my tee-shirt sleeve. "He had a slingshot. He yelled, 'Hey, *Fatso*.' When I turned, he shot me in the eye with a peanut. Then he rode away."

Sweat convicts had begun a jailbreak from my arm- pits when Alan snorted, "Whaaat, a ride-by shooting?"

I'd learned early on it was best to hide the truth, especially when attempting to dodge punishment. Fact was that after the movie at the Inwood Theater, Melvin Schliffstein and I went next door to the TG&Y Five & Dime store. Melvin bought a slingshot. Once back outside, he had picked up a shelled peanut off the sidewalk in front of the store, aimed, fired, and hit the bull's-eye—or should I say the Brian's-eye?

"Ida, do you see anything?" Dad's response was blasé. He was clearly unaffected by my story. He likely figured this was just an attempt at getting attention. Reaching across his plate, Dad picked up the glass of RC Cola and sipped, making a sound like the static on our TV before the morning's first broadcast.

"Oh my God! Murray, there's a dent in his eye. I see a dent."

"Are you nuts?" Dad launched a dissenting glance, twisted his head from side to side, and added, "Ida, you can't dent an eye. Stop with your *kvetching*."

Never one to miss an opportunity for rebuke, Mom launched a salvo. "You know, Murray, you're a real *putz*. I don't care what you say; I see a dent." She looked back at me as I tried to focus on my hand, moving it back and forth in front of my right eye while keeping my left eye closed.

Mom shrieked, "Oh my God! Murray, I think he's blind." She cupped my face with both hands—her face so close to mine, I could smell Bubbe's sauce on her breath. "Brian, did you tell Melvin's mom what happened?"

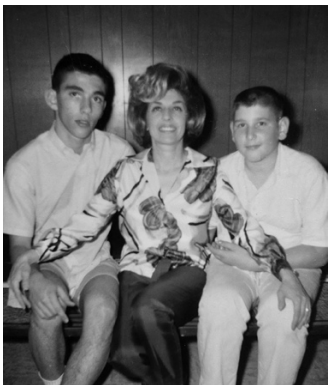
"I was too scared to."

Dad continued dueling with Mom. "He's not blind, Ida. Okay, fine. So, what do you suggest? Wait; I know," he said, his index finger pointing straight up. "Why don't we take him to a collision shop for dent removal?" Dad and Alan looked at each other and chuckled.

Mom parried with razor-sharp contempt and a steel-melting glare. "Oh, that's brilliant. Go shit in your hat, Murray. I'm calling Dr. Fader," she said

while walking into the kitchen toward the powder-blue wall phone next to the stove.

Dad called after her. “Really, Ida, you’re making more of this than necessary. His eye will clear up by morning.” Mom shot a scowl bullet his way, and Dad waved both arms out in front, swatting away any further gnatty attacks from Mom. “Okay, Ida, whatever you say.” He shook his head and took another swig of RC.



Mom, Alan, and me—both my eyes working.

“Hello, Dave. This is Ida Kagan. Yes, I’m fine, thanks. It’s Brian I’m calling about. . . Well, he got shot in the right eye with a peanut a few hours ago and just told me he can’t see out of it and . . . No, with a slingshot that this kid . . . Yes, he can see from the left eye, but . . . No, I don’t want to wait; I want you to come over now. . . Why? Because there’s a dent in his eye. . . That’s right; I see a dent.” Then she whispered into the receiver—as if to prevent me from hearing—“I think he’s blind.”

In 1960, doctors still made house calls. Dr. Fader, dressed in a chocolate-colored tweed sport jacket, crisp white shirt, and tan pleated slacks, entered our living room. “Ida, Murray, so good to see you,” he said.

Our family doctor since our move to Texas in 1953, he carried the obligatory worn black leather medical kit. After greeting Mom and Dad, he looked over at me. By this time, I was sitting on one of the overstuffed jade-colored fabric couches on either side of the living room. My eye

hadn't cleared up, and I was getting really scared after Mom's repetitive declarations that I was blind in my right eye. With the left eye, I looked around to find Alan, certain my hero would protect me. He wasn't there. Then I heard his hi-fi blaring Chubby Checker's "The Twist" at the other end of the house.

"Thanks for coming over this late, Dave. I'm worried about Brian's eye," Mom said. Dad stood silently behind her, where he sipped RC throughout the dialogue between Mom and Dr. Fader and turned his head from side to side in disagreement—or maybe it was resignation. He didn't say much when Mom was leading the conversation. Actually, it didn't matter who was trying to lead the conversation. Mom always had the last . . . well, most of the words.

"Of course," Dr. Fader replied, smiling. He turned and walked over to the couch where I sat, still alternating eye blinks. "Now, Brian, let's have a look at that eye."

As he sat down next to me, I could smell his woody-scented aftershave. He opened his bag and removed a stethoscope and tiny black flashlight. He moved the cool silver disk to different spots on my chest and then took a long time examining my right eye with the flashlight while asking me questions about what had happened. He hummed "Uh-huh" each time I paused.

Mom hovered, her head only inches from the doctor's face as if evaluating his examination skills. When he finally stood, Mom stepped back as he addressed both my parents.

"I do not see anything suspicious on or around his eye," Dr. Fader said with authority. "And the redness from the impact should clear up. He'll be fine by the morning." Sighing, he finished with "Brian is not blind, and there is definitely no dent. Ida, you can't dent eye tissue."

Dad responded first. "See, Ida?" he said with an "I told you so" nod.

Mom responded, "I don't care what you say, Dave. I *saw* a dent!"

Dr. Fader sighed again, but before he could respond, Mom ended the debate. “Dave, I want an eye specialist. Now.” She paused and shook her bangled fist in the air. “And when I get my hands on that lousy kid on the bike, he’s finished.”

Around eight o’clock that night, Mom, Dad, and I stood outside the office door when Dr. White arrived in blue jeans and a ratty-looking white knit shirt with SMU Mustangs written in bold red-and-blue lettering over the breast pocket.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Kagan,” he said while exchanging handshakes with each of my parents. Then he unlocked the front door to his office and switched on the ceiling fluorescents. We waddled single file behind him like a duck family down the long hallway and into the exam room.

Mom reiterated her contention. “I know I saw a dent in his eye, Dr. White. I tell you, there’s a dent in his eye.”

Without replying, the doctor had me hop up onto the burgundy vinyl-covered exam table. As I settled in, my belly shifted side to side like a windup toy monkey.

“So, young man, tell me what happened.”

I retold “The Peanut Bandit” story while Dr. White bent over and continued his examination using various shiny tools. He ignored Mom’s incessant ranting. Suddenly, the doctor stopped and straightened up. He turned, and with narrowed eyes addressed my parents.

“Mr. and Mrs. Kagan, Brian’s right eye is hemorrhaging blood, probably the result of a severe impact. It’s very serious. I’m calling St. Paul Hospital and admitting him tonight. Both eyes will be patched shut, and he won’t be able to move out of bed or turn over until the hemorrhaging stops.” Mom and Dad looked like wax figures, their mouths and eyes frozen wide open. Tears cascaded down my scarlet-blotched cheeks.

“And, Mrs. Kagan, while it’s impossible for an eyeball to be dented, had you not persisted, Brian would have been blind in one or both eyes by morning.”

I awoke that first morning at St. Paul Hospital with a fierce urge to pee. Calling out for the nurse, I heard soft-soled footsteps approaching. I imagined a Florence Nightingale lookalike rushing in in her dainty white starched uniform and stupid-looking curved white cap glued to the back of her head. With a sugary voice, the nurse said, “Yes, Brian?”

“I have to pee. Really bad,” I whined.

“Okay, I’ll help you.”

No way was she touching my private parts. “No, I can do it myself.”

This could easily have been what my nurse team looked like at breaks during the week. A little nicotine never hurt anybody in the ’60s, right?

As if triggered by some obscure footnote in the hospital operations manual, Nurse Flo responded with caring conviction. “Well, Brian, it’s our job to help our patients when urinating and defecating in a bedpan. Now, don’t be shy. I’ve handled this many times before. It’ll be fine; you’ll see.”

“That’s the problem. I can’t see.” I chuckled, hoping humor would cover up the terror-inducing thought of her holding my weenie.

“You’re a funny little guy. You’ll just have to trust me,” she said.

"Okay," I conceded. I couldn't hold it in much longer. Plus, I didn't know how to tell her that, since I was nine-years old and responding to the threat of a hostile invasion, my teeny weenie had retreated like a turtle withdrawing its head into the shell.

I felt Nurse Flo pull back the blanket and lift the gown. After two failed attempts at capture, she nabbed Mr. Winky. Gingerly bending and aiming the little guy into the opening of the metal pan, she suddenly sneezed. Mr. Winky escaped her grasp.

In 1962, the Wham-O company would unleash the Water Wiggle on innocent neighborhood children across America. When attached to a water hose, this delightful toy would strike out in all directions without warning or possibility of control. It would lash and drench anyone within striking distance without regard.

The nurse shrieked as she tried to wrangle that cagey rascal. To no avail. I pictured lemonade-colored droplets dripping from her hair and dribbling down onto her lily-white uniform.

I handled all future bed-panning.

While I had to lie flat on my back that entire week, Mom stayed by my side every day, reading all four volumes of my favorite book series, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, about a magical woman who lives in an upside-down house in a neighborhood filled with mischievous children. One evening, Mom finished feeding me dinner and had just wiped my face with what felt like a washcloth—when it came to mealtimes, even with eyes covered, I'd polish off any food placed within biting distance. She had started reading me another chapter from a Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle book.

Mom read me all her books at least twice that week. I was so piggle-wiggled.

“Well,” said her daddy, “your careless heedlessness has almost lost me my life. I am now going to give you a spanking. And he did and so dinner was a snuffling red-eyed meal filled with cold looks and long silences and the cheese soufflé, which was delicious.”

“Mom, what’s that cheese thing? You know I love cheesy food.”

She chuckled. “Well, it’s a puffy kind of dish. I’ve never made it.”

“Can you make some for me, Mom? Sounds yummy.”

“Absolutely. As soon as we get you home.”

Just then, I heard one of the Flos enter. Mom stopped reading as the nurse asked her to step out of the room with her for a moment.

“I’ll be right back, honey,” Mom said. Her chair screeched like fingernails on a chalkboard as it scraped across the floor.

“Where are you going, Mom? Are you coming back?”

“We’re going to see what’s for dessert. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh boy.”

After the Water Wiggle episode, you’d have assumed my bevy of nurses would have approached horizontal caregiving more astutely, right? Wrong. Years later, Mom would cackle as she recapped all that happened next, starting with how the nurse had taken her by the arm and led her into the hallway far enough outside the room so I couldn’t overhear. Then, Mom had asked the nurse in a low voice, “What’s wrong?”

“Mrs. Kagan,” she said, her voice just above a whisper, “the doctor has prescribed aspirin for Brian tonight.” She’d paused and looked over Mom’s shoulder toward my room to make sure I couldn’t overhear their conversation. “Is Brian allergic to aspirin?”

“No, but he won’t take aspirin with liquids. I have to mash it up in applesauce and give it to him on a teaspoon.”

“Unfortunately, we do not have applesauce on hand tonight,” the nurse responded.

“How about peanut butter or jelly? They work fine,” Mom said.

“The kitchen is closed, so I don’t have those either.”

Before Mom could respond, the nurse’s face lit up. “I’ve got an idea,” she said. “We have cherry Jell-O. We can chop up the aspirin and sprinkle it on top. We’ll tell Brian it’s powdered sugar. His eyes are covered. He’ll never know,” she said, and gave Mom *The Wink.*

Mom wasn’t sold. “Yuch, aspirin is bitter. Trust me. He’ll be able to tell it’s not sugar.”

“You’d be surprised how many people actually like the taste of aspirin.” Mom would tell me how the nurse had placed a hand on her shoulder, leaned in, and whispered conspiratorially, “It will definitely work.”

“Mom, is that you?”

“Uh-huh.” Mom had returned to my bedside with the conniving nurse. “The nice nurse has brought you a very special dessert.”

Nurse Frightengale jumped in with a cheerful voice and said, “Brian, I have a delicious treat for you tonight.” Unbeknownst to me, the red cubed swindle she carried jiggled excitedly in a clear plastic cup.

An incurable sucker for sweets, I responded, “Really? Tell me, tell me. What is it?”

“Well, we’ve made you cherry Jell-O . . . with *sugar* sprinkled on top,” she said as if I’d just won a cameo spot on *The Rifleman*.

“Oh boy! Mom *never* lets me eat just plain sugar.”

The nurse, a bit puffed up about her deviant plot, had decided to do the honors herself. “Would it be all right if I fed it to you, Brian?”

“Sure.”

She must have filled the spoon with a heaving mound of quivering goodies, because the next thing I felt was the tip of a metal spoon and something wiggly and cold touching the edge of my lips.

She said, “Open wide,” and delivered the goods.

Remember Linda Blair’s Regan McNeil character and projectile-vomit scene in the 1973 horror classic, *The Exorcist*? Good. Now, picture the spoonful of cherry-flavored Jell-O and “sugar” passing between my unsuspecting lips, onto my drool-covered tongue, and the mouthful of flavors communicating with my brain. Satanic vomit launched from my mouth. The nurse screamed as the crimson projectile struck her. I envisioned cherry chunks and undigested dinner globs showering the nurse’s crisp white hat and coiffed hair, tumbling down her face and onto the front of the snow-white uniform. It was just desserts.

I didn’t move from the hospital bed for the entire week and was cared for with ample prudence, the Water Wiggle and exorcism events still vivid in the nurses’ memories. When Dr. White prepared to remove the patches on the seventh day, he had me keep both eyes closed until told otherwise. I could feel Mom’s tender strokes along my arm—Dad was on the road again and missed the unveiling.

Both patches removed, my closed eyelids trembled with anticipation when the doctor said, “Okay, Brian, now open only your *right* eye veeeery slowly. Then tell me what you see.”

Mom echoed, “Remember, veeeery slowly.”

I felt as straining to lift a half-dollar with my eyelid, and the first sliver of light sent a pain jab to the top of my head. What had been a colorful blur

a week earlier now appeared as a fuzzy, thick, and long vertical line with a thick, shorter horizontal line crossing near the top. My eye now fully open, the blurriness cleared and the form sharpened. I smiled as what I was looking at became crystal clear.

Dr. White asked, “Brian, what do you see?”

Mom echoed, “Brian, what do you see?”

I couldn’t resist. “If I’m in heaven, Mom, they made a big mistake. I think they sent me to the wrong room. It’s Jesus on the cross.”

Mom’s smile illuminated the room as she squeezed my arm and said with great pride directed at Dr. White and the nurse, “That’s my Brian. He’s his mother’s son.”

Now in focus, I looked up at Mom adorned in a zebra-striped knit top, black slacks, and black patent leather belt. Her diamond-studded gold “Ida” pendant flashed in the afternoon sunlight. She smiled, winked, and said, “I love you, my Brian.” Then she leaned over and cupped my face in her hands as if cradling fine china and said, “Such a sweet *punim*.”

“I love you, too, Mom. I’m *really* glad to see you,” and we laughed out loud.

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