

BRUCE DUCKER

Findurman's News

The thought recurred to Findurman that morning, as it did daily when he stooped to cut the twine. What if I would write the newspaper of my life? A single edition, I would edit its stories, assign a head, suitable column space and layout. What would my lead be? Would it have changed in the past fifty-five years? No, he would decide. It would never change.

By the time he opened the shop in the morning, the morning papers, bundled into lumps with hairy twine, sat outside his front door like tombstones. He followed a routine: first the *Times*, after all, that was the paper of record, the paper most of his regulars sought. Then the *News*, then *Newsday*. He stored them in that order, too, the *Timeses* farthest in the back where they would be hardest to reach.

It used to be his floor plan was the opposite. When he had started, New York took four morning papers and four in the afternoon. He would set them out on racks in front of the store, for customer convenience. But a regular, Mr. Dalsimer, told him no. Not that way, Findurman. Make them walk through the store. Smell the tang of Spearmint and the pasty vanilla of Bonomo's Toffee. Make them walk by the dark aromas from the loose cigars, to a smoker they smell like dark fruit. Mr. Dalsimer did advertising in the City—he seemed to know.

Sure enough, Findurman's sales picked up. What did I tell you, asked Mr. Dalsimer, pleased to help. You got to consider their feelings. It hadn't occurred to Findurman. In the morning they're hungry for another cup of coffee, they're thinking how good that first smoke will taste. It's the story of their fears, Dalsimer told him. They leave home, they travel in a tunnel carved in the black rock through Brooklyn, under the river. They're scared, you'd be too. Findurman didn't correct him.

Findurman had seen worse. They'll need comfort, Mr. Dalsimer said. That's what you sell, not candy bars.

Then at night you get a second crack. Chocolate smells like childhood, licorice from those twists. Mr. Dalsimer knew his stuff. Hit as many senses as you can, he told Findurman. Open up that humidior of Balkan Sobranie, let them touch the moist tobacco. It looks like farmland, never mind they've never seen farmland. They dip their hand in to fill a pouch, they're hooked. Sell it by the sense. Mr. Dalsimer knew his stuff.

The day he learned about the romance of merchandising—it could be a story in the newspaper of his life. Maybe a feature, maybe on the business page. Which was otherwise bare. What else to put there? The closing of the papers? The printers went on strike, the owners turned their backs. The first strike lasted months, people out of work, finally the printers came back and Findurman had papers again.

The second strike lasted longer. No compromise, vowed the union. No deal, vowed the owners. One by one the papers died. The *Journal American* with its red banner headlines, the *World-Telegram*, for a while a strong contender, the *Herald Tribune* with its elegant nameplate of a woman carrying the flag into battle.

It was all too familiar for Findurman, old friends here one day and then gone, no good-bye, no funeral, no nothing. When the *Mirror* folded, no one told him. Hearst closed the doors, posted a notice on the gates, no more *Mirror*—too bad for you, ordered his Cossacks to protect the building. Findurman was calling to complain about no delivery when he saw the story in the *Times*, lower left page one where they ran the City lead. Old friends just disappeared.

He looked down. In his hand was a knife, where had it come from? A single-edged Gillette blue-blade fit into the plastic handle, when was the last time he'd changed it? You could use an old one from the razor. On the handle were printed the words, The Sun. But the *Sun* was gone, swallowed up by the *World-Telegram*. Ach, he thought. What a universe. What would God have thought that his planets and his sun, especially his sun, were being swallowed up?

He put the knife blade under the fat knot on top of the *News* and pulled. The twine gave with a satisfying and musical *thunk*. A note, today's was an A flat. If you put them together six mornings

a week, would you have a song? What difference? Findurman no longer cared for music. It used to mean too much to him, a long time ago, but it carried memories. He didn't want memories, he wanted a fresh start every day. Like a newspaper.

Findurman closed on Saturday. People assumed he was religious, figured he was honoring the *shabbos*. No longer. Not in years. Findurman could remember the day *shabbos* ended. He closed because he couldn't sell papers, all there was to it. No one came around. Weekdays the commuter trains brought his customers. On Sundays, women sent their husbands to the bakery, for bagels, to the deli for lox, maybe some whitefish for brunch. Then to Findurman's so they could do the puzzle, the wives could thumb the ads.

He had owned the store almost as long as he had been in the country. The congregation at Rodef Shalom had brought him over after the war. He was their project for the year 1946. Found him—how? He didn't know—it was then he allowed himself to begin remembering again, and his early tries were imperfect. Brought him over, arranged for his immigration, clothed him, fed him so his pants would stay on. Put him to work in the *shul*. He protested, he didn't belong there, he was an infidel. They ignored him. They made him *shamus*, sexton. For those few years he straightened the *siddurs* and dusted the pews. No one minded that he didn't join in the service. He locked the doors after the last prayers and opened them for the first of the minyan to arrive.

Congratulating themselves on how hard he worked, the members of the synagogue decided he was ambitious. They had no idea. He didn't bother to explain. Why explain? What would he say?

When Carmine's barbershop on the beach block of Beach 116th Street became empty, they immediately thought of Findurman. The landlord was a member of Rodef Shalom, he knew of Findurman's diligence and sobriety. Where else would he find a tenant for space only larger than a vestibule?

Why not take this over? I'll help, the congregation will help, you'll have your own business. What business? Findurman asked, as if someone had mistaken him for a Rothschild.

Carmine's two bachelor brothers had died in the same week, and Carmine was the beneficiary under both policies. He buried his brothers in Elmhurst and bought a double-wide in Florida,

within sight of Hialeah. He had always loved the ponies. Carmine had made a living in the tiny shop, not so much the barbering and shaves as the bets and the policy. This is a good location, the landlord told Findurman. Carmine knew how to do it. Close to the station for haircuts, close to the *schvartzes* for numbers. Complementary lines of business, here you become a conglomerate.

I don't know how to barber, Findurman said and shrugged. A newsstand, the landlord answered. You'll sell things. Cigars, maybe a soda fountain. The landlord headed the Rodef Shalom Men's Auxilliary, he spoke Yiddish. We'll buy you the fixtures, a display case for the candy and the *tchotchkes*, a humidior. You'll sell newspapers, magazines. People board the train just down the block, they'll want newspapers for their ride to the City.

Findurman shrugged. He didn't have to say yes. A shrug had gotten him through to now. One for yes, a different shrug for I don't understand.

The landlord ripped out the three sinks and sold them. He sold the mirrors that faced each other on the north-south walls, the mirrors that to Findurman suggested infinity. Good riddance. Findurman had no mirrors in his home, he didn't want them here. The man sold the three LaFrance barber chairs, sea green, wrought iron foot grilles and adjustable headrests. The proceeds more than covered the plastering and painting, paid the sign man to scrape off the words Barber Shop from the plate glass and to paint over. Findurman's News in gilt, Candy Tobacco Sundries in simple black.

So what are sundries, Findurman asked. Findurman, said the landlord. You're making this more difficult than it is.

The barber pole brought an unbelievable sum from some *goyische kopf* who put it in his family room in the Hamptons. From the working capital the congregation raised, Findurman paid for the dark green awning that he cranked down every morning and cranked up every evening after the arrival of the late train from Manhattan. Findurman's News, it announced, as if the bent and defeated man had matters to announce.

Findurman cleaned out the barbers' supplies from upstairs, cases of Wildroot and Vitalis, Barbasol shaving cream. For an extra thirty dollars a month the landlord rented him the two

rooms, a toilet in the middle of one, as a one-bedroom apartment. Findurman went to work in a twenty-five by fifty-foot cell by day, and by night slept in a second above.

When the numbers men came around to strike a deal, Findurman shrugged no. He had nothing against gambling, it wasn't a matter of morality. He simply didn't like the runners. *Ganefs, paskudniks*, he had seen his share of thugs. In this country they didn't wear brown shirts, but he recognized them all the same. These American hoodlums were amateurs.

Customers came and went. He particularly liked that about the newsstand, the passing through. For the most part it was pure transience, they made no identification of him, no connection. A paper, a pack of Newports, a cartridge for a ball-point pen. He ignored habits, what a customer smoked, what paper he took, whether he liked Camels or Coronet. Findurman leaned on the counter, a lit cigar in the bronze-glass ashtray, his sleeved elbows resting on the display case about an open paper. Occasionally, someone would pause in the commuter rush to engage, to ask an irrelevant question in that particularly American way of feigned cheerfulness. Anything in the news today? What do you think, Findurman? Is this really a thinking man's cigarette? What has that SOB Truman (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush) done to us now?

From this phenomenon of fake cheer Findurman developed his thesis of human intimacy. Sympathy, he decided, filled a vessel the shape of an exaggerated funnel. At the wide mouth spread a lagoon whose surface appeared to show depth. But as one engaged the heart, as one descended, the circumference quickly narrowed. The vessel was corked at the spout, and there, in some, the dew of pity formed, geologically slow. In most it showed as a damp spot, in some a bulge, in the noblest the orchid of a tear. That was the fount of human pity. If you depended on it for life, you'd die of thirst.

Sometimes if they persisted, and if they looked right in age and in—what? color? bearing?—he would ask his questions. What year were you born? What month? That was all. Never the name. The name was too difficult to say.

Those he asked often went away smiling to themselves. Did they talk about him outside the newsstand? Was he the crazy old

man with broken English who seemed fascinated with astrology? What did it matter what they thought?

Sometimes they would ask him as if he cared about his products.

“These cigarettes, Findurman. Are they really mild on your T-zone?”

“That’s right mister. You seen the magazines? Nine out of ten doctors smoke these. These cigarettes won’t kill you. But you gotta be a doctor.”

They laughed at that, they paid for the pack and left smiling. Why were they smiling? Cigarettes were intended to kill you, more so cigars.

Only they didn’t work. The doctors turned out not to know so much after all. Findurman smoked a dozen cigars every day. Inhaled them. They turned his teeth yellow and his throat raw and gave him an indelible, muddy spot on his lip like a giant freckle. But they didn’t kill him. *Abi gezhunt*, go figure.

He liked the early morning. He walked down from his apartment after morning prayer—he was no believer, the prayers were a residue from his childhood, like washing up. The morning editions waited, stones that had tumbled from an eroding hillside. He would stack the leftover papers for the pulp man, then sweep. Cut the bundles and stack the inventory.

The landlord had left the old barbershop floor. It was tiled in a white half-inch hexagon that, with a geometry Findurman found satisfying, produced black mosaic blooms. Every so often when he crammed the tip of his broom under the baseboard he would draw out a few strands of hair. Hair cut from a living head that had visited the store in its past life. He would collect the strands with the day’s sand and dust, brooming until the pile made a smudge on the tiles, then sweep the blemish out to the street. Finding strands of hair forced from him a soft grunt. Their appearance struck him as a sign, but it was not a sign that was intelligible. He was not interested in its decryption. He knew no one who might be sending him messages.

It was still early, the commuters had yet to arrive, so he usually padded upstairs—Findurman went about in slippers—cut and buttered a bagel, brought it down to the counter. The first risers found him there, eating his roll, sipping a soda from the cooler. In the mornings he preferred Nehi’s Orange or the Kirch’s Black

Cherry, something citrus. He would set it in front of him and wait for the first sale, then carry the bottle to the large blue cooler half-filled with cold water, insert the bottle's neck into the built-in opener on the side and behead it, the cap would fall into a metal basket below, and the day would begin.

By the time the afternoon papers arrived, dead weight tossed from the back of tumbrel trucks, he had read the morning's cover to cover. Comics, the classified, the *Times'* account of ship sailings and arrivals, the prices for commodities and stocks and for different currency. Astonishing, this new world, where money itself carried a price.

In the long hours, he had invented the conceit of a personal newspaper. As he imagined his own, it had only one hole. There was a small rectangle whose dimensions he foresaw but whose content he could not yet fill. It would run two column-inches, and it would be written in the stylistic formality of the *New York Times*. His own obituary.

It should be buried towards the rear. Even as he reported his own life, its end would not deserve prominence. The *Times* knew how to do it. They saved up the biographies of the nobodies and ran them as a group. The way the *Times* told it, the dead had a single notable thing occur in their lives. This one had briefly been married to Gertrude Ederle, this had seen the crash of the *Hindenberg*. Each deserved two column inches.

Findurman's News neither flourished nor perished. It simply abided, like Findurman himself. Occasionally a salesman would persuade him to vary his stock. One got him to try seaside trinkets for the summer crowd, and he sold a few. Seashells that said New York Harbor, sand pails for the children, plastic snowballs with a lighthouse and an octopus under the snow. Souvenir pictures of ancient bathing beauties smiling in front of a wave.

Up the street the penny arcade became a porn shop and the movie theater closed. The Long Island Railroad went into bankruptcy and sold the station to New York City. Its tracks became the last stop on the Rockaway subway line. Next door a dairy restaurant went under and a Thai take-out opened. There was talk of someone renovating the block. Findurman's News abided.

In the summer Findurman crouched over his counter in a shirt that had been laundered to a shade of ivory. Its cuffs were so

frayed, the Chinaman who did it turned them for free. In the winter Findurman wore a wool cardigan that the congregation had given him with the store. It was warm enough, not for outside, but he rarely went beyond his storefront. He read every news story, penned in every crossword. The events of the world struck him as puny and fruitless, the endless invasions, coups, elections, appointments, conferences. He might have been hovering over the Earth, he might have been a perpetual cloud in the sky, stocked with an unlimited supply of Nehi Orange and onion rolls.

“Say, Findurman.”

He looked up from the afternoon’s *Post*. Beyond the plate glass window was black night. Fractured raindrops caught little beads of red and green from the traffic light. From the mainspring clock he guessed this young man came in on the last train from the City.

“Tonight’s my anniversary.” The man was maybe forty. Well dressed—a tan gabardine topcoat against the flooding November air, a snap-brim hat. He unbuttoned the coat to show an alpaca lining, a dark pin-stripe suit, a blue shirt with white collar. Findurman had never seen him before. He was sure of that. And unsure.

“You got anything in here for a present?”

“An anniversary present? You think this is maybe Saks Fifth Avenue?”

“Anything. A box of candy, a nice book.” The man looked up. Black eyes, a face of olive cast, and on his forehead, a purple starburst. Findurman caught his breath. And almost smiled: the mark of great beauties. Where God touched me, his wife used to say.

“A box of candy? I got bars. Mounds, Chunky, Clark. Hershey and almonds, *mit* and *mittout*.”

“The stores are closed. It’s pouring outside.”

“Maybe,” Findurman was in no mood to be helpful. “Maybe she smokes cigars.”

The man looked around, fingered the advertising placards on the counter. One featured a pack of cigarettes with the long legs of a young woman coming out of the bottom. The brand hadn’t been manufactured for a decade. He picked up a yellow envelope of pipe cleaners from the shelf.

“What year were you born?”

The man looked surprised.

“Nineteen forty-three.”

“So. What month?”

“April. Why?”

Findurman said nothing. The man continued to browse at the shelves. He opened the cooler and gazed at the tops of the pop bottles.

“You think maybe I keep champagne? No champagne.” Findurman went over and lowered the lid. The young man was so taken with his task that he didn’t notice Findurman’s close observation of him, of the profile, the brow.

“What kind of *nudnik* waits until after eight-thirty that night to buy his wife an anniversary present?”

The man continued moving about, fingering faded postcards. He inspected the cubby with decks of playing cards and stacked rummy pads. Glanced at his watch.

“Tell me, *nudnick*. What is your name?”

“My name?” He was looking at a diary. Simulated leather, blank pages, four ninety-nine. Findurman took the book from the customer’s hands and replaced it on the shelf as if it was not for sale.

“My name is Benjamin. Why?”

Findurman seized the man by the wrist.

“Benjamin,” he said. “You know what that means?”

“Means? It’s a name.”

“Names mean,” Findurman said. His eyes looked into the other’s as if he owned him. “Names mean. Your name means, Son of the righteous.”

It wasn’t merely the grip. Something in Findurman’s closeness told the man to be wary, suggested menace. He twisted his arm free and stepped back. His eyes sought a path beyond Findurman to the street.

“You want a present? An anniversary present? Here.” Findurman took a newspaper from the counter and opened a page.

“This morning’s *Times*? You want me to give my wife a newspaper?”

“Here,” said Findurman, and his finger stabbed at the paper. At the top of page two, as it appeared every day, a New York jeweler ran an advertisement. The man looked.

“That? That will set me back a small fortune.”

“Money? What does she give you, *nudnik*? She gives you children?”

“Two.” He was still uneasy, still suspicious. Outside, rain fell as if someone had set a fire hose at the store window.

“She gives you two children and you want to give her dreck. You are worse than a *nudnik*, Benjamin. You are a *shnorrer*. You know what it means, a *shnorrer*?”

The man’s face gave a small tic. He knew.

“You take from her and you give nothing back, you’re a *shnorrer*. A leech. Here.” Findurman put the newspaper in a paper sack. “You put this under your fancy coat with the fur and keep it dry. You say to her, here is a picture of what I got for you. They are engraving it with the words that I told them to engrave. When it’s finished, I’ll bring it to you. It is a pittance, you know what that is? A pittance to thank you for my children. Thank you for my life.”

The man took the bag and put it beneath the topcoat. He clamped it under his arm and maneuvered around the shopkeeper.

“What,” his assurance had come back now, with nothing between him and the door. “What do I owe you?”

Findurman watched the man a long time before answering. He saw the thought cross the man’s eyes, now I could escape. But Findurman held him.

“Nothing. You owe me nothing. Except not to be a *shnorrer*.”

The man half-opened the umbrella he had left by the door. Its handle was covered with an animal hide. He went out into the night.

Years later Findurman died in his sleep. The landlord was now the son of the man who had let the place to Findurman. He had inherited the property, and because he was educated he paid others to collect rents. It was that man, the man who collected rents, who found the body. Findurman always paid two months in advance, but the collector had anticipated the death and had withheld the second month from his principal. Now he was able to pocket it.

The collector immediately knew something was wrong when he saw two days’ bundles. Except for the *shabbos*, Findurman never closed.

He called the 100th Precinct. In the drawer of the old NCR register the police found the entirety of the Findurman estate. Thirty-six dollars in cash and coin. A passbook for the Marine Bank and Trust, showing savings of \$4,871. Five dollars a month had been deposited for twelve months a year, thirty-nine years. Plus interest. Findurman had missed only the months of the newspaper strikes of '57 and '64. And, under the change drawer, two sheets of paper, each neatly printed in a surprisingly delicate hand.

The first was in the nature of a last will and testament. "I Meyer Findurman of sound mind, unforgiving memory, and failing body, hereby leave everything I own to the Congregation of Rodef Shalom, who helped me to get the store. This means my savings, the cash in the drawer, the inventory. Only you should keep a fresh orange peel in the humidors or the tobacco goes stale."

The second page was similarly holographic, similarly neat, its letters also formed with grace and palsy, but reverentially, as if learned from an ancient scroll. The two cops who arrived on the collector's call, who neglected to ask about the two cartons of Kent king-size under the collector's windbreaker and the meerschaum pipe in his pocket, confiscated the will and the second page. Back at the Precinct, they were told that that page was part of the remainder estate, no different from Findurman's ancient taxi-driver's cap, his cardigan sweater, his long-sleeved shirts. That it and every object in the store and the apartment now belonged to the Congregation Rodef Shalom.

They delivered everything in cartons to the synagogue. The rabbi consulted with the president of the Congregation. There was consideration of forming a discrete fund to benefit recent immigrants, but the sum was too paltry, and the moneys were spent within the year as part of needed roof repair.

The rabbi decided to run the obituary, for that of course was what the second sheet contained, exactly as Findurman had written it, in the monthly synagogue newsletter. After all, the *Times* would not run it, and even the local paper, the *Rockaway Wave*, could not be trusted to copy it faithfully.

So the temple newsletter printed it word for word. All but the last sentence, which the rabbi redacted. The rabbi had only to fill in the age of the deceased.

It was a precise piece, written so cleanly and in the style of the *Times* obits that, had it run there, it would have comprised exactly two column inches.

MEYER FINDURMAN
STOREKEEPER

Meyer Findurman, owner of Findurman's News, Rockaway Park, Queens, died in his apartment last month. He was ____.

Findurman was born in Czernowitz, Romania. He taught music to children until the Nazi occupation. He was emancipated from the work camp at Birkenau, Poland, by the U.S. Seventh Army. With the help of a local synagogue, he immigrated to this country in 1946 and settled in Rockaway Park.

He was predeceased by his wife Miriam and his son Benjamin, both of blessed memory. Findurman was present on the day that God died.