

## False Dilemma

Maybe one in ten of my high school classmates can name the Vice-President of the United States, but I doubt there's a kid in that learning factory who couldn't pick my father out of a crowd. Dad's a legend at my school.

Today is Thursday and I have to stay late for tutoring. A couple of other kids, Carl and a lump we call Thickness, have smart phones, so we played Battle Royale all afternoon. They rode a late bus home when we were done and I walked, since I live across the street. My family moved into the rental two months into my freshman year and it's nice being so close, but changing schools mid-semester was no fun and I only made it worse on myself by wearing my *Let the Little Children Come to Me* bible camp shirt that first day.

I approached our yard and spotted Dad at the property line in a discussion with our neighbor, Mr. Khan. I don't know who's more offensive to Dad, the Muslims or the gays, but he's convinced that Mr. Khan is both, so the poor Pakistani doesn't have a chance with him.

Khan has lived here for years and Mrs. Kraft, our landlady and a member of a church we used to attend, assured us before we took the keys that he was a fine man. She rents to us well under market value because, as she told my parents, she wanted *to ease poor Eddie's situation*. I was curious when I heard this because until that moment, I hadn't been aware that I had a situation.

Three years have passed and Dad still claims that he didn't lie to Mrs. Kraft to persuade her to drop her lease price. Yes, kids pushed me around on

the bus at my old school, and relocating to a house situated a mere two hundred yards from my classes did resolve my problem with bullies, but only those who ride buses. Conversely, Dad's claim to Mrs. Kraft (and to the school administration, half of the medical community in town, and the universe of Facebook) that I am autistic was a stretch.

Dad and Mr. Khan turned to me in unison. I see in my father's bulging eyes that he's in one of his moods, while the yard blower in my neighbor's grip suggests they've kicked off their autumn leaf skirmish early this season. We have no trees on our property, but a couple of Modesto Ashes shade the house next door. My father insists that Mr. Khan bears full responsibility for each leaf that falls from his trees into our yard, just as a dog owner is liable to clean up his pet's deposits.

Dad started to speak, no doubt to sandbag his feeble argument, and Mr. Khan triggered his blower. Dad hushed and our neighbor let off the throttle. They did this three times and my father balled his fists like a toddler set to launch a tantrum. He's hypersensitive about people talking over him and he surely isn't going to let a possibly homosexual Islamic leaf agitator taunt him this way. He lunged for the blower, but Khan dodged and Dad tripped, tangling himself in the electric cord, and ended up on all fours in the grass. He sprung to his feet and I feared he would start swinging, but I reached him in time, signaling my neighbor to his garage while towing Dad home.

My father has always been a crank and I can never be sure of what might set him off. Last month, a couple of my prescriptions ran out and, given how he

grouses when I don't provide him enough lead time to refill them, I told him not to rush because I still had a week's supply. I lied and had to go without meds eight days, but somehow my video game scores spiked. Since then I haven't taken any pills and I kick ass at Battle Royale. It's like I levitated above a fog. Even my teachers have started making sense, and I'm reading faster. The downside of this new clarity is that Dad's rants grate on my nerves like never before.

I've been off my pills for a month now, but no one can know that. My parents crave sympathy and having a sick kid draws plenty of it in their circle. Don't ask me how or why, but my prescriptions somehow assure them that my being so screwed up isn't their doing. Among the pills I was taking were Ritalin for ADD, Prozac for depression, and something to keep psoriasis, which I don't recall ever having, at bay. I took Isotretinoin for acne, which I have in florid abundance, and Enulose eased the epic constipation that the other drugs brought on. I'm doing fine without them, but now when I look at my parents, they just seem... Jesus forgive me, they're nuts.

I ushered Dad into our house and he complained about his wrenched back as I led him to the couch. "Stretch out here and you'll be fine," I said. Fawning over each other's ailments is how we bond in our family, but I can't bring myself to do it now.

Mom rushed in. "Jack? Are you hurt? What happened?"

"Get me your back brace, Eddie. Oh, God, it hurts..."

“It’s too small for you. Mom can massage your back, or something.” I stepped away and made room for her.

I wore that back brace when I was eight years old and Mom and Dad were convinced that I had scoliosis. It’s probably in my closet with the other medical torture devices they’ve pushed on me over the years. I’ve got supports for weak joints caused by an autoimmune disorder—I can’t remember what it was called—and I have a shoe insert from a chiropractor who decided my left leg is half an inch shorter than my right. Somewhere there’s a mouthpiece for TMJ, whatever that is. There’s plenty more tucked away in that closet, but I never did get the one item that would benefit me—braces on my teeth. Apparently, we don’t have money for such an extravagance and, as Dad pointed out, who am I to try to correct what my Lord and Savior gifted me at birth?

“Should we call a minister?”

This was Mom’s go-to solution in a crisis, perceived or real. I don’t know what she thought a minister could bring to our little dance party, but Dad had it out with our last preacher three Sundays back and we left that church under threat of police intervention. He doesn’t burn his bridges; he blows them up and melts down the scrap.

“A lawyer is who I should call,” he said, still moaning. “Eddie, you witnessed everything. Write out a statement while it’s fresh in your mind.”

“I have math homework.” That line gets me out of just about all contact with my parents. I ended up in Special Ed when I transferred schools, though

I'm not sure how that happened because, despite Dad's public proclamations that I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, I've never failed a class. Sure, Math and I are not on friendly terms, but I get no help at home. Mom threw her hands up when I hit fractions in grade school and Dad's patience petered out midway through Algebra I, which is when he trekked me to the Office of Special Needs. He couldn't teach me, so he assumes I'm incapable of learning.

"Math, huh?" He's onto me. He challenged me with his eyes and I smiled, another upshot of dropping my meds. Dishonoring my father is wrong and could end up sparking one of his episodes, but feels so right. "Fine," he said. "Type up something later."

I spent my first year of high school shopping doctors with my parents and the time out of class tanked my grades. Trying to keep up in school was a downward spiral and it wore me out physically and emotionally. And that gave Dad leverage to twist a prescription out of a specialist. Several prescriptions, actually, and that changed the game. What my father didn't recognize at the time was that without my cooperation, there is no game.

"Wait," he said. "Tomorrow's Friday. I need help with my signs."

Shit. God forgive my language. Dad posts Bible quotes on signs and plants them in our lawn to advance whatever crackpot philosophy he's fixated on that week. He changes out his signs Thursday nights and stands in our yard Friday afternoons shouting the word of Jesus to kids heading home after classes. As I said, he's a legend at my school. "I don't have time."

Mom muttered a Lord Have Mercy and Dad sat up. “If God had given me the money, you’d be in a proper Christian school. Instead, you walk among sinners in that den of iniquity across the street and it is my mission to save you and your godless friends there. You can sacrifice five minutes of your time in support.”

Friends? Every kid and half my teachers call him The Dork. The German students call him Herr Dorkmeister and I’m Son of Dork, or some variation, to pretty much everyone down to the janitors and lunch ladies. He’s my father and I’ve ignored the harassment at school because his heart always seemed to be in a good place, but I’m beginning to think he’s just a whackjob. Maybe dropping my meds has changed my outlook, but my father strikes me lately as an angry bigot who uses religion to bully me and Mom around as compensation for him being such a limp dick in every other corner of his life. God forgive me.

Dad works for Stanislaus County nine hours a day Monday through Thursday, and he knocks off Fridays at noon, when he rushes home to Mom’s soggy egg salad sandwiches and a bag of corn chips. After that, he’s on lawn patrol, impressing my classmates.

Most kids pass our house mildly amused, but Dad’s too irresistible to a certain subset of them. They launch his signs to our roof at night or draw anatomically optimistic penis images on them. Occasionally the posters find their way to the gym walls at school, but lately, and with disturbing numbers, kids have taken to festooning them with spent condoms.

I gave in and gathered his signs. I'll do the printing work for him, too. I suspect that this week's message will be a dispatch on how man-loving leaf litterers will spend eternity gnashing their teeth in the blazing furnace.

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I ducked into the boys' room and had nearly finished my business there when a kid from the wrestling team stepped in, talking on his phone. His name is Hansen and he's been riding me for years. He positioned himself at the urinal adjacent to me, despite there being three vacant slots to his right. His cologne was in a battle of supremacy over the stink of piss and I found myself conflicted over which of them was more nauseating. He unzipped and let out a groan. "Oh, man..." he said into his phone. "I've been holding that back *way* too long."

I kept my head down.

"Yeah, so what?" he continued. "I've been holding it for like an hour, Julia." I let a smile escape and he elbowed me to the wall. "Didn't Daddy Dork ever teach you it's rude to listen to other people's conversations? Thou shalt not eavesdrop, Dork Boy."

"What choice did you give me?"

I regretted that straightaway. Hansen turned and autographed my leg with his impressive stream. "Praise God, brother."

I jumped away and he turned back to the urinal, telling the girl on the phone that he'd catch up with her in Biology. Retreating to a stall, I dabbed at

my pants with a wad of toilet paper as Hansen primed before the mirror.

When he finally left, I slipped out and saw his backpack hanging on a hook.

What would Jesus do? My father drops that on me when I ask for advice, which is largely why I stopped asking for it. Jesus would turn the other cheek or render unto Caesar, or something, but I gravitated to a response more in line with an Old Testament, eye-for-an-eye temperament: piss on it. That would be elegant, but my tank is dry. I considered my own backpack and the Ziploc bag inside it, where I've stashed a dozen pills a day for a little over a month. I pulled the bag from my backpack and shoved it into Hansen's, then slipped out of the bathroom.

The hallway was empty, meaning I was late to class. I hadn't yet figured out how my brilliant move was going to balance out the humiliation of walking into class in piss-soaked pants, and I was working through that when a voice broke my concentration.

"Don't you have a class you should be sleeping in?"

It was Señor Clancy, my sophomore year Spanish teacher. Nice that he remembers me. "Yes, sir. I'm going." Then it hit me. "Hey, some kid left a bag of pills in the bathroom. Short, stocky guy with a wrestling jacket."

Clancy widened his eyes and I turned toward my class, smiling too soon. Hansen was coming my way, apparently to retrieve his backpack, and Clancy asked me, "This kid?"

Hansen paced a wide arc around us, glaring at me like he knew I was up to something. "Maybe," I said. "I'm not sure." I rushed to U.S. History.



My father is notoriously critical of my school curriculum. He denies evolution and climate change, even launched a Biology textbook across a classroom at a parent-teacher meeting. With similar ardor, he tore out four chapters of my history book when he learned that it gave his War of Northern Aggression the propagandized title of the American Civil War. We're deep into that conflict in class and, since I'm unable to read about it, I have to pay attention if I'm going to survive the next unit test. I made my way to my seat and kids moaned at the trailing stench as I passed them.

My teacher, Mrs. Torres, was deep into her lecture when the wall phone behind her rang. She lifted the receiver and listened a moment, then nodded as she said, "Yes," then, "Right," and, "He's on his way." She hung up and looked at me as though I represent everything that is wrong in her world. Pointing to the door, she said, "You have thirty seconds to get to Vice-Principal Amador's office."

I trudged across campus and entered the waiting pen as Hansen stepped out of the VP's office. I don't read lips, but what he mouthed as he passed was no message of brotherly love. Mr. Amador waved me in. He has to treat students like civilized people every day and I suspect he's hit his limit with us today. I noted the mound of pills on his desk.

The good news is that he won't call my home. The counselors tried three times last year to bring Mom in to talk about nutrition and my sleep regime because I was dozing off in classes. She no-showed each time, citing sciatica

pain, and they gave up trying. Since then, I eat both breakfast and lunch at taxpayer expense and I've put on a good twenty pounds.

"You smell like a toilet," Mr. Amador said, "and Hansen says you set him up. What happened?"

At times like this, I wonder not what Jesus would do, but what Dad would do. He can draw pity out of others like an old pervert pulling a quarter from a kid's ear in the park. In this case, he'd agree that the truth was pathetic enough to speak for itself, so I told Amador my story.

He rubbed his jaw, thinking, and offered to call Hansen back in, but I protested. "It's your decision," he said. "Now let's move on to a new topic. Counseling tells me you're not working with your tutors. They say you do nothing but play games and stare out windows." I objected as a matter of decorum and he raised his palm. "Yet your classroom work has never been better. What changed?"

What changed is the volume of pharmaceuticals I wash down my gullet every day. I glanced to the pile of pills on his desk and back at him. "I can't think of anything."

"How's life at home?"

I get that question a lot. "Same ol'."

"So, what's behind the improved grades?"

I shrugged. He may have been debating in his mind whether to send me on my merry way, but he said, "I understand you take a lot of grief around here over your father."

The shrug again. I can do this all day.

“Did he tell you that we spoke?” I sat up. Dad hadn’t said a word.

Amador continued, “I told him that his signs had become a distraction to some of our students and he told me that if I’m not for him, I’m against him.”

“One of his favorites, but a distant second to *Honor thy father.*”

Amador smiled but he looked like he had indigestion. “Do you know what a false dilemma is?” I stared at him. “It’s when someone creates an either-or situation when in fact there are more choices. They use an incorrect assumption of truth, like ‘if you’re not for me, you’re against me,’ in place of logic.”

That’s Dad wrapped up and sporting a bow. “And?”

“Your father quotes Matthew’s ‘He that is not with me is against me’. I was curious, so I looked it up. Do you know that Luke says, ‘Whoever is not against you is for you’? Mark, same thing.”

“Dad prefers lines in his sand. Why are you telling me this?”

He pushed away from his desk and motioned to the door. “What I’m telling you is that you’re going to be fine if you decide that’s what you want to be. And find a better place to dump your garbage than Hansen’s backpack.”

I agreed and turned to leave.

“You’re lazy, Eddie, and your compass is too close to a very strong magnet. Otherwise, there’s nothing wrong with you.”

Unsure how to respond, I said, “I have to play the cards I was dealt.”

“Another false dilemma. Go to class.”

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Crossing the street on my way home, a kid coming my way asked if I knew the time. As I consulted my watch, someone threw a coat over my head from behind and bear hugged me. The jacket reeked of the cologne that I recall from my earlier restroom adventure, so I had an idea of what was coming.

They frog-walked me to the parking lot of a minimarket at the intersection and pushed me against a car. I already know how this drill works, so I dropped and curled up to protect my vitals and my head, and they kicked me until I wore them out. “Stand him up,” a familiar voice said. They hauled me to my feet but a sharp pain in my ribs kept me from reaching full height. They pulled the jacket away and as sunlight reached my eyes, Hansen introduced his fist to my nose and my world went dark again.

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I awakened to the vision of a morbidly overweight woman with spectacular fingernails reaching down to me. I recognize her from the store. “What’s wrong with you? You’ll get run over if you lay out here on the asphalt like that.”

I don’t know if she thought I was there taking a nap, but she got me to my feet and offered a couple of cotton balls for my bleeding nose, which I shoved up my nostrils. My head swam with pain.

I walked home and saw Dad out on the lawn, staring at Khan’s house. He just stood there, his back to his precious signs, kneading his fists, and I stepped into our home and found Mom crying in the kitchen. “What’s going on?” She looked at me and chills traced my skin.

“He’s going to do something. Something we can’t fix.” She drew a sharp breath when she noted my face. “What happened to you, Eddie?”

“It’s nothing. What got him going?”

“Mr. Khan brought a man into his house.”

Dad burst through the front door and it rebounded against the wall, coming just short of closing again. He noticed me. “Good, you’re home. Get over here.” He grabbed a towel and dropped to his knees near our kitchen table.

“Which hand did that sodomist hit yesterday?”

I don’t think it was either hand, but I said, “The right one.”

He splayed it flat on the linoleum floor. “Stomp on it.”

“What? Why?”

“Do as I say.”

“What’s going on?”

Shaking his head, he pulled his telephone from his pocket and thumbed in three numbers. Someone answered and he said that our neighbor assaulted him the day before, and then gave his name, date of birth, our address, and the fact that Jesus Christ is his lord and savior. “I need help.” A pause. “Khan. First name Ali. Same street, but his number is 1304.” Another pause. “He broke my hand with a leaf blower.” Pause. “I didn’t think of it until now because I didn’t want to make trouble, but if he comes back I’ll be forced to defend my family.” I waited for him to say he had a gun, but I guess he isn’t completely gone yet. A long pause that he peppered with nods and then said,

“I’ll be waiting.” He hung up. “Eddie, I’ll be in trouble if you don’t do it before the police get here. Do you want that responsibility?”

A classic Dad move: set off a shitstorm and expect me to quietly hand out umbrellas. He was oblivious to the swelling and red cotton blooms of my busted nose, and Mom stood there as useless as a mannequin in a snowball fight. “What are you doing, Dad?”

“I’m making that heathen next door pay for his wickedness,” he said. “Now choose a side. If you’re not for—”

“Yeah, yeah.” I turned to Mom, who would dial up the nerve to do it if I didn’t. She would do anything he told her to do, and he wouldn’t care how much it might damage her. Through the kitchen window, I noted a police cruiser pulling up. They park a unit at school, so the cop didn’t have far to go. I raised my foot and Dad closed his eyes, his smile locking into place as he bit into the towel.

I brought my foot down on his fingers with every bit of force I could muster. Twice. Then I gave it a twist. He rolled away in silent agony, teeth mashed into the towel, and Mom pumped out a Lord Have Mercy.

I left to escort the police officer in and when I returned, Dad had taken a seat and looked like he had just crossed the finish line of an uphill marathon. He caught his breath and walked us through his tale and the cop took notes, even snapped a photo of Dad’s mutilated hand with his phone. Everyone ignored me.

“Sir, I’m going to visit with your neighbor now. Ma’am, I need you to get your husband ready to go to an urgent care, but don’t leave before I come back. Understood?” Mom nodded, eager to be of help, and the cop turned to me. “Can you show me where Mr. Khan lives?”

This guy was everything my father wasn’t—competent, authoritative, in control. Midway across the lawn he asked, “What happened in there?”

I hadn’t said two words, yet I feared he would arrest me for falsely accusing Mr. Khan, who just now stepped out of his house and was watching with interest. He accompanied a stranger dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase, and who looked more like an insurance salesman than a fornicator. I told the cop, “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do. Tell me about your nose.”

I recalled Mr. Amador’s reversal of Dad’s words—if you’re not against me, you’re for me—and saw what I had to do. I pointed across our yard. “He got sick of me complaining about his signs.”

“And?”

“He punched me.” My aching ribs would bruise up nicely, might even be busted, so I tossed that log onto the fire. “I called 9-1-1 to turn him in, and he took the phone before I could speak. He knew that if he hung up you guys would call back, so he made up the story about our neighbor. He made Mom and me swear to back him up.”

“And what would he do if you didn’t?”

I shrugged. People tend to find their answers when I do that.