

## Render unto Caesar

The single fear I nursed when starting high school was that I'd be invisible to the world. My mother laid that concern to eternal rest when she made me wear my *Let the Children Come to Me* bible camp T-shirt the first day of class.

Graduation is now half a year away, and I call it a win if I make it through a day unnoticed. Today is Thursday, so I stayed late for tutoring. I spent the hour in the back of the Learning Center playing *Battle Royale* on my phone until the bell rang, and that's when they chased me out.

I live across the street from the school, which makes for a quick walk home. As I approached our yard, I spotted my father at the property line in discussion with our neighbor, Mr. Khan. I don't know who's the greater evil in Dad's mind, the Muslims or the gays, but he has it in his head that Mr. Khan is both, so I don't imagine the two of them are over there swapping recipes.

When our landlady handed over the keys to our house three years ago, she assured us that we couldn't hope for a better neighbor than Mr. Khan. We met her at a church we used to attend, and she rents to us below market value because she wanted *to ease poor Eddie's burden*. I was curious right away when I overheard that because until then, I hadn't been aware that I had a burden.

Dad still maintains that he didn't mislead the landlady to get her to drop her 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 troubles with bullies, but only those who rode buses. Dad's claim to her (and to the school administration, half of the medical community in town, and the universe of Facebook) that I am autistic, well, that was a stretch.

Khan and my father turned to me in unison. I saw exasperation in Dad's bulging eyes, while the yard blower in my neighbor's grip suggested that they'd kicked off their annual leaf skirmish. We have no trees on our property, but a couple of Modesto ashes shade the house next door. My father insists that Mr. Khan is responsible for each leaf that falls from his trees to our yard, just as a dog owner is bound to clean up after a pet that's done its business on a neighbor's lawn. My father is quick to point out that people need to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Dad started to sandbag his feeble argument, and Mr. Khan triggered the blower to drown out his voice. Dad hushed and our neighbor let off the throttle. They cycled through three iterations of this before my father balled his fists like a toddler set to launch a tantrum. He's sensitive about anyone talking over him—fanatical, really—and he'd never let a possibly homosexual Islamic leaf agitator get away with taunting him this way. He lunged for the blower, and Khan dodged, causing him to tangle in the electric cord and fall to his hands and knees in the grass. Dad scrambled to his feet as I reached him, and I signaled Khan to his garage while towing my father back to our place.

Dad has always been a crank, but his episodes have darkened lately. Last month, a couple of my prescriptions ran out, and I told him I was still sitting on a week's supply to avoid his carping over not having enough time to

replenish them. I went without meds for eight days while I waited for the refills, and my video game scores spiked. Since then, I haven't taken one pill, and I rule *Battle Royale*. Even my teachers are making sense lately.

I've been off the drugs a month, but no one can know this because my parents feed on sympathy, and having a sick kid draws a steady stream of it. I've never understood their reasoning, but the prescriptions somehow assure them that my being so screwed up isn't their doing. I was on 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 rounded out the regime with Enulose to ease the epic bouts of constipation that the other drugs inspired.

I ushered Dad into our living room, where he now complained about his wrenched back. At the couch, I told him, "Stretch out here. You'll be fine." 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. The pain is unbearable."

"It's too small for you. Maybe Mom can massage your back." I stepped away and made room for her. She lives for opportunities to come to his aid.

I wore the brace when I was eight years old and had a passing touch of scoliosis. It's in my closet now, where I keep a museum of medical torture devices. I have supports for weak joints caused by an autoimmune disorder, a shoe insert from a chiropractor who decided my left leg is half an inch shorter

than my right, and a mouthpiece for TMJ. I've tucked away plenty more, but I never did get the one set of hardware that might have done me any good, which is braces on my teeth. We don't have money for extravagances, and, as Dad pointed out, who am I to ask for more than what my Lord and Savior gifted me?

“Should we call a minister?”

That was Mom's go-to solution in its perpetual search for a problem. I don't know what she thought a minister might bring to our dance party, but Dad had it out with our last preacher three Sundays back, and we departed that church under threat of police involvement.

I couldn't stay in that room any longer, so I took the quickest exit, saying, “I need to start my math homework.” Math and I have never been on friendly terms, and I get no help at home, where the mention of it clears the room. Mom threw her hands up when I hit fractions in grade school, and Dad's patience died a torturous death when we started rationalizing denominators in Algebra.

“Wait a minute, today's Thursday,” Dad said. His eyes challenged me, and I smiled, another upshot of dropping the meds. Not honoring my father breaks one of his top ten rules, but lately, I slide into it like a hot bath.

Dad posts Bible quotes on signs and plants them in our lawn to further whatever crackpot theology he's fixated on that week. He changes out the signs Thursday nights and stands in our yard Friday afternoons shouting his take on the word of Jesus to kids heading home after classes. Maybe one in ten of my 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 lineup. Dad's a legend at my school.

"I don't have time," I said.

Mom muttered a *Lord Have Mercy*, and Dad sat up smartly, his agony in apparent retreat. "If God had granted me money for tuition, you'd be in a proper Christian school. Instead, you walk among sinners in that godless institution across the street. My mission is to save you and your friends there, and it won't hurt you to give five minutes of your time to support your own cause."

Friends? Every kid and half the teachers at school call him Mr. Dork, and I'm Son of Dork or some variation to everyone down to the janitors, lunch crew, and freshmen tennis squad. He's my father, and I've ignored the harassment because his heart always seemed to be in a good place, but I've started to think he's just an angry bigot. He uses religion to bully Mom and me as compensation for being such a limp noodle in every other corner of his life.

Dad works for the county nine hours a day, Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, he rounds out his forty-hour week at noon and rushes home to one of Mom's soggy egg salad sandwiches and a single-serving 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 subset of them. They launch his signs to our roof at night, and occasionally the more memorable posters find their way to the gym walls at school. Lately, and

with disturbing numbers, kids have taken to festooning them with spent condoms.

He's my father, so I gave in and gathered his signs. I'll do the printing work, too. I suspect that this week's *Gospel According to Jack* will be a dispatch on man-loving leaf litterers gnashing their teeth in the eternal furnace.

I ducked into the boys' room between classes and had nearly finished my business there when a wrestling team member stepped in talking on his phone. His name is Hansen, and I've been his second-favorite sport for a few years now. He positioned himself at the adjacent urinal, despite having three vacant slots to his right. His cologne battled for supremacy over the stink of piss, and I found myself conflicted over which of them I hoped might prevail. He unzipped and let out a groan. "Oh, man..." he said into his phone. "That's a relief."

I kept my head down.

"Give me a break, Julia," he continued into the phone. "I had to hold it in for like an hour." A smile escaped me, and he elbowed me to the wall. "Didn't Daddy 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 saying that straightaway. Hansen turned, one hand on his tool and the other holding the telephone up to his ear. He autographed my leg with his impressive stream and said, "Lord have mercy."

He had me cornered, but I managed to side-step out of his range. Hansen turned back to the urinal for the final shake, telling the girl on the phone that he'd catch up with her in American Literature. My pant leg dripped with piss, so I hurried to a stall and dabbed at it with a wad of toilet paper. Hansen zipped up and primped in front of the mirror a few minutes. When he finally left, I slipped out and spied his backpack on a wall hook.

What would Jesus do? My father drops that on me when I ask for advice, which is why I don't. Jesus would turn the other cheek or render unto Caesar or something, but I gravitate toward an Old Testament eye-for-an-eye response: piss on it. That would have been elegant if I hadn't just drained my tank. I considered my backpack and the one-gallon Ziploc bag inside it, where I've stashed a dozen pills a day for the past month. I pulled the bag from my pack, shoved it into Hansen's, and then slipped out of the restroom.

The corridor was empty, meaning I was late to class. I hadn't yet figured out how my brilliant move with the pills was going to balance out the humiliation of cruising these hallways in urine-soaked jeans, 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 Castillo, my old Spanish teacher. Nice that he remembered me. "I'm going." Then it hit me. "Hey, some kid left a bag of pills in the bathroom. Short, stocky guy with a varsity jacket and a low forehead."

Rodriquez widened his eyes, and I turned away, smiling too soon. Hansen was coming back, likely to retrieve his forgotten bag. Mr. Rodriquez asked, “Was it this guy?”

Hansen paced an arc around us, glaring like he knew I was up to something, but he couldn’t tell what. “No idea,” I said, and I rushed off to U.S. History.

My father challenges the validity of the school’s curriculum on moral grounds. He denies evolution and climate change and even hurled a Biology lab workbook across a classroom at a parent-teacher conference. He tore out four chapters of my History text when he learned that it gave his War of Northern Aggression the propagandized title of the American Civil War. We’ve been studying that conflict in class, and since I can’t read about it, I need to pay attention to the lecture if I’m going to survive the upcoming unit test. I made my way to my seat, and kids moaned at the trailing stench as I passed.

The wall phone behind my teacher rang and interrupted her presentation. She lifted the receiver and nodded as she said, “Yes,” then, “Right. Eddie,” and, “He’s on his way.” I was already on my feet when she hung up and pointed me to the door. “Vice Principal Amador is expecting you.”

I trudged across campus and entered the waiting pen as Hansen stepped out of Amador’s office. We passed each other, and I didn’t make eye contact, but I felt the rage boiling off him. Mr. Amador waved me in. His job forces him to mingle with barbarians all day, and his mussed hair and crooked tie hinted that he’d hit his limit with us today. I noted the bag of pills on his desk.



The good news is that he won't call my home. Last year, the school tried four or five times to bring Mom in to talk about nutrition and my sleep regime because I had been dozing in classes. She no-showed each appointment, citing sciatica pain after the fact, and they gave up on her. Since then, I eat breakfast *and* lunch at taxpayer expense, and I've put on like twenty pounds.

"You smell like a toilet," Mr. Amador said, "and Hansen claims you set him up. Explain yourself."

At times like this, I wonder not what Jesus would do, but what Dad would do. He's skilled at drawing pity out of others, and in this case, he'd judge that the truth is pathetic enough to speak for itself. I explained how I came to smell so bad but made no mention of pills or backpacks.

Amador rubbed his jaw a moment, studying me, then offered to call Hansen back in, but I protested. "It's your decision," he said. "But Hansen needs to learn there are consequences to his actions."

It was the consequences that worried me. "Can I go?"

He shook his head. "Counseling tells me you're not working with your tutors. They say you do nothing but play games and daydream." I objected as a matter of etiquette, 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 morning. I glanced at the pile of pills on the desk and back at him. "I can't think of anything."

"How's life at home?"

I get that question a lot. I shrugged and said, “Same ol’.”

“So, what’s behind the improved grades?”

The shrug again. I can do this all day.

He pushed away from his desk and motioned to the door. “It may not seem so now, Eddie, but you’ll be fine, assuming you decide that’s what you want to be. Meanwhile, I need you to find a better place to dump your garbage than Hansen’s backpack.” I pleaded that I didn’t know what he was talking about, and then reassured him that it would never happen again. Amador hadn’t finished with me. “You’re lazy, and your compass is too close to a powerful magnet.” I take it he means my father. “Otherwise, there’s nothing wrong with you.”

Propping up a smile, I said, “I have to play the cards I was dealt.”

“A kid like you shouldn’t play cards at all. Now, we need to talk about your punishment.”

Shit. “Punishment?”

“Community service.”

The school piloted the program this year as an alternative to planting troublemakers in detention. They make us scrape chewing gum from underneath desktops and shovel dogshit and cigarette butts from the sports fields. The idea is to shock students with any sense into straightening up, and to develop job skills in the rest of us. “Where and when?”

“The Learning Center, right after last period today.”

“What do you need me to do there, mop up the drool?”

“Maybe next time,” he said without humor. “You’re tutoring a kid in Math.”

“I guess I misheard you. Last year my Geometry teacher called me the reciprocal of Einstein.”

The fingers of his right hand started for his temple. “You’ll do fine. This kid won’t graduate if he can’t get past the basics.”

And the poor bastard needs me to get him through? “I’m sure his parents are concerned, but I don’t see how—”

“It’ll be useful for you to deal with someone else’s problems for a change. Come back Monday and tell me how it went.”

I showed up at the Learning Center, and the director smiled at me from her side of the counter. I’m one of her regulars. “I’m here for a counseling session,” I said.

“I don’t have you scheduled for today, Eddie.”

“I’m the tutor this time.” I chuckled. “Math.”

She turned to her monitor, her brow in a deep furrow. “I have one student-led math slot today. Yes, at 2:45. Basic Math Skills.”

“I guess that’s me.”

The smell of Hansen’s cologne hit me a split second before he did. He shoved me aside at the counter. “I have a math appointment. Where do I go?”

The director's jaw went slack at the intrusion, and it occurred to me that Amador is one brilliant son of a bitch, which is another way of saying he's a son of a bitch. "I need you to step back and wait your turn," the director said.

Hansen nodded and complied. To me, he said, "You smell like piss, dude." He barked out a laugh that stirred the few students who weren't slumbering in their cubicles.

"Here you are." The director handed off a folder. In it, I found a series of math worksheets featuring a smiling elephant in thick-framed glasses standing before a blackboard with a piece of chalk curled in his trunk. "This will get the two of you started." To Hansen, she added, "Eddie will tutor you today."

I made my way to a free table as Hansen stewed. Marveling at my newfound power, I considered how I might show him how two plus two add up to five, and six times seven equals green. The possibilities are endless. Meanwhile, Hansen pulled himself together and voiced his complaint to the director that he wouldn't graduate if he didn't get serious help. She asked him why he thought I wouldn't be serious, and he turned from her to me. Anger and fear battled each other across his dull face.

I took my seat and thought again of Amador. The SOB. He expects me to help this numbnuts, and he's gambling that I won't want to disappoint him Monday when I report back on how the lesson went. It takes a good measure of confidence to nurture that kind of optimism. Hansen dropped in the chair across from me, scowling. I lifted my leg—the one that reeks—to the table and smiled at him, weighing the consequences.