

Urinary Redemption

Our stepmother dispensed punishment as a televangelist grants grace: fervently and with devotion. Blessed with a punitive predilection and fertile imagination, She relished both common and novel techniques: pants down paddling with a bristled brush or sometimes plywood slats, pinching beneath the chin and earlobes sufficient to break the skin but not bleed (much), and assigning us hundreds of lines to write on unlined pads such as ‘I will not disobey’ or ‘I will not lie.’ Those, naturally, fostered in us a lifelong inclination toward disobedience and dishonesty.

She once hit my brother Paul in the head with a steak bone, and he needed stitches. I don’t know if She judged that a successful experiment or failure, but She didn’t go back to it. However, the punishment I most detested was standing in the corner, sometimes holding arms upright over my head, sometimes not. You wouldn’t think it, but staring endlessly at a vertical crease where two walls meet is cruel, cruel punishment to boys 8 and 9 years old, as Paul and I were on one particular day. I’d rather be flogged with a wooden rod or even with the broken cue stick She tried a few times. Blows end quickly, and welts fade in a day or two. We never knew how She got to be that way; nature or nurture feels exactly the same to the one bent over getting the business end of a brush.

Now, I'm not suggesting there's nothing to see peering into a corner. Quite the opposite: after an hour or two you see faces in handprints and animals in dents from balls thrown at the wall, and, if you look closely, you can find rivers and hillsides in the streaks of paint. In the early morning, slanted sunlight casts shadows from every paint pimple. I know that because one summer - it might even have been the summer of this event - our every morning punishment, Paul's and mine, was to rise when we awoke and stand in the corner until Mother came in and said we could get dressed. Only after that could we go out and play, and She didn't awaken early. I don't remember why we had to stand in corners that summer and am not sure we knew it then. Self-punishment for something you didn't know and weren't sure you ever did was an inspired punishment strategy even for Her. Thinking about that - which we tried not to - would make it hurt worse.

You might notice that I write She with a capital 'S,' and that's because our stepmother, the black shadow across our family, needed no other name and never would. We had to call her 'Mother' to her face, but otherwise, 'She' sufficed.

Now, urination likely seems completely unrelated to corners, and it mostly is except for the once of what's coming. Though not known to him or me at the time, my brother Paul would later manifest extraordinary urinary ability. He had native talent, I'm sure, but he also nurtured it. As an adult he bragged that in a crowded pub he could empty his bladder under the bar - maybe into a beer mug, though I'm not sure - with nary a person noticing. While walking between drinking holes and without visible hitch in his stride he could open up, piss a trail straight as a dagger down the sidewalk, and readjust himself so to arrive at the next stop ready to refill. He became talented that way.

I tell you the above so that when I now tell you about that late afternoon Paul and I were in our bedroom standing in corners, you grasp the fact that we were not corner standing amateurs. We understood what was what in that line of business even if we rarely knew why. And I admit not to recall the why that particular day. You probably guessed by now that the transgression didn't matter, only the punishment. Not everybody grasps that concept, but it made sense to us. However, if I had to guess, I'd say we were assigned corners for fighting. And that's also funny. Paul and I bickered and punched or needled each other all day every day, but we didn't consider it fighting. That was just how we lived, same as breathing, and it meant nothing.

Technically, that day we weren't both standing in corners. I had a standard bedroom corner with two walls kissing top to bottom. Since a desk, the door, and my bed took up the other three possibilities, Paul had to use a makeshift corner where our dresser met the wall up to about eye level. On top that dresser we had a lamp with a base built from a fake Colt 45 pistol, an electric alarm clock plugged in behind, and my statue of St. Michael the archangel stabbing Satan's eye with a long black cocktail toothpick used as a spear.

She was in the adjacent kitchen banging pans around readying dinner. Every now and then we heard a cabinet open or a pot clatter down onto the stove. Hearing noise was good: we knew where She was - kind of a geo-locator in ranch houses of that time - and that She wouldn't be sneaking around the corner to catch one of us slipped from our shackles. I'd use that moment to sidle over to Paul and poke him in the ribs or karate chop behind his knees and then dance back to my corner. Of course, like as not, it'd be him taking the opportunity to Bruce Lee me in the neck or worse.

Late in the afternoon, She often played songs from musicals like 'Sound of Music' or 'Gigi'. She'd set a stack on the spindle and play them one after the other. Sometimes, She'd sing

along. That afternoon She played the album from 'Camelot.' A while later, we heard the tires of my dad's car crunch on the gravel drive. He came in the front door and said something to Her and then - as he did most nights - opened the cabinet over the refrigerator and took out his bag of chips. Our dad loved salt and was intensely partial to Fritos. I heard murmurs from him and Her talking in the kitchen and once I heard 'the boys' but not the rest.

What I haven't mentioned is that we'd already been in the corner what seemed a very long time. One thing about corner standing - for anyone with limited experience - is that time contracts or expands until you simply lose track. It's like passing through a wormhole in your own life and exiting further down the track no wiser. So, it could have been 15 minutes or it might have been two hours by then. What I do recollect is that after a bit I look over at Paul and he's running in place in his corner that wasn't a corner like he's racing after the popsicle truck, and he's not looking at anything but the side of that dresser or maybe my statue of St. Michael.

"Paul," I hissed. "What're you doing?"

"I have to go."

"We can't go until She says."

"No. I mean, I have to GO." My brother half turned, and I understood when I saw that he had grabbed a fistful of his pants zipper, though I couldn't figure how that was going to help him any. In spite of myself I started to grin. Paul didn't notice me smiling, which told me something for nothing, and he looked ready to cry. He slowed the pace of his jogging. In a small voice he said, "No no no no no nonono." Then he quickly turned back to his corner that wasn't and fumbled in front of himself. He stood completely still for what seemed like a long time. I heard a rustling sound where he stood. I saw his shoulders straighten, he bent slightly at the waist, and then he stood and hopped once.

Paul turned to me. I just stood there with my mouth agape looking back at him and behind him. “What’re you looking at?” he whispered.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“I, I, did you do that?” I whispered. Paul looked back at me with the uttermost serious look on his face as though rehearsing a death scene in a tragic movie, and then he started to grin. And then I smiled. I began trotting in place just the way I had seen him, and I opened my eyes wide. Paul stepped back and gestured toward the crack where the dresser hit the wall. I saw nothing. By then I was grinning like a pissing fool. I tried so hard not to laugh that I thought I might pee my own pants, and maybe I did a little.

Then I heard whirring from behind Paul. Ruh - ruh - ruh - ruh - ruh. The sound got slowly louder. Paul stood on tiptoe and bent his head to the electric clock, and then he nodded. He seemed amused, but also proud. He slid the clock next to St. Michael on the dresser and with his right fist he scribed a circle around the side of the dresser and repeated it faster and faster. Soon he was cranking on the dresser like an organ grinder’s monkey. Paul must have had that same thought, because he stopped a moment and curled his hands up towards his armpits and said, “Ooh-ooh-ah-ah-ah,” and then went back to his crazy cranking. His red face split with a goofy smile as I stood dancing in place. The sound of the clock digesting its gears got louder until I thought that Dad and She must hear it. I swear I saw the hands of the clock - all three - racing around the face like second hands gone mad.

I smelled something foul, which I thought was frying piss or plastic but which I now think might have been ozone. Then we heard a sizzling sound behind the dresser immediately followed by a muffled ‘pop’ from the kitchen or from the stairway to the basement beyond. The

lights from the kitchen and the hall blinked out and the music stopped, mid note. The house held its breath.

“What the Hell,” I heard Dad and “Shit,” from Her. I heard footsteps headed our way.

To this day, I am murky about some details after that moment. However, my father did appear at the bedroom door a moment later and, as always, stepped over the thing he might have seen and abso-fucking-lutely over what he should have said and, instead, looked between the two of us, sniffed the air, and asking his dad question. Paul gave his son answer, “I dunno,” although my father would have seen the guilt on his face and likely spatters on the front of his shorts. As soon as the dresser was pulled out, our father certainly saw the wet arc on the wall pointing directly to the electric socket sooted around the plug and with a puddle on the floor beneath. I believe that the clock survived but can not swear to it.

I would imagine - since I saw it often in life - that my father gave my brother the look, half puzzlement and half pity, that he reserved for me or Paul at such moments. I doubt She came to our room at all. I believe he then said, “You two get cleaned up and ready for dinner,” and went off to replace the fuse.

Though I don't recommend corners, I learned something standing in one that day. I learned never to urinate near a wall outlet with a clock plugged in it. Paul and I had a good laugh, and that's worth something, maybe a lot. And ever since that long, long summer, I've occasionally found myself in tight spots, but I favor open spaces. However, my brother: well, Paul seems drawn to life's corners like a rusty spike to an iron magnet. And every time he finds a corner, he looks somewhere close by for a socket to piss into.

The End