

Homework

By Brendan Rush
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Maybe it wasn't every night, but it was enough. Eight of us crammed into our house in West Roxbury, though small for us, it was a palace for my dad who sat in the same kitchen chair each night.

A steadiness of sound that started with the chair legs reverberating off the linoleum floor was a constant reminder that he was there.

From the chair he would make his way, sometimes with a little soft shoe move, to the cabinet to the left of the sink where we stored dishes, coffee mugs and on the top the bottles of brown stuff – sometimes referred to as his medicine.

As kids, we would all snicker and feel a part of his world when the medicine line was used. It was usually in company of relatives or neighbors around the holiday. We didn't know why it was funny, it just was, and we were in on the joke.

It was about as close as you could get to my dad. I wanted so bad to buy him a bottle as I got older. When I was 19 and working at a liquor store, I had my brother Pete come down to use my discount around the holidays. We were given \$30 toward any purchase in the place and I stood salivating looking over the “stoof” in the locked case.

I knew the difference between blends, whiskey and scotch and brandy. If I applied \$20 to the \$30 I figured we could get something real nice for dad. You'd think I stood in front of a cabinet filled with proven cancer treatment, and I just had to choose the right one. I would be the good son this Christmas Eve. I'd be the medicine man.

Up it went with the other. It could have been more. He may have reacted with a bit more show, but he didn't. A pleasant thanks and up with his brothers he went. “I'll have to hide that from Marty.” he said. We laughed at another joke we didn't really understand but knew that uncle Marty was good for the extra request when he visited. It wasn't often and it depended on the last visit as to how long it would be for the next arrival. Like any large Irish family arguments and threats could result in any family gathering, but when Marty was back on the good list he might pop in for a beer.

“Jimmy!” he barked louder than anyone else in the brood, “How about a touch with the beer?” The touch could be a shot, straight or on the rocks, and sometimes it was dropped right into the glass of beer.

“How do you like that?” he'd scream and look around the room at whomever was watching. I'd laugh and look at my dad. If he rolled his eyes then the show would commence with a trick from Martin T that might be the removal of his finger, a disappearing coin or some story about my dad as a kid.

If my dad looked away then we knew it might be months before Martin T rolled through. “Ah C’mon now Jimmy.” The he would ask about my stepmother. She never seemed to be around when Martin T arrived. My dad would fix a drink with his back to Marty.

He used an old two sided shot jigger. It always smelled sweet and clean. One side was a full shot and the other was a double. You could fill one side, dump it over the ice and fill the other side while it was draining. A splash of water and back to his seat he would land. The chair would squeak on the linoleum and then reverberate as he pulled it up closer to the kitchen table. The click sound of a striking match announced the cigarette. He slid the ash tray to the center of the table and dropped the cigarette in. He needed room to open the paper and piece through the sections.

His ritual became more controlled and slower as the night went on. His breathing would steady into a hypnotic sigh only to be broken by the reverberating chair legs. His glass was never empty long.

In the small dining area next to the kitchen you sat facing the kitchen or you had your back to the kitchen. Neither position was sought after, but each had their pluses and minuses.

If you had your back to the kitchen you were closer to the entry way and thus closer to my dad. You could almost feel the heat of his presence and the wind created by each turning page of the Boston Globe. Your arched back could act as a fortress and you could hide within the cave created by your shoulders.

The danger was created when my dad returned with a full glass. You were right in the line of site and God help you if you did not look like you were thoroughly engaged in your homework. You might get a question about school. Did you have any tests today? Did you pay attention today? And the worst, did you ask any questions today?

You were fucked then. You had to come up with an answer and this might lead to another question. At that point your whole world would become so crisp and clear. Like a deer in the clearing that has just noticed a twig out of place, you feel it – you feel everything – but most of all you know you are fucked.

See my dad had it in his mind that you were the problem. If you got a B instead of an A, you were not paying attention. If you got a C instead of a B, you were not asking enough questions. If you got a D or an F you were dead or fucked and neither was good.

Turning to answer him, fluids began to stir within you. My eyes would water. My mouth would go dry. If you had to stand your head would fill up with lead and almost roll off your shoulders. The room seemed to wobble. You were fucked.

“What are you doing?”

If you sat facing the kitchen on the far side of the dining room you could see my dad at all times. Right now I could see him looking past my brother Pete and directly at me. I must have done something when he began asking Pete about school today. I may have held my breath too loud. I may have twitched or moaned. Whatever it was that I did it caught his attention and as Pete's shoulders relaxed I knew that I was looking straight at a world of hurt.

"I was just stretching." It was the best I could come up with. I had no idea what I had done to attract his attention when he was so clearly locked in on Pete.

It was not like you could plan for my dad. You never knew from night to night what would happen. You prayed that he didn't check your homework. If you brought home a good grade on a test or worksheet you gauged his behavior and movements and revealed it like a winning hand in poker. An 85% in spelling may do the trick to lighten the moment and get you through the night, but it could also back fire if you misjudged his mood. He may question the three words you spelled wrong pointing out that if you paid a little more attention, you would have got the 100%.

Everything was a risk. What worked tonight may be disastrous tomorrow night. One thing you could plan for was a good hour of ranting and raving and a smack to the face if you gave the wrong answer.

"Enough stretching, you need more studying and less stretching."

At this point the room would get very hot as we waited to see if how he would react. The room would wobble again and my eyes would glaze over. Each one of us waiting for the verdict that would condemn the other - there was no honor in survival. Would he continue yelling at me, or would he go back to my brother? Seconds seemed like minutes passing away with every inhale and exhale from my dad. One of us was going down.

"Let me see your homework." I looked up from the far side saw my Dad's eyes lock on Pete. Like a Christian standing in a coliseum tunnels as the gates goes up, he walked into the kitchen. If you were in ear shot of that question your heart immediately began pounding. Even though I was still in the dining room I knew that everything could escalate into a full shit fit from this point on until you were safe in your bed - whenever the time was safe to retreat there.

Looking back, I can't tell if my dad was too drunk some nights or not drunk enough to check your homework. What pissed him of to no end one night might roll off his back another. Tonight he might take us all down and tomorrow he may be satisfied after one interrogation. You never knew.

Nothing was rolling off his back tonight.

For some reason, my brother Pete, who could not draw a straight line with a ruler, was inspired to doodle something in the top corner of his notebook. Where I loved drawing, Pete historically hated art class. Why he decided tonight was the night to draw a boat in his homework notebook I would never know, but that one chicken scratch drawing about the size of a nickel was the trigger that set all guns a blazing.

Pete stood next to my dad like he hadn't gone to the bathroom in weeks and he was trying to balance on the edge of axe. My dad situated himself putting the glass down, moving the ash tray with lit cigarette and sliding the newspaper to the middle of the kitchen table. He was now ready to check Pete's spelling notebook.

His pencil came out and pointed to the first item on the page, then to the next, then the next, then back to the top.

Down the column of words he would go and then to the next and the next and then back to the top and over to the boat. Each time he would be breathing in, exhaling and then moving onto the next item.

Number one, number two, number three, he had seen the fucking boat, number four and back to the top and then to the boat.

“What's this?”

It was a boat. For some reason he drew a boat. Maybe he was dreaming about the seashore of Maine. Who knows why? It was a boat. It didn't look like any boat I ever saw and I probably would have drawn a better boat, but there it was in the corner of the notebook and you could feel the barometric pressure in the room drop.

Like a car hitting a dog my brother bounced off the short wall of the kitchen and banged into the olive green phone on the wall. Appropriately enough it let out a short bing like we were in the ring.

My dad could strike like a viper only instead of cutting you with fangs it was like getting hit with a bag of dirt. The room would spin and your tongue would retreat to the back of your mouth. Meanwhile, a hum would settle in all around you and it felt like you were wearing a hat of nails for the next ten seconds.

I wobbled back to where I had just been standing, but I had to stop and fumble with the phone receiver that had fallen into the chair that was positioned directly under the phone on the wall. I can't remember when I was called into the kitchen. Everything had become a blur. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Pete hunched over his workbook like some Irish Monk – writing like the Vikings were knocking on the door.

“What's 3 times 1?” my dad boomed.

“3” I answered.

“What's 3 times 2?”

“6”

“What's 3 times 3?”

I could hear Pete, back in his seat in the dining room, sniffing back his own tears and snot. His art work had not gone over well and he had held up well under the barrage of accusations and head strikes that were a result of his not studying hard enough and spending more time “Drawing this shit than asking questions and paying attention in class!”

If Pete had spent any less time drawing in his life they might question his ability to use his hands. He barely liked printing let alone drawing.

“What’s 3 times 4?”

I cannot tell you why 3 times 4 confused me. I knew the answer to the next one was 15 and I was not positive but I would have gone with 18 for the next one after that, but 3 times 4 was not working out for me and BOOM!

My world was hotter and there were more nails in my imaginary hat. My nose was running like a river and I could find my hand to wipe it and that goddamn phone kept binging.

When I could focus again I could see Pete scribbling a number 12 on a piece of paper. He took a huge risk turning toward me and mouthing the number 12 because if my dad saw this he would have dragged his ass back into the kitchen for another art lesson.

I took my position again and we began the 3 table of multiplication again and again we came to 3 times 4 and I blurted out an agonizing 12. Then I said 15 before he finished with 3 times 5. To my surprise 18 was right as well and I pulled 21 out of my ass.

Through some stroke of genius I was rolling. Maybe the outward spinning of the room and the humming sound in the air was somehow working in harmony and opening up a channel to the places in my head where I stored things I could not remember. What ever it was the channel closed on 3 times 9.

“Ah fah Cryssake.” my dad moaned. “You are not even paying atTENTion!” He exclaimed as he stood up with his hands out heading for the cabinet. It has been thirty years and I can still recite the entire homily of why he bothers to pay for us to go to school and why he goes to work every day to provide food and a roof over our heads so we can go down to that goddamn school and act like jackasses day in and day out,...and for what!

But he was an idiot! A grade Ay double barreled number one idiot for giving a shit about it. If we would just take a goddamn minute to just think and ask questions and pay attention it would be a goddamn miracle. But no, every goddamn night it was the same thing over and over again, and do you listen? NO!

The “NO” could be accompanied with a backhand to the face depending on where he was in his drink preparations. If he was still mixing or testing the mixture you were safe. If

he was moving back to his chair you braced yourself. If he was sitting in his chair it could be the front of his hand crashing down on you. Either way, it was probably the last strike of the evening.

At this stage he had erupted to the point of disgust and he only had so much energy left. The medicine had taken its toll and the fact that you were the second one tonight had winded him.

He would send you back to the table with a half hearted swipe accompanied by threats and calling on god to save us if we did not start paying attention in school. We all settled into a steady banter between my dad and some unknown figure in the kitchen. Was it God? Jesus Christ? Or some other sonofabitch? It was hard to tell. It was also hard to figure out how to approach the teacher the next day when she would suggest that you go home and work on your lessons with your parents. Why wouldn't she let me pay attention in class?

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