

Holidays Frightened My Father · *Walter Donway*

HOLIDAYS FRIGHTENED my father. They were invitations to enjoyment, when the mind lets down its guard and happiness is allowed to creep into the heart. On Christmas, on Thanksgiving, on the Fourth of July, he was driven to undertake any available and unappealing chore. As we opened our presents, or lingered over dinner, or played checkers, he would go off, in his work shoes and his oldest sweater, to move heaps of furniture in the attic or to worry at a year's accumulation of junk in the cellar. My mother never protested, but sometimes I would say, "Why do you have to do it *today*, Dad?"

Hurt would come into his voice. "It's got to be done," he would say. "Who's going to do it?" And no logic could answer him.

Hating him, despising myself, I would follow him and offer to help. True to the holiday spirit, he worked happily at such times, relaxed as he seldom relaxed, as though we two now understood one another and, in spite of myself, I felt a kind of peace.

The lessons my father learned were few, but he returned to them doggedly. Like some humble, bewildered traveler, eyeing the ticket collector who seems to control his fate, my father repeated over and over that he had paid his passage, held his receipt, and could not in fairness be asked to pay again.

Hard work, for twelve or fourteen hours a day, was his religion—almost a ritual by which he hoped, perhaps, to appeal to some terrible celestial taskmaster, watching the human race, irritated if he glimpsed an arrogant mortal enjoying himself. My father lived as though watched.

He came from a poor, first-generation Polish family that lived in New Bedford during his boyhood. His father worked in the flour mills and his mother in the textile mills for most of their lives: his father lugging the fat, dead sacks of flour, his mother tending the looms. Only late in life did his father save enough money to buy a little, hilly farm, too raw and rocky for most gardening, but suitable for raising temperamental and astonishingly disease-prone turkeys that lived, it seemed, on a strict diet of human devotion and corn.

In the face of threats and anger from his father, his mother insisted that he attend college, which he did, and she worked more long years in the mills to support him. Gradually, she went deaf from the furious racket of the power looms.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, my father worked every morning and evening—shoveling coal into furnaces, mostly, but at whatever job he could find. One summer, during the Great Depression, when no jobs were available, the Institute hired him to wash walls in the Chemistry Building. My father labored at full speed, swashing from room to room, down long

corridors, until his supervisor told him to slow down: the work had to last all summer. My father tried to slow down but he could not, and when he finished the work by the middle of July, he was laid off.

Though he loved the precision of numbers, the finality of things built, the known resistance and measured effort of digging and hauling earth, my father worked for twenty years—the core of his adult life—running a dress and bridal shop.

He felt obliged to talk with every angry mother whose daughter's wedding gown was late, whose alterations did not fit, whose shoes did not match her gown. He came home evenings, grey-faced and silent, carrying hefty ledgers under his arm. I remember that at one time, after years of watching him at his desk each evening, he came home one night with an expensive hi-fi and, thereafter, brought home new records every Friday. He would sit alone in the livingroom, sometimes listening to classical music, but more often studying the critiques that came with the records.

I asked my mother why he was not working anymore and she said: "The doctor has said that Daddy has to listen to music. He can't work at night anymore."

"He *has* to listen?" I said, uneasy, as though my father had been sent upon some search, some incomprehensible assignment in the depths of this music.

"Yes," said my mother. "Your father is sick. It's good for him to listen to music, so he won't worry."

With the first money he saved from the dress shop, my father bought a hundred-acre tract of land. He would wander over it, evenings and weekends, measuring and calculating, talking of roads and houses he should build. He bought a transit and surveyed the land, needlessly and too often, jotting in his notebook precise and detailed calculations that went unused year after year. To have the measure of his land, to know the intimacy of its angles and relationships, was his passion.

Love for the unambiguous and unarguable rigor of mathematics and engineering crept into everything he did. After dinner, he sat beside me at the kitchen table, through hours that for me were like a cage too small to stand in, and helped me with my homework in mathematics. When I completed a problem, carelessly and without conviction, and looked up at him, impatient to be told it was correct, that I could get on to the next, he would ask, grimly: "Are you sure of that? Would you stake your life on it?"

I flopped my hand onto the page of the open book, on the shiny pages of dull and pointless figures, bewildered by his passion, and said, "Oh, I don't know. I don't *care*!"

My father shook his head, like a sergeant confronted by a recruit unaware

of the seriousness of the war he will soon enter. "You've got to be willing to stake your life on it," he said. "We can't go on until you're sure."

To please him, and to get on to the next problem, I put conviction into my voice and said: "Yes, it's right. I'd stake my life on it."

My father leaned over and pointed to the fateful marks. "No," he said. "You're wrong. See. . . . look at this"

I cannot say whether my father loved me, for with me, as with all things, he followed his duty with precision, systematically. On alternate evenings, half-an-hour was set aside for each of us—my brother and two sisters and myself—to be spent alone with my father. For years my father followed this system; he called it, "Time Alone." We were to do whatever we liked with him during that time, but in practice, "do anything" meant either learning some specific new subject or, more often, building something.

One evening I stood at the foot of a ladder, gazing up at my father as he worked, absorbed and happy, on the pigeon coop we had set out to build during my "Time Alone." As I climbed up the ladder a few steps, to stretch up and pass him a fistful of nails, I said, suddenly: "I don't want to build a pigeon coop. Let's not, Dad."

He stopped and looked down at me. "What do you mean?" he said. "You can't leave it. You started something, you've got to finish it."

"It's Time Alone," I said, pleading. "I get to do whatever I want, don't I?"

My father paused, his hammer poised, and stared at the half-shingled roof of the coop; for a moment, he seemed to struggle with himself, hesitating, then he positioned a nail and whacked it. "No," he said. "It's got to be finished."

"Okay, I just don't want to and I won't," I said. "It's Time Alone."

My father slid a shingle into a place, not looking down at me, and whacked in another nail. "Go back to the house, then," he said. "Go home, if you want to."

But I stayed, as I always stayed when he said I could go home. I attended him until it became too dark to work, my neck stiff from gazing up at him against a sky that was now almost lightless. I stayed, joyless and guilty, not out of pleasure, but in search of the bleak relief of knowing that I was not disappointing him.

For two weeks more, my Time Alone was spent finishing the pigeon coop, down to the last, obligatory latch on the door and wire-covered vent beneath the roof. "Now," said my father, as he plied the latch for a final check on its precision, "now you've got something. It's done. Doesn't that feel good?" He took a deep breath and gazed up at the neatly shingled roof of the coop. Then he sighed, and said: "You'll learn that you don't want to just play all the time. When you grow up, you work. That's all the satisfaction there is."

"Yes," I said, "I'm glad it's finished."

Purchase of a summer house at Webster Lake in southwestern Massachusetts, not far from the Connecticut line, was my father's boldest investment in pleasure. Commensurate with this risk was his propitiation of fate, and there came about, in this way, the drilling of the well.

Water for the cottage was pumped from an old well, which was suspected of filching its water, in turn, from the lake, rather than from underground springs. Although my father, at this time, was wealthy or close to it, he dismissed the idea of an artesian well as extravagant. Power drilling of an ordinary well was likewise dismissed.

The contraption that finally was selected for the job was like nothing I have ever seen. Had it not shown signs of previous, heavy use, I would suspect that it had been designed, to order, for my father's martyrdom.

A rugged tripod, ten feet high, stood over the chosen spot of earth. At its apex was a heavy-duty pulley, from which hung a great, lead-filled weight of perhaps one-hundred-fifty pounds. Attached to this weight, and pointing toward the ground like a slim finger, was a steel rod about four feet long. A length of pipe with a drilling point was aimed into the ground beneath the tripod, like a nail to be driven, and into it was inserted the tough steel finger. The weight was then dragged to the apex of the tripod, by means of a rope run through the pulley, and the finger was drawn upward, almost out of the pipe. Then the rope was released, the weight drove down the pipe, guided by the inserted finger, until the weight struck the pipe with a slam and the pipe was driven an inch or two into the ground.

This was repeated, drawing the weight and letting it fall, until only a few inches of pipe remained above ground. Another length of pipe was then attached to this remainder, and in turn driven downward. Thus the probing point of the pipe was jolted deeper and deeper, nosing the earth for water. As it went down, section after section of pipe disappearing into the gravelly earth, the resistance became greater, until a single blow of the weight would drive the pipe only a quarter of an inch.

From early June, day after day, my father toiled at the rope, hauling like an Egyptian slave at the stone sled, letting the weight slam again and again, nailing his great steel straw into the earth. The site of the well was close to the house and the lake, so as we went by with our towels and rubber rafts, we passed my father—naked to the waist, heaving and sweating. And as we swam, or drifted on rubber rafts, or fished from the wharf, the monotonous slam of the weight spoke to us, certain as conscience, that all is not pleasure, that the price is paid, is paid, is paid . . .

Several times the probing pipe struck a stone too large to bully aside; the entire pipe then had to be *withdrawn* and started somewhere else. I have neither heart nor recollection to say how *this* was accomplished, except to say that it made driving the pipe look like fun.

For three months, the entire summer season, my father worked at the rope. Visitors and passers-by did not say, "Hello"; they said, "How is the well?" The callouses on my father's hands achieved a kind of fame.

At first, he worked sullenly and alone, like an outcast. But gradually the primitive rhythm of the work hypnotized us, and family and guests alike—women as well as men—joined my father at the rope. Some afternoons we would stand along the rope, a family united, dragging together, sweating, driving the accursed pipe by inches.

At such times, my father seemed at peace, more relaxed and voluble than I had ever known him. He joked marvelously, as though intoxicated, and he chanted out the rhythm of our heaving, so that we learned to pull in respectable unison on the unforgiving rope.

I suppose, incredibly, that I loved that rope and the idiotic well, because that summer a fear seemed to lift from my father, as we hauled on the rope, and his heart opened; he seemed to be a man living, at last. That summer, at the well, I heard my father sing! In bits and snatches it came, a line of this and a line of that, all run together—he knew no complete songs. But that summer, his family behind him on the rope, he sang.

It came at last, after dark one evening at the end of August. Only I was with him: too tired for the rope, too guilty to return to the cottage and leave him hauling and grunting alone in the dark.

It came, first in croaking, muddy spatters, then arcing and beautiful, choking the throat of the rusty pump, clear spurts that pulsed with the rise and fall of the handle. My father pumped and pumped, furiously, as though unwilling to release his end of the long, silver rope he had wrenched from the earth. He pumped, drenching his feet, his pants, drenching me as I caught the silver stream in cupped palms that ran over, that never filled.

"All up and down the *whole* creation," he sang tonelessly, pumping.

"Dad!" I shouted. "You've got water!" It isn't what I meant, not at all, but I shouted again, "You've got water!"

And somehow, too, I thought: it's forgiven—as though I watched him step up to a celestial judge, to take in his rough hands some final trophy that said: peace . . . it's over.

I stared at my father's face, bent over the pump; I stared and grinned and waited for him to look up.

But he did not look up. He studied the spurting water, his face scowling, untrusting, as though he watched for a black streak of infection to thread the silver stream. I reached out slowly and touched his wet wrist. "Dad," I said, softly, "you've got water, huh?"

He let the pump handle fall of its own weight; his fingers followed it down. A final arc of water relapsed and dribbled beneath the pump.

He did not look at me, or reply. He stooped to pick up his scattered tools,

one in each hand, one under each arm, and started off through the darkness toward the cottage.

And I bent, too, to pick up what he could not carry.