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~~Where God Hides~~

BACON BURIAL ← 4/4/17

Except for the occasional "God damnit!" muttered by Dad when something truly irritating happens, like when he finds too many long distance calls on the phone bill, God is pretty much a total stranger in our home.

But just because Dad is not a religious guy doesn't mean he's short on virtue. To the contrary, his moral and ethical standards are of the highest caliber. His most longstanding and frequent advice is, "Always do the right thing." It's just that Dad is not going to be signing up for any longer list of personal commandments. In fact, for God to be warmly welcomed into our house, He would do better to be selling vacuum cleaners or encyclopedias door-to-door.

In 1948, when a door-to-door salesman bangs the big iron knocker on our front door, I assume that Mom will politely send him packing. Moms in our neighborhood generally shoo salespeople away, telling the kids that it's dangerous to let strangers into the house. But today, when the well-dressed Electrolux vacuum salesman tips his hat at our door, Mom's face lights up. "How timely!" she declares. "I hate that pile of junk in my closet. It's falling apart."

She flings the door open and invites him in for what turns out to be a two-hour demonstration leading to our family's conversion from a manual push-pull carpet sweeper to a new Electrolux Model XX with auto-cord rewind and a foot-operated on/off switch.

Another door-knocking total stranger welcomed into our house is the Encyclopedia Britannica salesman. It's Saturday when the book-carrying gentleman rings our bell. Dad is immediately brought to meet him because this merchandise, like the prints of French Impressionist paintings on our walls, is a whole-family product and Dad makes the decisions in that category. After listening to a half-hour presentation involving the passing around of impressive samples of gold-accented maroon leather bound books, Dad agrees that we need this item and he ceremoniously signs on the dotted line. I'm not sure if he looks so pleased because the books are educational for us kids or because they will look prestigious in the bookcase when seen by visiting clients. How things look heavily influences Dad's judgments. As soon as the salesman, order in hand, packs up and leaves, Dad organizes my sister Gale and I into a shelf-cleaning brigade for the anticipated arrival of the volumes. We are told to pack our very large collection of National Geographic magazines in boxes and carry them into the cellar. This is a disturbing development as these magazines are my only connection with pictures of naked people.

To many of his friends, Dad is an underground Jew. Among the Jewish community in the suburbs of the 1940s, this is a slightly disparaging thing to be called.

The term suggests that Dad's Jewish-ness is so pale that he's hardly recognizable as a member of the faith. My guess is that Dad cultivates this transparency in an effort to more easily become a member of the advertising profession, which in New York City in the late '30s and early '40s, is closed to non-Christians. Dad is "passing."

One summer, when I am 15, instead of summer camp, I am shipped off 1,800 miles to stay with my Grandfather in Denver for the month of July. For the first five days, Granddad cooks me a pretty boring breakfast of Cream of Wheat and sliced apples. Back home, my mother's remarkable lack of talent for food preparation has encouraged me (in self-defense) to become an acceptable cook. On the sixth day, armed with the confidence that I know how to cook stuff, I decide to make breakfast for myself.

I rise early, walk to the corner market, and purchase a half-pound of my favorite breakfast food, smoked bacon. Fifteen minutes later I'm shaking the hot frying pan around, shifting the sizzling strips, when Granddad walks into the kitchen and explodes in a red-faced rage, screaming, "My pan, my pan! What are you doing?" Both hands waving wildly above his head, he demands, "Take this fry pan out into the backyard and scrub it with dirt to purge the bacon. This is a kosher pan!"

I ask timidly. "Where should I get the dirt?"

"I don't care!" he yells. "Take the dirty fork and dig with it!"

Apparently, Dad's father is seriously Orthodox.

I run into the backyard and start digging up dirt. I scrape a shallow trench with the fork and scrub the pan with the loose dirt.

I lay the perfectly cooked crispy bacon in the trench and bury it.

From this eye-opening event, I learn for the first time that we do have some serious religion in our family. Given my passion for bacon, it is racking experience.

Back home in the early autumn, I sense Dad has begun to feel guilty about my lack of understanding of the basics of Jewish laws and tradition. He enrolls me in the local reform temple's Sunday school program. I think he's concerned over my shocking lack of understanding of what a kosher kitchen is all about. For a young teen, this is an eye-rolling punishment because I am losing a precious weekend sleep-late day. After a few miserable months of silent suffering, we both call it quits. I, because I'm whining about getting dressed up on a weekend, and he because driving me to and from my classes every Sunday conflicts with the better tee-off times at the golf club.

On the chilly October ^{SUNDAY} ~~day~~ we decide to call it quits, he picks me up at Sunday school in the family Pontiac, smoking his favorite Cuban cigar. Dad cherishes these "Cubans" and after repeated drags and slow swirling dispersal of the blue smoke, he will periodically open the window to clear the air and with a loud "hock-toowee," discharge a mouthful of cigar saliva.

This morning, though, he is content to remain at the curb enjoying his smoke. He holds the stately six-inch cigar; hand rolled by Cuban cigar artisans and wound with only the finest Cuban-grown green and tan tobacco. I see in Dad's face the mellow expression of a man enjoying a rare and fragrant jewel, a smoking scepter of delight.

It is adorned with a gold paper band with a painted cameo portrait of a Spanish explorer surrounded by the words "HABANA Made in Havana Cuba."

He asks, "How did it go today?"

I say, "I hate this stuff. It's so boring."

Dad nods with a faint look of understanding and releases a long blossom of blue smoke and, with a gurgled gathering of cigar saliva, turns his head and spits out the window.

Unfortunately, the window is closed. A decidedly unglamorous glob of viscous stuff starts sliding down the glass. Impeccable in every social grace and gesture, Dad produces a handkerchief and wipes the mess. I chuckle and say, "Gee, Dad, do you think God heard us and closed the window?" He snorts a big grin, rests the wadded up hanky in the ashtray and pats me on the knee. We drive away and I know some silent agreement has passed between us and in which I will not be back at religious school and Dad will be teeing off earlier on Sundays.

As a result of this arrangement, I am pretty much on my own as far as developing a relationship with God. Like the childhood boogeyman still living under my bed, I sense God was also hiding nearby, quietly leaving me alone.

Now, after eight decades of navigating life's waters without a Supreme Being at the rudder, I think I have discovered where God really lives. God isn't up in the clouds. He's not lurking watchfully from my closet. He's not hovering over churches, mosques, temples and other houses of worship.

God has parked himself in the essence compartment of my brain, sitting in a big leather chair, savoring a large Cuban cigar. I can read the ornately lettered paper band wrapped around its middle. It says, "Always Do The Right Thing."

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