

# Another One of His Punishments

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**My son and I meet in the City—dinner and talk. And drink.**

More and more drink as time goes by. He is quite the drinker, my son is, Old Overholt Rye on the rocks—a drinker's drink. None of those blends that people call rye. Who am I to talk? When I was his age, twenty-seven, I was out drinking every night and my drink of choice was tequila shots, another drinker's drink.

But it's not the same. Sometimes I think he needs his golden anesthesia to tolerate our time together. We hug hello and goodbye and he never acts embarrassed to kiss me when he sees me. We never have a bad time, not like the old days, which were rocky as all hell. That's okay. Fathers and sons should have a little conflict to make them stronger, make them bond as more than just parent and child when they get older. By now we should be bonded at the hip, but I worry that he's getting the Irish disease—which is even worse for a Jew than for a mick. I should know.

I could never say *mick* in front of him. That's another thing I have to watch around Mr. P.C.—my mouth, my slang, my made-up nicknames and even my everyday garden-variety vulgarity. Especially in mixed company. Mixed company—that's a term you don't hear much anymore.

Fuck. Cocksucker. Motherfucker. The Holy Trinity of my normal conversational vocabulary. The kid can't handle it, although his friends of both sexes speak the same way. If I do, I get The Look. Or worse yet, no matter how full his glass is he orders another. He punishes me by drinking to excess in front of me. He knows I worry about whether he drinks the same way when I'm not around. That's what he wants from me—worry. It's payback for some real or imagined childhood that lacked the father he wanted. The one he thought all his friends had. What did he know?

I played ball with him often but I never went to his ballgames. I spent my time after work in bars instead; often with fathers of his teammates. I once told him, after I staggered in and had to endure

his mother complaining that I missed a big game, that if his team were any good they'd have been on the tube and I would've watched them from the bar.

Another night in my bleary, wobbly state I tried to explain that I hated little league baseball because I got cut from the team when I was young. "Too bad you can't hold your liquor as well as you hold a grudge," my wife said.

"You don't drive me to drink," I told her; "I drive myself to get away from you." And those were our pleasant conversations.

I don't drink anymore. I quit on my own without going to those coffee-guzzling, smoke-filled meetings. It was the day after my divorce-bender celebration that I scared myself sober. I don't remember getting in the car but I do remember driving on the sidewalk and the look of terror on the old lady's face as I swerved back onto the road to keep from hitting her. I remember she wore a hat—a large-brimmed bright green one; and she had rouged-up cheeks and rimless glasses.

I somehow made it home and haven't had a drink since. I've never shared this story with anyone. Now every time I look at a bottle, I see her face on the label. The fact is, unlike most drunks I don't crave a drink except for an occasional real cold beer on a hot day, not for the alcohol but for quenching thirst. But it's never hot enough for me to open a bottle and crawl in. I never just drank, I chewed my booze the way others would chew sirloin. If you haven't been there you wouldn't understand.

Most probably, like everyone else, my son, Sam, thinks I quit drinking because of the divorce. That's okay by me. I'm not proud of leaving that lady shaking on the sidewalk, and he doesn't need any more ammunition to use against me. He's never discussed my drinking or non-drinking but when we meet for dinner we're just as likely to sit at the bar and have our meal as we are to sit at a table. His choice—it's yet another way to punish me.

I still live on the Connecticut shoreline, on the outskirts of New Haven, where my son grew up and now hates to visit so I take

the Metroliner into New York and visit him when he can fit me in his busy fucking schedule doing God knows what. There are rules to our visits that have developed over the years and most probably more rules to come. I can't mention his mother, my former wife, divorced the week after he graduated from college. Nor can I speak of her parents, his grandparents, or any other relative on her side, and that goes for her neighbors, too. He doesn't seem to realize that they were my family and neighbors for twenty-five years too. My son doesn't want to know about my social life and not that I want to, but I could never bring a woman into the city to meet him. It makes little sense, especially since his mother is remarried for the second time and most likely heading for a third. That's my fault too; but that's for another time.

I can't say, "Remember when?" and then go on to tell a story because it depresses him. I can't ask personal questions like "What kind of computer programs are you writing these days?" or "Who's the lady in your life these days?" He'll tell me what he wants to tell me and only then am I free to discuss the topic.

Also, I never get to pick the restaurant. "What do *you* know about New York restaurants?" Sam asks. "I live here." Sometimes he'll pick an Indian or Ethiopian restaurant because he knows I hate the food but I'll suffer through it, picking away, while he, without even checking for my reaction, does extra lip-smacks.

These dinners aren't all painful. We have many things in common and we laugh a lot too. It's a strange relationship we've come to, but no stranger than I set the groundwork for years ago. We don't look alike as much as resemble each other. He's about four inches shorter than my six two and I know he's waiting anxiously for my shrinking days to begin. We both have naturally curly hair. I have a mustache, he a beard. We are both finger-drummers, whistlers and toe-tappers. Walking down the street it's not uncommon for one of us to begin whistling a tune and the other to whistle in, making it a duet. Often one will switch, mid-song, to a different one and the other will follow and then back and forth again, just as we did when

he was young and holding my hand as we walked. We both love hats but neither of us wears a baseball cap. I'm partial to a fedora, he to a porkpie he bought off some street guy a few years back when we were walking in the Village. I wanted to have it cleaned before he wore it but he just looked at me and popped it on his head. "Cooties," I said to him. "I hope so," he answered. "Cooties are the only pets I'm allowed in my apartment." In colder weather he wears a lint-covered knit hat that he loves, holes and all. It's like watching an adult carrying a teddy bear.

**I hadn't seen Sam for a couple of months; he'd been too busy** the last few times I called so I decided to not call for a while. One evening I got home from the movies and he'd left a message on the machine. "Let's get together," he said. "Pick the food and I'll pick the restaurant." I should've been happy to hear from him but his attempt at not slurring his words only made me sad. I called and got his machine. "Sushi," I left, and hung up. The next day he left, "Wednesday, seven-thirty. Tokyo Rose, Broadway, near 80th. "Wilco," I responded.

I got there fifteen minutes early and my son was sitting at the sushi bar drinking sake. We hugged and he asked if I wanted a table or the sushi bar. The restaurant was big and noisy. I sized it up and pointed to a deuce off by itself near the swinging doors to the kitchen. He threw some bills down and instead of heading for the table he walked out of the restaurant with me following him. I caught up to him and his sadness enveloped me. I threw an arm over his shoulder as we walked. He didn't shake it off.

"How's this?" he asked after five minutes, stopping in front of a steak and chop house. "Fine," I told him, "I'd rather have cooked food tonight anyway." He nodded and looked as if he were trying to smile and opened the door. It was a man's restaurant, dark paneling, red leather banquettes, long bar filled with pictures of famous mobsters. The hostess told us it'd be ten or fifteen minutes and sent us to wait in the bar.

We found two stools separated by a loner and I started to ask the loner if he'd mind moving one way or the other when my son tapped him on the shoulder and jerked his thumb toward one of the empty bar stools. The man, not looking tolerant, swiveled his stool toward my son. I took a step forward, not quite between them, smiled, and said, "We'd hate to talk at each other with you between. We wouldn't want to put you through that. Would you mind?" He shot my son a look and slid his cigarettes and drink over a stool. The bartender, arms folded over his apron-covered stomach, stood watching from a dozen feet away. He kept watching until he caught Sam's eye, then pivoted and walked to the opposite end of the bar and began chatting up the waitress. Finally my son slapped his palm on the bar a couple of times and the bartender looked up with 86 in his eyes and slow-walked over.

"What's a guy have to do to get a drink around here?" my son demanded with a practiced degree of belligerence. "You'll never know," the bartender said, and walked away. I got up and said, "Let's blow this joint. The food probably sucks anyway." My son followed me but not before scowling at the bartender.

On the next block we wandered into a Blarney Stone and the bartender was right there with a cheery hello as we sat at the half-empty bar. "Old Overholt on the rocks for me and a Shirley Temple for the old man," my son said. "Make it a Coke," I said. The bartender returned with our drinks and apologized to me for being out of umbrellas. He and Sam got a big kick out of that. An hour and three doubles later my son was on the bar and we still hadn't ordered any food. I tried to rouse him but he was unrousable. I drunk-walked him out to the street and hailed a cab. Even though I'd never been to his apartment I knew the address from sending him notes and news clippings.

We pulled up to Sam's apartment house. After I got him out of the cab I fished his keys from his jacket pocket and somehow managed to get his dead weight to the building. The doorman had this here-we-go-again look about him. I cut off any snide comments by

telling him I was Sam's father. He helped me load my son into the elevator and rode up to the third floor with us. He even helped drag Sam to the apartment door before saying good night and leaving ten bucks richer.

I deposited my son on a comfortable-looking chair, then closed the door. His apartment was spotless, to my surprise. There were piles of books and CDs all around but they were neat in a unfiled sort of way. There was a large folding table with several computers and a tack board with boxes from computer games and how-to programs along with many computer-generated pictures. The living room walls were bare, as if he were a transient. I looked into the kitchen and got a Coke from the fridge. Then I opened his bedroom door.

His bed was made, his shoes lined up neatly under the bed and there were framed pictures everywhere—pictures of him with me and his mother, some of just the two of us, and others with just him and his mother. On the desk was a pile of letters, all with my handwriting on the envelopes. I opened the scrapbook that was in the bookcase and saw pictures and articles about me winning sales contests, doing something civic-minded, and even earlier pictures and articles about me in high school and college playing baseball.

There are times in our lives when we are rendered dumb and this was one. I tried to think if I was better off knowing or not knowing about his personal life. I had no answer but finally I got up from his bed and walked into the living room, where he had fallen half off the chair. I hefted him up and started to drag him to the bedroom and heard the familiar sounds of first retching. I deviated to the bathroom where I bent him over the bowl and let him be. Eventually I wet a towel, wiped his face off, helped him up and into the bedroom where he passed out as he approached the bed. I took off his shoes and pants, pulled off his shirt and pulled the covers out from under him. I tucked him in. Right before I walked out of the bedroom I saw his blue knit hat. I slipped it under his arm, smoothed the blanket, and kissed him on the forehead, wishing him a good-night and a soft landing in the morning. Then I went back to the

bathroom and the all-too-familiar task of cleaning up.

That moment, if a waitress had walked into the apartment, I would have ordered my tequila shots and kept on ordering them until she cut me off.

I took my shoes off and lay down on the couch waiting for my son to get up in the morning and find me in his privacy—not knowing what to expect, but hoping for his pain to go away.