

My Father's Son

The September before I turned six, my father decided
that my sister and I start Hebrew school.
For some misguided reason
(probably because she was a girl),
it hadn't been necessary to enroll her
when she'd turned six, nor make her party
to an interview with the Rabbi (principal of the school).

I can just barely remember
my feelings at the time: a bit proud of
going off with my father to start school
(he hadn't been around
for my kindergarten enrollment one year earlier);
a bit nervous about what this rabbi
was going to ask me.
Yes, I was Orthodox (because my father was)
but was low-key about strict observance.

I did keep strictly kosher, though,
said some prayers before going to bed
(Now I lay me down to sleep...),
didn't keep a hat on my head but didn't
turn on or off the lights on the Sabbath;
didn't pray every day, but went to synagogue
almost every Saturday.
It was a little iffy,
but I guess I felt secure enough.

We entered the synagogue, it was a Sunday morning,
found the office off to the side,
and there was The Rabbi.
He motioned to us to wait
while he finished up some work on his desk,
giving me a chance to get a close look at him.
And he was scary!
Tallish and heavyset, he had a black goatee
punctuating a face with deep-set eyes, swarthy skin,
straight grim mouth, deep lines running
from the sides of his nose to the ends of his lips.
And he moved—seriously I thought at the time—
pompously, I learned later.

He finally turned to my father and me,
shook my father's hand
and reached out to take mine.
Had I been a free agent,
I'd have kept my hand to myself,
but with my father standing beside me
I extended mine and shook.
It felt to me as though I were shaking hands
with a crook—some ogre.
Only because I was my father's son
did I have the assurance
that this I would survive.

At first the rabbi asked my father
some questions about me:
my age, my year at school, my place in the family.
“Ah, the youngest, the only son, I see.”
Then he turned to me.
The eyes seemed to stipple my face as he asked me staccato:
did I eat trafe hotdogs, did I listen to the radio on Shabas,
did I go to the movies on Saturday afternoons?
With no prompting from my father
I could answer surely and satisfactorily
these myriad queries.
I could also see my father was not displeased with my replies—
he was clearly coming off quite well
in this not so subtle test of his paternal tutelage.

The rabbi, also seeming pleased with my responses,
then asked: “And do you have tsitsis?”
A blow!
I knew my mother and two oldest sisters had them—
or something that sounded like them;
my youngest sister didn't;
that was because she was too young.
I looked at my father—he was turning red—
I looked at the rabbi—not a clue from either.
Not knowing how to parry
this seeming challenge to my malehood,
I answered: “If my father has, then I do too”.

Little did I realize that this parry
was the cruelest thrust
to my father's orthodox image.
I looked at him and saw he was a burning red;
I looked at the rabbi, who stood there placidly
though his swarthy face had taken on
a slight tinge of rose.
"Well," said he, "you'll learn about all of that here."
And the interview was closed.

It took a while
(the whole walk back to our apartment)
for my father to recover,
and I was loath to break our silence.
Once in our house, he explained to me
that tsitsis were a fringed undergarment
worn by observant Jewish males;
they were not what I had apparently taken them to be—
a part of the anatomy.
I asked him why, then, he didn't wear any,
and he said that starting the next day he would.
And so would I.

He left me and went to tell my mother
how the 'interview' had gone;
I quickly went off to do something more to my taste.
A little later, when my mother spoke to me,
she said she was glad the interview'd gone well;
she said no more, but there was a sparkle in her eyes
and a smile curving her mouth
while she spoke.

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