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A Hushed Persuasion

By the time I had turned ten, my mother had mastered the art of silent shame. She didn't say a word when I stole candy from the teachers lounge in preschool. She simply dragged me by the collar and pushed me toward the principal with the empty wrappers in my hand. After she broke up the fight between Eddie Kowalski and me, she sat with me in the front seat of the car for an eternity, watching the windshield wipers swish the melting snow back and forth, back and forth. I particularly remember parent teacher conferences, however, because my mother loathed them. Meeting with our teachers reminded her that my brother Nathan and I were not the smartest children in class.

At the conferences I would wait in the hall with my brother while my mother and stepfather consulted our teachers, and then we'd all pile back into the car and putter home. Nathan and I would huddle in the dirty red Nova waiting to be scolded, but the worst punishment came when my mother said nothing. Without her spoken rebuke, we had nothing to protest. Without knowing what our teachers had said, we were damned to assume the worst. We would squirm while Mom sat with the static tension of the Mikado. My eyebrows would knit together while a staccato thump drummed in my concave chest. My brother would shift and twitch, looking for a corner to hide in, out of sight of the rear-view mirror. Although the conferences were always held on a cool fall

evening, our humiliation would radiate enough heat to keep the atmosphere in the back seat uncomfortably warm. With the windows rolled up and the red-checked vinyl interior glowing, the car always reminded me of a pungent toaster oven. In the stillness, Mom's disappointment would permeate the air, and the mugginess beneath my flannel shirt would curl around my collar and flush my cheeks.

My brother and I always received poor marks. I got B's and C's with the occasional D, and my brother's grades were worse. Every quarter our teachers would check the box on our grade cards that stated, "lacks self-discipline." This puzzled my mother and stepfather. They seemed to think we were jumping out of our seats and screaming, or dancing with lampshades on our heads. The fact was, we hadn't done anything: no homework, no class participation, no studying. I thought that kids showed up at school and if they were smart they were rewarded, if they were stupid, they were punished. It had never occurred to me that studying outside of school was mandatory. "Why do they have to discipline themselves," my stepfather would demand. "Isn't that the teacher's job?" As my stepfather trumpeted his protests, my mother would purse her lips and cross her arms. We were tacitly expected to know what crime we had perpetrated and how to atone for it. Her silence empowered her, and we would wonder how to redeem ourselves. My mother had a queenly air, and we were members of the court, trying to avoid the iron maiden or the stockade. Pleasing my mother seemed to me an insurmountable feat.

Then one night, after a particularly devastating critique by my fourth grade teacher, my mom took me by the arm as we got out of the car. "If you could just get A's and B's Matthew, it would make me so happy," she whispered to me. Years had passed

since she had spoken to me privately. Once the shock wore off, I realized the significance of her proposal: she had singled me out for a special assignment. Because of her royal, implacable stature, it had never occurred to me that I could make my mom happy. She worked long hours, and I rarely had conversations with her. When she was home, she was usually reading. When she was absorbed in a book, she was not to be disturbed. I longed for her to pay that kind of attention to me, but I couldn't get next to her. The closest we ever came to bonding is when she would tease me about being fat (like my dad), or Polish (like my dad), or stupid (like my dad). The only time she would raise her regal brow from a book was to admonish my brother and me for fighting. So the news that all I had to do was get better grades was nothing short of a revelation. Now I had a goal. When fifth grade started, I decided to turn myself around.

First, I needed a place to study. That was a major task because our house was filthy. Crusty dishes and half-finished glasses of milk were strewn everywhere. Laundry sat in huge mounds on the dining room table. In fact, every horizontal surface was hidden beneath a pile of found objects; we were living our own post-modern art piece. So everyday I would get home from school and go to work. I would start in the kitchen, washing last night's dishes and throwing out empty pizza boxes. I cleaned the counters, the electric skillet caked with rancid pork grease, the end tables fused to the bottoms of coffee cups. Next, I would move to the dining room to fold the clothes, and I would distribute the folded stacks to their respective rooms. Finally, when there was enough room to spread out my books, I would sit down and, for the first time in my academic career, do my homework.

On top of studying for the first time, I started working out at a local gym called Torio's. It was a cinder-block building that fumed with man-sweat. There were free-weights, a wrestling mat, and a leather dummy held together with duct tape. The ceiling leaked into the pool, which was kept at a shocking 64 degrees. It was rare for a kid in Toledo, Ohio to have a gym membership during the early eighties, but I rode my bike to Torio's three times a week to work out with body builders and semi-professional wrestlers. I heaved the weights up and down until my sinews hardened and burned and my hands were grey and callused from the iron. I lifted and sweated, and the ache of lactic acid drowned out my loneliness. The men at the club kept their distance, but once in awhile a power lifter with biceps as big as my head would nod to me, as if to say, "You're okay kid."

When my grades finally arrived, I was staggered to see that I had indeed received all A's and B's. I would present these to my mother as a humble token of my efforts. This, I thought, would be the key to unlocking the hasped iron gate between us. I fantasized that my mother's teasing would stop, that she would offer me some maternal warmth, and that she would grant me access beyond the palace walls that guarded her embrace.

Unfortunately, none of these things happened. Mom was laid off. This was a major blow to her ego; she wasn't used to failure. The night the company told her to not return to work was the only time I have ever seen her drunk. I pitied her. She prized control above all else, and now she was peeing in the bathtub.

A week later, she enrolled at the University of Toledo. Rather than acknowledge my good grades, she posted her grades (all A's) on the refrigerator. The crock-pot

cooked our meals. Mom needed her “space” to study. Furthermore, she resented my housework. She would demand to know where I had hidden some piece of clothing I had folded and put in her bedroom. She left dirty plates on the kitchen table and half-full coffee cups on the counters. She would critique a cloudy glass, interrogating me as to whether I had rinsed it before loading it into the dishwasher. The cleanliness irritated her. When I asked for an allowance for cleaning the house she scoffed, ”That’s your choice; I don’t see anyone twisting your arm.” She held the gate shut.

Mom wasn’t the only one who lost her job. The recession and the outsourcing of auto factory work hit Toledo hard during the eighties. Jeep fired hundreds; whole plants shut down. The streets were riddled with potholes, and schools were consolidated and overcrowded. My own elementary school had over a thousand kids in it, and DeVillbis Junior High, where I would attend middle school, loomed in my future. I had strained to control the environment at my house, but the public school system overwhelmed me. Cleaning the kitchen table to cross-multiply fractions paled when compared to navigating a middle school in which kids sat at card tables to share ragged books. How could I prosper in a classroom that both the teachers and students hated?

I went on a tour of DeVillbis as a sixth grader and was overwhelmed by the swarms of kids packed into halls and classrooms. They filed through metal detectors. A loud speaker blared overhead. It was like some Orwellian nightmare. The dented, chipped flat-grey lockers and the scuffed black and white linoleum floors gave the halls the appearance of a correctional facility. The din from the slam of locker doors reminded me of inmates running their steel cups along jailhouse bars. The bedlam swirled around me, isolating me within the seething crowd. I could not imagine learning there.

The chaos in the hallways of DeVillbis Junior High echoed through the crumbling alleyways behind the Laundromat and the porno movie theatre where we paused to examine posters on the way to elementary school. During the recession, the city had assumed the grey pallor of a prison yard, and escape seemed less likely the more time I served. Living in Toledo with my mother had evolved into a life sentence of hard labor. So, I decided to leave. One night, at midnight, I crept out of the house and jogged to a local payphone. My plan was to hire a cab to drive me to my father's house an hour away. The cab dispatcher told me I didn't have enough money. I was crestfallen. I called my dad and told him I couldn't live in with my mother anymore, and that I wanted to live with him in Adrian, Michigan, a town a tenth the size of Toledo. He told me to go home, go to bed, and that he would take care of it.

A few weeks later, a letter came from the Amicus Curiae, the "Friend of the Court". It was a summons to review custody. My mother, stepfather, brother, my half sister (who was five) and I sat in the living room staring at that letter. No one spoke until my sister finally asked, "Why doesn't Matt want to live with us anymore?" My stepfather held his forehead. My mother fused her lips together into a single white band. What could she have been thinking? Why was she angry? I didn't feel victorious. I hadn't acted out to get attention. My shoulders rolled forward as I sunk into the couch next to my brother. A single lamp illuminated the room. I longed to state my case, to tell them that the move to my father's house was about self-preservation, but instead I slouched further into the dusty sofa. My mother crossed her arms and shook her head. Her authority had been challenged and I could see the determination welling up inside her. She was not going to hand us over without a fight.

“Well, we just won’t go,” was my stepfather’s solution. “You gotta be served by a court officer and this was just sittin’ in our goddamn mail box for chrissakes. We’ll just say we never got it.” But we did go. We all went to the big old sandstone courthouse in Monroe, Michigan.

My brother and I waited in worn wooden booths. They were painted black and resembled banquettes from a 1950’s soda shop. We pushed a matchbox car back and forth across the boomerang Formica tabletop. Our parents entered the office of the Amicus together. It was the first time we had seen them that close to each other since their divorce. I tried to concentrate on pushing the little blue Chevy to my brother. Soon it was my brother’s turn to enter the office, and I sat silently, not wanting to look up to see my parents’ faces.

Finally, I was summoned into the Amicus’s office. There were books and files piled on the orange shag carpet. He had attempted mood lighting by illuminating a green banker’s lamp on his desk. He motioned for me to sit down in the over-sized leather chair, and he shut the door.

“You want to tell me what’s going on,” he asked.

I started to tell him about my relationship with my mother, but as I spoke, I realized there was nothing to say. There was no relationship to speak of. I was merely a subject trying to curry favor with royalty. I was not able to adequately describe the silence, the absence of affection. I tried to concentrate on tangible things like school and geography, but my explanations rung hollow. In the Midwest, people did not complain about schools or towns. Rather, people showed school spirit, and were loyal to the place they were brought up, and, most of all, they were loyal to their parents. The bald

Amicus Curiae sat frowning at me, his pencil-thin mustache pulled down on the sides of his frown. After letting me ramble for what seemed like an hour, he finally spoke.

“Okay,” he grumbled, “I’m gonna let you go live with your dad,” and here he paused for a long time to add emphasis. “But listen here,” he scolded, “you gotta start being nice to your mom.” He stood up and opened his door, signaling that I could leave. I hauled my broken ego out of the room. My head swam. Was I not being nice? Was the living situation truly untenable? Was I blundering through a decision I would forever regret?

He called my parents back in to give them the news. When the door opened, only my dad left the office. I could see my mom sitting in one of the big leather chairs, sobbing.

I had never seen my mom cry before. I was confused and ashamed and I pitied her all at once. Was she crying because we would not see her as much? But, we rarely saw her now. Was it because she had failed as a mother? I couldn’t believe she would ever admit to that. Or, was it that she had lost? She sat stooped in the chair with my stepfather’s arm around her, and she seemed small. She was a little girl who had been punished for not getting an A. She was no longer royalty, but a peasant in the empire of a much more powerful organizing principle. I walked back to the car with my dad. My scuffed shoes squished through mud from the thawing snow. Had I done the right thing? The thought nagged at me. Seeing my mother so vulnerable and powerless made me want to retract all I had said, to run into the courthouse hug her, but I climbed into my father’s station wagon instead. My brother and I sat in the back seat, not saying a word, watching the grey rural skyline roll by as my father drove us home.