

The Punishment

Their merriment disgusts me. Listen to that racket. They never did know what was appropriate behavior. What do they care that I lie here with malignant cells devouring my body, my skin afflicted with bed sores and bruises? Oh yes, they came to see me—a noble effort. All eight of them. They came—to watch me die—even the one who hasn't been home in 30 years. Now she comes after all these years. Stood in my room with all the others, gaping, never saying a word. What malevolent pleasure did she get from seeing me like this?

I know what she was thinking. "Abuse"—they all call it "abuse." Bunk. It was nothing but good old-fashioned discipline. But what does anyone today know of discipline? A father can't raise a family without school officials and government interfering. But they were *my* responsibility, and I didn't shrink from it. If a child needs discipline, a belt or a switch across the rump or a mouthful of soap doesn't hurt them. I did it when they needed it, that's all. I have no regrets about that—but now they call it abuse and go running to shrinks, accusing me of some awful thing. The country's gone mad—there's no more discipline—it's all "abuse." Everyone now adays must have a shrink to help them get through life. Pooh!

—My heart—whew!—I feel lightheaded—

But do you think anyone would give me credit for keeping six of them pure? Not like their mother—and that middle one with three abortions before she finally married. But what thanks do I get for making sure no boy touched them—watching what they did, following them, threatening—whatever it took? Oh yes, there were plenty protests of my "cruelty," but look at the results—all except that middle one. But, never mind her. I can't be too critical of my failures—I've always been too self-critical. At least the other six girls married first before having pregnancies. So I saved six from the fate of their mother—but who cares about that?

What does it matter now? I know what they say behind my back—no gratitude for my difficult task or my efforts and what I gave up for their sake. Ha! Accused of "abuse"—a fine legacy for a father to leave behind. Look at me now—just a common man of the *lower* middle class. A talented genius who gave up his dreams of fame and riches to take care of eight children. Pooh, let them accuse me of "abuse." Certainly I can't be accused of shirking my responsibilities. No! That I did NOT do. I NEVER turned away from responsibilities.

Oh, I'm tired—tired of living—tired of fighting.

"Be ready for death"—uh, what it is? "Life or death"—uh—"will then be the sweeter"—well, something like that. OK, I'm ready. Look at these heaving lungs gasping for air—the skin draping my body like a slack umbrella, and these ribs—you can count them. Surely it won't be long now. Thank God there's not much pain.

Where's my remote control—I know it's here somewhere? There—ah, good grief. I'm winded.

Is there nothing on the TV but sports? Ugh! A bunch of self-centered, inarticulate barbarians. How can the public idolize these pea brains? At least I tried teaching my brood some culture and sophistication—the arts, music. Being poor was no excuse for being inarticulate or not to appreciate the arts, I always told them. Lot of good it did—most of them talk nonsense and listen to whatever music is popular. And I always told them that being poor was no excuse for being dirty or sloppy. We, at least, had needles and thread for sewing on buttons or repairing rips and tears. I wasn't going to raise a bunch of peasants. But their mother—oh, what's the use.

Where's the "up" button? There—the sitting position is better. Good—that's good. Now, let' elevate the legs—ahhhhh, much better.

Oh, my aching head—there's no gratitude. Not one made anything of themselves no matter how much I tried to help—overseeing their homework, correcting their grammar, talking till I was blue, and giving them money for A's—but no one ever tried to break the bank with As. Or, do you think they'd make a poor man richer for his sacrifice? No! Not them! Oh, what shame. Not one to make me proud—not one.

The oldest came close. She was the one who had the advantages of lessons—art, singing, music, but she was too full of flighty dreams. And her talent is marginal, I must admit. But that didn't stop her from bragging of the great things she would do—ach—but nothing. Only small stuff, singing in this church or that, or at weddings. Just small stuff. But to hear her talk, she's a diva, a prima Dona—a Jeannette MacDonald or Anna Maria Alberghetti. Ha! Now she's 54—still dreaming like she was still a young girl. She'll never be anything—it's too late. Just a dreamer, that's all.

Oh—my heart—it feels light—like it skips beats.

But, the middle one—the true genius, like me—never had a lesson. She, with perfect pitch and playing the piano by ear, but what does she do with *her* talent? Nothing. No ambition. A waste. What good is it to be born with talent when it's never used? Just a common tramp like her mother, that's all she's amounted to. A mouth like a sewer and a chain smoker. At least, when she did marry, she married well. What a surprise. What man could be impressed with her? But she did finally marry—and married money. Her husband's family provides well enough for them, and he'll inherit it all, being an only child. But she could have been something—someone. With all that money she could have taken all the lessons she ever wanted. But, she never wanted—no ambition. She'll never change.

Damn sun! It's hitting me right in the face and I'm too weak to shut the blinds.

"Lorna!" Bah! They can't hear me—too much noise. Of course, no one would think to check on me. How long have I lain in here and no one's come to check? Just like when they were kids, carrying on and making so much noise. Thoughtless and selfish. How much can one endure?

Blast that sun!

"That's a D-minor chord, not a—" Oh, curse it—they can't hear me. Must I lay here suffering and endure an impromptu family recital as well? Who disgraces Mozart's "Requiem" on the old pump organ—the only heirloom my family leaves behind? Probably that oldest one who fancies herself a great organist and diva.

"Lorna!"

And here I lay as my own *vox humana* swells beyond all tolerance, my manhood decaying and diseased.

"Hey, Pop, I thought I heard you calling. Do you need something?"

"Yes, I called for your mother to close those blinds—the sun is scorching me."

"Sure, Pop."

"Thank you."

"Anything else? Maybe I could pick up a good-looking whore to give your organ a massage or smoke a joint with you. You could use some loosening up."

"Ha ha. No, I'm tired. You can go join the others now."

"OK, old man. Drinking your water like a good boy?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Ha! Caught you in a big, fat fib! The glass is still full. Here, sip some of this—it's an aphrodisiac."

"OK—satisfied?"

"hmmmm, barely a drop gone. All right, then, if I can't harass you, you're no fun. I'll check back later."

She's my only surprise—that middle one, the one who hated me so much at 15 she swore to put me out of my misery—hid a hammer under her bed to beat me to death. Thank God her younger sister told on her. Spent a year in the state mental hospital—imagine that, one of my kids in a mental institution. Raised hell there just as she always did at home—nearly burned the place down.

But now, only *she* comes to fuss about my health. Only *she* had the sense to force my "loving" wife to take me to a doctor. Ha! The only one to see through my protests—or mean enough to ignore them. But it was too late, as I well knew—feeling the bloated bags between my legs. What does my wife know of my body there? I waited to see how long it would take her to notice—*if* she ever would. Ha! She hasn't touched me there in years. She made sure I was castrated long ago—sleeping with any man who lowered his eyelids at her.

Foolish woman was too naive to realize that I knew what she was doing behind my back. The insurance man, men from church, neighbors—she had no pride. As long as they gave her sex, she didn't care. But she never thought her own kids would give her away. In complete innocence they'd tell me when the insurance man gave them each nickels for ice cream cones and sent them off to Baker's Drug Store—baah! She was too dumb to realize that her own kids gave her away. Fool that I was to think a woman who let me lay with her before marriage could ever be trusted or faithful! Oh, the mistakes we make in life. But I never betrayed her. I let her have her fun and never said a word. I showed restraint. At least my mother taught me tolerance—more than her parents ever taught her.

"Frank, are you awake?"

"How can I sleep?" The queen of the night comes to check up on her "beloved."

"We're going to eat an early dinner since some of the kids need to leave soon. Do you feel like coming out and joining the family?"

"I'm far too weak to get up, and I'm not hungry." —especially if you cooked it.

"The nurse said you need to get up a little. Your feet need to get some circulation. Why don't you come out for a little while?"

"Do you believe everything everyone tells you? The nurse doesn't know how tired I am. Can't you see how labored my breathing is?" Pooh, not her.

"But, look at your feet—they're turning blue and—"

"I'm tired. I don't want to eat. It's hard for me to talk." Like she cares.

"I'll have to tell the nurse to trim your toenails—you look like Howard Hughes."

"Leave my body parts alone. I like long nails." —as long as they irritate you.

"Well, I'll fix you up a little plate of something. You can eat what you want from it."

"Do what you want. I need some rest." —from you, my dear.

"Here, let me straighten out your blanket—you're half naked."

"I like being naked—it's hot in here." Look at her pretending to care, trying to be my nursemaid. If she had really cared, she would have noticed long ago the changes in my body and force me to go to the doctor's.

"It's cold out, Frank. You need to cover up. It's supposed to snow tonight."

"Good, I'm hot."

"I'll go and get you some food."

"Sure, fine."

Why did I ever marry? And especially to one so hopeless. She never had a thought all her own, taking from me whatever she could and making it her own—borrowing my ideas and opinions. What's she going to do when I'm gone? Which one of her brats will she use for her own mind? No doubt, whoever stands the closest to her and speaks the loudest. She's done nothing but what's come from my mouth or mind. And before me, she used her parents' opinions. Why couldn't I see that when I first met her? Why couldn't I have married someone who could think? I wanted an intelligent wife, but instead, I got one who was horny. She believes whatever I believe and thinks it's her own thoughts. After I'm gone, she won't know what to think. Her health's not good. I know she can't last long after I'm gone. That's when I'll finally get my revenge. Serves her right that I'm dying. I've waited a long time for this. So my life's come to this—the best part is to die so she'll be even more miserable without me—poetic justice.

"Hi Dad. Hope I'm not interrupting your sleep."

"Hardly." Mama's boy, my namesake, arrives to force feed me?

"Here's some dinner for you. Mom said you didn't want to eat out there with us."

"I didn't say that. I said I wasn't hungry." Leave it to her to misinterpret what I said.

"Maybe when you see the food, it'll make you hungry—where can I put this?"

"Just put it on the end table, Frankie, but I'm too tired to eat." He's as blind as his mother.

"OK, Dad. You got your remote control for the TV?—You're watching sports?"

"It's all that's on and I'm not really watching it—it's just some noise."

"Oh. Say, Dad, I didn't tell you? I got a contract in California. I'm going out there for a couple of months."

"No, you didn't tell me. What's it for?" Here come the lies and bragging.

"Oh, the same thing, but for a different company. I'm writing a software program for another big bank chain. They're going to put me up in some fancy place and rent me a car. This is the biggest contract I've had yet—should help pay for Kent's college tuition. He starts in the fall—he got accepted at Harvard, you know."

"Yes, Mom told me. Could you adjust the blinds to let in a little more light?"

"Sure, dad. It is getting a little dark in here. Do you want the light on?"

"Just the one here by the bed."

"There. Anything else?"

"Nothing. I just need some rest."

"OK, dad, we'll come get the tray in a little while. Bon appetit!"

That useless boy my wife calls "my son"—always bragging about his money—driving fancy cars—building his own house. Now he sends his two boys to Harvard—as if Ohio State isn't good enough for them. What's the difference? He just wants to tell people his sons are at Harvard—him without a college education, and he barely got through high school. Always wetting the bed and lying when he was a kid. Even when I tried beating it out of him, it didn't stop him. Even the air force threw him out—too cocky for them.

My only son—ha! My namesake—and he's not even mine. Lorna got caught that time. Of course, I did the only honorable thing and accepted him as mine, but I knew all along he wasn't. Look at him now—not a feature that looks like my side of the family. In fact, he doesn't even look like Lorna's side. But what was I supposed to do? I was married to her. So, this kid was my responsibility—like it or not. And what's it matter now—I'm a dead man soon.

"Lorna! Could you come here a minute?" She never hears me. Besides, it's too noisy out there.

The sun's going down now—good. I won't have to lay here and look at this filthy room. At least death will spare me from her lousy housekeeping. When's the last time she washed my sheets? Thank God for the nurses who come here. At least they notice and change them.

"Did you call me, Frank?"

"Yes. I'm thirsty. Could you give me my water?"

"Sure, but it's just right here on the table beside you. Here."

"I know, but I'm too weak to get it. I'm such a bother for you. Why did this have to happen to me?"

"It's not such a bother—besides, you had to take care of me when I was really sick last year, remember?"

"Yes. I even had to cut your meat for you."

"OK, see? People take care of each other. But, you know you have to accept part of the blame for your condition. You know you refused to see a doctor the whole time we've been married—and that's been 55 years. You haven't taken good care of yourself—smoking two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day. At least I try to take care of myself and go bowling for exercise. But you wouldn't try to get any exercise. If you would have at least taken some of the vitamins I tried to get you to take. But, you were too stubborn even for those."

"I quit smoking last year, didn't I?"

"Well, sure, after more than 50 years of smoking, AND because you thought you had emphysema—which you didn't even tell me until recently. Damn, Frank, how am I supposed to help you when you don't even tell me something that important?"

"Oh! I'm sick and dying, and now I'm a big bother to everyone. I should just die quickly and get it over with and not have to make you go to so much trouble."

"Stop crying. Don't worry about it. It's OK. Here, why don't you try some of this—it's a sloppy Joe. You always loved them before."

"I can't eat—I'm too weak. Look at me. I can barely breathe."

"All right, then. Sometimes I think you don't eat because you want to die. You ate fine when you were in the hospital."

"The nurses were pretty."

"Sure—and I'm just an old hag. Is there anything else you'd rather eat?"

"Maybe some tea." And a donut—but why bother to ask. She'll give me a lecture about eating junk food and won't let me have one.

"OK. I'll go fix it."

Anything—just to get her out of here—my "sanctuary." Look at the dust in this place—it's thick enough to plant shrubs in. Phooey. I gave up long ago for the comfort of living in a clean, tidy house. But, at least I taught her some decent taste. She decorates the way I want because she can't choose for herself—except for all these damn flower prints. Never could convince her that you don't mix 20 different flower prints together in the same room. Just couldn't get through her thick skull and stop her from doing that. Maybe she thought all those horrid flowers wouldn't show the dirt. Well, Lorna, I'll leave you to your flower prints—it's the only idea you ever had on your own. But you can't live on flower prints.

"Uh, Daddy, you awake?"

"Yes, how can I sleep with all that commotion?" Now it's the long-lost lamb returning for the funeral.

"Oh, sorry. We're trying to be quiet, but I guess we get carried away sometimes. Here's your tea. Can I fluff your pillow?"

"No, it's fine."

"Here, let me take out your tray—you haven't eaten anything."

"I told your mother I wasn't hungry." Why don't they quit harping about eating.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

"No."

"Oh. Um, what are you watching on TV? Sports!?"

"It's just on. I'm not watching it."

"Oh. I suppose you get pretty tired of just laying here, huh? Can I read you something?"

"I'm laying here because I'm tired."

"I'm sorry. Mom said the nurse told her you need to try to get up sometimes. Do you want to come sit with us a little while in the living room? I'll help you get up."

"It's too exhausting to do that. I'm fine here."

"It would be nice to just be out there a little while. All the grandkids are here, too—except for Frankie's oldest. We're telling dirty jokes—maybe you need a laugh."

"No, I'm fine here." So, they're into the intellectual stuff—ach—what did I expect.

"Well, OK. Want me to read you something?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm glad you came, but I'm too tired to talk."

"Gee, I'm sorry you're so tired. I really haven't had a chance to talk with you during my visit and I have to fly back home later tonight."

"Uh, well, maybe later."

"OK. Maybe we can chat some after dinner."

"Sure."

"I'll go check and see what raunchy jokes they're telling now." Oh, now I rate a kiss.

I'll never know what possessed Lorna to have all those kids. She knew I didn't want any. The first one was a surprise, and we did what we had to do. But, there was no reason to have any more, but she just kept getting pregnant. She'd always trick me, acting that sexy way she did then. She was always good at that. But no more. She lost interest in that. My manhood is shot now anyway. The doctor wanted to cut them off, but I said "No!" A man needs something to be proud of—even if they are swollen the size of elephant balls and rotted. I can still feel them—at least they're still there. No one's going to cut them off, and I'm going to die like a man.

I wonder if she thought that having all those kids made her a woman? I certainly didn't need them to make me a man. But once they were born, all she did was sleep—never was good at mothering. And what could she teach them anyway? She didn't know how to clean house or to cook. At least most of the kids keep a clean house—even that middle one. But Lorna never learned. Her mother did everything for her and her no-good sister. So, she never learned how to do anything—except how to sleep and how to sleep around—like her father.

Oh, the horror—hmmmm—seems like I read that somewhere—where was it? Hell with it—I can't remember. What's it matter now anyway? My life is wasted. All my talent and intelligence gone for naught. I should have said to hell with everything and been a musician like I wanted. But stupid me—I gave it up for them—no money in being a musician. In the end, we were poor anyway, so what good did it do to give it up? At least I would have enjoyed my life.

"Dad, are you awake? Oh good, you are. Is it OK if we come in and take some pictures while the whole family is together? You know it's been over 30 years since we've all been together. How do you feel—is it OK?"

"Sure, go ahead, you're all in here now anyway." Oh wonderful—pictures with me looking like this! I'm sure every dying person wants to be remembered at his worst. They probably want to remember me in my misery.

"Why don't you all stand behind his bed—he's got it cranked up in a sitting position so there's room back there."

"Let's take turns then because we all have cameras—someone has to take the picture."

"Someone turn the lights on—it's pretty dark in here."

"I'll take the first one. Everyone smile."

"HO! What's that?"

"Dad turned on the vibrator in his bed—whoopee!"

"Hey, dad, this isn't bad. I hope you and Mom have tried this!"

"Oh right—especially with that tube up his—"

"Say 'cheese!'"

"Sex!"

"OK, Frankie, we all know where your mind is."

"You'd better turn this thing off, Dad, before you start a riot!"

"Who else needs a picture?"

"Just one more. Say 'sex' Frankie, and everyone else say 'cheese'."

"OK, everyone in unison—1—2—3—Sex!"

"Poor, Dad, with that tube up his weenie and us talking sex. What kind of kids did you raise anyway?"

"Yeah, really, you guys, mind your manners."

"I think we've worn Dad out. Everybody out! We'll check on you later, Dad."

"Could you turn the lights off before you all leave?"

"Oh, sure Dad."

"Just leave this little one on by the bed."

"OK, Daddy. Get some rest—we're outta' here!"

Well, there goes a bunch of hooligans any parent could be proud of—bah! The grandkids aren't too bad, though—yet. But, that boy of "mine." Who knows what he did—his own daughter committing suicide at 16. Always talking sex, the pervert. I saw it coming, how he'd touch her and carry her around when she was little. Always hugging and slobbering all over her—too unnatural for a father.

—My eye lids feel so heavy—and I'm lightheaded—

What could you expect with a mother like that. And look how she got him! She could never handle them—couldn't discipline them—I had to do it all. She always needed me to do everything for her. The helpless one—more than her own kids. She let those kids raise themselves. Not like that new puppy, though—she never lets him out of her sight. She cares for that animal more than she ever did me—or the kids. And for heaven's sake, why does she need a puppy now? Is she preparing to replace me? If she thinks all she needs is a puppy, fine. I'll leave her to her helpless little world of flower prints and her dog. When I'm gone, maybe then she'll realize all I did for her. She can't see it while I've been taking care of

her all these years. This is what you've wanted, Lorna—your freedom. Congratulations. You don't even realize how much you really need me. But I'm leaving you—I'm not going to be—

—I think—the darkness—I feel—heaviness—like a soft blanket—surrounds me.

All of them—they're too insensitive to see—the end—is—ah, I—what—what's—to fear—I—I welcome the peace. I think—

—my heart—it—

Who cares? What do I leave behind anyway? Nothing. I'll—just—oh—here—its dark—I'll—exit—in silence—don't need them—to—show me how—to—die—

—no—maybe—I—my eyes—heavy—w-wait—my heart—it—

Pooh! When I'm gone—then they—they'll—know—what I—when I'm g—then—
rev—

—ah—heavi—ness—pulls—w—wait—maybe—I—I remember—someone—she wanted—to talk—wait—m-maybe—I should—tell—no—wait—

"Lor—n—ahhh"—I—ssss—in—k—

"Dad? Are you—"

"Shhhh. He's asleep."

No—www—ai—t-hhhhhh

"Well, I guess we can't talk, then, before I leave."