

My father had many dreams, but, one was a common topic when we were out together on one our guys' Saturdays. Those special days we left the chicks (my mother and sister) at home and left to do, well, whatever we wanted. It was not uncommon for him to say to me "What do you say we go see a movie?" We would leave the house, walking confidently past my mother's scowl and huff, off to the Fox theatre a few blocks away.

The fun didn't stop after the theatre, though. Afterwards, it was not uncommon for us to cruise car lots, motorcycle shops, and RV lots. We would sit in cars, on motorcycles, and tour the RVs and trailers while talking about what we'd do if we could travel. You know, just to get away from it all.

Driving from one lot to another, his arm half out the open window, his right hand at twelve o'clock, wind blowing through his receding jet-black hair, we would venture through the mean streets of the San Fernando Valley high on wanderlust. Suddenly, in a wistful tone, he would say, "You know what I want? I want to live in a church! I would love to live in a church!" He would then grow silent. We'd go a few more blocks, AM radio playing through the sole speaker in the dash, before he would start to hum, then join in with whatever song was on at the time.

This was not the end of the conversation, though. When the song ended he would pick up where he had left off. He would expound upon the topic: "Yes, I would love to live in a church. Think about it! Wouldn't that be great?"

At this point I would usually look at him, trying to figure out what had triggered the thought at that precise moment. The conversation up to that point was dominated mostly by the Dodgers stupidity in trading away their best, upcoming talent or the fact that the Angels had none... with the exception of Nolan Ryan. How on earth did this church thing come up?

"Now, I don't mean our church," he continued. By this he meant one of the somewhat bland, blending-into-the-local-architecture Mormon churches we attended each Sunday in our pursuit of the hereafter. Just wouldn't do. He had specific requirements that had to be fulfilled and our church did not possess the most important: a steeple

"Catholic church won't work, either. Too much baggage. Too ornate. Too... ostentatious. The Presbyterians. Now, there's a church. Classic sort of church you see in the movies - white wood, little picket fence, steps up to the front door, steeple. Like the one in *Pollyanna*. Now, there's a church. Nice, sturdy, sort of box-like, but with a usable steeple. Just take the bell out... Or, maybe leave it in, you know, to use when you kids get out of

line..." He would trail off in his reverie at the thought, I assumed, of strapping any one of his offspring to the clanger and meting out that special brand of punishment brought only through the strategic tuning of a well-struck chime. "Let that be a warning to you and the rest of the malcontents. Twelve comes twice a day."

The rest of the malcontents? At that time there were only two kids in the family so it hardly warranted so far-reaching a comment. I would look at him with one of those "what are you talking about?" sort of looks.

"I am not averse to using on any of your little friends who might need it." This I believed. I had many times heard the story of the time my father kindly kicked his own brother's family out of our house due to the fact that one of his daughters refused to adhere to house rules regarding the furniture. Dad's brother, likewise, refused to make her. When it persisted, he let his little brother know that they would be welcomed back any time they were ready to follow the rules his own children lived by on a daily basis. The leap to neighborhood kids, I could see, was going to be a small one, at best.

My concern over his desire for a little Quasimodo-type justice was eclipsed only by the worry that we were leaving the only church I had known. The true church. You know, looking for a new God. Maybe one that specifically endorsed his cavalier use of the call to testify. I had worked myself up past concern, actually, to a good, healthy anxiety attack over the fact he would be making decisions regarding our eternal salvation based upon this comforting, but, odd penchant for bell-based corporal punishment.

It wasn't until I was the ripe age of ten that I caught on: He wasn't looking for some of that old time religion, he was merely looking for some peace and quiet. Solitude. Some place to read without being hounded. He wanted, as I learned during a particularly long guys' Saturday, "a library with the door in the floor and a padlock on the inside."

We were not, exactly, of the privileged set. To us, 'Library' was a relative term, really. In our house, wherever you hung your book was the library. Mine was usually on the floor of my bedroom. Sometimes I would find a vacant corner in the living room and plant there for a while. My older sister, Kim, liked her bed. My mother didn't read. It's not that she didn't know how. I had, on rare occasions, seen her open a magazine; even more rarely a book, but, that was usually tracking down some information that could be used against others. To be honest, catching a glimpse of her actually *reading* was more difficult than proving the existence of Nessie or the North American Yeti, Bigfoot.

For all intents and purposes, though, he had a library... we called it the bathroom, but the principle was the same. If he wanted a little "alone time," he merely gave old Mother Nature a call and, voilá! If, during those times, you were ever so brazen as to inquire, "Where's dad?", you received any one of the stock answers: He is... "...in the bathroom." "...in his office" the classic, yet simple, "he's busy" or the more truthful, "he's reading." If you received any of these, well, take a seat. It was not uncommon for him to go unseen for the better part of the afternoon.

Don't get me wrong, this was a good thing at times. Say you, oh, I don't know, smashed all of your sister's toes with a bunk your father made to fit across the bed of his old Toyota Stout pick-up. A bed, mind you, made of wood closely resembling, in weight, design and size, railroad ties which were nailed together with equally strong cross beams, then covered with carpet left over from when they blanketed the hardwood in their bedroom. You lift (as I did). Gravity takes hold. The next second Kim is screaming, her toes quickly turning every shade in the crayon box - including burnt sienna. See, I'm talking the 64 set, here, not the piddly 12-spot. She is alternately screaming in pain and letting the neighbors know how stupid you are for even trying to lift that behemoth.

Hey, she dared me - what could I do?.

In the middle of this, my mother, whose level of calm in these situations rivaled Don Knotts on a double-espresso, comes tearing through the back door, stopping to take it all in, then flying into a rage. Grabbing my arm, and, with a move that would make most NFL linebackers jealous, she dragged me into the house. I fought it every step of the way, to no avail. She ricocheted through the house, me in tow and flailing wildly.

"I can't believe this! what were you thinking?" she screamed at the top of her lungs. Our house was a rather loud one. While we had not yet reached gossip status, we still had few secrets from the neighbors. "Where's your father? You are in so much trouble!"

"In the library." My reply rolled calmly off the tongue. Surprising considering my predicament. She stopped dead on a dime. As we stood there face to face, satisfied smile shining brightly across mine, she began meting out her own special brand of justice: smacking the crap out of me while repeatedly screaming, "You just wait until your father gets out!"

Luckily, that meant I had a cool hour to clot and, if need be, stitch myself up while I waited for the real punishment - Dad's cold stare coupled with his long, slender finger pointing out the path to my room, usually followed by his formal statement of disappoint-

ment. This was a far more painful punishment than the blood-letting that preceded. Only because it came from my dad. When my Mother tried it, I couldn't have cared less, so she resorted to corporal punishment as her first, and only, strike capabilities.

As she flailed away, my life became a scene in an action movie. Everything moving in slow motion as Orff's *Carmina Burana* filled my head. Her voice became muted, like the adults in a Charlie Brown special, leaving me with the music and the sight of her swinging wildly, her lips moving, words falling out inaudibly.

Right about the time my mother became winded (see, this is where conditioning really pays off - in the heat of battle - a point my mother had apparently ignored), the bathroom door would open a crack and, through the rustle of Popular Mechanics pages, we'd hear, "Anything broken?"

"I don't know yet?" My mother huffed, folded in half, hands on her knees.

"Haven't you looked?"

"No! I've been busy!" This was usually accentuated by her mustering one last smack to the back of my noggin.

"Well, get her in the car! I'll be out in a minute!" With that, the door would close.

"Go out there and lift that thing off your sister! Then help her get in the car!"

The memory Kim pinned beneath the deck my father called a bed had left my mind, or been knocked out, but, I spied her through the french doors at the back of the dining room - Sure enough, she was still trapped beneath half the B & O Railroad and the top step of the back porch. She was still screaming and while I have no doubt she tried to free herself, she seemed, by now, to have given up physically. I think she was considering gnawing off a few little piggies to taste the sweet air of freedom once more when I emerged from the house. All I could think at that point, however, was the fact that I had, obviously, proven my point: I *am* stronger than she, but weaker than a Teamster.

Begrudgingly I helped her out from under the slab and steadied her hobble to the front of the house. Irony oozing from every pore, I lifted her into the truck's seat, just in time for Dad to come out the front door, see this, and attempt to stifle laughter as he ordered my incarceration with the usual, "go inside and wait. I'll talk to you when I get back."

As he backed out of the driveway I caught a glimpse of a wicked grin on his face. I swear I heard him laughing as he drove away.



My parents, like most couples who share a bathroom, had a space to call their own. They each had a drawer where they kept their precious sundries. My mother's drawer was an area into which I rarely, if ever, ventured, but I seem to recall it being filled with hair tools: brush, comb, more bobby pins than a hairdresser in a Florida retirement village. In Dad's drawer was a comb, a tweezer, nail clipper, and two electric razors. One he had received as a gift somewhere around his fifteenth birthday. I think it was endorsed by the Babe the year he hit 60. The other was compact. It ran on AA batteries and came in a handy-dandy briefcase for maximum portability.

In addition to these he had his reading material. There were always two, sometimes three, rotating pieces of reading material. One was usually a dime novel - *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys; Run Silent, Run Deep*. Another could be a magazine. *Popular Mechanics* was a favorite of his. I remember in one issue he had dog-eared the page with directions to build your own satellite dish the size of which rivaled those used by SETI. Having worked a number years as an auto mechanic, *Car and Driver* also found its way into the stacks.

The last piece would be some other novel, a book of poetry, maybe a play. It was sort of a grab bag affair. You never knew what would be filling this position on the library's catalogue.

There was one book that was a constant, though - a small, creased paperback collection of Edgar Allen Poe. My first exposure to the American Gothic of the 19th century. came not too long before I tenderized my sister's digits. This particular edition had a bright yellow cover and sixties concert-poster lettering. Poe by way of a Hendrix show. I leafed through the tome. Past "The Raven," "Evangeline" and "The Tell Tale Heart," though the latter two would make my top five in later years, I didn't quite grasp their genius at the time. On to 'The Cask of Amontillado'.

I loved this story the very first time I read it. Loved it so much that, upon completion of my first read, I read it again. I learned something that afternoon in the library: One reading of "The Cask..." was fantastic. Two readings? Your legs go numb.

After the sparkles left my legs, I snuck the book to my room and read it again. I thought, "this could be useful. I mean, really useful." I read it again right way, this time taking mental notes as to motive, setting, and, of course, necessary supplies. When I finished this third reading, I had a clear idea of what had to be done and to whom.

The next day I awoke, a man with a mission. There was a revenge must needs be exacted. After all, she dared me, practically *made* me lift the slab that changed her feet from an A width to the triple-E. And I was the one who got in trouble for it! Me! It was obvious I was being made being used as a scapegoat by my mother and her agent, the wily Kim. Kim, the operative sent to do her bidding, had to be taken care of before she could do any more harm. Thus, my sister made my hit-list. On the next page in the notebook was another list: Supplies. It's important in big projects to be as organized as possible. I started to check them off:

First, I needed a confined space. One need look no further than the garage. This was a space that, throughout my childhood, was in a perpetual state of disaster. Forget about parking a car in there. Hell, forget about walking through the place without a sherpa and pack team. Annually my mother would become so incensed at the fact that the Christmas decorations were harder to get to than peace in the Middle East and would not allow them to be put back in until the place had been set straight. If she was smart, she would have required it to be done some time in October. Maybe if she read more...

At any rate, the garage still held the perfect place for my plot: Under Dad's workbench. Regardless of the fact that it was in the front of the garage, it was just as difficult to find as anything else in the great void lurking inside the small building behind our house. Not only would it be perfect for trapping, it would hide the body from prying eyes. Something very important in the world of revenge. As for walling materials I had the whole garage for that. Hiding place? Check!

Second: Something to draw her into the great beyond. Simple. Barbie! Kim loved her Barbies. She had two of them that she kept impeccably dressed and coiffed at all times. Unfortunately, one had been a hooker for my soldiers on maneuvers and was doing 30 days in lock-up for that little display. You see, unbeknownst to the soldiers partaking of her services, their Captain was running a sting operation and, afterwards, Barbie was turned over to local authorities. I couldn't spring her in time. Besides, she had fallen out of my sister's good graces when she disgraced the good name of Mattel through her activities with the 3rd Battalion behind our walnut tree. No, this had to be the pristine, blonde beauty who had the dream house on the hill and the hot guy with the pretty red car.

It was going to be tricky getting her out of the bedroom without my nosy sister noticing, but I knew what I had to do and set about it with alarming ease. I found Barbie lounging, as she always did in the afternoon, waiting for Ken to return from the office. On the

dream bar were a pitcher of, presumably, martinis and two glasses. She was dressed in her classiest lingerie. It left little to the imagination regarding exactly where the evening would be going. Apparently life in Malibu was one big plastic orgy.

My list had been completed. (Okay. It was a short list, to be sure, but a list nonetheless.) As I set the scene I realized that I had forgotten a very important part of the plan: How was I going to let my nemesis know her precious plastic hussy was being held against her will? Barbie had to be pre-set, so I had to find some other way to get Kim to enter her Craftsman tomb. My young brain set to work on a way to make it happen. The best, and easiest way, of course, was to leave a note, written with Barbie's own hand. Yes, I said, 'with'. The arms came off quite easily so I didn't even have to fight her for control of the pink crayon I decided best for the job. The note was short and sweet: "Kim, Pleez save me! I am in the guhrodge!" Barbie is a rotten speller. Always has been. Little known fact. Still, the idea came across. I, then, left it on Kim's bed to be discovered, no doubt, when she laid back for a quiet afternoon with a good book. The irony was delicious.

One thing I didn't count on was the possibility of my mother finding the note. She was none too happy with me when she discovered it. She put the kibosh on my plan sparing Kim the full effect of Poe's work come to life. She also banished me to my bed where I spent the afternoon sitting on my bright yellow, textured bedspread, waiting for my father to return from work and wishing for a simpler time. A time before vengeance ruled my very core. When my father finally arrived home, I had fallen asleep and had to endure the speech and dinner afterward with deep, heavy lines criss-crossing my face.

My mother threatened many times after to get rid of "that foul book." She even went so far as to take it out of the library and hide it in her nightstand. It wouldn't take long for Dad to find it, though, and return it to its rightful place: snuggled comfortably in the middle of his lavatory Dewey Decimal system. My mother, when its return was finally discovered, would scream and kick and threaten to throw it away. To be honest, she could have thrown it away. It would have returned by its own hand or someone else's, but it would have found its way back like a lost puppy.

Poe remained in the library many years after. I read some pieces in that book many times. Others - not at all after the first. My father was usually heard thumbing through magazines in the relative silence of the reading room which led me to believe that Poe was left solely for my edification. My father knew me far better than I would have ever wanted to admit in my younger years and knew that sometimes you just needed a good

scare to get things moving again. In addition to the Poe, though, he would, every now and then, leave some Shakespeare or other classicist in there, thus ensuring that I would be well-rounded in my artistic pursuits.

Through these books, and whatever sliver of time that could be carved out of my father's library time to read them, I learned the necessity of solitude. Though the privacy my father sought was, fundamentally, unattainable, it was, nonetheless, necessary for his mental well-being. There were times he entered the Library red-faced, shouting to the heavens, only to emerge with a fresh demeanor and a spring in his step. This was, I believe, due in no small part to the reading material. As much as could be attributed to anything else. He truly needed that time alone. Let's face it, we all need some time alone. I mean, you may love your wife and kids; enjoy spending time with friends; holiday meals with the rest of the family; but, when you need a moment alone, you just need a moment alone, dammit!

Regardless of the fact that he was a dreamer, pragmatism ruled his life. It had to and he had to let it. This same pragmatism, I'm sure, made him realize that his desire for seclusion was buried deeply behind the brick and mortar of his own reality. And while he dreamed of a little place to get away from it all, I believe he realized that solitude can be limiting. Of course, had he ever gotten his wish for steepled isolation, there is one thing that might have dampened his joy: Steeples rarely, if ever, have plumbing.