

My Father's Hands

by

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In all the forty years I knew him, I never saw my father handle a tool, wash a dish, change a light bulb, make a bed, drive a car, mow the lawn, fix a toy, or do anything useful or helpful with his hands.

Unmarked by manual labor or by any physical exertions more arduous than an occasional game of golf, my father's hands were as smooth and un-calloused as those of the most dilettante-ish English dandy.

But my father was neither English nor a dandy. Born to poverty of immigrant parents on New York's lower East Side, he went to work at the age of twelve. He attended High School sporadically and was able to graduate only because a friend took his place the Geometry Regents exam. After High School, he clerked in the Corporation Counsel's office and entered New York University Law School in the class of 1911, without college, with almost no high school, essentially uneducated.

A silent, self-contained man, he never said much about his childhood or adolescence. He was proud of being self-made, of lifting himself out of the ghetto by his own wit and will, of becoming a successful lawyer and a lay leader of Reform Judaism. This is the stuff of which heroes are made. But to me, my father was no hero. He seemed to delight only in his own work, never taking a vacation, never finding time to play or read or just talk to his only son. And when he did talk, he struck terror in my heart by telling me that I was "riding for a fall", or reciting one his favorite maxims like, "Laziness is a bad habit. It begins in cobwebs and ends in iron chains." I can still feel the oppressive weight of those chains if I dare to be idle for more than five minutes.

It was my mother who cultivated my talents, such as they were. It was she who appreciated my "sensitivity", who hoarded every story and poem I wrote; who sent my verse to various children's magazines and made me sit through interminable evenings of dance and chamber music to enlarge my soul.

When she was in her early thirties, my mother began to suffer the ravages of a diseased heart. But my father still refused to help her in her labors. Every weekend she drove him to the golf course on Long Island and waited for him in the clubhouse so that she could drive him the weary way back to Manhattan. As her health deteriorated, she began to spend her winters in Florida and her summers in New Hampshire near the camp I went to. My father was an infrequent visitor and at the moment of his arrival seemed ready to leave.

Now, what had once been muffled arguments burst into wild gusts of fury. There were separations during which my father would pack his bags and go off to some downtown hotel where I would visit him weekends, eating exotic hotel food and having all the Sunday comics I could digest. Finally, just before my senior year in high school, my mother's suspicions of his infidelity became an ugly reality. Threats and recriminations were not enough. Inevitably, I was drawn into the maelstrom and forced to take sides. And the side I took was my mother's.

My father tried to explain to me what it had been like for him to live for decades with a neurasthenic invalid who, years before had been forbidden to have sex by one of her faddish doctors. But I would not listen. My mother told me I must say to my father that I had lost all respect for him, and I complied. He was shattered. He said he had never expected me to think of him as a hero, but he treasured my respect. The marriage was over. They separated. I went off to college, and in my freshman year, when I had barely turned seventeen, my mother died of

complications following a minor operation. My aunt, who had been with her, said she died of a broken heart.

When I married at twenty, a college graduate and two weeks out of Officer Candidate School, my father banished and disowned me. He had devoted years to me, he said, now I owed as many years of my life to him. Marriage was not part of his plan for me. But as we traveled from post to post, he would send chaplains to find out how I was and ask me to forgive him. Just before I went overseas, we were reconciled, and in later years he came to love my wife and our children far more than he had ever loved me.

As a grandfather to my seven children, as the squire of seven lovely acres in North Salem, New York, he maintained his mandarin detachment. His hands still touched no tool, cleared no brush, mowed no lawns, changed no diapers. My last memory of him, a week before his death at seventy, is saying goodbye at North Salem with the kids already in the car eager to get home. I stood with him for a last minute beside the driveway, kissing his smooth cheek, holding for a lingering moment his smooth, manicured hand. And I never saw him again.

Can a father ever be a hero to his only son? With no other siblings as buffers between them are they always too close to the truth to be seduced by the myth? I loved him as a grandfather to my children, feared and often despised him as a father to me. At the end of his life we could reach out to one another in uneasy truce, but at the end he was as enigmatic and unexplained as during the years of my growing up.

One day, more than two decades after his death, I was browsing through the stacks at Barnes and Noble when something drew me to a table of remaindered books. A hand seemed to direct my hand to a small volume entitled "The Triangle Fire." An echo, faint as a whisper rose out of the past. There was some connection. Someone had mentioned it. I could not quite recall. But I picked up the book, opened it at random and read these words:

"From the roof above them, when it seemed that the last Triangle survivor had been rescued, Charles Kramer climbed down the ladder for a final inspection of the roof. He groped through the thick smoke. Flames were now rising on all sides. He heard someone moaning and moved in the direction from which the sound seemed to be coming. He found a girl lying across the top steps on the Grove Street stairway, her head on the floor of the roof, her hair smoldering. He smothered the sparks in her hair with his hands. He lifted her in his arms and headed back across the roof toward the Washington Street ladder. Then he tried to carry her up the ladder to the higher roof. But because she was unconscious, he had to wrap long strands of her hair around his hands. Dragging her slowly, he made his way up the ladder."

Charles Kramer, my father. And I wanted to say to him, "Dad, on that afternoon of March 25, 1911, your twentieth birthday, you did enough good work with your hands to last a lifetime. Yes. I respect you. But why didn't you ever tell me?"

My father's hands. Useless hands. Hero's hands.