

Heaven and Hell

WE CAN rarely know what goes on between a couple, and if either offers an account of a disagreement, we're best advised to take it with a pinch of salt. The more unpleasant and vicious the argument, the more the other was to blame. That goes without saying. Family and friends often take sides and muddy the waters even more. So pity the poor children. The poor children know even less, just that Mom and Dad are arguing a lot and shouting at each other, and it makes them sad. As they grow older they spend more time at friends' homes or just hang out at the mall. The younger ones have less chance to escape the toxicity and just spend more time alone. When I was a child, I was a younger one.

I'm now married with my own children and in many ways I can piece together some understanding of the dysfunction which made my parents' home so unhappy. From snippets about this and that passed on by aunts, uncles and older cousins I have a fair idea of the causes, and now I know they are by no means uncommon. I shall metaphorically touch wood, but I'm glad say my wife and I rub along quite well. Yes, we have our ups and downs, but they are soon settled because we value both peace and each other, and any disharmony has never yet lasted out the day. We laugh a lot and at the same things. Laughter is something I rarely heard in my childhood home, and if only for that reason I love it a great deal. Laughter spells happiness.

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Far too many boys and girls — or call them men and women — partner up for the wrong reasons. But are there right reasons? I think there can be, but there are certainly more wrong reasons. I was the second oldest, but from family confidences I know my mother had conceived a child with our father before my sister Karen was born, but miscarried. Was that pregnancy why my father and mother married? I doubt it. The dark ages of a child being born 'out of wedlock' had long since passed. I do know that Mom and Dad were utterly mismatched. He was easygoing and pleasant company, my mother found trouble everywhere. My father was generous, a spendthrift even. My mother pinched every penny and if possible would spend it twice. For my father every glass was half full. My mother saw only bleakness, gloom and doom, and was keen to tell myself and Karen. That was perhaps what attracted her to the gang of evangelical zealots who arrived in town when I was six. Their

message was simple: prepare for the end, prepare for death! Abandon any hope for joy on this earth and be pure for the Second Coming when He will judge you!

For my father it was all stuff and nonsense, and he said so, again and again, and so the rowing and shouting became ever more intense. My mother spent longer and longer at the disused pool hall the zealots had converted into a church, at prayer meetings, at bible studies, at witness proclamations, and despite her penny-pinching ways she began contributing ever more for the upkeep of the pastor and his fat wife.

At first Mom took Karen and me to meetings, but Dad told her she couldn't. They rowed but then agreed she could take us to a meeting now and then. Then Karen, just 13, but always the stubborn sort, made it clear she wasn't going at all. Mom gave in. I was still dragged along now and then, but soon she even stopped taking me. I reckon having in tow a bored, restless, whining child for ever to be shushed spoiled for her the holy misery of it all.

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I was nine when she announced we were going on holiday.

'Where are we going, Mom?'

'To the church, honey. 'Holiday' is just another way of saying 'holy day'. In the old days the only time folk didn't work was when it was a holy day, Christmas or Easter or Pentecost and they went to church to praise the Lord.'

'So we're just going to church?'

'No, honey, we won't be just going to church, it will be a special day, a holy day. It will be special.'

'Is Karen coming?'

'No, honey, Karen's not coming, just you.'

'Why will it be special?'

'Because you're going to be baptised, honey, and dedicated to the Lord.'

Now, almost forty years on, I can still remember how I felt when she said that. I felt as though I was going to be locked in chains for the rest of my life.

'Why?'

'I want to make sure you are saved, honey, when the Lord comes to judge us all and takes to him in Heaven all those who lived a righteous life and will cast down to Satan in Hell all those who did not abandon sin.'

When we look back to our early years, we rarely recall how hopeless and frightened we could feel. I was scared of my mother and never felt at ease when she was around. Yet I found the courage to tell her

‘I don’t want to be baptised, Mom’.

‘You’re going to be baptised, honey!’

‘I don’t want to, Mom.’

‘You’re going to be! I don’t care what you want.’

I began to cry.

My dad was in his work shed where he stayed out of the way. I went to see him. I needed his help. I told him what Mom had said and he gave a deep sigh.

‘I don’t want to go, Daddy.’

‘Don’t worry, son, you won’t, I’ll talk to her.’

It was the last conversation they ever had. He put down what he was doing and told me to go up to my room. Then he went to find Mom in the kitchen.

Usually when they argued, they both shouted, but I noticed now only my mom was shouting. In fact, she was screaming. Then I heard something smash, something big, then there was the more smashing and banging. Then there was silence. I went to my door to listen, but I could hear nothing. I began going down the stairs, but Dad came out of the kitchen and told me to go back upstairs. He made a phone call. Soon I heard a siren wail and an ambulance arrived. Cops came about and one sat with me. Karen arrived back from work and began crying when she heard what had happened.

Mom was on life support for a few weeks, then she died. Dad was charged with first-degree homicide, but the DA changed his mind and Dad stood trial for involuntary manslaughter. He had a good lawyer and the jury believed my Dad (as I did then and still do) that he hadn’t touched Mum, that she had gone wild, mad and started throwing things, then slipped and and banged her head on the cooker.

I didn’t miss Mom and nor did Karen. Dad married again a few years later and our home became a lot happier.