

Pork Chop Night

By

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It's pork chop night. Night two of a ten day rotation. Brisket, pork chops, Peter and Brenda get lamb chops, sloppy joes, roast beef, matzo ball soup, spaghetti, don't remembers, and smorgasbord night. Mom called leftover night smorgasbord night.

Night two, nine Jews, ten day rotation, square table in the suburbs. Acting American. I thought that all the Moms and Dads were from Europe. Didn't find out otherwise until the fifth grade. Grade five, eleven years old, Peter going on twenty, Charlie seventeen.

There aren't any "thank you's" or "please pass the's" or "your welcome's". Lots of move-overs, where's the ketchup, and shut up's. No shortage of shut ups. Shut up. You shut up. You shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

Dad's more shut-down than shut-up. He comes up from the basement at seven when mom say's "Dad, dinner's ready." He's down there by five - soldering wires, scoping the oscilloscope,

doing tests, connecting batteries. The batteries that I disconnected while he was at his day job. He screams. Scream's not the right word. Shouted no - too tame. Hollered no - too waspy. Ogres. He ogred me for disconnecting the batteries. I hide in the closet of Cindy, Sheila, Joyce's room. Knees curled up against my chest. Skirts and dresses against my head. He clomps up from the basement. My skinny legs, no hair yet, bang against each other. He didn't beat the shit out of me. Never did. That's love by anybody's standard.

I always go down the basement when dad's at work. Not in school time. Only summer. I close the door. Keeps the dogs out, dad says. He yells if we don't. Mom covered the stairs with carpet when dad was in Europe last year. Said he would like it.

Dad's desk with the heavy drawer is at the bottom of the stairs. Dad leaves a small light on so he can find the big light above the ping-pong table. I find it too. I pull the string with the little metal thing on it. One time I pulled the metal thing right off. Dad didn't yell though.

The big light above the ping-pong table doesn't go on. Something else is plugged in. Something's always plugged in. I get the chair from the desk with the heavy drawer and stand up

on it. I unplug the something and plug the light. Pull the string again and the light that I sometimes burn my hand on goes on like it's supposed to. Makes me squint like I do when I come up from under water. It's dad's drill that's plugged in this time not the battery charger thing.

Dad has boxes, 'ready for shipping,' he says, pushed up against the ping-pong net. The net's all stretchy now but it doesn't matter because we don't play anymore. I only got to play once before dad started saying, 'business is picking up,' and he put the ready for shipping boxes on it. Peter and Charlie got to play a lot. Charlie always beat Peter and sometimes Peter would start saying mean stuff to try to mix him up. I watched from the end of the net and chased the foul balls. That's when the net still had the plastic new netty smell. It doesn't smell that way now. Now there's only dirty carpet smells.

Dad has a small carpet over the carpet on the floor. Keeps him warm in winter, he says. I still get cold when I watch him work, when he writes the numbers in the book and everything. One time I was shivering and he told me to stop shaking the table. Went up to the top of stairs, third stair from the top, where it's warmer. I can still see him work from there but I can't see the numbers and everything.

Dad even put up brown carpets on the walls before he put the shelves up. They don't smell bad 'cause the dust doesn't go there like on the ping-pong table. Dad should dust more but he doesn't think like that. Told him once but he said, "don't worry it's not your business." I kinda laughed 'cause Dad says worry like worry 'cause of his accent and everything. The bad carpet smells make my nose kinda all dried up. I try not to pick it because Mrs. Pfeiffer, from across the street, told me not to. Upstairs I pick anyway, but in the basement, picking with dirty fingers is kinda gross. Anyway picking with dirty fingers makes my nose more crusty and all like that.

I was kinda sad when Dad put the brown carpets up on the wall. Because when he was in Europe last time for work and everything, Cindy, Sheila, and me, wrote 'Welcome home Dad' on the wall with spray-paint. Dad smiled that night. He had to cover it up with the brown carpets to make it warmer so he could do his work and everything but it still made me kinda sad. Peter told me not to get too bummed out. He talks like that 'cause he's going to college next year.

The shelves are strong because Dad used some strong kind of metal, angel iron, I think, to hang it up. Dad's really good at

making stuff. A lot of the stuff are promo-types, he says, and shows them to me, kinda proud like. I like the promo-types but then he makes me hold them for an hour or something. He does tests and writes down numbers and everything.

I walk over to the workbench. It's the tall kind of workbench and dad stands when he's doing his work. There's a machine that he calls the o-silly-scope 'cause it makes wavy lines that are kind of funny, I guess. One machine says AC/DC generator and it's hooked up to one of the circuits dad's working on. I have to swing the hair out of my eyes when I walk because its time for a haircut. Dad's supposed to take me but mom didn't tell us when yet. I like going on Fridays so my hair has time to grow back before Monday in school - haircuts make you look like a dork. Mom was going to take me last Friday but she had to go to the doctor again. Mom likes her doctor. Says that he saved her life. Dad says mom exaggerates.

Dad uses one long alligator clip to hang all the others. There's some long red ones but most are medium size like from my elbow down. I counted once and there were fifty-three alligator clips in all. I don't think dad uses them all for the circuits but has extras for when he needs more electricity or something. Mostly he uses the red ones and the yellow ones but sometimes

the green ones are all hooked up too. I like the ones that press easy. The metal ones, without the plastic stuff, don't press easy and they leave little dents in my pointing finger and thumb. The dents last forever. I don't think dad likes the metal ones either 'cause they're always hanging in the same place. One time I asked dad why he uses the red ones most and he said "Christ, do you think the electrons actually know the color of the insulation?"

Sometimes I rearrange the alligator clips and make different patterns with the colors. I don't think dad minds 'cause he didn't yell or anything.

I walk over to the desk with the heavy drawer and have to swing my hair three times 'cause I need a haircut and everything. Dad's got letters in frames next to the desk with the heavy drawer. The letters call him Doctor and everything. He's not the sick kind of doctor but the doctor you get when you go to school a lot. He's got a picture of himself next to one of the letters and he looks kinda bald. Not bald like no hair but bald like he's got a big forehead. Mom says that's because he's smart. I don't think that's the reason but I tell my friends anyway.

The letters are from people that dad saved. He didn't save them by himself or anything but his invention saved them. Sometimes, when Mom and Dad fight, they yell about the letters. Mom says, "Why are you acting so stupid? I married you because you were smart." Mom says dad is one of the best in the whole country in his whole field. Dad yells back stuff like, "What do you want me to do? End the business? Why don't you tell the people in the letters that." Mom doesn't answer right away. Then dad says, "What do think they'd say about that."

Sometimes mom starts to cry and says, "A lot of good those letters are gonna do when I'm six feet under." I don't know what mom means 'cause she mixes things up because of her accent and everything.

I sit down at the desk with the heavy drawer. I play with the hangman character dad has above the heavy drawer. I'm right at the bottom of the stairs but I think everybody went out.

I try to open the heavy drawer with one arm but I can't. I use both arms. The ones that are the same size as the alligator clips and all. Dad has airplane stuff in the front of the drawers. Maps and like that. In the back is his Playboy magazine. Dad's not one of those creepy guys like downtown in

the red-life district. He's only got one Playboy magazine, not like a whole stash or anything. Mom said he got it because there's an article about his invention in it. I never read it 'cause I don't like to read anyway. The ladies, well, I guess they're not ladies like you would call Mrs. They're a different kind of lady in Playboy. The pictures come after the article about dad's invention. I like looking at the pictures but I don't like what happens in my underwear. Feels okay but makes me nervous. Jimmy Pfeiffer, from across the street, told me it happens to him too. Said it happens to all the boys. Peter teased me about it once. Because Peter and Charlie and me share the same room and I woke up with that happening in my underwear and everything. Peter said, "looks like you've pitched quite a tent there." Jimmy Pfeiffer, from across the street, told me that it means you're gonna get married one day. But Jimmy said that if you don't wanna get married you can join the navy.

I'm looking at the ladies in the magazine and I got my feet on the heavy drawer in case I have to push it back fast. The ladies are sexy. I think the sexy ladies are the ones you're supposed to call Ms and the Mrs are the ones that get married.

I move one foot on top of the desk and my legs are kind of spread. The thing in my underwear happens again and I don't like it and do like it all at once.

The door at the top of the stairs opens. Peter looks right down at me. He can see my foot on the desk and the other foot on the heavy drawer and the magazine not open to the article and everything. Peter's mean a lot 'cause he's going away to college. He says, "looks like you're going on quite a camping trip again." I throw the magazine into the heavy drawer. Push the heavy drawer in. "Shut up," I say.

Peter says, "Well, when you're done camping, come up for dinner, Mom's making pork chops."

Dad's doing calculations during dinner. All the shut up's make a good back drop for circuit analysis. Peter and Brenda battle for the last lamb chop. Keeping kosher. Mom does laps to the other side of the thirty foot kitchen. The feeding lot, the neighbors call it.

Mom had a stone floor installed. Dad drops a glass. Breaks it. "God damn it," he says. "Where'd this floor come from?"

Every night a different canned dessert. Mom and Dad model great conversation. Mom's accent, Belgian. Dad's Austrian. Both Jewish. "Dad, do you want me to open a can?" she says.

"Yeah, if you got it," he ogres.

I sit between Brenda and Joyce in the corner of the booth. The feeding lot has a booth for nine. Mom's across the diagonal. She always sat closest to the cooking end of the feeding lot. Why doesn't she just bring the can to the table at the same time as the Brisket, pork chops, Peter and Brenda's lamb chops, sloppy joes, roast beef, matzo ball soup, spaghetti, don't remembers and the smorgasbord. Is the can of fruit cocktail the grand finale?

Peter's finishing high-school a year late. Charlie decided to be a doctor ten years early. Peter's got lots of girlfriends. He engraved Linda's waspy name into the concrete floor of the garage. He was supposed to be working on one of his cars. Had eight cars. The neighbors see our house, in the middle of the block, in the middle of beaver-cleaver ville, as the Warsaw

ghetto. I can count the number of Jews in my school on two hands. Six of them are my siblings.

Charlie's got one steady girlfriend. Also a wasp. I'm across the diagonal, dad ponders AC versus DC. Mom opens a dessert can with the avocado-green can-opener. The avocado-green dishwasher and avocado-green refrigerator stand guard to the eating half of the feeding lot. They're pillars at the city gate - Warsaw ghetto.

Charlie and Peter start the argument. First generation siblings one and three, starting nightly argument one-hundred thirty seven. Shut up. You shut up. Brenda: Would you guys shut up, we're trying to eat. I'm stuck in the corner of the booth. I've got green padding behind me. Sisters on both sides - additional padding. Padding behind both of them.

Girlfriend insults gain momentum. Shut-ups form a nice buffer so we can eat in peace. Dad's calculations buffer him. Peter takes a piece of fat from his lamb chop. Throws it with his left hand. Lefty's are supposed to be more creative. Nothing creative about throwing food. Happens once a week. Lands on Charlie's canned-carrots. "Fuck you," Charlie says. The feeding lot looks up. The shut up's take a break. It's the

first "fuck you" for me. I stop chewing my pork chop. I put my spoon down next to my apple-sauce. "Charlie," Brenda says. "Watch your language."

I push my canned-carrots into the apple sauce. "Shut up," Charlie tells Brenda. Joyce and Sheila throw in a couple of shut-ups for cushioning. "Fuck you too," Peter says. Dad stops cutting his pork chop.

Peter stands up. Charlie stands up. The two of them form the base of an isosceles triangle. I'm the vertex.

Pork chop bones go in one direction, lamb chop bones in the other. Fists up. Some punches land. Most miss. Degenerates into wrestling - always does. Mom looks over from the avocado section. Fight saliva is in the air. Legs kicking chairs, doors, and our dog named Lassie. Shut-ups change to quit-its. The triangle contorts into obtuse, acute, and scalene all at once. Siblings two, four, five, six, and seven, me, yell overlapping quit-its.

Then... Charlie and Peter use the table as a wrestling mat. Another first. The base of the triangle goes down. My plate at the vertex goes up.

Dad ogres, "God damn it."

All the fuck-yous, shut-ups and quit-its stop instantly. Peter and Charlie take up limp positions between the avocado-green dishwasher and avocado-green refrigerator. Mom says, "Clean that up, I'll open another can."