

It's A Tie

The first direct confrontation with my father came on an unseasonably balmy day in early April, 1975, when I returned home from school for lunch, as was my habit at the time. My father also returned home for lunch, as he did only occasionally. As he was rarely home for lunch, I was relatively free in my behaviour for that period, eating what I liked and leaving what I didn't like on the plate, and so on. Often, I just picked up fish and chips at my Auntie Mavis's chip shop and ate them directly out of the bag, something my father would never permit.

By now, nearly two weeks had passed since Barber had issued his threats, with no sign of the promised replay. I knew, of course, that my father had to be aware of the details of that initial confrontation between me and him, in which I had certainly come off worse. But the subject of my future academic career had not come up between us. I knew from casual remarks, however, that my dad once again imagined my schooling would be many times longer than I planned it to be.

At this lunchtime meeting, I was still sitting at the dinner table, drinking a cup of tea and reading my copy of *Motorcycle News* when my father arrived home for lunch.

"Get your feet off that chair", he ordered me when he saw that I was resting my feet on another chair. "And where's your tie?"

"In my jacket pocket", I answered.

"Well, get it round your neck, where it should be."

I left the table, but to put my shoes on rather than my tie. I had a feeling I may be needing to leave in a hurry. Then I returned to the table, picked up my copy of *Motorcycle News*, and began reading again.

I also had a strange feeling that this confrontation was in a sense fated. I no longer had a choice of putting this off; I had put this off far too long already. Now I *had* to set things straight, and make my father understand I was no longer a kid to be ordered around.

Sure enough, my father noticed that my school tie was not where he felt it should be, and pointed that out. I decided to stand up to him on this point. "I only wear my school tie when I'm at school. When I go back there, I'll put it back on."

For a few moments, there was no reaction. Was there any possibility, I asked myself, that he would leave it at that?

My father slowly put down the knife and fork he had only just picked up to begin eating, leaving his hands resting gently on them as he turned his attention to me. He would not permit anybody in his home to speak when they were eating and in this respect he also practiced what he preached.

"You wear your school tie", he began in slow, measured tones, "during school hours. Whether you are at school, at home, or in Timbuktu, is besides the point. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Now get your tie on. Immediately".

"I understand what you're saying", I told him, to clarify the point. "But I don't agree with it. For me, I just wear the tie when I'm at school, like."

My father gave me a cold, hard look for a moment, before suddenly bringing his right fist pounding down on the table. "Get your tie on, now!" he bellowed.

I looked him straight in the eye: "No." I said. I just wear the tie when I'm at school, like I told you already," I repeated. Then I added one of his favourite warnings: "Don't make me have to repeat myself!"

My father's eyes opened wide when I said that. He was slowly rising to a true fury, beyond his usual, already

formidable outbursts of anger. I could certainly feel the temperature rising and could almost sense the explosion of kinetic energy about to be released at any moment even before it was, and so I was on red alert, ready for rapid reaction. Suddenly, he lunged at me in an attempt to grab my right wrist, which was still holding on to my cup of tea. I pulled my hand away and stood up just in time, but the tea was spilt over the table. My mother came rushing in, and exclaimed: "Oh God, now look what you two have done! All over my best tablecloth! Will you two please stop fighting?"

That was probably the worst thing she could have said. The formidable mass of energy that a moment before I felt was about to be directed at capturing me suddenly seemed to simply drain away, as his posture changed from that of a wild animal about to pounce on its prey to that of a man who had just taken an unexpected insult of inconceivably huge proportions. His hands fell to his hips as he looked at my mother, who was busy mopping up the spilt tea with a flannel. "*Fighting? Fighting?*" he asked incredulously. "What the hell are you talking about, woman? Do you think I *fight* with a 15-year-old brat? I'm trying to instil some discipline into your offspring!" My father often referred to me and my brother as "your offspring" when talking to my mother. I felt it was a way of relieving himself of responsibility for something too disappointing to want to accept as his own.

After my mother had cleaned up and left the scene, the two of us were still facing each other over the table.

"Come around here, boy, right now", my father ordered me. "You can minimise your punishment by coming around here immediately. Otherwise, I'll make you wish you'd never been born!" He pointed to the floor by his side to make it clear exactly where I was expected to surrender to him.

"I don't think so, pal, no", I answered. I knew he would bristle at being referred to as "pal".

My father burst into action once again, running around the table after me. I ran half way around the table, to the side he had been on, then continued straight through the kitchen to the back porch, out through the back door, passed the back garden to the gate at the side of the gravel drive and out onto Oak Road. I looked back with a breathy laugh: no sign of him. My father had been wearing slippers, while I had been prepared for the chase.

At a much more leisurely pace, I crossed to the other side of the road and set off back on the 15 minute walk to Penketh High School. I had left the gate perhaps 15 yards behind me when I heard the sound of its rusty hinges opening and closing. I turned to see my father no more than 10 yards from me, wearing shoes, and running towards me like a bulldozer on steroids. I immediately broke into a sprint, but before I pulled away he had closed the gap to no more than a couple of yards. I could hear his strained breathing, the pounding of his heavy steps, and even the rustle of his clothes. I had never imagined he could move so fast.

By the time I reached a narrow shortcut path that ran from Ash Road to the Warrington Road dual carriageway, I had opened up the distance to more than 20 yards. But I didn't let my guard down after the shock of almost being caught, and continued down the path at full speed, slipping deftly passed a young mother who was pushing a pram with a baby in it. The woman didn't even have the time to respond in any way and merely gave me an astonished look as I slipped passed her. But, looking back when I reached the end of the path, I saw her move to one side to avoid the onrush of my father's bulk, then, upon realising she had moved to the wrong side and actually ended up blocking him, she moved back to the other side. My father's clumsy reaction complemented her movements perfectly; he attempted to get passed her by moving to the same side she had moved to! Both then simultaneously moved to the other side, but my father, seeing the move coming, bellowed "get out of the bloody way, woman" and took the pram in his hands before she could manage to block him yet again, and then shoved it to the side. I heard the woman finally objecting indignantly, but couldn't make out exactly what she said.

I quickly crossed the busy dual carriageway, knowing that by doing so I had finally shaken off this clumsy, maladroit and bad-tempered heavyweight, and I relaxed my pace to a walk around halfway down Coronation Drive, which led to Heath Road, and the main entrance to Penketh high. It was difficult not to feel some pride in having shaken off this awkward and ungainly, overweight, middle-aged specimen of inhumanity, powered only by his own immense arrogance and pomposity. I felt he had grossly overestimated himself by thinking that he could catch me.

I saw a fifth-form student on the other side of the road whose name I didn't actually know, but with whom I had nevertheless walked to school on many occasions, for no other reason than we happened to walk the same route at the same time. I lifted my hand in greeting as he noticed me and he slowed his pace to allow me to catch up with him. But as I approached him, and he stopped to look in my direction, I saw a look of astonishment cross his face. Instinctively, I turned to look behind me, and there was my father, once again,

only yards from me! I bolted, and quickly left the red-faced, sweaty mass behind me once again.

But as I sped towards the main entrance to Penketh high, successfully shaking off my father once again, I had to ask myself what he was trying to do? Surely, he wouldn't actually chase me into the school? Surely, he wouldn't dare to give me "a good belting" right there in my school?

He did indeed chase me right into the school. I ran, still at full speed straight for the doors of the ROSLA building, where my first class was. Just as I reached the doors, the deputy headmaster, Tufty, walked out of the building. I tried to slow down but couldn't stop completely, and ran into him. "Whoa! Whoa! What's going on here?" he asked.

Seconds later, my father came to a halt a few paces to my left, the last few pounding steps of his feet acting as brakes. He immediately bent over, placing his hands on his knees as he tried to get his breath back. A growing number of students were gathering around to see what all this was about, but the deputy head told them, "Yes, yes, you can all carry on to your classes now, if you please..."

"It's my dad", I said in answer to the deputy head's question. "He wants to make me wear my tie when I'm home for lunch. I usually take it off when I leave the school".

The deputy headmaster gave this a moment's thought, then responded: "Well, I wouldn't insist on that. I don't think you need to wear your tie when you're not at school".

"What?" my father asked between breaths. "What? Incredible!"

"Well, lunchtime is not really school time, Mr. Leigh. Especially, if the student isn't on the school grounds."

"What? Incredible! Incredible! I'm incredulous!" My father repeated, still busy getting his breath back.

"Apart from that, we do give students a little more freedom in terms of dress by the fourth form."

My father finally straightened, throwing his right arm in an upward sweep, as if generously tossing some items to a crowd. "Why not just let them wear whatever they damn well like? Why bother having uniforms at all? And here I am, wasting my time trying to instil some discipline in my son and pride in his appearance. Not to mention pride in his school. *This* school!"

My father's six-foot muscular build and his domineering personality were enough to ensure that no-one questioned his authority, either when he was at work or at home. In other circumstances, where he actually had no authority and met with opinions contrary to his own, he would usually employ a tactic of ridicule and mockery. And I could easily see he was doing just that with the deputy head.

The deputy head then seemed to notice that I was still standing by their side. "Er, you can go on to your next class now, while I'm talking with your dad..."

"Thank you, sir", I told him and left the scene, smiling back at my father. And I was more than grateful for the unexpected support. But I knew my father would not simply leave a scene where somebody had actually implied he was in the wrong. And I knew that by the time he did set off back home, the deputy head's views would have been modified somewhat, if only to get rid of him.

By that time, the margin of what had seemed like an outright victory over my father as I went to my first class of the afternoon would have been whittled down. But still, at the very least, it had to be regarded as a tie.