

With Painful Labour

I conducted an interview with John T., teacher of Bible and World Religions at a Christian high school. The following story, told from his perspective, is factual.

I was sixteen; 1984, I think. I'd gotten my driver's licence a few months earlier—got a girlfriend out of it, too. We lived out in the farmland, Dutch Canadians, and I flew down the country roads, speeding oh, so much. I had freedom, those days. I never exactly had the desire to get inebriated: I drank from time to time.

All in contrast to the very conservative Christian Reformed home. Above all else, we laid out our life around the Sabbath, which was holy. We were very strict on a godly life, keeping the Sabbath at the expense of other things. We read the Old Testament; the Sabbath is sundown to sundown, but my dad chose twelve o'clock, Saturday at midnight. That was always my curfew, and it was holy.

So I developed this trick when I came home drunk: if the coast was clear I turned into the driveway, cut the lights, killed the engine, put the car in neutral, coasted into the spot, and came in as noiselessly as possible. My dad was usually asleep, and my mum registered my coming, barely. In the morning they'd ask what time I got home, and I'd come up with a number that, well, it was almost the truth.

I went out with my girlfriend one Saturday. I'm not sure what we did, but afterwards, we sure as hell spent some quiet, intimate time together. I didn't think about duty. The realization broke over me late—three or four in the morning late. Then the dam burst and everything caught up to me. With panic in my heart I said goodbye to her and whipped out—I drove like a madman, all down the country in the night; I was driving, but the only thing driving me was fear.

My father was a strong man. He was a welder; he worked with metal all his life. I knew he was incredibly powerful—he threw me into a wall once, when we were just playfighting—but he was also a very controlled man. I had never seen his rage, except on one occasion. The shove into the drywall was just fun, but another time when I was young, maybe half that age, my sister was being a pain. I yelled at her, "I hate you and I wish you weren't my sister!" In a second my dad turned on me and roared, "Don't you *ever* say that!" and I was already running down the hall. He grabbed me, brought me to my bed, and commanded, "You stay here, and you think about that." And he was staring at me, shaking.

What drove me was fear.

At one point a police car chased me, but I made it onto Highway 2. I paused near the gravel driveway and breathed. I stayed just out of the light: there was a huge metal pole, my father's pride and joy—if something could be made out of metal and

welded together, my dad would do it—and it had an industrial-size light on top. The fixture was yellowed with bugs and age, but the light was still beautiful, and bright, and I didn't want to enter it.

I realized that the chance of me coming home unseen was nil. But my adrenaline was high and with it self-delusion; and besides that the gravity and magnitude of my father's desire to keep the Sabbath, which was the sign that God's law was intact and the children healthy; and besides that he was serious about relationships, and that the man was the responsible one, even in dating; and besides that, I had simply disobeyed him. The stakes trumped the odds.

I turned into the driveway, cut the lights, killed the engine, put the car in neutral, and coasted into my spot. Even before I got out of the car, I saw the man on the porch, a silhouette before the light above him. My father sat on the picnic table, elbows resting on his knees, head down, underdressed. It was cold, but he was wearing old-man pyjamas, white with red stripes, and long underwear. He wore long underwear all year. I shivered.

I knew I was busted, but you never give up hope; I got out and closed the door softly. I walked up to the house and he looked up. I stopped. Awkwardness fell from the light, and I was caught in it. I broke the ice. "Hi, Dad," I said, suddenly surprised by how silent the night was. "What are you doing out here?"

Then he stood up and slowly started taking steps towards me. He was shaking. I thought, "He's gonna hit me." Whatever it was for, the insolence or the girlfriend or the Sabbath, he was standing there and he was *shaking*, his arms and hands down at his sides. I knew he was pissed off. I knew he was going to hit me.

I don't know how long or short his rage held. He looked at me, and finally, in measured words, he said, "Never forget: I love you." Out of this shaking anger he reached out and grabbed me and gave me a huge hug. And he kissed me on the cheek. It was almost four thirty in the morning, and we stood there in the cold and the pale yellow of the huge streetlight, my father's creation, just like me. To this very day my kids don't like getting kisses from their Opa, because they're very wet—just *slobbery*. And, furious, he gave me one.

My father drew back and uttered the words, "What happened tonight will never happen again. We'll talk about it tomorrow. Go to bed." And I went to bed.

I went to bed. I slept knowing something bad was going to happen to me. I slept knowing that I was cared for and deeply loved. I slept knowing I was going to get punished. And that he had not abandoned me.

What punishment was levied on me? To my relief, I worked. We lived on an apple farm, and for three weeks, my father said, I was not to go anywhere after school, but to come home, to prune, unload, and harvest the apples, and to come in for dinner.

And to hear that the Sabbath is holy: you give to God what is God's. Yet he didn't take away my freedom. I still got the car next day to go to school.

Those were the moments of building, of being formed, though I didn't know it. Now, even at forty-three, it's still the hallmark, the barometer, that my dad sees—that I and my family observe Sunday for the Lord. That's how you check for holiness.

And as it happens that's how you raise a child. You know, it's true, and it doesn't just mean the moment of birth, and it doesn't just mean the woman, when it says in Genesis 3: "With painful labour will you raise up children."