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God and DNA Over Coffee

Once again, my father and I squabbled over God at breakfast. "I just don't understand how I could have emerged from you!," I said. "DNA" he replied, as only a scientist could. "But why must everything be proven?," I asked him. "Can't God exist without the lab reports to back it up?" "It depends what you mean by God," he said. "To me, God is the sum total of all the intelligence in the universe. To others it's something else, something more emotional perhaps. Pass the danish." "But what about faith, dad? Can't you ever just take a leap of faith?" "Faith, kiddo, is anything where the evidence is missing. You got any Sweet and Low?" He was in a hurry to eat, He had to get to his lab on Second Avenue, where malignant tumors in glass vials were waiting for him.

"Then why be Jewish dad?" He dunked his jelly donut in his decaf, submerging it throughout his reply. "It's about belonging to a group. A family of man. As for the Torah? I certainly don't believe God came down in a cloud or anything. Moses went up there and scribbled it out. It's a nice set of moral laws. Get me my coat from the closet, will you?" I could see his mind was turning to other things, to electron microscopes and Bunsen burners, his bio-chemical mistresses.

In a last ditch effort to elicit a morsel of abandon from him, I resorted to using a familiar Jewish ploy -guilt and suffering. "But dad, you married a Holocaust survivor. Your mother's youth, her entire family, was stolen from her by the Pogroms in Russia. Does this mean nothing to you?" He lowered his head for a moment. When he raised it, however, I realized he'd actually been looking for a token in his top pocket. "Kiddo, it means that somehow mankind still has potential for goodness. After all, the fact that you're here is proof of that."

Is scientific imagination really so different than religious faith? I wondered, but knew not to ask him any more questions. By now he had already started to mumble equations to himself. He was somewhere in the clouds, with satellite technology or God, depending on your DNA. "Don't forget your umbrella," I said top him and stuffed it in his raincoat pocket, although I'm not sure he noticed.

Just then my phone rang. I ran for the receiver and, from the kitchen, I could see him preparing to leave. He buttoned his coat collar, pulled a wool cap over his ears, and through no fault of his own, kissed the mazuzah in the doorway as he headed for the elevator.

House of Silence

There are some secrets that are precious, like the ones that were wrapped and ribboned and delivered into your ear by a classmate, the ones that would cause an immediate outbreak of the giggles or send you gliding onto the playground with a knowing smile. Somehow, the secrets at home never felt as good. They were dark, I knew that much, and they were off-limits.

I don't know how I knew; my mother never talked about it. Yet the Holocaust was there in the house, in everything we did and said and touched. It was in my mother's face, hallowed and frightened at the time. It was in her tears, which fell without cause at a Little League game or at a school play, when she should have been cheering. Its presence wasn't tangible -- there were no objects, no pictures, no jewelry, since everything had been lost or stolen in the war. There were no stories, since any attempt at recollection would bring tears to my mother's eyes. What there was was silence, and it was deafening.

When my family bought a summer home by the sea, I thought the waves would be loud enough to drown out that silence. I thought the Cape breezes, the incessant gulls, the relentless tides lapping up, were enough to quiet our souls, if only for the summer. The house was one of the oldest on Martha's Vineyard, nestled on the Edgartown Bay with a direct view of Chappaquiddick. It was the subject of a Revolutionary War poem, a local sea captain told me, and he recited the rhyming verse, in which a feisty maiden fights off a mob of British soldiers off its long stone steps.

But shortly after we moved in, the workers came, two by two, like animals to the ark, like we were a drowning ship and they were our hope. They chipped and banged and hammered away all remnants of history that remained in that old home. They tore down the cavernous hearth in the cellar, whose fire, I imagined, dried generations of socks after many autumn romps in the chilly leaves. They razed the old wooden exterior, and as it fell to the ground, I knew that a century of stories, stored in its grain, were falling too. They changed its classic form, stretched it longer and wider and rounder than any New England home is comfortable with.

I would hear whispers in town. Not in the summer. when the island swelled with tourists, but each November when our family gathered there for Thanksgiving and the native islanders came out of their hibernation. Their comments fell the hardware store, or the drugstore or the A&P, whenever people thought I wasn't listening or hoped that I was: "Oh, there's that new family. They bought the old Tommy Smith house. Such a shame what they did to it!." They were all so sad, as if a dear friend had been taken away from them. The house represented more than classic New England architecture. It represented roots and theirs were being severed.

How I wished I could have explained to them what forces were operable in my mother, how she needed to erase anything old and anything rooted. How I wanted them to understand the pain it would have caused her to live in a house whose past was alive when hers was buried deep within her. The wide beam floors, the handmade windows,

the eaves that fell at a million angles, these features were far too noisy for our house of silence.

The Art of the Schtupp

"Done any schtupping lately?" my voyeuristic friend, Steve Zeitlin, asked me this week over dinner. Before I had time to answer, Steve, who is a folklorist and loves to view behavior through the lens of story, began to examine the word "schtupp" and the way it's used by Jews in their anecdotes.

According to Steve, "the schtupp" is a thoroughly Jewish concept, made possible by our guilt-free relationship with sex. " It's not a fuck, nor is it making love. It's something in between, to be enjoyed like a great meal," said Steve, while devouring a plate of fettucini. To support his theory, he shared a story about Abie Hirsch and Moishe Klein, two elderly men living together in an old age home.

One day, after discussing the possibility of an afterlife, the two men make a pact: Whoever dies first must phone the other from heaven and tell him what it's like. A few months later, Abie has a heart attack and dies. Shortly thereafter, Moishe gets a phone call from him. "Nu, how is it up there?" Moishe asks. "It's unbelievable!" answers Abie." All I do all day is schtupp, schtupp, schtupp. Eat, eat, eat. Schtupp and eat. Schtupp and eat!" "It's sounds incredible !" says Moishe, with a hint of jealousy in his voice. "Not so fast" answers Abie. "I'm a bull in Wisconsin."

Marriage, children, romantic love, praying, even business investments--these are the places where Jews put meaning, says Steve, not in the schtupp. That's because the schtupp is not of the spiritual realm. It's not anti-heaven, it doesn't belong to hell, but is part of the earthiness that runs through Jewish culture and folklore, and our willingness to accept the body and sex in particular as part of a duality between the spiritual and the carnal.

Perhaps that explains Melvin Schwartz's confusion upon entering heaven. His entire life, Melvin never sinned. He was always doing mitzvot. To his surprise, when he dies, God rejects him from heaven, telling him, " We don't take perfect people up here. You have to do at least one thing wrong to get in." He makes Melvin go back and sin. Melvin returns to earth and finds an elderly, unsuspecting widow at his synagogue. He takes her home, makes her undress, and schtupps her. He's delighted by his transgression. Unfortunately, when the widow sees him leaving her apartment the next morning, she screams out "Wait! Before you go, I just want to thank you. It's a real mitzvah, what you've done for me."

"Done any schtupping lately?" Steve asked me again as dessert was being served.
But before I could answer, he got distracted by the chocolate moose pie, covered in home made flecks of white chocolate and powdered sugar. Like a good schtupp, an activity to be savored in the moment like a fine wine or a great dessert, he handed me a fork and together we indulged