

Advice

There is such a thing as duty, of course, and it is sometimes conditional. But family that is never conditional. We stick with each other even when it might not be a good idea to do so. That's the way my mother was brought up. It might not make any sense, but you shared the same opinion and did what agreed with those in your family. Because in the end, family was the most important possession you had in life.

I remember long ago sitting at the kitchen table doing homework while my mother peeled potatoes and my father fooled with a lamp he was trying to get working again. Mom asked my father, "Who should I vote for, Jack?"

"Stevenson," he said, "A Democrat is always the working man's friend."

"But I like Ike," she said. "He looks like a President."

"I suppose so," said my father, "but what about Father Gallagher, Mary? He likes Stevenson."

I could tell a provocation when I heard one, even at nine years of age.

"The priests always like Democrats," she said. "Something fishy there."

"That could be sacrilegious, Mary," he said.

My mother didn't respond. She too could tell a provocation when she heard it. Besides, a proper Irish Catholic woman in 1952 did not play against the Catholic trump card, not in our neighborhood.

"What about the bomb?" she said.

"What bomb?" asked my father.

"The Atomic Bomb," she said.

Dad snorted. "What about the Atomic Bomb?"

"Well, " said my mother, "Ike is a military man. He'd know how to stop one."

"Now, just how would Ike stop an Atomic Bomb, Mary," said my father, becoming exasperated.

"How would I know?" she said, "I'm sure it's a military secret."

"Uh huh," said my father.

I said nothing. I was just having fun watching my parents while I memorized five facts about the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria. When friends at school described their parents' bickering, it seemed scary to me. But Mom and Dad's quarrels were always amusing, maybe to them, too. Any squabbles that were not civil presumably took place well away from their children's ears.

After a moment, Mom came back with an argument less sensible than her first.

"So how do you think Father Gallagher would stop a bomb?" she asked.

"Father Gallagher is a priest," said my father with some emphasis, "he doesn't have to know how to stop a bomb!"

"But it could land here in Cornhill," she said, heat now rising in her voice. "And Gallagher is always talking about the Church protecting us."

"He means our immortal souls, Mary, not our bodies," said my father.

"Well at the moment," she said, "I'm interested in our bodies and the few belongings we have in this 'vale of tears.' You'll care too when the Japs rain fire down from the sky and ruin your new car."

"Mary, we beat the Japs six years ago. It's the Russians we're worried about now."

He looked at me and winked. "And I'm using the best car wax I could find in the National Auto store. At \$1.95 for just a small can, I assume the wax is bomb proof."

"All I'm saying," continued Mom, "is that Ike knows how to handle the bad guys."

"I think," said Dad, "that if an Atomic Bomb drops on James Street, no one can save us."

This bothered me. "Would we have to move?" I asked. "I don't want to go back to West Utica".

"There won't be any Utica left," said my father. "Maybe pieces of it dropping down in Syracuse."

"That's the problem for Ike," said Mom, "where to go first. Should he stop a bomb in Syracuse or Poughkeepsie before he comes to Utica?"

My mother had no idea where Poughkeepsie was, she just liked saying the name. She pushed out each syllable as she imagined an Indian would, equally accented and with gusto, like a cheerleader after a set shot swooshing through the loop. Years before a boy in high school had told her she looked like an Indian maiden. She was as pale as any Irishwomen, but she took it to heart. She always cheered for the Indians at the movies. She wrote letters to Rome asking what the hell the hang up was with Kateri Tekatwitha's canonization to Saint. Auriesville was her Mormon Temple.

Mom took the peelings over to the garbage can next to the back door. When she turned back toward Dad and me at the kitchen table, I could see the twinkle in her eyes. It was visible from across the room.

"Do you think," she said, "Ike would go to Albany first to save all the bureaucrats and pencil pushers?"

She knew my father's negative opinion of our state lawmakers and their families on the payroll.

"I certainly hope not," said Dad.

My mother harrumphed as she sat down at the table.

"Gallagher would go save the politicians first," she said.

My father almost laughed at idea of the priest going anywhere to save anyone if we were bombed.

"I don't think," he said, "the good Father will be allowed by his doctor to go on rescue missions."

"Well, you can't expect Ike to be everywhere!" said Mom. "And Father Gallagher is always in some gin mill"

"Mary!" interjected my father.

She was steaming up again. "Admit it! You know Stevenson won't even try to come here to stop an Atomic Bomb, don't you?" she said with a flourish.

My father sighed deeply. "Do you really think Ike would?"

"I'm sure he'd send a ... what do you call those guys?"

"A go-fer," said Dad.

"With instructions on how to turn off the bomb," said Mom. "Maybe Father Gallagher could help. He's good at turning things off. Like the heat in church when the collection wasn't enough for him."

Mom got back up and went over to the sink. Dad said nothing.

My mother continued. "He said Mass that Sunday with his overcoat on. Can you imagine? He should have been excommunicated for consecrating the host with his boots on and wearing a coonskin hat he said his nephew gave him."

My father remained quiet as he stared up at the ceiling, grinding his teeth. Then he reached over and put a hand on my arm.

"If you're ever offered a job as a go-fer when you grow up, ask a *lot* of questions."

"Like what, Dad?"

"Like whether you'll have to carry a Geiger Counter."

He leaned farther over to me and glanced at my open text book and what I was writing.

"Did you know," he said, "the man who first spotted land when they reached South America was never paid the money Columbus promised? The first land was a small island. The old cheat said he'd seen light in the sky that night and he told the sailor it must be the real mainland. That sailor was just another victim of an owner who held all the cards and had all the rights."

Dad turned back to my mother and spoke to her in a calm voice.

"I think," he said, "you should vote for Ike."

"No!" she shouted, slamming the potato peeler down on the sink. "I will vote with my husband," she said. "I'll vote for Stevenson."

My father made the best decision he would make all day. He went over to where Mom stood cleaning the potato peeler, kissed her on the back of the neck and without a word left the kitchen.

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