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DRESSING FOR MASS

by

Brian Doyle

It is not now the fashion to dress meticulously for Mass, and I cannot say that I completely mourn the old custom, for it is inarguably more comfortable to wear khaki pants and my Boring 1950s Dad Sitcom Jacket than a suit; but on days when I see young men wearing surfing shorts to Mass, I find myself drifting back to the hour before Mass when I was a boy, many years ago, in a large family, which featured many boys, but only one girl, which was a fortunate state of affairs on Sunday morning, for my sister would claim the bathroom like a disputed territory long before dawn, and marinate in there for hours, apparently addressing each of her many long hairs by name, and cooing to it lovingly, and asking it gently about its emotional state, and taking eight or nine baths and showers alternately, while snarling at her brothers, who hammered on the door so assiduously that our dad twice had to putty over the places where his sons had thrummed on the door, begging in the most polite and courteous tones for just one moment of ablution, shy murmured requests that were denied with the most shocking and vulgar language, and this before we were to go to Mass and
sit silently and ponder the Unimaginable Mercy at the root of all things, even our sister.

Occasionally we would try to beat our sister to the bathroom early, just to snatch the briefest of showers, even though she would vengefully run the kitchen tap in an effort to scald us out, but mostly we just lay abed until the last possible second, and then we dressed and thundered downstairs for shards of toast before being packed like herrings in a light olive oil into the car by our dad, who always wanted to strap our youngest brother atop the car for entertainment's sake, saying What do we have ski racks for if not for strapping Tommy to the roof of the car? Tommy was totally willing, I should say, and we were all more than willing to watch, but our mother was not willing, and our sister never weighed in on this because she was still in the bathroom applying her final mysterious unguents and potions. Every single time we ever went to Sunday Mass as a family my father would start the car, as the first signal to our sister that we were indeed leaving without her, and then he would turn the car around, as a second signal, and then he would bleat the horn, as a third signal, and then he would let the car inch forward slightly, which was the last straw, at which point our sister would come pelting out of the house like a fragrant harpy, trailing clouds of unguent and bad attitude.

For some years three of us boys lived upstairs together, and we would dress together by the old mirror, putting on the suits our mother had laid out for us, the suits we wore only for Mass and weddings and wakes, the suits we thus assumed were made of sacramental cloth. The crisp white shirts, sometimes still warm from our mother's steam-iron; the ties of various hues handed down by

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our father (fat ties) and older brother (narrow ties); the black shoes, polished by your breath and a brother’s stolen sock; the utilitarian unFashionable black belts issued to all American male children at birth; the crisply ironed white handkerchief that each male in our clan carried by command of our mom, who grimly lined us up by the front door and checked for clean handkerchiefs before we were allowed out into the soiled world. Showers not being part of the program, what with our sister camped out in the bathroom since Tuesday, we did what we could to tamp down the unruly thickets of our hair; and more than once, I now confess, we tamed our youngest brother’s hair with the spit that God had seen fit to grant us as part of the amazing salivary system, without which you cannot properly eat or digest your food.

It took time to get dressed for Mass; our poor mother ironed everything in sight for hours, preparing us for public inspection; and yes, there were times that we moaned and whimpered and complained about the custom, whining and mooing and bleating like professional soccer players. Yet even now that I am long past the habit of dressing in my best for Mass, I sometimes feel that I should, and not just for nostalgic reasons, or to hint to the boy with surfer shorts that he ought to get a grip. No; it has something mysteriously to do with respect, and humility, and ritual, and reverence. When I was young I thought dressing for Mass was silly and empty performance art; now I wonder if it was more a gesture of something like awe. For great moments in life you prepare slowly and carefully, and present yourself buffed and polished and shining, as a way to say something for which we do not yet have particularly good words.

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