

My Father Sits in the Dark by Jerome Weidman

My father has a peculiar habit. He is fond of sitting in the dark, alone. Sometimes I come home very late. The house is dark. I let myself in quietly because I do not want to disturb my mother. She is a light sleeper. I tiptoe into my room and undress in the dark. I go to the kitchen for a drink of water. My bare feet make no noise. I step into the room and almost trip over my father. He is sitting in a kitchen chair, in his pyjamas, smoking his pipe.

'Hello, Pop,' I say.

'Hello son.'

'Why don't you go to bed, Pa?'

'I will,' he says.

But he remains there. Long after I am asleep I feel sure that he is still sitting there, smoking.

Many times I am reading in my room. I hear my mother get the house ready for the night. I hear my kid brother go to bed. I hear my sister come in. I hear her do things with jars and combs until she, too, is quiet. I know she has gone to sleep. In a little while I hear my mother say goodnight to my father. I continue to read. Soon I become thirsty. (I drink a lot of water.) I go to the kitchen for a drink. Again I almost stumble across my father. Many times it startles me. I forget about him. And there he is - smoking, sitting, thinking.

'Why don't you go to bed, Pop?'

'I will soon, son.'

But he doesn't. He just sits there and smokes and thinks. It worries me. I can't understand it. What can he be thinking about? Once I asked him.

'What are you thinking about, Pa?'

'Nothing,' he said.

Once I left him there and went to bed. I awoke several hours later. I was thirsty. I went to the kitchen. There he was. His pipe was out. But he sat there, staring into a corner of the kitchen. After a moment I became accustomed to the darkness. I took my drink. He still sat and stared. His eyes did not blink. I thought he was not even aware of me. I was afraid.

'Why don't you go to bed, Pop?' 'I will, son,' he said. 'Don't wait up for me.' 'But,' I said,

'you've been sitting here for hours. What's wrong?

What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing, son,' he said. 'Nothing.

It's just restful. That's all.'

The way he said it was convincing. He did not seem worried. His voice was even and pleasant. It always is. But I could not understand it. How could it be restful to sit alone in an uncomfortable chair far into the night in darkness? What can it be?

I review all the possibilities. It can't be money. I know that. We haven't much, but when he is worried about money he makes no secret of it. It can't be his health.

He is not reticent about that either. It can't be the health of anyone in the family. We are a bit short on money, but we are long on health. (Knock wood, my mother would say.) What can it be? I am afraid I do not know. but that does not stop me from worrying. Maybe he is thinking of his brothers in the old country. Or of his mother and two step mothers. Or of his father. but they are all dead. And he would not brood about them like that. I say brood, but it is not really true. He does not brood. He does not even seem to be thinking. He looks to peaceful, too, well not contented, just too peaceful, to be brooding.

Perhaps it is as he says. Perhaps it is restful. But it does not seem possible. It worries me.

If only I knew what he thinks about. If I only knew that he thinks at all. I might not be able to help him. He might not even need help. It may be as he says. It may be restful.

But at least I would not worry about it.

Why does he just sit there, in the dark? Is his mind failing? No, it can't be. He is only fifty-three. And he is just as keen-witted as ever. In fact, he is the same in every respect. He still likes beet soup. He still reads the second section of the Times first.

He still wears wing collars. He still believes that Debs could have saved the contry and that T.R. was a tool of moneyed interests. He is the same in every way. He does not even look older than he did five years ago. Everybody remarks about that.

Well-preserved, they say. But he sits in the dark, alone, smoking, staring straight ahead of him, unflinking, into the small hours of the night.

If it is as he says, if it is restful, I will let it go at that. But suppose it is not. Suppose it is something I cannot fathom. Perhaps he needs help. Why doesn't he speak? Why

doesn't he frown or laugh or cry? Why doesn't he do something? Why does he just sit there? Finally I become angry. Maybe it is just my unsatisfied curiosity. Maybe I am a bit worried. Anyway, I become angry.

'Is something wrong, Pop?' 'Nothing, son. Nothing at all.'

But this time I am determined not to be put off. I am angry.

'Then why do you sit here all alone, thinking, till late?'

'It's restful, son. I like it.'

I am getting nowhere. Tomorrow he will be sitting there again. I will be puzzled. I will be worried. I will not stop now. I am angry.

'Well, what do you think about, Pa? Why do you just sit here?' 'What's worrying you?'

'What do you think about?' 'Nothing's worrying me, son. I'm all right.'

'It's just restful. That's all. Go to bed, son.'

My anger has left me. But the feeling of worry is still there. I must get an answer. It seems so silly. Why doesn't he tell me? I have a funny feeling that unless I get an answer I will go crazy. I am insistent.

'But what do you think about . Pa? What is it?' 'Nothing, son. Just things in general.'

'Nothing special. Just things.' I can get no answer.

It is very late. The street is quiet and the house is dark. I climb the steps softly, skipping the ones that creak. I let myself in with my key and tiptoe to my room. I remove my clothes and remember that I am thirsty.

In my bare feet I walk to the kitchen. Before I reach it I know he is there.

I can see the deeper darkness of his hunched shape. He is sitting in the same chair, his elbows on his knees, his cold pipe in his teeth, his unblinking eyes staring straight ahead. He does not seem to know I am there.

He did not hear me come in. I stand quietly in the doorway and watch him.

Everything is quiet, but the night is full of little sounds. As I stand there motionless I began to notice them. The ticking of the alarm clock on the icebox. The low hum of an automobile passing many blocks away. The swish of papers moved along the street by the breeze. A whispering rise and fall of sound, like low breathing.

It is strangely pleasant.

The dryness in my throat reminds me. I step briskly into the kitchen.

'Hello, Pop.'

'Hello, son.' he says. His voice is low and dreamlike.

He does not change his position or shift his gaze.

I cannot find the faucet. The dim shadow of light that comes through the window from the street lamp only makes the room seem darker. I reach for the short chain in the centre of the room. I snap on the light.

He straightens up with a jerk, as though he has been struck.

'What's the matter, Pop?' I ask. 'Nothing,' he says. 'I don't like the light.'

'What's the matter with the light?' I say.

'What's wrong?' 'Nothing,' he says.

'I don't like the light.'

I snap the light off. I drink my water slowly. I must take it easy, I say to myself. I must get to the bottom of this.

'Why don't you go to bed? Why do you sit here so late in the dark?' 'It's nice,' he says. 'I can't get used to the lights. We didn't have lights when I was a boy in Europe.'

My heart skips a beat and I catch my breath happily. I begin to think I understand. I remember the stories of his boyhood in Austria. I see the wide-beamed kretchma (inn), with my grandfather behind the bar. It is late, the customers are gone, and he is dozing. I see a bed of glowing coals, the last of a roaring fire.

The room is already dark, and growing darker. I see a small boy, crouched on a pile of twigs at one side of the huge fireplace, his starry gaze fixed on the dull remains of the dead flames.

The boy is my father. I remember the pleasure of those few moments while I stood quietly in the doorway watching him.

'You mean there's nothing wrong? You just sit in the dark because you like it, Pap?' I find it hard to keep my voice from rising to a happy shout. 'Sure,' he says. 'I can't think with the light on.' I set my glass down and turn to go back to my room.

'Good night, Pop,' I say.

'Good night, ' he says.

Then I remember. I turn back. 'What do you think about, Pop?' I ask.

His voice seems to come from far away. It is quiet and even again. 'Nothing,' he said softly. 'Nothing special.'