

The Darkness

It is a long time ago. I am probably aged nine and it is Monday. School Assembly. The dreaded Miss Kenny is passing down the line, inspecting us for hankies, (neatly folded on the back of hands), clean fingernails and shiny black shoes.

Usually, it is not too bad. Fingernails can be dredged out with the aid of a twig stolen from a passed tree, hankies can be surreptitiously passed along the line behind pupil's backs, but shoes are a dead giveaway.

Miss Kenny stops in front of me. "Nice clean shoes," she says approvingly. "Who cleaned them?"

"My father, Miss Kenny," I answer truthfully.

Her face darkens. She hauls me out in front of the school.

"This little girl," She declaims, "This little girl is an idle, shameless little girl! She expects her father – *her father* - to clean her shoes for her!"

It was true. My father, largely disabled in the First World War, took pleasure in performing what physical tasks he could for his family. It took him a long time to clean shoes with his poor, deformed hands, but he did it with love and he did it well. Probably with the "spit 'n polish" technique learned in the army. How could I tell him I wanted to clean my own shoes?

The next Monday, the ritual is the same. Miss Kenny passes down the line and stops in front of me.

"Well, she demands, "Who cleaned your shoes this morning?"

"My father, Miss Kenny" I reply.

She is furious. I am hauled bodily from the line and pulled by ear to the front of the school.

"*This child,*" she trumpets, "*This nasty, lazy little girl, has no shame! She won't clean her own shoes. No! She asks her father to clean them for her!*"

It was a problem. I couldn't hurt my father, but neither, surely, could I tell a lie. Ours was not a particularly religious family, but we were expected to be honest.

Sunday night I lay in the dark and I prayed. I asked God to forgive me, because I was going to go against His commandments. I was going to tell a lie.

The next day, I watched Miss Kenny's approach with trepidation. As usual, she stopped in front of me.

"Nice clean shoes," she said. "Who cleaned them?"

I put my hanky in a sweaty palm and, putting my hands behind my back, I crossed my fingers.

"I did, Miss Kenny" I said.

She smiled, in triumph, and passed on down the line.

end