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## Punishments

Each of us had one. Or, I should say, each of our fathers had one. This common fact of our pasts emerged during a long and blurry night of talk in my living room. There were six of us, three married couples, but mostly it was the men who did the talking. The women listened and, at least as it seemed to me, became witnesses united by the foreignness of what they heard described.

Steve's, or his father's, was most unusual; Michael's most traditional; mine most threatening and in this sense worst. (Although there was much debate on this last point.) Despite the differences, our three memories were really just variations on a single theme.

Steve's father had been an engineer for a company that manufactured stereo equipment. He often brought home discarded wires. He had woven together a cluster of speaker wires, the kind encased in plastic, and created a thick strand of metallic rope. With this device he punished his son for any serious transgression.

Steve was not beaten often; none of us were. Mostly the wires were used a threat. Steve told only one story of a beating. He had been caught with a collection of basketball cards so large that his allowance couldn't possibly explain its existence. The money, as he eventually confessed, had come from weekly thefts from his mother's purse. "I remember waiting for my father to come home from work after my mother had called him to tell him that I had stolen the

money. It was dread, sheer and certain. But there were also a hint of relief-- it would be over soon.” The beating was lengthy and systematic.

Michael’s father used the belt. Michael described how once he had been caught unawares as he came out of a bath. “It was something about getting in trouble again at school and my father was furious.” Michael was still wet from the bath as his father approached, snapping the belt. It was the sound, the wild menace of the belt as it cracked against itself that stayed with Michael. That, and the somber look of dutiful determination on his father’s face.

My father, like Steve’s, had been an engineer who had also devised his own weapon. It was a thick, black piece of rubber hose about two feet long. My father had bent the hose around, a job that required considerable effort since the rubber was hard, and joined its two ends together with wire . The result was an oval shaped monster which he called “the truncheon.”

The truncheon was kept hidden in the basement. Threats about it were often made and in the midst of our worst behavior my brother and I were reminded of its existence. The very word “truncheon” made me pause with fear. It conjured up images of “fascist thugs,” about whom my father often told stories. I had no clear idea what a fascist thug was; certainly I had never seen one. I only knew from my father’s stories that they were cruel and stupid and would use their truncheons to beat peaceful and good people. Their favorites targets, as far as I could gather, were Jews and demonstrators. My father, a Jew and a demonstrator, hated them....and so did I.

And yet there in my basement, along with the cheap pool table, the TV, and the two small desks my father had built for me and my brother, was hidden a truncheon.

“Your father used to *beat* you with that thing?” one of the women asked.

Actually, he never did. The truncheon was only a threat designed to remind me that the world I occupied was ruled by a moral order. If that order was violated, chaos would reign. My father, the peaceful demonstrator, would become a fascist thug.

The three of us now have children of our own. None of us keeps a weapon nor have we ever beaten any of our kids. But our memories of punishment are with us still. We three are friends and similar. We are fond of order, bound to rules, likely to control a situation. We sense, and fear, the proximity of chaos and believe that it is only by vigilance that trouble is kept at bay. Acceptable behavior, for us, has strict limits.

Perhaps the wires, the belt, even the truncheon, played useful roles in our lives. Perhaps justice needs weapons after all. I don't know. Our memories are also wounds. Our fathers, good men who protected and cared for us, also threatened us. Our childhood worlds were, on occasion, turned upside down.

Our voices with tinged with embarrassment as we recounted our memories on that blurry night, for in fact we were confessing that we did not, and never would, completely trust another man. How could we, if even the closest of all connections could explode at any moment into armed rage?

The women listened. I suspect they were appalled: they had, thankfully, never been beaten, nor had their young worlds been invaded by violence. For them love and good counsel do not need to be armed. Trust, I think, comes more easily to them.

We made two discoveries that night. First, that the three of us shared a past. None of us had ever mentioned our punishments to another man before, only to our wives. As a result, we each thought, quite wrongly, that our fathers were somehow unique and that we were somehow

uniquely wounded. Second, much to our surprise we learned that the wires, the belt and the truncheon were important forces in shaping our lives. These weapons, surrounded by an aura of duty and terror, enforced the boundaries that our fathers declared, and that we ourselves accept even today. I really don't know whether such punishments were for better or worse, or whether such memories today do more harm than good.