

Dressing up in Church Faces

We bathe two at a time on Saturday nights because mom says there isn't enough time or water for eight baths.

Debbie is nine and because she is the oldest, she is my mother's helper. She towels Theresa and Andrew off as mom kneels at the tub, adding more Mr. Bubble and hot water, while Thomas and I strip down for our turn. Once in, we splash at end, making bubble beards and passing the bar of Ivory soap back and forth. Our bathroom has a curtain instead of a door on it, and Mom appears every now and then, pulling the curtain back to remind us to wash behind our ears and keep the water in the tub.

From the living room, the evening news ends, and the Jackie Gleason Show begins. I hear the band playing and know that the June Taylor dancers are performing, gliding across the stage in their glittery sequins and feathered hats. My favorite part is when the camera is on the ceiling pointing down at them, and they look like a giant pinwheel, twinkling and twirling on the floor.

My father loves the show – he laughs when Jackie Gleason clenches his jaw and fists and tells his wife that he's going to send her to the moon. I don't think it's so funny. The actor scares me with his loud voice and his eyes that bug out of his head when he gets angry at Alice. I worry that he really *will* hit her. I know he is only pretending but my father wears that same face a lot and when he does, there is no laughter from any of us.

Mom comes back in when the bath water gets cold. I hold a wash cloth against my eyes to protect them from the sting of shampoo, *ouch, ouching* as her finger tips scrub my scalp.

“Oh stop it,” she grumbles. “That doesn't hurt.”

She calls to Billy and Michael that it's their turn, adding again, more water and Mr. Bubble when Thomas and I climb out of the tub.

In the kitchen, I sit on a chair as mom rolls my hair up in small silver curlers that she keeps in a blue metal cookie tin. They pinch tight against my scalp and when I lay my head on my pillow that night, it feels as though I have small stones tied all around my head.

The entire family is up before the sun the next day, getting ready for 6:30 morning mass. I ask Debbie to take my curlers out because she is gentler than mom, unrolling them slowly so they don't tear my hair out. When she's done, I shake my head side to side, enjoying the tickle of the curls bouncing lightly against my face.

My brothers all line up in the bathroom, waiting for mom to slick their hair back into a Brylcreem swoosh as my father paces in the living room, brow furrowed, yelling that we are going to be late. Debbie hurries me and Theresa into our dresses while Susie rubs Vaseline on the toes of our scuffed black patent leather shoes, trying to make them shine. It's still dark out when our Chevy leaves the driveway, my father at the wheel, his mouth a tight, straight line across his face. There are ten of us in the car but we are so quiet that I can hear the crunch-crunch of the gravel as we pull out onto the road and head into town.

I watch my father's face change as he parades us down the center aisle of the church to the front rows where we always sit. He is nodding and grinning at other parishioners we pass along the way, puffed up like a peacock in full-feathered regalia. The four bigger kids shuffle into the very front pew. Mom slides in behind them with Andrew on her lap, and me, Thomas and Theresa squished between her and my father.

Michael fidgets all during mass, wrapping his hand around the bench in front of him, rubbing it back and forth until the friction and his sweat make it start to squeak. He looks at Billy

out of the corner of his glasses to see if he hears it, and they smirk at one another, both trying not to laugh. It *is* funny – it sounds just like a fart, and I stifle my own giggle. Michael continues until he feels a poke in his back and turns to a stern look from my father.

I can't blame my brother for fidgeting. Church does get pretty boring with Father Biskey up there on the pulpit with his wet, saggy eyes droning on and on about how we are all sinners, and how God will throw us into the fires of hell if we don't obey Him. Even Andrew gets restless, wiggling around in mom's arms until she sticks her pinky in his mouth to quiet him.

At the end of mass, the priest says *go forth and bear fruit*. My father sits up straighter, and I wonder why the two old ladies across the aisle are staring at my family and whispering.

The altar boys open the tall, wooden doors at the back of the church, and Father Biskey stands on the steps outside, greeting parishioners as we filter out. He shakes my father's hand as we pass, saying something about the blessing of all these gifts from God. My father is once again a peacock and wearing that face with the grin that I never see at home.

We pile into the car, Debbie between my parents in the front with Theresa on her lap. Thomas climbs up to stretch out on the window shelf while the rest of us nudge each other for room on the crowded back seat. My father wheels the Chevy out of the parking lot, and once we make the bend in the road and the church is out of sight, he pulls slowly over to the side. Off slips the Church Face and with a swift twist in his seat, he punches Michael right in the chest, causing my brother's glasses to fly off his face and land in my lap. And then there is silence - thick and sudden - and anxiety begins to tap-tap along my ribs.

"I *never* want to hear you making noise in church again. Have you got that?" My father is shouting out of his real face now as the cords on his neck strain against his tie.

Michael whimpers a yes, holding his hands to his chest.

“And *you* should know better than to encourage him,” my father shakes his fist at Billy, then grabs the glasses from my lap, and throws them at Michael.

“Now put these back on your face, and I don’t want to hear a *peep* until we get home.”

He spins back around and pulls back onto the road, and we ride home in silence. Not a word from my mother, frozen in her seat, eyes fixed on the windshield in front of her.

Later, I search out Debbie. I want to ask my big sister why my father’s Home Face is so different from his Church Face. I want to ask her about what happened in the car, and why mom never says or does anything. I want to know if she is as scared as I am. But when I finally get the chance to talk to her, the words cannot find their way out of my head and onto my tongue. The secret about what happens here on our isolated farm has locked itself inside of me just like it has for the rest of them. Not to be spoken, not to be discussed, even when it is right out in the open. Instead, I ask her what Father Biskey means when he says to bear fruit.

Debbie rolls her eyes. “Oh *that*,” she tsks. “He means have more babies.”