Time Out

What Sophia needed was a good smack across her bottom, but I had my hands full. I sat with my back braced up against my granddaughter’s bedroom door. One arm (the one with the bite marks) reached up behind me with a clutch hold on the doorknob. The other hand held a half-peeled banana. What would Sophia’s wisecracking mother say, finding her mother-in-law suspended from the doorknob like a hapless chimpanzee? I looked down at the opened book smugly nestled on my lap, and the kitchen timer ticking away at my side. The book insisted time-outs should be administered with complete calm, consistency, and indifference.

“Nonni, I’m never, never, ever, ever, ever going to....” The open-ended rantings of the once angelic five-year-old charged through the door like the dictates of a power hungry tyrant. Never, ever going to what? Say please when you ask for a banana? Stop biting? Since her brother’s arrival, Sophia’s Ps and Qs had morphed into sass, back talk, and biting. I never spanked my boys. I certainly wasn’t going to spank my grandchildren. The war to regain civility was waged on the time-out battlefield. Sophia was feeling the effects of sibling jealously, despite the collection of “How To Be A Big Sister” books, and the certificate from the hospital’s sibling education class. In the bookstore, “Setting Limits with Your Strong Willed Child” looked promising. It offered parents teaching tools for effective, long-term discipline including time-outs. How different time-outs were in my day.

Looking back on my childhood, there were a few perks to growing up in the 50s and 60s. One of them, I gotta say, was the popular disciplinary measure of the day - spanking. Mandated reporters take note, I am not talking today’s front page, 25 years to life, child abuser here. I’m talking about the disciplinary tool my generation refers to as a “good ol’ fashioned” spanking. The reference to “good” is subjective, depending which side of the spanking you were on.

Growing up Italian, in a San Francisco suburb peppered with other Italian households, “time out” meant our father would have to stop what he was doing to administer discipline. It was painfully clear to us. Americans kids got spanked, Italian kids got hit. American spankings were administered by TV fathers in shirt sleeves and ties who came home from work to find Junior had spent the afternoon simmering in a “Just wait until your father gets home!” stew.

Our Old World philosophizing father found this approach positively barbaric.
“What kind of cold hearted son-a-ma-bago would come home from work and hit his kid when he wasn’t even mad?”

Italian kids weren’t sent to bed without supper. Missing a meal was deemed too cruel a punishment. Lectures were a waste of time. What was there to talk about? A good smack from across the dinner table and it was “Pass the pasta, please” before the sting had a chance to register. There was no definition for “whining” in our Italian dictionary. It was thrown in under the heading of crying. Crying, without due cause, prompted a warning.

“I’ll give you something to cry about.”

Papa’s 2:00AM shift packing garbage on San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf lasted only as long as it took to finish his route. He was home by 9:00AM. An ever present force to be reckoned with, Papa doled out swift and effective punishment on site.

“I hit first and ask questions later!”

Not that we kids weren’t given fair warning. Papa’s menacingly mimed threats from across a crowded room had the effect of a well-aimed stun gun. If you caught sight of his clench-toothed, bugged eyed, blink-less glare, you were forewarned. Biting his lower lip while mimicking a backhanded swat with an airborne arm of bulging muscles made every kid in his sight line wince. Instigating Papa’s having to get up from his chair and grope around for his belt buckle at half stance meant you’d better get out of swinging range, pronto.

Papa operated on impulse. A couple of swift blows administered at the time of the transgression should be sufficient to get the message across. If he sensed there was any doubt, he was quick to add,

“You want more?”

Papa didn’t tolerate fighting amongst ourselves, either. He’d warn us, imitating a scene from The Three Stooges where Moe takes Larry and Curly’s heads in hand and bonks them together.

“I’ll use one kid’s head to knock against the other.”

The visual was usually enough to keep me and my siblings in check. Once, my sister and I had a full blown fight in complete silence. It resulted in a torn window shade, some nasty scratches, and wicked hair pulling. Papa’s suspicions were raised, but never confirmed.

What compelled my ordinarily easy-going, good-natured father to resort to corporal punishment? Papa simply saw it as his responsibility, like providing food, clothing, and shelter. It was one of the tools he used to teach us boundaries, manners, respect. In light of Dr. Spock’s philosophy, “Discipline with words, not corporal punishment,” Papa responded,

“Nobody’s going to tell me I can’t spank my kids!”
Papa was 5’6. The fierceness and melodrama in his expressive body language delivered the real impact. There was an odd sense of comfort in knowing your father cared enough about you to keep you in line.

What hurt most after receiving one of Papa’s lickings happened afterwards. He’d sit at the kitchen table late into the evening. In the darkness, there was only the glow from his cigarette to define him. I’d remember another saying,

“This is going to hurt me than more than it’s going to hurt you.”

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I sigh. That was almost sixty years ago. How done could it be? The buzzer goes off. I feel the door give way against my back. An angelic voice whispers through the opening,

“I’m sorry.”
Pdf Entry Information

Exhibitor Name:  Sue Barizon
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Class:  02 Literary Essay
Title:  Time Out

Description:  A grandmothers dilemma - to spank or not to spank based on her own childhood.

Notes: