

My Father

R.F. Tripp

“...my father...would weigh nothing in common scales...”

—Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

I can't say my father was intentionally cruel.

My father had a plastic belt. A yellow stripe down the middle. A serviceable instrument.

There was something about my father that made him unapproachable, like Dwight David Eisenhower, or Walter Conkrite.

My father was clueless about how the universe works. He knew all he needed to know.

Man will never land on the moon, my father informed me, a few days before. (My father always checked the news against scripture.)

My father sold things. He was good at selling. Not great. He would never make a million. He sold DDT, by the train load, right up until the EPA banned it as a carcinogen. He said he sold cookies, but I have no memory of that. He sold clothes, retail: two pairs of pants to the suit. For a farm boy who didn't get his first pair of long pants until completing the eighth grade, that was something.

My father did the proper thing and asked my mother's parents for her hand in marriage. They of course rejected his offer: my mother had been raised to take care of them in their dotage. So my father rephrased it: they could come to the wedding or stay home.

My father was a minister of music, part time, unpaid, but for the love of God.

My father once contemplated killing my mother. I have the gun: a .22 caliber rifle, single shot. It seems like a mean thing to consider. She was a silly, harmless woman.

When I read that the aggression of birds is inversely proportional to their flight distance from the nest, I thought of my father.

I accompanied my father once to the doctor when he was dying. He wanted me to be with him in the examination room. The doctor told him to take off his clothes, everything but his underwear. He wore white briefs. He had little skinny legs. A paunch. His arms were flaccid. I saw all this without looking directly at him.

I sat with my father for three weeks while he tried to die. It was a rough go. I sat day and night. I didn't want to miss it. But I did. I went to get a sandwich.