

THOU SHALT HONOR

by

Marvin Green

Schulman did not know whether he should kiss his son. Mike's plane was landing. There were only minutes to decide. Beyond the terminal window, other jets rolled past, wheeling into the diagonal flurries of snow.

He remembered his first arrival from Poland more than 50 years ago. The cardboard tag strung around his neck was his most vital possession. He had no other identity. The man who was supposed to have watched over him on the voyage had been a chess player, and he had not seen him as much as twice. There had been no one to meet him at Ellis Island.

He was at the last gate of O'Hare Airport's D concourse, a hollow, rectangular finger stretching out to touch the arriving planes and to flick away the departing. Crowds surged to and fro through the finger. Five children, shepherded by a woman his own age, waited quietly with balloons skittering on strings above them.

Mike's first return – from Harvard, some twenty years ago – had been at the railroad station. He had embraced him, but Mike had pulled back and had turned his face so that his kiss had landed on Mike's hair behind his ear. "Forget it," Annie had advised. "He's trying to become independent. I'm that way myself." The concept had been acceptable, but the rejection continued to sting, recurred in dreams, and throbbed through him at least once a week, even though the relationship with Mike had gone through a dozen metamorphoses.

Now the white jet with the gold emblem on its tail maneuvered beyond him directly outside the window. A man on the field flapped his hands, directing the pilot. Despite the snow,

the sun was out and glared off the oval windows so that he could not make out a face behind any one of them.

The children with the balloons hopped up and down, lost their early decorum and rushed to the stainless steel guardrail. The enclosed exit ramp pivoted out from the building and telescoped into the jet's front door. The children's shrill excitement sliced through the steady airport drone, playing a happy counterpoint to the monotonous metallic loudspeaker announcements.

A man with a tan overcoat over his arm lurched out as the first passenger from the ramp, his satchel pulling him far over to one side. He did not look for anyone but simply went to the concourse. After an interval two women emerged, gardenias in their mink stoles, a boy with an open sport shirt following them, and a very tall man limping behind him on crutches.

Mike appeared. He scanned about with his eyes and barely nodded his recognition. It was giving him the benefit of the doubt to accept it as a nod. His face was round under his short brim hat. His red necktie had flipped onto the shoulder of his overcoat. Temporarily he was obscured while a tall girl hugged the old man, and then Mike reappeared to one side. He came to within 2 feet, set down his case and stood up, his elbows out and his hands on his hips. "Hi. Dad," he said. He made no effort to bend forward.

"Michael, I sure am glad to see you. How was the flight?"

"Okay. How's mom?"

"Better. Much better. I'll tell you all about it."

Mike picked up this case. "Let's go," he said. "I presume you drove."

"Yes. The car is in the lot."

They started through the concourse, dodging the oncoming passengers, both of them pretending to be preoccupied with walking itself. Mike always moved fast, and now it was hard to keep up with him. Deliberately he let him get a few steps ahead. His left shoulder appeared somewhat lower than the right. His coat was an expensive looking tweed, and the tailor could have compensated. It was a short coat. Since Mike was even smaller than he, he made a square figure, with the bottom tweed lines flaring out alternately left and right as he walked.

Mike did not once look back once. What Annie at the railroad station had passed off as an adolescent phase had now hardened into a permanent condition, a virtual estrangement between father and son. Yet he did not doubt that Mike liked him. It was Mike's way to be abrupt. When they had visited him in Denver last year, when Mike as usual had been aloof and even silent with a houseful of friends, he had taken him aside and had tried to explain how easy it was to be sociable. "All you have to do is talk about things that interest you," he had said, but Mike merely gave him the barest acknowledgment of his attention.

Now he stopped, partly to catch his breath and partly to look back. He had meant to watch the reunion of the children with their parents. The crowd was too dense, and all he could see was the top of one balloon all the way back by the gate.

Mike was a good fifteen feet ahead, waiting for him at the entrance to the terminal proper but studying the headlines in the newspapers at the stand. He caught up with him, patted his shoulder, then almost had to run to keep up as they headed for the escalator. "Hold on, Mike," he said. "You forget you've got a couple years on me."

"I didn't forget, dad. I'm just anxious to get to mom. Fortunately, I don't have any baggage to pick up."

They went through the automatic doors. It was a mild day, and the snow had already

stopped, with hardly a trace of moisture on the pavement. As he walked into the sprawling parking lot, Mike said, “All right, Dad. What’s the story?”

“Not so good, son. She won’t recognize you. Or maybe she will recognize you, but you can’t tell. And yet the doctors say she’s doing well. She uses oxygen at night, which is the main reason we have a nurse. Believe me, this is an expensive proposition.”

Mike began to speed up. “I see your car,” he called.

At the car, he paused for breath, unlocked the door, and reached across to open for Mike. The engine was still warm. As a fan went on, a blast of warm air hit his ankles, and the rest of him shivered by contrast.

“Son,” he said. “Before we start, I want to say just one thing, get one thing off my chest. Didn’t do you realize you didn’t even shake hands with me?”

Mike pushed back his hat. There were gray hairs in his sideburns. He seemed pale and tired. “You’re crazy, Dad,” he said. “I certainly did shake hands.”

“No, Mike. Believe me. I was watching for it.”

Mike’s lips curled to one side. His whole face skewed itself into a skeptical scowl, one cheek taut, the other bulging out and forming a deep dimple like an arrowhead at his mouth. “All right,” he said, thrusting out his hand. “Shake. It’s good to see you.”

“That’s not enough for me, Mike. I want you to kiss me.”

Mike’s lips opened slightly at the dimple, and he let out a buzzing blast of air. “Jesus Christ,” he said.

The car next to them started up and backed out. Almost immediately, a blue sedan pulled into its place. Three girls stepped out, one of them carrying skis. She had pretty blonde hair and

was not more than twenty years old. As she struggled with her equipment and with her little overnight bag, he watched until she disappeared beyond the cars by the lamppost.

“Mike, when I was waiting before, I had an usual experience. Something I saw – don’t ask me what it was – reminded me of Ellis Island. I arrived here in 1906. Stop to think how long ago that was. Let me see – that’s 58 years. I didn’t know one soul. But there was one man there, an immigration officer, just an ordinary man – I can’t even remember what he looked like – who gave me a sandwich and coffee out of his own lunch pail. Imagine that! A stranger who saw hundreds of immigrants every day. As long as I live I won’t forget him.”

Mike’s face had relaxed, but lines of age and fatigue radiated from his eyes and replaced the scowl. “I know that,” he said quietly. “Dad, you have to remember that many of these stories I’ve heard before.”

“I resent that, son, Every time I tell a story, I have a different point to illustrate. Think about that. That’s true, isn’t it?”

Mike merely shrugged. At last he said, “We’ve been through all this.”

“Fine,” he answered, his voice rising in anger. “We’ve been through it, but even if I can’t hold your interest, am I not entitled to respect? I’m asking not as a father but as one human being to another.”

“Dad, I’ve told you before. Whatever it is that’s happened between us comes only out of your imagination. I love you. Can I make it any clearer? I am a naturally undemonstrative person. My wife objects, my children object, you object. What can I do about it? At my age, can I go about making myself over?”

“Mike, you used to be such an affectionate kid. Something happened to you at college. I

don't know what it was, and you don't have to tell me. After all, you're entitled to your privacy. But when I saw you at the railroad station, I told your mother there's something funny there, Annie."

Mike's face grew violently red. He raised his fist to the roof, held it still there and then slammed it onto the dashboard. The sunglasses there jumped up a full inch and actually flipped over to their face side.

Now his stomach began to burn. As he reached into his shirt pocket for an acid pill, he fought to control his trembling. Worst of all, Mike was right. They had been over it not ten times but fifty. With Mike the way he was, with himself the way he was, the only thing was to forget it, bury it, let it all alone. He wanted to reach out to shift into gear, but his hands were shaking so furiously that he had to clasp them in his lap and just wait until he calmed himself.

Mike reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "That's about as affectionate as I can get," he said very nicely. Now I want you to tell me what point you're illustrating with the Ellis Island story."

"Thank you, Mike. And I want to admit that I've been wrong. You're always nice to me. You write us every two, three weeks. I have no complaints. If every so often I crave a little affection, I'm sure you understand that, too."

"Yes. Now what about Ellis Island?"

"That man, Mike. That man that I never saw again. This is something it will be hard for you to understand, because you were born here. When you went to college, when you went off to the East all by yourself, I wondered, would you have the same experience? I was not even twelve years old. Five thousand miles I came all by myself. The person who was supposed to watch me, I never saw him. And then in this big country, at its very threshold, where I couldn't speak a

word to anyone, one man was friendly to me. Do you see what I mean?"

Mike's hand was still tight on his shoulder. His finger lay directly touching his neck, and every so often it stroked up and down. His face was relaxed and almost smiling. "I did have a similar experience," he said. "My first day in Cambridge, I was eating by myself in the drugstore. A man came in with a boy my own age. He brought him over and introduced him to me. He said this would be the greatest day in our lives, the beginning of the adventure of independence. The boy kissed him goodbye, and he went away. I never got particularly friendly with that boy, but the idea that I was alone for a definite purpose, that idea has always stayed with me."

As he heard Mike speak, he became increasingly excited. "That's exactly what I mean," he said. "The reason I bring up Ellis Island, the point I'm trying to illustrate, is that your mother is dying. You're in Denver with your family. You've got your colleagues on the faculty. Here I've got my business and my friends. But, when she dies, after almost fifty years together, I can already see it. I will feel like I'm back at Ellis Island."

The sun was behind a cloud. The winter twilight was commencing. Overhead the jets arrived and departed, intermittently drowning out even the humming of the car engine right at their feet. He was glad to be alive in this miraculous age. He himself had witnessed the changes of the century – radio, television, airplanes, rockets to the moon. The world of his grandchildren would be even more astounding. He had been thinking of that in the terminal when he was watching the children with their balloons.

"Mike," he said, "Will you please kiss your father hello?"

Instantly Mike drew away, his hand sliding from his shoulder, down his arm and then off into the distance. It had moved no more than one foot, but for all purposes that foot was an ocean

and a continent away.

“Mike, I’d like to point out something very interesting in that story you just told. For me the whole thing pivots on this one thing. In your story the boy kissed his father goodbye.”

Mike took a deep breath and sighed. He was staring straight ahead. “Dad,” he said, “in a way there really was something that happened to me at college. I used to worry a lot. I’d worry about my work, about my health. I’m worried about you and Mom, whether you are still alive, whether maybe something bad was happening right when I was thinking about you. You know what I mean?”

“Of course, Mike. We all go through it.”

“That’s right, Dad. And there was something else in that story that kept coming back to me. It was what the man said in the drugstore – the adventure of independence. I remembered that, and I decided that my life was my life and that your life was yours. We’re separate creatures, every one of us. If you had died then, I would have gone on living.”

“All right, Mike. I’m glad to hear some of these details, but what’s the point?”

Mike turned to him, scowling again, but not fiercely this time. He held out his hand. “The point is I want to shake hands with you.”

A car down in one of the rows began to honk. He thought again of the children with the balloons rushing over to the guardrail. He took Mike’s hand and squeezed it with both of his.

“Okay, son,” he said. “I appreciate this. It’s better than nothing.”