
Pro Rege

Volume 39
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2010*

Article 24

December 2010

Family

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Recommended Citation

Van Schubert, Ryan (2010) "Family," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 39: No. 2, 35 - 36.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol39/iss2/24

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Student Essay: *Family*

Ryan Van Schubert¹

My family are gathered together on the chesterfield in the basement. Somehow we've managed to fit all five of us on the worn-out cushions, even though the battered old frame complains if one of us shifts our weight even slightly. A movie is playing, but we've long since finished paying attention to it. My youngest sister, Breton, is asleep on Dad's lap, her breathing deep and even. My other sister, Kayla, and I are at the far end of the couch, me sitting straight, her with her head resting on my arm; she's about to fall asleep as well. Mom and Dad have their arms around each other as we sit.

*

The G-20 talks are about to begin, and Dad is one of the police sergeants in charge of maintaining order. For weeks, we've known that he would be going to keep an eye on the chaos that would overtake Toronto, but we hadn't realized that he wouldn't be able to come home, that he would have to stay at the complex just outside of the city for the whole two weeks. Mom isn't happy with the idea of him going to maintain order at what she calls the "stupidity of the summit." She stays upbeat right up until he has to go.

This moment is the first time we've ever seen our parents embrace for that long, as Mom squeezes her eyes shut and hugs Dad until her arms are shaking from the strain. We watch this from the doorway, my sisters and I. I feel a strange sort of apprehension.

*

The back deck is the place to dine for our family during the summer months. Dad has slipped inside to shave so that he can go to a school meeting right after dinner; Kayla and Breton are playing soccer in the back yard, and Mom and I are busy

getting everything ready for the burgers we plan to eat.

Suddenly smoke is pouring from the bar-be-que. My sisters go running inside to tell Dad that the burgers are on fire, at which point he, playing along, runs outside barefoot and shirtless, half his face still covered in shaving cream. He throws open the lid to the bar-be-que. There is nothing on the grill!

My sisters groan as Dad grins and points to the kitchen table, where a plate of hamburgers rests neatly, waiting for dinner. Mom and I arrange condiments and cutlery on the table and roll our eyes at our resident comedian.

Over dinner, Mom holds Dad's hand as we pray. As Dad says "Amen," she squeezes his hand. My sisters' eyes snap open, and they throw themselves at the food. My parents, oblivious for the moment, smile at each other, as if to say, "What a little slice of heaven we've carved out for ourselves, eh?"

This is how things are supposed to be, some voice inside me says.

*

I arrive at work, and switch off my car's radio. The last news update said that the protests in Toronto were still peaceful, even though some of the protesters looked as if they were ready for trouble. I work for all of two hours before my co-worker—a nice guy, but not particularly bright—arrives shouting the news; "They're burning cop cars in Toronto! It's getting *crazy* down there!"

I barely turn away from the computer I am working on before my co-workers bundle their loose-lipped compatriot back out the door. I can't move for the longest time, as thoughts race each other through my mind, each scaling new heights, or maybe depths.

For years, Dad has worked on the riskier side of police work. He was an undercover cop, dressing like the drug-addicted folks he wanted to portray to the dealers he later arrested. Later, he joined a new unit, designed to prevent contraband material from ever being distributed. His job required him to break down the doors on houses and seize guns, drugs, etc., from the inside, typically by pulling them out of people's hands. He and his team loved the work; Mom most decidedly did not. It wasn't long before Dad agreed to find a less chancy position.

He became a member of T.A.V.I.S., the Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy, a unit that spends most of its time downtown as a visible response to violence. Although he is still actively engaging problems on the streets, he isn't in nearly as much danger as he was before, which pleases Mom to no end. His job comes with all sorts of chances to serve in an even more active role, such as guarding the G-8/G-20 discussions, and he takes those chances excitedly.

But things are exploding downtown.

When I get home from work, Mom and Breton are sitting in front of the TV as the newscasters play over and over the same footage of a protestor breaking windows. To the public watching, and evidently to the newscasters as well, this is the sort of thing that shows why the G-8/G-20 makes such a fantastic spectator sport. To all four of us left at home, this is the sort of thing that makes you lose sleep.

*

The night after the G-8/G-20 riots begin, Dad phones home to say goodnight to my sisters before he asks for Mom. Mom is worried sick and talks to him for almost an hour about being safe, being careful, and making sure that he isn't ever in danger.

The talks continue, the rioters become more

and more aggressive, and finally our phone rings once again. Mom grabs it and answers, and I can gather from her half of the conversation that Dad is having a grand old time at the G-8/G-20. When Mom is satisfied that her husband is coming home with all of his limbs intact, she passes the phone over to Kayla.

Kayla takes the phone and presses it tightly to her ear. "Hello?" she says

Because she has the phone pressed tightly to her ear, I can't even tell if Dad is talking on the other end. Kayla's end of the conversation, though, leaves little enough to the imagination.

"Hi Dad!" she says. "Anything exciting happen around there? . . . He tried to hit you? Then what? . . . Really? He just fell right over? . . . Oh; through a window? . . . You didn't hurt him, did you? . . . The hospital? Really? Well, if he pulled out a knife, then I guess . . . Yeah, it *sounds* like you're having fun . . ."

Mom is driven to ignore every word from that conversation, and leaves to go and fold some laundry. Of course, the sound of her stomping across the floor is warning enough that she has heard at least some of the conversation.

*

Three days after the riots start, Dad gets home. We haven't planned any grand or spectacular homecoming, but he does agree to make burgers. It is a rushed dinner, but it tastes delicious. Dad tries to pull the flaming burgers joke again, but this time my sisters ignore the smoke as I set the table.

Dad says grace, and we all begin to pile up our plates with food. I lean back in my chair and realize that, despite what could have happened, what nearly happened, there isn't anything that can shake this sense of rightness from this table.

On this table sits the food. Around it sits a family.

Nothing from without can intrude on that.

¹ Ryan Van Schubert is a junior at Dordt College. He wrote this essay for Dr. Jim Schaap's Advanced Expository Writing class.