

# Cleanliness

*A child is punished for swearing.*

In his classic, *Mirage of Health*, Renes Dubois convincingly demonstrated how the greatest gift of western civilization to humanity was cleanliness. It was not so much the great scientific discoveries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the discovery of penicillin, of anesthetics, vaccinations and so on, but rather the improvements of public health facilities: the engineering feats of sewerage systems, piping and storage of fresh water, the routine use of soaps, detergents and habits of cleanliness to keep bodies and living spaces clean. From all these great accomplishments of civilization, so came the modern epithet, “cleanliness if next to Godliness.” To this day, parts of the world that do not have modern public health systems—crowded towns and cities where people live amongst open sewers and so on—are at much greater risk from “natural disasters,” whether of plagues, floods, or earthquakes. If the basic infrastructure ordained by western civilizations—standards of public health, safe building regulations, urban planning, roads and bridges and so on—is not available or has not been built, then the health and safety of everyday life is constantly at risk.

It is against these circumstances of everyday life that most those who live in societies that have been touched by western civilization (probably nine-tenths of the world where even the remotest places have been reached by imperialism of one kind of another) that this story takes hold. Though before we can begin, we must also acknowledge that a basic tool of cleanliness of western civilization, the knife and fork, adds a serious dimension to health and safety, as do other eating implements such as chop sticks, and certainly discriminates against those societies whose eating habits do not conform to the western rule of cleanliness; that is the skill of eating stews and mushy meals with one’s fingers and various breads that take over the function of a fork or spoon. Washing one’s hands before and after eating thus becomes an essential rule of health. And in an era of pandemics as has overtaken us in the 21st century, the washing of hands has become a prime focus of cleanliness and defense against health disasters.

There are, however, other kinds of cleanliness that have become a constant companion to hand washing in many civilized

societies. Such is the focus of this story.

Thomas Randolph was the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Randolph who inhabited a prim little house at 36 Pakington Street, Geelong West. Mr. Randolph worked at Donaghy's rope factory as a foreman and rode his bike there and back each day, his lunch carefully made by Mrs. Randolph, and packed in a small tin container that was strapped on to the back of the bike. Thomas attended Geelong West primary school, a red brick schoolhouse, the schoolyard completely covered over with bitumen, a city school typical of those in cities and towns of Victoria in 1950s Australia.

On this Sunday morning, a morning that would remain fixed in Thomas's memory for the rest of his life, Thomas sat at the kitchen table eating his Rice Bubbles. A robust ten years old, just finishing sixth grade, he was more than ready to go off to Geelong High School next year. His mum hovered above him, watching his every move. Thomas for his part was doing what he did every Sunday morning, slurping every spoonful, trying to delay as much as possible, hoping that just maybe one Sunday he would not have to go to Sunday school. He reached across the table for the bottle of milk, but his mum grabbed his arm and said, "now that's enough milk, young man. Hurry on now or you'll be late for Sunday school." Annoyed, he pulled his arm away and to his and his Mum's horror, he knocked over the milk bottle and milk poured out all over the well-scrubbed table and started to drip off the edge on to his pants. Thomas pushed back his chair and cried out, "shit Mum! Look what you made me do!" He gulped and his cheeks went all red.

Mrs. Randolph stood back in horror, her hand to her mouth. "Thomas! How dare you speak to me like that! How dare you!" She ran out of the kitchen and called for her husband who was working in his old shed. There was no answer, so she ran out to the shed to convey the terrible news.

Mr. Randolph emerged from his shed. "What's the matter?" he sighed.

"It's Thomas! He swore at me!"

"Well, it's only to be expected."

"What do you mean by that?" cried Mrs. Randolph.

Mr. Randolph coughed nervously. “You know what I mean. He’s growing up. Going to high school next year, you know. It’s only to be expected.”

“Not in my house! Speak to him! I won’t have a child in my kitchen who talks like that!”

Mr. Randolph sighed again. “All right. I’ll speak to him.” He turned to go back in his shed.

“Now! Talk to him now! He can’t go off the Sunday school talking like that!”

“All right! All right!” Mr. Randolph emerged from the shed again, this time wiping his hands on an old oily rag. He had been working on the car.

Thomas stood at the table, wiping it down with a washcloth. There were a few streaks of milk on his good school pants that his mother insisted he wear to Sunday school. He edged back to the corner of the kitchen, getting ready for, he knew not what. The word had just slipped out. He didn’t mean it, of course. Who knows what his father would do to him. He expected a belting, though he had never been smacked before, as far as he could remember. Maybe he would get to stay home from Sunday school. That wouldn’t be too bad.

Mr. Randolph walked straight through the kitchen to the bathroom to wash his hands, without looking at his wayward son. Thomas looked down. He was on the verge of crying, but tried very hard not to. He was too old to cry. His mother stood at the table scrubbing it with a scrubbing brush. There were tears in her eyes. She wasn’t too old to cry. He heard the tap run, then silence. And finally, his father emerged from the bathroom, a dripping bar of Palmolive soap in his hand.

“Take this!!” ordered Mr. Randolph.

“It’s all wet and slimy!” complained Thomas.

“Take it or else!” threatened his dad.

“What’s it for anyway? I didn’t do nothing!”

“You swore at your mother!”

“I didn’t! I mean. I didn’t mean to. It just slipped out.”

“You used a dirty word, Thomas,” said his mother, trying to calm things down.

Mr. Randolph stepped towards his son, grabbed his hand and

forced the slimy bar of Palmolive into it. “You have a filthy mouth,” he said, “so now you must wash it out with soap and water.”

“But dad!”

“No buts!”

Mr. Randolph grabbed Thomas’s hand and the Palmolive soap and pushed it into his mouth. Thomas clenched his mouth shut. The soap hit his lips and hurt them.

“Don’t! You’re hurting me!” he cried.

Mr. Randolph had gone as far as he could. He pushed Thomas ahead of him and guided him into the bathroom. “Wash your mouth out with soap and water and don’t come out until it’s done.” He gave him a little shove, then quickly retreated out the bathroom and pulled the door shut.

“He won’t do it, will he?” asked Mrs. Randolph.

“Probably not. But he’s learnt his lesson.”

Mr. Randolph went back to his shed. Mrs. Randolph finished cleaning up the spilled milk from the table and the floor. She looked at the kitchen clock. Time to put in the roast to cook while they were all at church. Thomas would miss Sunday school this morning. The first time in many years.

**Moral:** *A perfect punishment reflects the crime it punishes.*