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Digging in October

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DIGGING IN OCTOBER

Early. This morning, the day I don't have to beat God and daylight to the job site, my quiet dreams are torn from me before dawn. I haven't even flipped on the living room lights and I can see Rich's big red face stretching before the window next to the front door, pushed up against the glass between the panes and the untrimmed bush, a look of agitated hurry among the leaves. A constant knocking drone. This time he's awakened Lilly.

"Daddy, Uncle Richie's at the door," Lilly says, dragging her yellow blanket from her bedroom.

"He's not your uncle, honey."

Rich needs my truck. Always needs something. A wrench, a power vac, my hiking boots. Never has any problem asking. He's been seven years older than me my entire life, but I often wonder how much he's aged in the last twenty years. Today I tell him that there's no way he'll ever take my truck.

"Isn't there a reason you can't drive your own truck, Rich?"

"Yeah," he says, looking at the ground. "But most days I don't need a truck. Today I've got to get a load of dirt. I'm building motorcycle jumps in the backyard," he says.

I don't mean to be a pessimist, but with some people the glass isn't half empty, it's been stolen, smashed and picked up by some poor bare-footed pinky toe.

"Rich, you don't even have a motorcycle. And if you did, the judge would probably take that away too." But he has an answer to this. His new scheme has something to do with building a track for kids who want to learn motocross. Says he'll start a new wave of interest in the community. The only interest the community has in my brother Rich is keeping a safe distance away from whatever he's got going on. "Sounds great. But you don't have a backyard to put dirt into," I say.

"Yeah, but you know that lot across the street? No one's ever doing anything over there, and if I put the dirt down before anybody says anything, there's no way they'd make me move it, especially if they see all the hard work I put into it."

I tell him that's not how the world works, that as soon as the property owner sees the heaping mess he's created they'll be on him like cops on a bearclaw. But my brother is incessant. He asks me what family is for, then he makes the most shameless begging face I've ever

seen. It's the same look he's been improving for years. "For God's sake," I say. If he wants to waste all his money on dirt, I figure it's better than wasting my entire day hearing him try to convince me.

Rich and his sliced-cantaloupe smile.

In the truck my daughter has questions.

"Where are we going Uncle Richie?"

"He's not your uncle sweetie."

"I am so, why would you say otherwise?" He looks offended in the half-dark of the cab. Our frosty breaths mix and rise to the truck's ceiling. "We're going a few places to get a few things, then we're going to my house to play in some dirt," Rich says. I have to stop his promises before they get out of hand.

"But remember," I say, "You've got gymnastics at four, so we won't be able to goof around with Rich all day." I'm supposed to meet Lilly's mother at four fifteen at the café across the street from Lilly's gym. She's been gone for almost two years.

"We can play until Little Gym though, right Daddy?"

"We'll see where our day takes us honey," I say. I've never been one to make a five year old cry. Distracting works a lot better than disappointing.

Driving through the center of town, Rich tells me to pull into the hardware store's parking lot. It makes enough sense.

Inside, Rich fills his shopping cart full, so he asks me to grab another one. An electric drill, a router, PVC pipe with all kinds of ridiculous looking attachments, rubber gardening gloves, about thirty Slim-Jims, a birdhouse, and a light fixture sit on the top layer of the incredible tangle of crap he's got accumulating in his cart. There's no way he can pay for everything in the first cart, let alone another. I tell him he needs to buy a shovel and get out before he spends himself into the poorhouse again. He laughs and wheels into the next aisle, which is packed with hammers and crowbars. Lilly stands next to me, eating the store's complementary popcorn out of a brown paper bag. I've always wondered what it is about hardware stores and popcorn that goes together. Lilly seems content. Her flushed little cheeks fill like water balloons as she chews. I call her my little squirrel monkey. She giggles and spins in the middle of the nail aisle scratching under an armpit, her chocolate curls swinging.

I find Rich with a second cart already full in the toilet aisle, sitting on each seat making ponderous looks as if he were sampling wines.

"A connoisseur," I say.

"You know, this Kohler guy probably shits in a golden toilet. I bet

he's got that much dough." I shoot Rich a look that lets him know Lilly is around here somewhere. "Sorry," he says. "But seriously, I've just got to find something that everybody wants that I can sell."

"Yeah, and the last time you were selling something everybody wanted, you had a nice little relocation for awhile didn't you?" I say. He says that was different. This time he'll take the straight and narrow. Toe the good line. Right.

The October light at ten thirty has finally diluted the night's darkness despite thick, desperate clouds. Daylight savings time ought to kick in here pretty soon. The sunless mornings and afternoons are killing me. It's hard to spend so much time in the dark alone. Lilly and I sit in front of a little coffee place while Rich runs in. I leave the engine running. The dry heat smells like the truck's musky polyester upholstery. I pull Lilly from the middle seat onto my lap.

"Remember when we lived at Grandma's house and everyone used to eat dinner there, you, me, your aunt Kathy, Mommy, and even Silly Richie?" I ask. She says she does. "Did you like eating dinner with everyone together?" She says she did. "Me too. I think we'll be able to do that again real soon," I say. Immediately I realize I've said too much. Just being around Rich makes you say things you wish you hadn't.

"Mommy too?" she asks.

"Well maybe," I say. Luckily Rich interrupts our conversation, appearing at the door, his hands full with three paper cups, steam rising from the lids. He slides his head back and forth across the window, smiling like a goon.

"The truck is old," I tell him, "but you don't have to spread your forehead grease all over the windows." Rich keeps smiling and hands me a coffee. He sneaks a candy bar out of his pocket and gives it to Lilly, as if I can't see what he's doing. She really shouldn't eat popcorn and candy bars for breakfast, but at this point taking it away from her would be like stealing meat from a lion. Shaking my head, I move Lilly back to the middle of the bench seat and strap her in. "Where to now, King Richard?"

We're on the highway. I told him I didn't have all day, that we can't cross the entire state just for a pile of dirt. But he's positive the best dirt is found in Granite County. Frost along the gray river bank reminds me of how quickly the summer disintegrated. Winter elbowed its way in like a sweaty mean drunk at the bar hollering for more

drinks. Eventually Rich points to a dirt road past a fishing access and says that that's our dirt mine. As he explains how this dirt we're picking up has the perfect combination of soil, clay, and moisture to build sturdy jumps and rollers, I realize I hadn't anticipated having to dig. Rich failed to mention digging. I should have known.

Up the road we cross over cattle guards that make the tires groan. Lilly giggles and asks me to drive over them again. I stop, back up, and drive over the steel rungs a few times. Lilly laughs harder with each heavy rumble. A couple miles later we pull up to a heavy stain on the side of the road where a pile of dirt clearly used to sit. "Well, shoot," Rich says, "This is a real chicken-or-the-egg situation." I'm about to tell him that missing dirt has nothing to do with the chicken or the egg question, but I leave it alone. It's for the better. "I guess we'll just have to drive a little further and see if we can't find ourselves another dirt mound," he says.

I know how this short-circuited idea ends before it even starts. "Rich, if you don't know where we're going, I'm driving home. We aren't going to search for a pile of dirt and hope that whoever owns it doesn't come around the corner while we're loading it up."

"I know a place then," he says.

"I'll give you ten minutes," I tell him.

Half an hour later I park in the middle of a giant frozen field in front of something resembling a shack. Or maybe it's a trailer. Or it was at some point. Whatever it is, it's thoroughly alone. Not a neighbor for miles. Dull aluminum trailer siding shows sparsely, hidden underneath dilapidating sheets of plywood tacked along the sides. The little shelter sits right beneath an enormous grandfather of a tree that's been dropping leaves on the shack's roof for what looks like years. No dirt hill anywhere.

"Rich, are you serious?"

He says it will take him just a few minutes.

For the first time today he honors his word. When he returns from the shack, he keeps his arms wrapped around his chest. A small lump bulges under his jacket. God only knows what he's got. I don't even ask. He says nothing after pulling the truck door closed. We sit in silence for a few seconds before I ask what we're doing.

"Head back towards town. I've only got one more stop along the way." I don't really believe this, but it sounds better than anything Rich has said all morning.

After we pull away from the shack and drive down the road a ways, the bulge in Rich's jacket starts to bother me. He still hasn't unwrapped his arms. Every few seconds, when he doesn't think I'm looking, he sneaks a glance towards the lump. I'm about to ask what the hell he brought into my truck when a small whine begins. Ah, this old truck. Surely we'll have to pull over. I haven't checked the engine in awhile, but the last time I did I figured I'd have to replace the belts soon. The muffled squeal starts and stops intermittently. Listening to this the whole way home will be a real chore. As it gets louder it sounds more desperate. Damn. I pull over. Lilly asks what I'm doing. I'm sure we'll break down before we get home. Doesn't this always happen during the freezing cold or horizontal rain? Rich stares through the windshield like everything was too normal. Before I open the door I turn the engine off, but the whining continues. Rich coughs into his fist loudly, keeping his face away from mine, looking innocent in a guilty kind of way.

"Alright. What's in the jacket?"

Rich turns his head in question, as if what I asked him was the furthest thought from his mind. He's formulating the next few seconds in his head. "Me?" he'll ask. Before he can, I say, "Yeah you. Let me see what you've got in the jacket." For a second I'm a little worried. If it's anything like what he's snuck around with before, I'm not sure I want Lilly seeing it. After a theatrical sigh he unzips his jacket and reveals a little red puppy with long ears, a black nose, and hazelnut eyes. Lilly begins screeching immediately.

"A puppy!" she says. Her excitement nearly shatters the windows. She nuzzles her face against the little dog whose shock looks newborn. I don't even know where to start. Before I can the dog howls a weak, prepubescent puppy-howl.

"What does this have to do with dirt piles or motocross tracks?"

"Well when we didn't find the dirt, I figured I knew this guy not too far away with a new litter of Redbones. So here we are," Rich says, tussling the dog's ears.

"Again, what does this have to do with dirt piles or motocross?"

Rich explains how he plans to build a kennel where he'll breed coonhounds. I ask him one more time what dogs have to do with anything.

"Well, it's Plan B. We couldn't find any dirt, so what's the next logical step?"

"Dogs apparently," I say.

"Of course," he says, as if it were obvious. "What does everyone

like, especially kids? Puppies. And how can any child-loving parent see a sweet little kid-face snuggled up against sweet little dog-face and deny their kid a puppy?" He's nodding towards Lilly and the dog. She's trying to hold it like a baby, but the little thing keeps pulling some jerky alligator death-roll maneuver and escaping from her arms. Lilly is unbothered by the dog's evasiveness. She must have got her persistence from Rich. "It's exactly what I was talking about earlier. I don't know how I didn't figure it out before. Perfect business adventure."

"Venture. Business venture," I say.

Then the inevitable happens. "Can we keep him Daddy?" And for once Rich pulls through. I don't have to be the cause of volcanic disappointment.

"I'm sorry sweetheart," Rich says, "But this doggy is mine. I'm going to breed her with other doggies, and when I do, if your dad will let you," he says winking, "you've got the first pick. Your choice. Whichever one you want."

Surprisingly, Lilly isn't that let down. Must be the power of an uncle. Or maybe she's too preoccupied by the squirming contortionist slipping from her grasp. When Rich's words finally register, Lilly cocks her head in my direction, the same way she does whenever we pass Dairy Queen or the toy aisle at the store. "Daddy?" she asks. I tell her I'll think about it whenever Rich's dog has puppies.

On our way back to town Rich enlightens the truck with his Plan B scheme and how it really won't be that much different from Plan A. He says that pretty much everything he bought earlier today at the hardware store can be used for kennel building and upkeep just as well as it could have been used to build and maintain a motocross track. I almost forgot about his jumble of stuff in the back of the truck. Now that I think of it, I have no idea how he paid for it all. Classic Rich. "Plus," he says, "We can just return some of that shit when we get back to town." I give him another hard glance and nod towards Lilly. "Sorry," he says. She didn't even notice. She's trying to distract the dog from the loose tail of the seatbelt that's halfway down its little throat. Rich laughs and points out his dog's comedic talent. Thank God he's the one taking that thing home.

Somehow Rich convinces me to stop at the hardware store to let him return some of what he bought earlier. Although this on top of everything else agitates me, it's better that he get rid of the junk now, because he'll never do it on his own. His credit report will thank him

later. He leaves the puppy in the car with me and Lilly. The clouds that were festering the last time we were here have moved on, and there's enough blue in the sky to consider the day bright. Whenever we get some blue sky and sunlight in the cold months I'm reminded of how cold and gray the entire winter is, has been, and will be. I stare up through the windshield, thinking of what it would be like to live in a place that wasn't a gray ice-hole for six months of the year when the dog starts hacking. Half of the ravaged candy bar Rich bought Lilly sticks out of the dog's mouth. It's coughing and heaving, and before I can get it out the door clumps of undigested caramel and nougat spread over the truck floor. When it has finished gagging, the little terror starts licking up its mess. Lilly pinches her nose and crawls into my lap.

Rich and his kind gestures.

While I clean the dog-disaster I think of what I've got to face later in the day. Even with her puppy-vomit prompting I could never abandon Lilly. I've never grown a child for nine months and lost it, but I still don't think that could make me leave my healthy baby. But Kristy is like that. Inexplicable. When Lilly is older I'll try to explain her mother to her, as best I can. I've told her how families come in all shapes and sizes. She seems content with that explanation. I haven't told her about the little sister she'll never have, how her mom couldn't look at me afterwards. She blamed it on herself. But somehow she blamed it on me. Either way, she left. She had to work things out. I understood that part. But it's been two years. Lilly has become a thinking, speaking person since then. That part I won't understand.

When I pick Lilly up out of the back of the truck, with the dog in her tiny arms, I hug her and peck her on the cheek. In the cab the dog finds a deep smell worth investigating and crams its head all the way up to its shoulders in between the backrest and the seat cushion. The little demon never quits.

Rich appears at the passenger window, distressed.

"The bastards will only take half of the stuff." He apologizes before I can reprimand him. "But what they don't know is that I don't need them. I can get rid of this on my own." Rich says he's got a buddy that would pay a pretty penny for his brand new equipment. It's two thirty. I figure we've been screwing around all day, might as well get rid of Rich's crap before it takes permanent residence in the back of my truck.

"Alright Rich. But we've got to be at gymnastics a little before four." He says it won't even take five minutes.

We're on the highway again.
"Don't you know anyone who lives in town?" I ask. He says he does.

Stony, snow-dusted mountains rip into the horizon as we weave our way round their road-carved underbellies. Rich directs me into an empty campground. In the back corner, between two squat pine groves, a rusted brown van converted into an RV sits parked. Beside it a stained canvas tent.

"I'll make this quick," Rich says. He hops out of the truck and sneaks up to the tent. I don't really hear what he's saying. He's straining like he's trying to keep his voice low. Eventually a hand pulls back the tent door and Rich crouches in. Lilly still has the dog to play with. She's pulling its long ears back into a ponytail and calling the thing Suzie. The dog seems to understand that it's a game and only feigns biting at Lilly's hands. I'm afraid they've created a bond.

Laughter bellows from the tent. A few seconds later the RV door crashes open and the angriest woman I've ever seen stands in the doorway. Her hair is wound tight in pink curlers even though it's three in the afternoon. She must know Rich.

"Damn it, Ted. You get that dumb-ass Rich out of here and stuff whatever notion you two have hashed up. I'm tired of you guys ruining everything you touch."

Rich hustles out of the tent and into the truck without so much as a glance towards the woman. He tells me to drive. As we back up, a haggard, bearded man steps out of the tent looking whipped. I don't hear what they say to each other, but the woman points so hard she could punch holes through the guy's forehead. He just stands there. Takes it.

When we're far enough away I ask Rich what that was all about. He says it's a long story, but he and that guy have dug themselves under the doghouse with the curler lady. "Sure looks like it," I say. The dog has rolled itself into a ball in Lilly's lap and finally fallen asleep. She pets it delicately and every few minutes or so kisses the top of its head. She tells me she needs to potty.

I pull off the road and lead her behind a bush. When I ask her if she needs help, she says she wants to be on her own. I walk the few steps back to the truck. Rich holds the dog up under its front legs so that they're staring at each other face to face, the dog's bottom half dangling in the air. He's babbling nonsense to it as if it were a baby. I can't believe what I'm about to ask.

"So by now I'm sure you've noticed that Lilly has taken a liking to your little monster." Rich blankly nods in agreement. "So depending on how things go today with Kristy, what would you say about letting me

buy it off of you? I'll even drive you back to get another one."

Rich shrugs his whole body. "I would," he says, "But the thing about it is, I've got to get this dog to a lady across town, and the guy I got it from doesn't have any more. I've got a kind of barter thing going with this lady." His moronic smile and pumping eyebrows tell me I don't want further details. Typical Rich. I want to remind him of everything we've done today, everything he's said. The motocross track. The kennel. Driving him all over the place. Bringing Lilly along. Even if I could explain to him what the dog would mean to my daughter despite what it would mean to me, it wouldn't go anywhere. I wonder what it would feel like to pick his big idiot teeth out of my knuckles. It wouldn't be worth having to hear about how I ruined his face for rest of my life. Rich is like a Chinese finger trap, you have to put him out of your mind for awhile before you can stand another look at him. But when I do look at him again he's rocking the dog in his arms, attempting his idea of a maternal posture.

Rich and his wholesale deceits.

When Lilly emerges from behind the bush I pick her up and set her in the middle of the seat. Rich keeps quiet, stares out the window. It's time to go.

At about three thirty we pull in front of Rich's apartment building. He takes ten minutes to remove his junk. In a pile on the sidewalk he stacks a six-foot aluminum ladder, twelve two-by-fours, a circular saw, a ball-peen and a claw hammer, a few bags of cement, two sprinklers, a different birdhouse from before, two cans of coffee that he couldn't have bought at the hardware store, and numerous boxes of nails and screws among the other expensive stuff that he'll never use. I don't have anything to say to him. Whether he's being genuine or just trying to look apologetic, it makes no difference. He tells me to take care, says we should go hunting on my next day off, then kisses Lilly on the forehead and zips the puppy into his jacket.

"Bye Uncle Richie," Lilly says. Rich closes the passenger door and waves.

"He's not your uncle," I say.

I get Lilly to the Little Gym five minutes to four. Lilly calls her instructor Miss April. I can't help but laugh a little whenever I hear it. April is younger than me, but not by much. When Lilly first started at the Little Gym I thought April was interested in me. Eventually I realized that she's just the touchy, smiling type. All the parents love her. So



does Lilly. I wouldn't want to compromise that.

Usually I sit behind the huge window in the waiting area, watching Lilly bounce around on the colorful pads and trampolines. It takes awhile to drag myself out the door. Deep sighs don't really prepare me for what's coming next. I haven't seen Kristy in two years. We've talked sparingly. My watch says five past four. Kristy's always late. Somehow she's even worse in the cold.

The café smells warm, gives you that feeling you get next to a cabin fireplace during the winter. College students sit behind glowing screens, illuminated and enveloped by caffeine and the internet. A slender gray cat paces on the front windowsill, arches its back then stretches prone. I order a coffee after I find a two person table close to the door.

Fifteen minutes later I'm still alone. Kristy isn't going to show, but I wait it out anyway. This isn't the first time. She drives a Chevy, but I've gotten to the point where I don't get worked up when a green SUV passes in front of the window. When the hour's spent I pay for the coffee and head across the street. Lilly runs out from the padded area smiling and excited. She jumps into my arms and gives me her best sweaty little girl kiss on the cheek. I ask her how it went. "Great," she says. After we tie her shoes we smile and wave to April and tell her we'll see her on Thursday. April smiles and cocks her head, her high ponytail swinging over her shoulder as she waves to Lilly.

In the truck something's missing. Lilly sits in the middle even though it's just the two of us. "Are you ready to go to Grandma's house?" I ask her. She nods, her thoughts elsewhere. I wish Rich would have let me buy that dog off of him. Lilly looks at me and hesitates, like she wants to ask a question that's hard to articulate.

Finally she asks, "Will Aunt Kathy be at Grandma's?" I tell her she will. "And Uncle Richie?" I tell her probably not, but you never know. She takes a breath that I know will lead to a harder question, one I'm not prepared to answer, but then she exhales and rubs her palm across the seat next to her, streaking a thin sweaty residue across the fake leather. "Think he'll bring the puppy, Dad?"

"I don't know, honey."

I hope he does. I hope Rich forgets whatever ridiculous agreement he had with the woman who wanted the dog. Lilly needs it. She needs that dog. I'm willing to do all the work. I'm willing live with it and not even like it. With all the cold and gray and anger of winter, Lilly needs that dog. And if Rich actually gets rid of it, I'll find another one, because sometimes you just have to make it work.