Hard Work

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The day after my high school graduation, I tried to run away from home. I took the train from Stamford to Boston; got on a bus from Boston to Kennebunk. I was looking for a job on a lobster boat, mostly because I could not think of a job more out of line with my family’s history of Manhattan investment bankers. But I also liked the water. Kennebunk wasn’t the place in my head. It was Vacationland (said so on the license plates), and though the air breathed a little fresher, the people walking down the street, buying T-shirts and saltwater taffy reminded me of the people from my home—my family—only they were tourists, just visiting, throwing gum and cigarette butts on the sidewalks of my fantasy.

So I boarded another bus and went further north. I ended up in a port town where all the buildings were made of brick and mortar, and the one-lane streets and sidewalks were warped and pot-holed. It was called Rock Bay. I pitched my tent in a state-run campsite near a pier and a short strip of beach. The whole town was in walking distance, and the campsite had grills set in concrete. Everything I need, I thought, struggling with the poles of my tent. That night I watched the grey eastern horizon fade to blue and then deeper blue, and black. I ate hotdogs pulled off the grill before they were all the way hot. The evening faded to night too quickly, and when it was dark, there was nothing to do.

The next morning, I went to the docks, and I felt a surge watching the boats slip through the fog, men with cigarettes shouting and laughing, coiling line and whacking blocks of frozen fish with wood mallets. There was a moment, a fleeting instant, where I thought, I made it—one of those boats will be my boat—this will be my life. But the feeling dissipated with the early day mist, realizing in the already-hot morning sun that I didn’t have a job, and what’s more, I didn’t have a clue how to get one.

This I blamed on my father. He never taught me anything useful. I never learned how to drive stick or chop wood or tie a
bowline knot. I knew nothing about engines—literally popping the hood was daunting depending on the make and model—and the only thing he ever showed me about love was that it didn’t matter how tall you were as long as you had a big trust fund. I felt my face flush. I stared into the oil slicks in the water, glistening. I was afraid to look up, to make eye contact with some old salt who would immediately identify me as an impostor and ridicule me in some quippy working-man’s way. His buddies would laugh and their bellies would jiggle and ash would shake from the tips of their cigarettes. Tears would well, I’d piss my pants, and turn and run to a pay phone and plead and apologize and beg my parents to order a car service to come and bring me home. I stood there. My eyes might’ve been closed—I might’ve blacked out for a moment. And then came a voice:

“Hey, kid.” I looked up. A short, sinewy man with blue jeans tucked into green rubber boots was clunking towards me. “What’re ya doin’, kid? You need work or somethin’?” I didn’t know what the hell was happening. What did he mean by work? A job? What was the or somethin’? There was no chance he was offering me a job. I stared at him, bug-eyed. “Kid, if you’re lookin’ for a job, it’s your lucky day. No promises, just down a guy. Get ya a couple days work. And if yer good, who knows? I’m always lookin’ for a reason to fire one of these pussies,” he said pointing a thumb over his shoulder at a boat with Two in the Bush painted on the side. That sealed it: this guy was offering me a job. Just like that, right in my lap. My head settled, I took a breath for the first time in minutes, and said yes. That night, I slid in and out of sleep. I was to report to the docks at 4:30 am, and every piece of me was scared to sleep too late. I stared at the wind rustling the top of my tent, the muted light of a full moon shining through. Everything felt new and foreign. The sound of water lapping the beach, the chirps and peeps of northern nighttime creatures, the breath of sea breeze; I was out of my body, I was dreaming, and I couldn’t sleep. I thought about home, about what my parents were doing. No doubt, my father had been lulled to dreams hours before by his third scotch. My mother was probably still stomping around the house, doing dishes, another load of laundry, writing a very important email to a very important board
member or trustee. She woke up first, she went to bed last. I could always hear her, her heavy footsteps reverberating through polished hardwood, echoing down long hallways, into my bedroom.

When I woke, the sky was light and birds sang outside the tent. There was no point in even getting out of the sleeping bag. I looked at my watch; it was after seven.

Ten years later, I would beg my wife not to leave me. I would invoke thoughts of our sure-to-be troubled young son forced to grow up in divided households. But “Charlie will be fine,” is all she would say. And then she would be gone, leaving me and our child in what was once our apartment, but then, in her absence, felt uncomfortably like hers.

We stayed in Missoula because she got pregnant, and we both thought the support of her parents would be good. I got a job in city planning, and her father, the contractor, let me use his old Tacoma to get to work. Work became important to me, not because I was passionate about traffic patterns or zoning codes, but because it felt good to do it well, to come home after a long day and see my wife and eat dinner and watch a movie or read and then feel so tired from doing my job so well all day. One night over a glass of wine, I would say to her, “I really don’t think it matters what the job is, doing it well—I mean, doing it fucking great—gives the same sense of satisfaction.” She would frown and say that wasn’t likely true, that some jobs were more satisfying than others. I would like the sentiment all the same. Of course, I was thinking about lobster fishing.

I got the bus back to Kennebunk. Kennebunk to Boston. I spent the night sitting on the floor in North Station. My third night away, I was halfway home. I was depressed not just because things didn’t go the way I’d hoped, but because this fact didn’t surprise me. It wouldn’t surprise anyone. This was expected. This was part of the plan all along. I was just too stupid to know it.

My mother met me at the front door. We stood in the foyer, and it wasn’t even awkward. She laughed and said she was glad I’d gotten it out of my system. And two weeks later, after I’d sent in my application to the University of Montana, she said at least I’d be getting some kind of an education.
My mother stands in the bay window when Charlie and I pull up to the house. She is motionless, her frame made big by four years of Dartmouth crew waiting palely behind the glass like a portrait of an apparition. She hasn’t seen her grandson in over a year, and she has never seen the old Tacoma. She opens the front door of the house as I unbuckle Charlie from his car seat. She hurries down the front steps--Sir, her yipping cocker spaniel, racing along with her--marches across the driveway, and just as I lift Charlie from his seat, she swoops in and grabs him, all the while making her own peculiar baby sounds. My mother wasn’t affectionate with me or my sister. She was responsible to the point of severity, never late, never flustered, and never cuddly. But in her old age, she’s softened, and with Charlie, she is (a little awkwardly) affectionate. She twirls around the driveway, Charlie over her head, spittle swinging from his open mouth. He squeals, she coos, I stand and watch. Finally, she brings him down to her hip and addresses me. “Whose truck?”

“My truck.” I don’t feel like explaining how my ex-father-in-law, in a righteous act of pity, had signed the title over to me, slipped it under the door a week before my departure.

“Well, you and Charlie our welcome to any of our vehicles. I’ve put a car seat in the Tahoe,” she says, combing her fingers through Charlie’s blond hair. And with that she turns and walks back to the house.

It’s the house I grew up in. Save for new granite counter tops and a new banister on the foyer’s floating staircase, this house is the same. The smell of freshly delivered roses, of specialty wood cleaners, of fabric softener--I feel transported, out of my body, shoved back in time. This house, the house of privilege, the house too big for a family of four, mostly empty, mostly unused. From the foyer, I can see the living room. There is a sootless fireplace and ivory colored couches and ornate glass vases on end tables. I remember the night my father took me into that room, hours after my high school commencement. He sat me down and told me about the money, about what would be mine, and about responsibility. He told me to be careful.

“You and Charlie will stay down here,” my mother’s voice
sounds from the door to the basement. I walk downstairs and find her tightening the corners of a bedspread. This, also, is new: the basement converted into a self-sufficient apartment, complete with a kitchenette and full bathroom. “You’ll have to mind your father, of course. He’ll want to use the elliptical occasionally. But I think this will suffice.” She turns to me and places a hand on my shoulder. “Until you’re back on your feet.”

My father arrives home around five. He doesn’t look different so much as just further along in what I’d always assumed would be his trajectory of aging. He has been fat as long as I’ve been his son, not all over, but just in his torso, like a beech ball had somehow been inserted and inflated in his lower abdomen.

He stops and inspect the bud of a petunia before striding across the lawn towards Charlie and I, where we spent the afternoon chasing a soccer ball and rolling in the grass.

“Ahoy!” he says, and quickens his stride as if to steal the ball in a soccer match. His knees don’t bend and his planetary torso teeters on twiggy legs. Two, three steps and he is falling over himself, his round body falling hard and definitely, his hands making divots in the grass. Charlie is overcome with giggling as my father scrambles to regain his uprightness, like some beetle flicked from a picnic table. He swears under his breath and brushes off his yellow golf shirt. Recollected, he says, “Charles, my boy, how are you, man?” He bends over to address Charlie who stares up at his oafish grandfather with quizzical eyes. He turns to me: “The boy looks good.” He slaps me on the shoulder. “What’d ya say we fire up the grill?”

This is the first dinner in a long time, and I wonder how many meals it will take before they are pleasant. We sit on the patio with candles and the soft hum of my father’s propane-powered mosquito zapper. Most of the attention is paid to Charlie. Cutting Charlie’s chicken, wiping his face, handing him his cup; my mother and father can’t keep their hands off him. For a while, I am thankful for the distraction. I don’t feel ready to talk about things. And then she asks, “Where is she?” My mother has eyes that add layers
to what her mouth says. I tell her I’m not sure. She nods. It’s not a satisfying answer, but she already knows everything she needs: I’ve come home again. Just like when I left Andover for the local high school, just like when I came back from Maine. That’s what she says with her eyes: home from Maine, home from Montana.

“Well, who’s up for a night cap?” my father interrupts the dinner–time silence. My mother clears her throat and buttons the top of her blouse. “What’d ya say old man,” he says, already lifting Charlie from his booster. He heaves Charlie onto his shoulders and goes inside. I begin to clear plates but am stopped.

“Allow me,” my mother says.

I wake after nine, but I feel I could sleep all day. Charlie is in bed with me, snoring his tiny breaths. He’s never slept this late. A “night cap” to my father is a two-part pleasure. The first part is a vat of scotch. The second part is a movie. He has always said he wishes he could do it over and become a filmmaker (or sometimes he wants to be a film critic). North by Northwest, Bonnie and Clyde, Blazing Saddles: “high art,” he’d say, “accessible to the masses, yet nuanced depth of meaning to the thoughtful patron.” Last night, it was Dr. Stranglove, and grandpa was persistent about watching the entire movie. Charlie was more than willing to stay up and watch him animatedly explain Kubrick’s genius, his gestures and facial expressions becoming more cartoonish with the evaporating scotch.

I dress and go upstairs. The kitchen is bright. I squint and see my mother, sister, and brother-in-law sitting on the patio. “Well, good morning,” my sister says as I open the screen door. Her husband, Michael, stands and shakes my hand. My sister hugs me from her chair. She’s pregnant. “Oh, well, yes, lucky number four on the way,” she muses. I congratulate her and ask about the due date.

“August 27th, two months from today. Another summertime baby,” she says, sighing. “Michael and I were just wondering the last time we had a proper summer vacation. It’s been forever.” My sister is beautiful. She’s six years my senior and has a dark, foreign-looking complexion and the tiny creases around her eyes make her seem genuine, like she grew up in a big family where everyone played a different instrument and spent summer days
picking lemons in the Mediterranean. Of course, the summer vacations my sister can’t remember were spent in Nantucket where it’s very difficult to grow any sort of fruit.

“I think your brother can tell you all about what it’s like to be on summer vacation,” my mother says. They all laugh, and my mother stands and asks if anyone would like more coffee. Michael says that he would, that he needs to fuel up for a big day. I ask him what he’s up to.

“It’s what we’re up to, Brother. I’ve arranged for the girls to take all the kids to the club, and for us—me, you, and your father—to get out for a bit of sailing.”

“I’m not much of a sailor,” I say.

“The social scene at the club was too much for him growing up,” my mother says, pouring Michael another cup.

“Well, in honor of new beginnings, I think it’s time you start.” I never got to know Michael very well. At the beginning of my senior year of high school, he was starting with a hedge fund in New York City. He’d met my sister at Columbia, and they came out to the house on weekends. Michael talked a lot, more than any guest should. Once, I caught him sneaking a cigarette in the driveway. He saw me and quickly buried his surprise with another drag.

“Hey man, let’s keep this between us,” he said raising the cigarette, “don’t tell your mom or sister. Bros before hoes, right?” That was the first time I wanted to punch Michael in the nose. Suggesting I start sailing “in honor of new beginnings” is probably the fifty-seventh.

Sailing is surprisingly pleasant. Michael discusses recession politics with my father, and I sit on the bow and relax for the first time in what feels like an eternity. Surreal, the past several weeks were surreal. My wife, my home, my life, everything gone, picked up and drop-kicked back in time to this place. I watch the shoreline, the gaudy country homes of New York City’s most successful. Huge spreads, roofs with five peaks, four chimneys, enormous bay windows looking over the Long Island sound, glass glinting like chrome. To the west, the skyline of the city is backset by a bank of dark clouds. Thunderheads. On September 11th, my father took us
all out here in his center console, just “to see what we could see.” From lower Manhattan, two spires of unusually black smoke rose into an unusually blue sky. My father tried to explain what it meant, what it would mean for generations to come. “Your generation,” he said, feigning prophetic wisdom. But quietly, we all understood no one knew anything about what that smoke and the blue sky meant. My mother didn’t say a word.

“What a day, right?” My father shouts from the stern. Michael grins.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, but I miss Montana; being beer-buzzed and sun-tanned, and the Blackfoot River. Amazing that things so big can be moved so quickly.

We arrive home in the late afternoon. My sister’s children are bouncing on the trampoline. Charlie is asleep on the couch in the den. I turn on my cell phone. One new message. It’s her, and she’s just calling to see how Charlie’s doing, to tell me that she’s sorry about all this, to tell me this is so good for her, so important. I think about calling her back, but I don’t.

My mother and my sister are in the office, looking at photographs on line. My sister explains they are shopping around for apartments in the city, for weekend trips during the holidays and for when Michael needs to work late. Neither of them take their eyes off the computer as they explain (and agree upon) the value of getting away.

We eat dinner on the patio again. The kids sit at their own table, and my sister’s children fawn over Charlie. They are spoiled and bratty but Charlie is smiling as they tuck in his bib. Michael dominates the conversation. More recession talk, Michael professes to be one step ahead of the economists in D.C. My mother looks impressed, my father is more interested in shrimp kabobs.

“And what about Montana? How are things out there?” Michael asks. “I mean the economic climate.” I explain that there wasn’t much of a bubble to burst. Things aren’t great, but they never were. He moves on: “So what’s the plan now, another city job? Or maybe put that anthropology degree to use?” My mother snickers.
He smirks, and my sister looks adoringly at him.
"I’m not sure," I say.
"I’ve always thought he should get into finance," my mother says.

Michael nods. "It’s time to think about Charlie. Everything changes when you become a father."
"What do you think, Michael, is there any work in the city?"
"Things have been slow. Most groups are tight, but we’re hanging in there. I’ll ask around for you."
"Wonderful," my mother says.

Then everyone is quiet. The mosquito zapper hums, spring peepers chirp in the garden, Sir lets out a sigh from under the table. The night is heavy with humidity, sticky and warm, the heat of the day trapped underneath a low overcast. Plates are clear, the shrimp kabobs gone. I stand up without knowing I wanted to. I pick my plate up off the table, and I feel deconstructed, and only vaguely aware of the night and my intentions.

"Are you finished, Dad?" I ask, and pick up his plate, stack it on mine with a sharp clink of ceramic. He looks surprised by my sudden move to clean up. I move around the table. My arms feel full of air and disconnected. "And Michael?" I take his plate. There’s a remaining piece of shrimp and take it off and drop it for Sir before my mother can object. I stack his plate on top. The sound of clanking ceramic and scoring fork tines create a wincing harmonic.

"Sis?" My mother begins to say something, and I interrupt her. "And you, Mom, are you all done?"

She looks up at me, and holds in a breath for a moment. She exhales and wipes her mouth with the corner of a napkin. "I’m not quite finished," she says. Charlie squeals from the kids’ table. The girls are attacking him with tickles. The plates fall to the patio. The giggling stops, my sister gasps. Michael stands up, my mother stares at the mess by my feet. I just stand there and the thought of Michael attacking me as if I were some dangerous intruder flashes in my mind. Michael defending his family, defending my mother. My father puts a hand on Michael’s arm and pulls him back into his chair.

I go inside, downstairs, and sit on the edge of the bed. I turn
on my cell phone. I want to call her. I want to call her more than anything. I can’t picture where she is, how she got there, where she’s going. I begin to dial when the basement door opens. My father comes down the stairs. He sits next to me on the bed. He’s quiet for a moment and kneads his thoughts in his thick fingers. He clears his throat. “You can use the phone in my study,” he says. “To call her, I mean. If you ever want some privacy, the phone in my study is on a different line.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“Of course,” he says.

It’s after ten. The basement lets in no light, and I feel I can sleep more but for the sudden thought of Charlie. I’m still wearing my clothes from last night, and when I open the door to the kitchen, the dull light of a grey day makes me feel something like a hangover.

The kitchen smells of cleaner. Outside the patio is spotless, no sign of what I’m sure my mother will refer to as “the incident.” A soft, steady rain makes dimples in the pool, on the slate patio. There is a note on the counter. It’s from my father: Board meeting this morning. Be back by 3. Charlie spent the night at your sister’s. The phone rings as I put the note down. It’s my sister. She tells me she has Charlie and the kids are having a ball. She tells me, without explaining what she means, to take my time.

I make a cup of coffee and sit at the kitchen table. The house is quiet. The sound of rain is all. I walk to the front of the house and look out the bay window. The old Tacoma sits alone. I take a long pull of coffee. It’s too strong—tastes like hot rotting wood. I go upstairs to my old bedroom; now, a guestroom. There’s a king-sized bed with an ornate headboard. Not my bed. There is a huge painting of a naked woman tumbling through a blackness. She’s smiling widely. You can’t see her breasts. Not my painting. The bathroom has a new faucet and, though it’s hard to imagine how, there is a claw-footed bathtub where there was once a shower. Not my bathroom.

I turn the faucet to the tub and leave my clothes in a heap on the floor. Steam lifts and the mirror fogs. I lower my body into
the water. My skin buzzes as I slide in up to my chest. My face flushes and I feel I might faint.

I stay in the tub until my palms wither. I stand in front of the mirror. My body is pink and toneless like over-cooked lobster meat. The towels on the rack are too perfectly folded to use. I air dry. Into my bedroom, I let the cavernous cool air of the empty house dry me. In the hallways, down the stairs and into the kitchen; my wet feet make soft slapping sounds, leave puddley footprints. I air dry into the garage and dig out my old baseball glove. It smells like leather and oil and diamond dirt. I slip it on my hand but can’t find a ball. I punch the palm and follow my tracks back into the kitchen, the foyer, and into the living room. I stand in front of the big bay window. The day is grey and dark and the rain continues.

A Fed Ex truck rolls up the driveway from behind the hedge and stops next to the old Tacoma. The driver hops down and spins a package between his hands. He cuts across the grass, through the garden to the front stoop. I rush into the foyer and open the door before he’s set the package down. His eyes are wide. I smile at him. His mouth opens, and his tongue begins to move before it closes again. With nothing else to do, he holds the package out. I take it, and as he begins to walk away say, “Hey, Man.” He turns his head, but makes sure his feet are still heading for the truck. His lips are pursed. “Don’t walk on the grass.” He nods, and I shut the door.

Laughter immediately comes, like it’s been welled up for too long. I see myself in the mirror next to the coat hanger. My skin is blotchy and my hair sticks out from the side of my head. I don’t look so good naked. I’m overwhelmed: deep-bellied convulsions of laughter. Hilarity. Giggles, like getting high for the first time, like hearing your buddy let out a fart in math class, like the world tumbling away in a seizure of red-faced, breathless laughter. My stomach muscles hurt, I can’t get a grip. I’m drunk, for the first time in a long time. With very old friends.

My father arrives home at three, just like he said. The rain has picked up, falling in giant quarter-sized dollops. Wind blows too and the maple leaves at the edge of the yard whirl on their stems and show their white undersides. From my spot on the
couch, I hear him burst through the front door. He is talking to someone: “Yes, a big storm indeed. Old fashioned nor’ easter.” I hear his footsteps coming down the hallway before he appears in the doorway to the den. He’s holding Charlie in one arm, a bottle of wine in the other. “Charlie recommended this vintage,” he says, holding up the bottle. “He said it has a bold body with a silky finish. Apricots and oak.”

I smile. I wear a bathrobe, and as my father lowers Charlie into my lap, I can see in his face that these hours were a gift he’s glad I accepted. “I’m going to go give this puppy some air. I’ll meet you back here in ten.”

He returns later with two wine glasses and the opened bottle. He wears a bathrobe and pulls a juice box out of its pocket.

The wind gusts and whistles around the corners of the house. It’s early evening and darker than it should be. Charlie is asleep between my father and I, mercifully asleep—he’s never heard wind like this, and I’m sure it will terrify him. The wine is nearly gone, and the movie (The Sting) is nearly over when the front door opens and slams shut. “Hello?” my mother’s voice is loud but somehow quivering, like there’s not enough air in her windpipe.

“In here, sweetie,” my father answers, seeming unaware of the panic in her voice. Her footsteps are light and quick down the hallway. She appears in the doorway and my father sits up.

“Sir’s gone,” she says. She is sopping. Her hair is tangled and dripping, her face grey. “I was walking Sir, he was off his leash, and the wind and the rain and he disappeared. I can’t find him.” My mother goes onto explain how she’d spent the day with my sister before going out for the walk. Then she lost him.

“The wind was too strong for him,” she says looking at my father. “I need you to go find him.”

“I’ll go,” I say, and I walk out of the room before either of them can disagree.

Immediately, I regret the haste with which I left. I’m wearing the bathrobe still, and as I walk across the driveway to the old Tacoma the wind does what it will with the soft fabric.
The old Tacoma’s headlights catch the giant raindrops like meteoric pearls. They pound the roof of the truck crescendoing with each swell of wind. I drive slowly. Branches and leaves cover the road. Power lines bounce between telephone poles. I stop and struggle to open the door against the wind. Then I struggle to close it. I have a flashlight, and I yell the dog’s name as I step from the shoulder of the road into the woods. I feel ridiculous; “Sir, Sir, Sir!” I always hated that name, would always introduce him to friends as “my mother’s dog.”

The woods are dark, and everything I can see exists in the beam of the flashlight. But it’s loud. There is no thunder or lightning, but the trees whip and bow like a spell has been cast. Everything crashes. I wade slowly through the woods, maybe for an hour, but maybe not. I can see the pale outline of powerless homes through the darkness. There is no light save for mine. My teeth chatter ridiculously. I try to keep my robe closed with my free hand.

“Sir! Sir! Sir!” My voice is hoarse from screaming, but it’s no use. The wind is a crushing symphony.

I’m surprised to feel desperation. I want to find the dog more than I ever thought I could. I want to find him cold and huddled, shivering in the hollowed-out space of some fallen beech tree. Find him whimpering and pathetic, ready for saving. I’m surprised to want to pick him up and carry his shaking body back to the old Tacoma; to put him in my lap and cover him with whatever I can find. I’m surprised to want to walk up the front steps and appear in the doorway of the den, soaking and tattered, with the whining form of my mother’s dog. Desperately. I want this, desperately. I hear a tree fall. I can’t see it, but I hear a definite cracking and a definite splintering, and then a boom. I imagine Sir stuck underneath. I start to run, but quickly realize there is nothing to move faster than—just to take care.

Maybe hours, maybe not long enough: I make a loop and end up back at the old Tacoma. I don’t want to get in, but I do, and crank up the heat. I sit with the headlights on. I drive. Each tree stump and bush and cluster of bramble looks so hopeful—like something with a soft canine heartbeat—before proving nothing. He’s waiting terrified. Somewhere, just on the edge of my head—
lights, between the light and the dark, he’s waiting. But nothing. I park in the driveway. I’m not cold anymore but as I grab the doorknob, my hand trembles and my knuckles are purple. I open the door just enough for my body to slip through, careful not to let in anything but myself. My mother is in the hallway. I’m dripping in the foyer. She doesn’t say a word and covers her face with her hands. Her body shudders with a sob. I don’t have her dog. My mother’s dog. She looks down the hallway at the floor near my feet. Not at me. Her hair is still wet with rain and now she cries. This is not my mother, I think, and I wish more than anything for Sir to be waiting in the old Tacoma in the driveway. Like a trick, the truck with Montana plates, parked in the daytime shade of a row of sugar maples. With her dog.