

Heavy Things, Long Hours, and What It Is to Be A Man

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I am twelve years old, and I am soft. I know this because when my grandfather asks me to show him my muscles and I roll up my sleeve and hold out my bicep, my face red from flexing as hard as I can, he clamps down on it with an arthritic hand, grimaces, and says “Hmm, kinda fat.” I am the product of suburban comforts, of cheap packaged snacks and video games and a refrigerator that is always full. I am a creature that my father, raised first by blue-collar alcoholics and later by the U.S. Army, does not understand.

The way my father talks to me is changing, and so is the way we see each other. He makes the money; my mother raises the children. For eleven years, my father was a positive though elusive figure in my life, disappearing to work before I left for school and returning home with just enough time left in the evening to eat dinner and watch Nick at Nite after building my sister and me a fortress from the pads on our couch. But now I am almost a teenager, mouthy and too big for couch-cushion castles, and my father no longer leaves disciplinary matters to my mother. Now when I challenge him, I can hear his teeth straining against the rage in his jaw, can feel his spittle when he brings his face right up to mine and tells me, *You want to act tough? Want to act like a man? I’m going to treat you like one.* Until now, it has not occurred to me that a man acts any particular way. Or maybe it had and I did not care. But now I do.

So, when my father asks me to help him dig a trench, I am both thrilled and terrified.

The trench is a single battle in the twenty-year war my father will ultimately fight against the water that leaks into our basement. It trickles in after a heavy rain or when the snow melts in spring, a tiny creek flowing from underneath the concrete stairs and across the floor. It’s barely noticeable since the space is unfinished and we never use it other than to store my mother’s seasonal decorations, but it’s like torture to my old man, as if the water drips steadily, one drop at a time, onto his forehead and not into the drain at the far end of the basement. His first planned attack against the enemy is to excavate around our house’s foundation, coat the concrete walls with some kind of sealant and install drain tile at the footer, then fill the five-foot deep trench back in. By the time he asks for my help, he’s worked nights and every weekend for months, and the trench is now about four feet deep and lines the back of our house like a dry moat. The loose, light topsoil

is already shoveled away, leaving one last foot of wet, dense clay for him to dig through one heavy shovelful at a time. That's where I come in.

The morning I'm set to help, I follow him into the kitchen where we fill a giant red Coleman with water, sugar, lemon juice, and ice before heading outside into the comfortable June morning that will be humid and blazing hot in a few short hours. He flicks on his little black radio to WLAV Classic Rock and soon Ozzy is wailing about generals and witches in black masses, and we are down in the trench with our shovels. We start digging.

We dig silently, and time moves at a fraction of the speed it does when I'm playing video games or skateboarding in our cul-de-sac. I struggle against every shovelful, each one feeling like a bowling ball on the end of a stick in my pudgy arms, but my father's shoveling is rhythmic and continuous; he stops only to take a pull from our gallon of lemonade or to remove his shirt when it is drenched enough with sweat to wring out. My shirt is soaked through too, but I'm too embarrassed at my doughy body to remove it. I stomp and pull and heave, my biceps and back on fire, a foreign sensation. I know I shouldn't, but I ask my father, *When can we take a break?* And he says, *When the job's done*, and doesn't stop shoveling. I don't stop either—I can't since he doesn't—but soon, between the burn in my muscles from the work and on my neck from the searing sun, I am past the point of exhaustion; heaving the chunks of clay up onto the pile above my head becomes untenable and I feel a strange desire deep within me to scream as I heave the next mound of clay up, and so, I do. A primal yell bursts forth, loud enough to alert our neighbors, as I lift another lump of clay above my head. It lands with a wet thunk on the dirt pile above. My father's shoveling stops. The old man turns to me, eyes gleaming like the sweat that covers his now sunburned skin, mouth turned up in a rare smile. *That's what I'm talkin' about*, he says. *Sometimes, you gotta get mad at it.*

A moment later, he is back to shoveling. And so am I. We work for hours more, the only sounds between us the scrapes of spades cutting into mud and the grunts of our physical effort. We are too exhausted to talk, the way my father prefers it, but that's all right with me. I'm a man now.

I am sixteen and no longer soft. It is August and the first week of two-a-day football practices. I hate the sport. I hate being made to sprint until I puke, hate coaches grabbing my facemask and screaming into my face, telling me to *quit tiptoeing through the tulips*, whatever that means. I hate hitting and getting hit, but I am good at it, and my father says that boys need football to teach them how to spend their time doing things they hate—because that is what men do.

My father and I talk even less now than we did when I was twelve, our communication limited to grunts and curt nods of our heads, but when I hobble down the stairs early in the morning, aching from four hours of hitting and getting hit and running sprints the day before, he smiles