

A PROJECT OF THE GOOD MEN FOUNDATION

**THE
GOOD
IMMENSE
PROJECT**

REAL STORIES FROM
THE FRONT LINES OF MODERN MANHOOD

Edited by
JAMES HOUGHTON, LARRY BEAN
AND TOM MATLACK

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Published by The Good Men Foundation

143 Newbury Street, Sixth Floor

Boston, Massachusetts 02116

Book Design by Poulin + Morris Inc.

Cover Photography by Stephen Sheffield

Interior Photography by Tyla Arabas, Stephen Sheffield, José Zaragoza

Edited by Larry Bean

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request

ISBN-10: 0-615-31674-3

ISBN-13: 9780615316741

Printed in the United States of America

For my father, Jamie, and my daughters, Isabelle and Abiga

—JD

For Mike and Jac

—L

*For Cole, Seamus, Will, and James Matlac
In memory of Jesse Yaukey and Robert Matlac*

Good men a

—TN

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Foreword

James Houghton

It all started a year ago. I was having lunch with Tom, my friend and former partner and boss, to discuss the memoir he was writing. I had just returned from a year abroad with my family—a year precipitated as much by a long-held dream to introduce our daughters to another culture as by the decision to wind down the venture capital fund we had started nine years earlier. I had enjoyed Tom's first draft: The stories of his countercultural childhood and the subsequent turbulence of his personal and professional lives were fascinating. But I could not shake the sense that there was more to the stories than the biographical details. While I knew the facts well, something about the telling, about the brutally honest way he described experiences so personal and revealing, evoked both compassion and gratitude. Given that I had been spending a good deal of time thinking about my own story, reflecting on the winding path that had led me abroad and hoping that more perspective on the past would somehow illuminate the way forward, Tom's willingness to share his own journey, despite the vast differences in our stories, provided an inspiring sense of connection and perspective.

By the time we sat down to lunch I had not made much progress on the bigger questions of my own life, but I did think Tom was onto something. Tom's experiences made me think about the stories of other friends—a married friend who grappled with his sexuality, an entrepreneur confronting his son's heroin addiction, and others who, like me, had less dramatic tales to tell but who had faced difficult choices. I admired not only their strength in the face of these challenges but also their willingness to share their fears and anxieties so openly. To someone who was particularly protective of his own story—partly because of my reserved nature, partly because I had convinced myself that my own concerns were less significant given the advantages I was born with—those moments when other men revealed themselves so completely were revelatory. They gave me courage to share more of my own doubts and fears, and in those moments I felt less alone and more connected.

Might there be something meaningful in gathering a diverse group of men to write essays about their difficult or challenging times in their lives and what they had learned from those experiences? Though I had nothing but anecdotal evidence to draw upon, it seemed that the men of our generation spend a lot of time struggling to balance the competing interests of achieving professional success and being good husbands and partners and fathers and sons. And unlike women, who are much better socialized to talk about how these same pressures affect them, we tend to keep those burdens to ourselves. While the stereotype of men retreating to their cave is not new, perhaps if a group of men wrote compelling and well-crafted stories about their lives, other men might recognize a little of themselves in those stories and take comfort in their shared humanity.

Fortunately my vague notions of the power of storytelling dove-tailed with Tom's passion to explore defining moments in manhood, and thus *The Good Men Project* was born. As exciting as the concept was in theory, it soon became clear that there was a lot more involved in publishing a book than coming up with an interesting idea. With our venture capital background, we probably should have expected this. The past year has been a roller coaster of great promise and dashed expectations, of angst and excitement, of doubts and tremendous personal learning. We have debated the content of the theme, and the title of the book. We endured the rejection of fifty publishers who did not believe men would buy a book of essays written by other men. We have argued about distribution and publicity and Web strategy. But throughout it all I have been sustained by the stories and by the men who wrote them.

I have been overwhelmed by the candor and strength of these essays, whether they came from the

early contributors and established authors who were willing to take a chance on an unknown team and an unlikely project, or from our numerous friends and family members who, despite limited writing experience, were willing to share some of their most personal and difficult moments, or from the countless contributors who responded to a national essay contest and from whose ranks we were able to draw some of the book's most compelling essays. Not only does each writer present a moment of experience that resounds (either directly or indirectly) with my own life, but in their breadth and diversity they offer the proof that everyone has a story to tell and that something can be gained from hearing these stories.

The real significance of the project became clear to me at a small reading and discussion group that we organized a few months ago in Cambridge, Massachusetts. To help start the conversation, each person attending was asked to fill out a note card with an answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a good man?" Ironically, I had never been asked that question directly, or even attempted to answer it for myself, but when I went to fill out my own card the answer came easily. Despite the pressure we felt at times to make the book more prescriptive, for it to provide easy answers and definitions, the great lesson I've learned over the past year—from every story, every conversation, every reflection—is that there is no definitive answer. Every story in the book, every submission that we read, has reaffirmed the idea that it is much more about the process than the resolution. My response on the note card was "asking the question."

Introduction

Tom Matlack

One of the first times I told my story I was in prison, in a facility in Boston used largely for protective custody, to be exact. My talk was to focus on drug and alcohol abuse, but looking out over the crowd of some sixty inmates—including gay prostitutes and pimps who might not survive in the general prison population—I wasn't sure if I could get any words out of my mouth. My heart pounded with fear.

"Hey, Gucci boy," someone in the audience called out, "wanna spend the night?"

I looked down, past my Armani slacks to my loafers, which were indeed Gucci, and then peered off into the distance, avoiding eye contact with any of the inmates, many of whom were now whistling at me. I started by describing a moment when I should have died, when, while hungover and driving along a highway, I flipped the car I was in. I recounted how I had taken wilder and wilder risks and how my risk-taking had paid off in my business dealings, but that all along I knew I was headed for a real crash, one that would destroy my entire life, not just a car.

By the time I told the inmates how I lost it all and had been forced, once and for all, to stare myself in the mirror, they were silent—no more whistling, no more catcalls; they were listening. I told them I was just a few months into my new life but already things were better. When I finished, several inmates approached me to say how much they appreciated my coming and how sorry they were for what I had gone through. One even gave me a hug.

Lying in bed that night, I felt euphoria at having reached across what seemed an unbridgeable chasm. I didn't expect the inmates to feel compassion for me or to get anything out of my story. But they did. Something had happened as I stammered on about kids and divorce and mistakes made. Despite all our differences in circumstance, my words had affected them, and I felt a lot less alone with my struggles.

Around the same time, 1998, I started a venture capital firm with James Houghton. During the decade I built companies with James, but before and after work, as part of my attempt to stay sober, I continued to tell my story and to listen to other men speak the truth about themselves. I came to value the listening more than the telling, whether the story came from a tough guy in Southie or a former investment banker in the financial district. In each man's story I heard something I could identify with, and I drew strength from that empathy.

After a decade as venture capitalists, James and I had both burned out. James took off with his family for a year in Paris, and I began writing my memoir. I sent draft after draft to James, which eventually prompted him to suggest that I take classes and also write about other people instead of just myself. Magazine articles about musicians, scientists, and athletes whose stories touched me as heroes followed. By the time James was ready to come home, two things had happened. He had the idea for this book, and he was ready to write down his own story. From that point, *The Good Men Project* fell into place like a set of dominoes. One chance encounter led to another and another. We needed a solid editor, and my favorite writing teacher's husband happens to be a magazine editor, Larry Bean, for whom I wrote several articles before broaching the idea of this book. He was intrigued. It wasn't until Larry met James that they learned they were Harvard classmates—and I realized I would be forever outnumbered. But I also realized then that this book was meant to be.

In my search for contributors to *The Good Men Project*, I went to the three most well-connected people I know: Matt Weiner (a Wesleyan classmate and creator of *Mad Men*), Sebastian Jungk (another Wesleyan classmate and author of *The Perfect Storm*), and my hairdresser of seventeen years.

Beth Bechard.

I begged Sebastian to write an essay. He was waist deep in his own book, but he put me in touch with photojournalist Michael Kamber. I first tracked down Michael via satellite phone to a bomb shelter somewhere in Baghdad and followed up with him by e-mail while he was in Africa, covering civil war. I wrote him an e-mail that, I thought, was an eloquent exposition on why manhood is at crossroads in America. He responded that he agreed with my premise, but that despite all he had lived through and photographed, he had no answers. In fact, precisely because of what he had seen, he didn't feel capable of addressing the topic of manhood, even though it was all he thought about while watching men butcher each other. Michael eventually agreed to contribute an essay, and he directed me to Charlie LeDuff, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who wrote a book called *US Guys* and had just appeared on *The Colbert Report* to give an update on "the status of the American man's balls." He had two cornerstones of the book's foundation.

Matt Weiner, about whom I had written frequently before he became a star, became a fan of *The Good Men Project* and led me to Franklin Reeve, his mentor at Wesleyan, who in turn led me to write John Sheehy, one of the few men in his family not to spend his work life hundreds of feet underground in Montana's copper mines.

Then there's Beth. She put me in touch with Mark St. Amant, who had written two books including one about getting married and moving to Italy with his new wife on a whim. Mark became a contributor and introduced me to the people who have formed *The Good Men Project's* advertising, marketing, and event-planning team.

More contributors arrived through a national essay contest that we sponsored during the spring of 2009. The overwhelming response to the contest confirmed our belief that men across the country have stories to tell.

As the momentum built for our then-unnamed anthology, we struggled to find a title that would fit our aspirations. *The Good Men Project* stuck because we came to view our goal as something much bigger than a book. *The Good Men Project* is really a four-pronged effort to foster a discussion about manhood; it includes the book, for sure, but also the companion documentary film, our Web site, and face-to-face events around the country. Our effort is based on the belief that most men—regardless of whether they are rich or poor, famous or not, black or white, gay or straight, living in the city or in the country—share a commonality in their experiences as fathers, sons, husbands, or workers.

Toward the end of the process of collecting essays from the contributors, I shared some of the proceeds with my thirteen-year-old son, Seamus. It made sense to gauge a teenager's reaction, given that the proceeds from the sale of *The Good Men Project* will support organizations that help at-risk boys. We not only want to spark a discussion among men but also play a small part in improving boys' lives by helping them learn about manhood. Seamus's responses convinced me that collectively the contributors of this volume are onto something important. He told me that even the most challenging essays in the book—about war, sex, prison, addiction, death—cover issues that he already has been exposed to and is trying to figure out.

Seamus often has expressed an interest in joining the military. But our conversations never go much past Jason Bourne. I told him to read Michael Kamber's essay and watch Matt Gannon's short film about him. The discussion we had afterward was completely different from previous ones. For the first time we talked about what serving our country at a time of war really means.

In speaking with Seamus I was reminded of what Kamber had said about not having answers. That certainly has been a guiding principle for *The Good Men Project*: There is no definitive way to be "good." When that word refers to a life or a man it is a concept that takes on meaning only gradually through a kind of soul-searching that is unique to each of us. But we hope that by reading other men's stories and watching them on our documentary film, you can reflect on the arc of your own life and,

the process, begin to form your definition of a good man.

Robert Pinsky

When I had no roof I made
Audacity my roof. When I had
No supper my eyes dined.

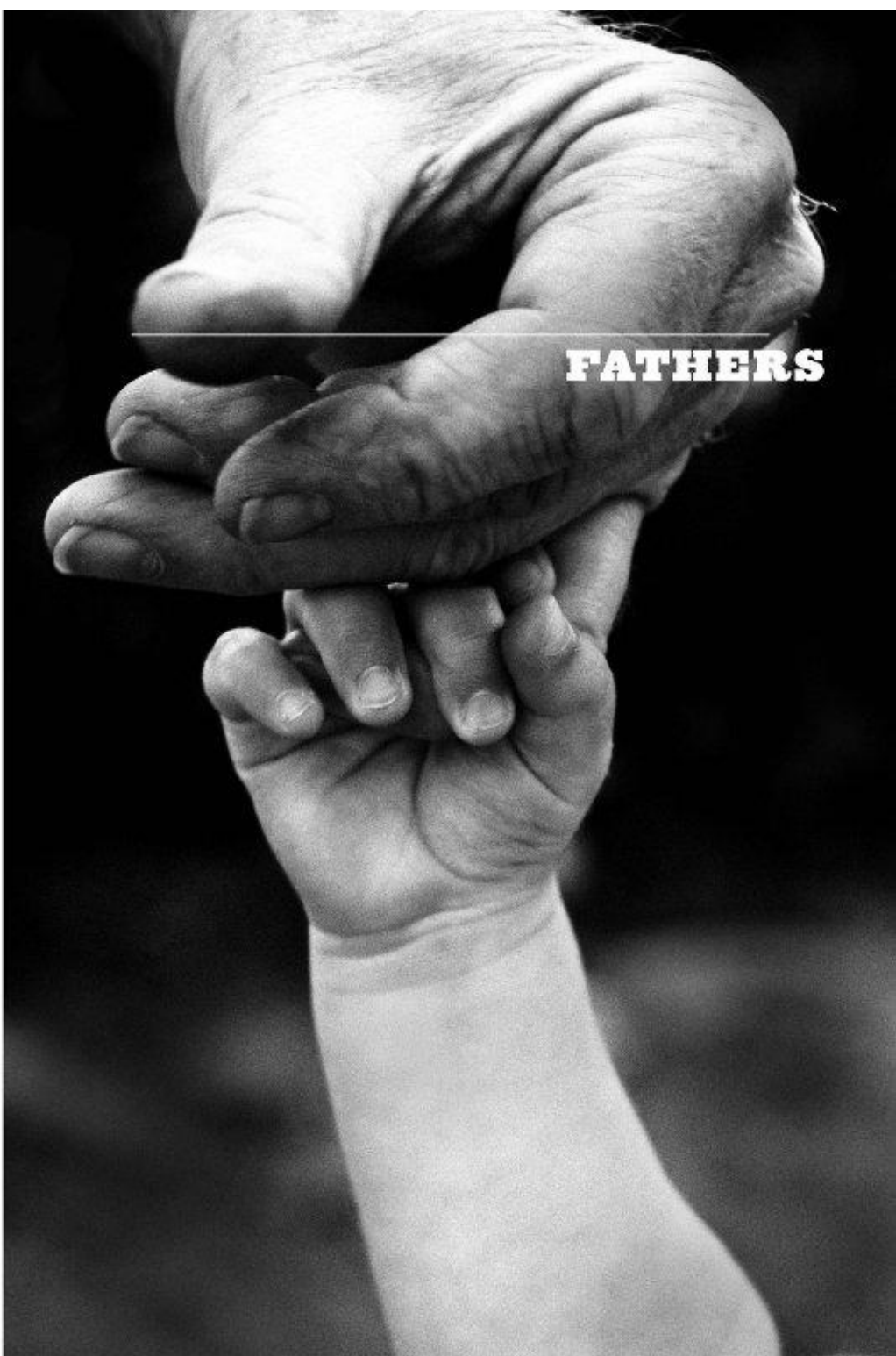
When I had no eyes I listened.
When I had no ears I thought.
When I had no thought I waited.

When I had no father I made
Care my father. When I had
No mother I embraced order.

When I had no friend I made
Quiet my friend. When I had no
Enemy I opposed my body.
When I had no temple I made
My voice my temple. I have
No priest, my tongue is my choir.

When I have no means fortune
Is my means. When I have
Nothing, death will be my fortune.

Need is my tactic, detachment
Is my strategy. When I had
No lover I courted my sleep.



FATHERS

Iowa Black Dirt

Perry Glasser

In July air thick as soup but clear as cold water, I step hard on a spade's edge and push it into Iowa rich, black dirt. Setting a tetherball court will be tougher than I had thought.

To dig a hole, you build a hill.

My back reminds me why I have made a life in which I work with my mind. I wipe my face with the red bandanna I have tied at my throat. I am shirtless, thirty-seven, wearing blue running shorts and cheap, nylon running shoes.

Yards from me, on the cracked driveway, I've stacked three bags of concrete mix in a square pyramid. Now that my back and arms ache with labor, I realize I have purchased enough mix to set the landing strip for an F-14 fighter jet. Sweat burns my eyes. The hole grows to a foot deep and twice as much across. I estimated a cubic yard; now I revise downward. I planned to preset everything into a coffee can but decide that will not be sufficiently stable. Not for Jessica. My kid needs stable.

She is eight years old, and she is coming to live with me; I am terrified.

Perspiration flows in rivulets down my forearms. Once my terry cloth tennis wristlets are saturated, the shovel handle becomes slick. A blister rises on my thumb; another swells across my palm. Prior blisters on my hand were raised by a tennis racket. My hands are the soft hands of a writer who teaches.

I hold the short stub of the tetherball post erect while the concrete base hardens. The post base is actually a short length of pipe. I prop it straight with a few bricks. The next morning, after I set the kit's five-foot pole onto the stubby base, I tie a clothesline rope to the post top and attach the tetherball to the other end of the line. Then I run at the post, hitting it as if it were a tackling dummy. It bends, then springs erect.

In such ways, I make myself ready.

•

The old house I rent is in walking distance from the center of Drake University, where they will pay me to teach creative writing.

Several months ahead of Jessica's arrival, I move in. That February, my heating bill tops \$600 because the wind whistles through the brittle windowpanes where caulk long ago dried to powder. But the house teaches me to cook, dust, vacuum, polish, and launder. When I steer a cart through the local market, the spirits of the parents who provided for their kids in the big house guide my arm to Ajax, Clorox, and Pine-Sol—safe, familiar brand names I know from my childhood.

I am told that Iowa's black dirt is the most fertile in the world, and come spring everyone urges me to start a garden. I know less about gardening than I know about farming—and I know nothing about farming. Setting a pole in concrete in this soil from which anything can grow, the soil that nourishes the world, is, for the entire three years I live in Iowa, my sole gesture to agriculture.

•

August 1, I pick up Jessica in southern Wisconsin, where her mother and her mother's husband attend his family's reunion. From Wisconsin we travel to New York City and then to Iowa. When we return

to Des Moines, I unlock the door and house air washes over us, soft as angel's breath. We pull our luggage through the door with the unmistakable sense of returning home.

That first evening, after we unpack, buy basic groceries, eat, and walk to the spot where next week Jessica will meet the school bus, we climb the wooden spiral stairs to her room. It is dark. I did not repair the broken light switch; at the ceiling's center is a yellowish bulb with a pull chain. I put clean linen on her familiar bed.

"Before you sleep," I say, "your room needs to be aired out."

So we kneel beside each other on the cedar window seats to open the narrow casement window that faces the street. The catch is shellacked shut. A streetlight beyond the big tree in the front yard casts its light through the lush leaves; shadows flit over our faces. I rap the window frame with my palm until it cracks loose, swings on its side hinges, and then gapes open. Sweet night air washes over us.

"Something flew in the window," Jessica says.

"Don't be silly. Look what a pretty night it is."

"I'm scared." She clutches at my arm.

It annoys me that she sees spooks in darkness. I say, "All right. We'll have some milk and cookies while the room cools, and when we come back, we'll close the window and the shade so there are no shadows. How's that?"

After we dunk a few too many Oreos, I lean against the bathroom door frame as Jessica brushes her teeth. It's awkward for her because she is too short to see the mirror. She'll need a step stool; suppose there will have to be other fine adjustments. OK, no one thinks of everything. We will become reacquainted. The trip from Wisconsin to New York City and then back to Iowa was good, but to know each other in this new living arrangement we will need to establish domestic routines. In the year we have been separated, despite a December visit, she has grown and changed so much I hardly know her.

"Hold my hand," I say after we climb the stairs to her dark room. We set out to cross the vast empty space, my arm waving before my face until it finds the string tied to the light's chain. I tug. Jessica shrieks.

The bat hanging above her bed casts a long shadow across the ceiling.

"Under your blankets. Quick."

Kneeling, her head beneath her pillow, her little behind in the air, she covers herself. Don't bat entangle in girls' hair? Are they rabid? I grab the broom with which we earlier swept and swiped cobwebs.

The bat is the biggest damn thing I've ever seen. It may as well be fucking Bela Lugosi. I swing and the bat, using whatever the hell it has for seeing—radar? sonar?—dodges the broom and flutters away. Leather wings soft as Death whisper over my face.

"Stay under!"

I swing and miss again. "You son of a bitch!"

Ahab spat hatred at Moby-Dick. This is no less dramatic than his hunt for the white whale. I bellow profanity. I yell to Jessica to stay covered. Desperate, I whirl around the room, flailing the broom at the air.

And then the broom finds its target.

The bat falls to the floor, where it spasms, broken. I hit it again to be sure it is immobile, and then I press the life from it by leaning all my weight on the broom.

Unspent adrenaline leaves me trembling. I know by how the muscles in my neck and shoulder knot that tomorrow they will be sore.

I bend close. The thing I killed is no larger than my palm, a three-inch mouse with wings, its eyes tiny slits, its frail wings broken. What the hell have I done?

“Come out,” I say.

~~Jessica and I stand over the corpse. I pant as though I’ve run a mile, and I am covered with much sweat. Without touching the bat, we manage to slide it onto my tennis racket and carry it to the still-open window. I hurl the creature into the darkness, and I slam shut and latch Jessica’s window.~~

“I told you something flew in,” Jessica says and then asks me to look away while she puts on her pajamas. With my back to her, I say something idiotic about bad words and how people use them when they are frightened. When I have tucked the blanket under Jessica’s chin, because it is something that I am sure good parents in good places like Iowa do, I try to read her a story. I am planning *Lord of the Rings*, the entire trilogy. Then *Narnia*. Every book. She will have none of them though, not this night.

“How many bats are in Iowa?”

“I’ve never seen one before. I think they mostly live in caves.”

The next morning, we search for the dead bat, but during the night, something took it. We never find a trace. I keep thinking how small it was, how large it seemed.

•

Jessica and I have been together three days in Iowa when I realize I am inept. She is being noble and spare my feelings. Wrapped in a green towel, her bare shoulders still shining with bathwater, she sits with her back to me. Like her mother, my daughter has hair that falls several inches below her shoulders. I work the brush along the line her part should follow, push the brush to her scalp and tug. My kid tries not to cry out; she does whimper.

It is not courage. Jessica did not have a good year with her mother or her mother’s husband, and for her last hope for a place that can be hers, she will not complain to me. Until that moment the hairbrush tangles, I did not realize the degree to which my kid is at some psychological risk. She will endure an amount of pain rather than allow Daddy to think she needs attention. What if Daddy does not want her either?

I’d planned hot breakfasts against the Iowa winters. I’d stocked up on oatmeal. I’d bought a clothes washer and dryer within days of moving into the house so that Jessica’s clothing would be washed spotless. I practiced ironing. Jessica’s complexion would be creamy, she’d never, ever, catch cold, and her hair, her glorious hair, would always be lustrous.

But my idylls of perfect parenthood are wrecked by a hairbrush. Knotted about two inches from her scalp above her ear, it rests five inches from the tangled ends of her hair and a light-year from all I had imagined. I recall my mother telling my sister it took a little pain to be beautiful, but pulling Jessica’s hair by the roots from her scalp seems too great a price to pay.

I give up and carefully scissor out the brush. Within days, her head resembles a bird’s nest in its molting season. She looks like a perfectly happy child raised by wolves.

•

Coming from Arizona, Jessica has no cold-weather wardrobe. Shortly after school starts, we go clothes shopping at the mall. I advise any father who waits in the girls’ department, whether in Iowa or Irkutsk, not to peer anxiously toward the entrance to the try-on room.

On this afternoon, I shrug off the stares from women who eyeball a man pushing his hand through racks of girls’ clothing, but there is no ignoring the mall security cop who politely, but firmly, asks to have a few words with me. “What do you think you are doing?” the guy asks me as he hitches his

pants.

I have no idea what is going on. Did I leave my lights on in the parking lot? I tell him I am shopping.

“But you keep staring into the try-on room. What do you hope you’ll see?”

Jessica chooses that moment to emerge in salmon pink, size 6X jeans. I ask her to turn around to examine how the seat fits. From the corner of my eye, I see a woman turn away, and it finally dawns on me what this little show of community concern is about. The seat is baggy, but with the onlooker and the guard watching my every move I do not dare grab at my kid’s bottom to see how much loose material is there. That innocent gesture might buy me hard time. Because Jessica—despite a head of hair that might be jungle undergrowth—is obviously a happy, clean kid, the guard lets the issue drop. I receive no apology. All this episode means to the biddies who called the cops is that I will be caught red-handed another day.

Weeks before the shopping mall shakedown, I registered Jessica in school. On school’s first day as we walk the tree-lined Des Moines streets, we are joined by dozens of decent-looking kids. Jessica glows. Back with Daddy, she will be attending a new school. Lots of houses on the route prominently display a poster of a blue leaf in a front window or behind the screen that encloses a front porch. A few days later Jessica informs me that these Blue Leaf houses are safe havens. Any kid in trouble or who needs a bathroom can stop there.

Terrific! I call the school to ask if my house can be a Blue Leaf house. Forms arrive in the mail and I fill them out. A few days later, I am rejected. I am unmarried. “Policy,” the police sergeant explains when I call. “Don’t take it personally.”

•

Some advantages to being single and a father are less than spiritual. I discover any number of women who take the sight of a happy, well-adjusted daughter to be an indicator that a man probably does not store thumbscrews or a rack in his basement. A bachelor with a happy child vaults to a trust level otherwise unapproachable for weeks. Moreover, an unattached man and a child fulfill a definitive fantasy for some younger women, allowing them a little harmless role-playing. I never exploit Jessica in that way, at least not by design; however, the phenomenon is here duly noted.

When I invite an attractive woman to our home for a late-evening dinner, it is because I cannot afford a babysitter or much else. These evenings, however, turn satisfactory for all concerned.

Jessica’s nature and our situation require that she meet my friend of the evening before she allows herself to be put to bed. We might read to her. Jessica will insist on a kiss good night, and some young women have their socks charmed off. Maybe more than their socks. Jessica learns discretion at breakfast. She never asks about the other lady, the one who made better scrambled eggs. By the time she is nine, Jessica shares with me her insights about which of my dinner partners has what virtues and by ten she threatens me with revealing everything unless her allowance is raised. Small bribes exchange hands.

My behavior does not seem to imperil her psychological health. My job is to be the dad; her job is to be the kid. Parts of my life are private; parts of her life are private. She grows confident of my attention’s return soon enough.

•

After her first few months in Des Moines, and before she returns to her troubled mother for a visit,

take Jessica to a mall beautician, no appointment necessary. Her hair is worrying me. I expect phone calls from a concerned guidance counselor discreetly asking about neglect.

Jessica lies with her head tilted back over a sink. She wears a checkered blue jumper. I chat with the hairdresser while her long fingers work shampoo into Jessica's hair. After the rinse, I carefully watch her brush it out. She starts at the ends and works the comb toward Jessica's scalp, freeing tangles until she easily and smoothly—and painlessly—can run a comb through the locks' full length.

You start at the ends, dimwit, not the scalp.

“What cream rinse does she use?” the hairdresser asks me.

“What would you recommend?”

In such ways, ever more mysteries are dispelled.

•

Twenty years after departing the heartland, I pass through Des Moines. The city has grown, doubling in size, at least. Corporate America discovered a central location with good golf courses, top-notch public schools, and an educated workforce.

I promised myself I would not, but before I return to Kansas City, I drive to 1327 32nd Street. The gray stucco house still stands. The oak and sycamores still arch over the narrow street, cooling the block with deep shade. I roll down the car window, and fresh, late-spring air rolls in. I recall smoking cigarettes on the narrow front cement steps on July nights, the musty smell of the cut hardwood stacked on the porch, how in winter the frozen logs popped and sizzled when they were in the fire. Being housebound after a blizzard, rushing into the street to steal a look at the eerie green sky when sirens sounded a tornado warning.

I crack my car door open, crouch, and skulk—unseen below the windows—up the driveway, pausing only to run my fingertips over the spot on the house's wall where I once scraped a car fender. It has been repainted, but the scar is still there. At the driveway's end, I confirm what my heart already knows.

In the small backyard's center, near a stand of rhubarb three or four inches taller than the overgrown grass, a pipe protrudes from the earth. I try it with my foot. Solid.

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