THE GOOD MEN PROJECT

REAL STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES OF MODERN MANHOOD

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IOWA BLACK DIRT

IN JULY AIR thick as soup but clear as cold water, I step hard on a spade's edge and push it into Iowa's 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 squat 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

"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 it. 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 bats entangle in girls' hair? Are they rabid? I grab the broom with which we earlier swept and swiped at 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 shoulders 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 as 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 it, 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.

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Jessica and I have been together three days in Iowa when I realize I am inept. She is being noble to 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 in 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 any 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 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

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.

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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.

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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; I 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.

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 molting season. She looks like a perfectly happy child raised by wolves.

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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 onlookers 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."

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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 definite 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.

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

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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's 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.