EIGHTEEN MONTHS

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THE FIRST TIME I WAS IN AN AUTOMOBILE FACtory, I was there to clean it. The outsourced contract was serious money and my brother was the foreman of the cleaning crew. He had hired me as a personal favor. I was living at home and going full-time to Wayne State University, so I needed a summer job to pay for fall tuition. At four dollars an hour, in 1965, I would be making as much as the average worker in the plant.

As I stood there wearing a yellow hard hat, our project seemed like a very bad joke, a Sisyphean task, and a rip-off of the factory manager. Clean meant free from dirt or pollution—but there wasn't a chance. Huge machines pressed sheet metal steel into the shapes of car doors, hoods, and fenders. Drills as big as bazookas cut holes for attachments and couplings. The noise was ferocious. My eyes bulged from the pressure of the sound. A mixture of oil and water flowed through tiny gutters to wash against the dies, allowing the molds an easier release. The tailings spun out from the drills as seal-black oil flushed through the holes to lower their heat and resistance. I thought, *This is hell, the American Hades of manufacturing.* And to my amazement, nothing stopped. The factory would remain in motion each day for sixteen hours straight.

I looked at my brother, not to catch his attention, but to read the expression on his face. He looked sad, circles under his eyes at twenty-five years of age, his shoulders leaning inward, a body tired and resigned. Soulless work. He knew he was going to have to find a way out. Newly married and without any savings, he couldn't afford not to work. His plan was to keep this job and use it as a stepping-stone to another job, something safer and with a future that didn't destroy his body and spirit. Ancient in their origin, social networks still mattered. Friends told friends when better jobs were available. We'd talk about that, but not today.

Our father had worked in a factory for over thirty years, the Packard Motor Plant on East Grand Boulevard in Detroit. It was one of the premier auto plants in the United States, where two shifts of twenty thousand workers made Packard Clippers from the wheel assembly to fully painted and customized automobiles—the glimmering, shining, metal machines, powerful and sexy. *Ready to*

go! For less than $6000, as the ads pronounced, the equivalent price of the house we lived in.

By the time my father was fifty, he had lost more than half of his hearing. His hands were, at initial sight, small bags of bent bones and flesh, not one straight finger, but "two good thumbs," as he would remind us. Even so, he never lost the feeling that he was lucky to have a good job. The context of that emotion, however, made me anxious. An illiterate refugee from Eastern Europe, he and his uncle had settled in 1919 in Kansas to "try their luck at farming and ranching." In the beginning they had fourteen acres of land, two horses, and a promise between them to stick with it until it worked. By 1934, they had built a small house, had twelve horses, and were growing vegetables for purchase. Then the worst dust storms in U.S. history hit Kansas. They lost everything.

After World War I, he didn't know how to prioritize catastrophe. During the war when he was ten, the Russian army kidnapped him after ransacking his village. Forcing him to be a messenger between their encampments, a sniper shot him. It took him a year to recover, existing on milk and potatoes. So, when he was standing in a soup line in Kansas and someone said there were jobs in the factories in Detroit, he gambled on hearsay. As my father put it, "What's to lose? I got another chance. I found a good job."

To my father, a "good job" meant steady work for forty hours a week, a fair wage—which meant a union-negotiated pay scale care of the United Auto Workers—health insurance, and a regular contribution toward a pension. It didn't mean the work was not backbreaking. But thousands of men in Detroit had a similar story and history, and for that reason, he seldom brought up his past or complained. If I had not asked him questions as a boy, I would have known far less about this history.

His attitude toward work bordered on a grand rationalization. Hard was acceptable because, as he saw it, the work was merciless for everyone. He was personally proud of the cars that Packard Motor Car Company produced. They were similar in status to Cadillacs, "a car I could never afford, but a very good car." When we would walk downtown, on occasion, we would see a Packard. More than once, he stopped, pointed it out, and declared with pride, "I helped to assemble the transmission in that car. Nice automobile, isn't it?"

However, if my brother or I resisted doing our schoolwork or complained there was too much homework, his most powerful ploy, one that he rarely used, would be to make us stand in front of him and promise we'd never work in a factory. "Now promise me...Okay. Now do your work." At these times, when we scrunched our faces, resisted, or showed impatience, he would say, "You'll end up just like me. You'll regret it. Just remember. I told you so." At these moments, what had been a predictable disciplinary tactic turned grim. His eyes were bleak, not angry. I took him seriously.

When the Packard Automotive Plant closed in 1956, nearly forty thousand people lost their jobs. Many had the option to move to South Bend, to regain employment at the Studebaker/Packard plant there.

We had a family meeting to decide whether to move to Indiana. I was in the eighth grade and my brother was a senior in high school. Eight of my mother's ten siblings lived in Detroit as did my father's sister. It was the only "family meeting" we had ever had. My father used that term, an idea the United Auto Workers had suggested in a directive they sent to their members.

When we sat down at our small Formica kitchen table, I noticed something different about myself, something I had only an inkling of before in some of my classes at school. It was as though my mind had climbed a wall; I could see further and deeper the intentions and emotions of my parents. I thought about my thinking in the moment. I was doing simple reflection, something I seldom did. Not just taking an idea or perspective and immediately reacting, but instead mulling it around a bit—morally and with the future in view.

I knew this was an important moment. Whether the decision was to stay or leave, it would affect the rest of our lives.

My mother said, "Your dad and I want to know what you think about moving to South Bend. Your father would have a job there with Studebaker. It would be a big change—a different home, a different school. You'd be leaving your friends and our relatives." Then she hesitated, her voice cracking. "But your Dad would have work, a regular paycheck, and health insurance."

At that moment, I knew they were going to leave it up to my brother and me. We were the tipping point. And either way we'd lose. That's the part that made me feel like crying. Where's my father going to find a job in Detroit? He's fifty-one and a machine operator, a job classification that means he has no technical skills. There will be five thousand other workers applying for any job that turns up. The UAW has told him work at union scale is pretty far down the line, at least months away, maybe a year. We move to South Bend, he has a job. But for how long? My friends think a Studebaker is a shitty car. So do I. It's boxy and weird. Piss poor colors like aqua. Performance sucks. Meet someone young with a Studebaker and you think they must have inherited it. South Bend is over two hundred miles from Detroit, at least a five-hour drive. We see my Aunt Ann and Uncle Pete about once a year. They live in Chicago. That's about seventy miles further. They come to Detroit, not the other way around. No, we're not going to see friends or family anymore. Who's got the money to travel, and maybe, most of all, who wants to go to South Bend?

I asked the only question I could think of: "If we stay in Detroit and Dad can't find a job, what are we going to do?

My mother answered, "He gets forty weeks of unemployment compensation. That's close to ten months. If we have to, we can refinance our mortgage."

I could see my father's eyes narrow. Owning his own home was a sanctity for him, something impossible in Romania, and his greatest source of pride after our family. It was sacred to his life.

Then another question snuck up on me. Barely registered, I coughed it out, "What's Dad going to do when he's not working?" He was sitting right there at the table, a foot away. I couldn't get myself to ask him directly.

My mother looked at him. He didn't like answering the question, a threat to his dignity and place in our family.

He looked straight ahead at no one in particular. "I've got plenty to do around the house. It needs painting."

I had follow-up questions: What are you going to do in the winter? Where are you going to get money for the paint? But I didn't dare ask them.

My brother's question tied it off like a tourniquet on a bleeding limb. "So, we stay?"

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Packard began suspending manufacturing operations in its plant in Detroit in early May of 1956. Springtime. When he lost his job, my father did exactly as he said he would. He chipped and wire-brushed the entire house. He started painting it about a month after he was let go. He also rededicated himself to his garden.

Being a farmer as a boy, he was skilled in growing things. A fourth of our backyard was dedicated to producing corn, green beans, strawberries, and tomatoes. Along both sides of the lot were extensive flower beds. The center was a peerless Marion bluegrass lawn. In the summer, when relatives came to our house, visiting the backyard was a ritual, a tour of pleasantries and genuine delight in the delicate beauty of the flowers and the abundance of the garden. It made me feel secure. My parents could make beautiful and delicious things grow. That in itself was a small wonder to me.

The whole thing had a festive air. Every summer, when the strawberries and corn were at their peak, my father would go about the neighborhood and distribute quarts of strawberries and ears of corn. There was too much for our small family to eat. He loved doing it, being generous while

showing off his skills as a gardener. It was part of his banter with our neighbors.

By the end of the summer, he had finished painting the house. It looked great—gleaming white with a deep grass-green trim. He was ready for his next project, painting the basement floor. He bought six gallons of a brick maroon-red enamel. Those paint cans stayed in a corner near the coal bin until Mother sold the property.

On an interior level, something started to happen to my father in the fall. Gradually and with a deepening affect, his mood began to change. He had waited six months to start looking for another job. He was earnest but not ready for how hard it was going to be to find work.

He would ask my mother to scan the papers, writing down any work that seemed possible for him to do. He would also get leads from the unemployment office and his friends. He followed up on every one of them. The first thing he found out was when the job seemed like a good one—take home pay about sixty dollars a week and health benefits—there would be as many as five hundred other workers applying for the same job, many of them people he had worked with at Packard's.

He kept looking but with a deadened will, like knowing full well there is an enormous weight on the ground and there's no chance you can lift it, yet you have to try over and over and over again. On the days he applied for a job he knew he would never get, he would come home, go into the bedroom, and, with the lights out, lie on the bed for at least an hour, not sleeping, only lying there in the dark.

Approaching ten months after Packard suspended manufacturing cars in Detroit, our family was certain the unemployment checks were going to stop. My mother, who was in her mid-fifties, told my father she could find work, probably as a salesperson. He would not discuss it. He left our house in a pique. There was no way to reason with him. My mother knew if she found a job without his support, there would be no peace in our family.

My brother and I had seen what happened between our parents. Unless asked, we never involved ourselves in their arguments. The next day, Richard went to the University of Detroit, where he changed his course load and schedule from full-time to part-time and began looking for a job. He found one within two weeks, packaging medications for S. J. Tutag, a small pharmaceutical company in the city. It was a dead end, and he knew it.

When he suggested to my father that he turn over his paycheck to our family, my dad looked stunned. He accepted quietly, seriously. He didn't feign gratitude. Richard did not mention what he was doing to anyone. I don't think he ever has. For me, it was an ineffable moment, a memory I hold to help me to have strength in times of crisis.

Then a curve, something I would not have expected. My father stopped looking for a job and started sleeping most of the day, fourteen to sixteen hours. Within a few months, he looked terrible, ten years older than he was. Nothing seemed to matter to him. His mantra became, "I'll take care of it later." The photos of him from that time still make me uneasy. He didn't grow a garden that summer. He didn't tend to his flowers. My mother kept them alive. He no longer lost his temper. There didn't seem to be one in him. I could come home as late as I wished with no reaction from him. He would be sleeping, as always.

We didn't know what to do. Relatives would say, "It's been a hard time for him. Be kind. He'll come out of it." I was not reassured. I was glad there were no guns in our home. My mother and I worried he'd become ill. It was as though he went into hibernation emotionally, oblivious to his surroundings. He had not worked for fifteen months. There was no longer laughter in our home. I think it was hardest for my mother. She loved him. She could feel his disintegration. Dark.

Today, I know things happen in the brain. Dopamine, serotonin, and new chemical balances. Clinical depression. Because no one saw him anymore, the neighbors asked about him.

My mother put it simply: "He's down about not being able to work. Just staying to himself. We're okay, though. Richard's working."

The neighbors didn't need any more information. What was happening with my father was happening in families throughout the entire city. The good part about neighbors knowing though is they could come to you if they heard about a job opening. Nothing came through the newspapers except standing in line with two hundred other angry unemployed workers to fill out an application. The few jobs that came along were filled by friends, or more likely, friends of friends.

At eighteen months, a year-and-a-half after he lost his job, a neighbor put a note through the mail slot of our aluminum front door. "Just wanted Joe to know they're looking for a sweeper at the plastics factory on Seven Mile Road and Mt. Elliott."

Among unskilled factory workers, being a sweeper was the lowest status job. It required less skill than being a machine operator or assembly worker. The sweeper kept the factory floor clean, put away boxes and used materials, and ran small errands for the workers who might need another wrench or a greater number of a particular kind of screw or brace. Factories easily became soiled, and most sweepers worked hard.

The day my father went to apply for the job, my mother helped him to prepare. His greatest challenge would be the interview. With a significant loss of hearing and a history of hypertension, he could become flustered in formal situations with strangers, aware that his lack of hearing could be held against him, or worse, indicative of a lack of intelligence. She had what I thought was a brilliant insight for doing well in the interview. She told him to take a small photo he had of his garden from the previous summer. It would reflect well on his ability to show care and to keep things neat. It did. He got the job.

That evening, my father opened a bottle of wine and we had drinks all around. It was the happiest I'd seen him in nearly two years. When I asked him what his hourly wage would be, my mother gave me a look that said, "That's the last question, Raymond." His answer, without any guile or regret, was $1.15 an hour. All of us at the table knew that was a full dollar below the union standard. But he ended up working there nearly ten years. He didn't complain about the wage. He felt lucky to have a job. He was popular. He liked helping people. He felt needed. He died there, a stroke on the factory floor, sudden and final. Upwards of seventy people who worked with him came to his memorial service. I felt grateful. I knew how much their attendance would have meant to him.

"Whether the decision was to stay or leave, it would affect the rest of our lives."

The first year my father worked at the plastics factory I had what is called "free floating anger," like give me a ball pein hammer and put me in a display room of glass windows. I'll smash them in no time. The aggression would come upon me when I was alone. The feeling scared me because it was real and I didn't know why I wanted to bust things up. It eventually left me the way water drains out of a large pool, noticeable after a while but not at first.

Now, in the stamping plant with my brother, three years after my father's death, I could feel that kind of ire coming again. This time I knew why. The job was not only impossible, it was phony. If someone wanted to really clean that factory, they would have to shut it down, like they do to redesign and reconnect an assembly line for a new model car. The job was a checkmark on some kind of maintenance report. Get a crew in, show the name of the contractor, the expense for the work, and avoid any further inspection.

I asked my brother, my sarcasm not well-hidden, "Where do we begin?"

When he looked at me, his voice had another tone—don't make me sorry I got you this job. "Up there."

He pointed to the air ducts that ran across the ceiling of the factory. They were about four feet high and six feet wide, huge rectangles, massive hallways of moving air to cool the plant and provide a source of rejuvenating oxygen for the workers. At each end of them there were massive fans like the propellers on a B-52 bomber.

"You're kidding."

"No. We have a week to clean those vents out." There were three other men on the crew. One held a regular job with the company. His name was Tom, and he was the assistant to my brother. The other two men, Marcus and Eli, were probably homeless, picked out of a line of day workers that gathered every morning against a fence on East Seven Mile Road. They were watching with guarded amusement as Richard and I talked. I could tell they didn't know what the job was either.

"How do we clean them? I didn't see any giant toothbrushes in the van."

My brother smiled. "With big, big rags, clean and fresh."

I looked at him. My bewilderment was obvious.

Richard said, "There's a small door to enter the vents. We'll shut off the fans. You and Marcus will crawl in there. Take a bunch of rags with you. The bottom of the vent is all that you'll have to clean. About an inch of oil and grease condense there. Wipe it off with the rags. We'll work out a pulley system to get soiled ones back to us and fresh rags to you. Every hour you'll get a ten-minute break. And don't worry, those vents are solid and attached with bolts to the ceiling. We'll put portable lights on the front of your hats so you can see what you're doing."

About two hours later, Marcus and I were on our hands and knees, inside the vent, our faces slick with sweat, the headlamps casting our shadows in sharp relief, the rest of the space a narrow volume of black depthless air. We had a pile of clean rags behind us. The pulley system worked fine. Best of all, I didn't feel claustrophobic.

Marcus looked at me, smiling. We were getting the job done. I smiled back. Marcus said, "You have big teeth but they're nice."

I said, "Thanks," and reached for another rag.

At that moment I felt a kind of awe. It may have been my youth and temporary circumstances. Yet, I realized I was having the experience of raw-boned factory work. The cavity surrounding me, the sounds and scents, literally down on my knees in muck and absurdity to earn money I needed. My brother was on the floor below me, probably feeling a bit desperate because he didn't know when he could leave this work. And then there was our father, the one that had come before us, who knew a way to be grateful for it.

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