

cold beneath the deep treads of the tires. In the freezing, concrete yard outside of the Service Garage I see a couple of slouching figures in army-green parkas. They stand there, next to the wire fence, leaning slowly to one side then the other, faceless, breathing cold mist, concerned about something, somewhere. They are, I am told by my grandfather, *the workers*. Once inside the Garage I see more hulking shadows of men, all wearing dark gray slacks and grimy white oxfords with the sleeves rolled up, all standing around in the dry heat, in the honeyed, whiskey-colored light. I want to remember that all of them had a slight limp, and that they were picking the calluses off of their fingers. They gaze at me briefly, emotionless, then continue working or talking or laughing. "Good men," my grandfather says. "They work hard."

Before long my grandfather grabs me under the armpits and lifts me into the dark cabby of one of the trucks. He slams the door, I grasp the wheel and savor the oily, leather smell of the interior—a big-man smell. I put on the yellow hard-hat. Slowly at first, then spastically, I press the center of the wheel, and fill the huge garage with a trumpet-call to announce my own arrival to work. Ten or fifteen trucks later I'm ready to go, and so is my grandfather. In his truck, on the way home, I play with the snaky seatbelt strap, growl like a demon, and wonder why he sucks on lemon rinds.

Of course he was a drinker—many of them were who worked with the trucks. At least I remember it that way. A man, say his name is Carl, has just come in from working on the trucks that are parked out in the sub-zero Iowa winter. His heavy black boots are limping snow across the gray floor of the Service Garage. Because his left leg is shorter than his right, he has to wear an elevated sole; a sole that catches snow and dirt, and makes an irregular scraping noise on the cement like a man rubbing his own stubble. You are a young boy, say, honk-

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Good Workers

To work, my grandfather said, was to work. To play was to play. And he meant to *work*—digging ditches, shoveling shit for pennies until the flesh on your hands peeled back in red strips. When I was just a teen he told me about those bloody hands with a serious, unfeeling pride that seemed awesome to me, a boy in school, the son of a lawyer.

When I was even younger, maybe four, my grandfather would drive me down to the Gas and Electric Service Garage where he worked, and while there he would let me honk the horns on all the bright yellow company trucks. The way I remember it, it is always winter, and my grandfather picks me up around dusk when the horizon holds a strip of azure beneath the blackness. A few strings of Christmas lights, red and green, linger on this house or that. The cabin of my grandfather's truck is warm, and the crunching snow sounds

ing horns, when you see him coming. As he passes, you slouch down in the seat of the truck to hide, because, along with the limp, you notice that the southern border of his gray flattop nearly touches the dark ridge of his eyebrows. He seems, to you, otherworldly. He's cussing through his large lips, something about how this is the goddamned last time he'll work on that carburetor. The *goddamned* last time. Then you see him in the fluorescence of the square breakroom, beneath the dusty 7-Up clock, taking his greasy hide gloves off one finger at a time, reaching into the pocket of his parka for his father's flask, and letting his prominent lower lip lead his mouth to the rim. He'll work a hard, cold afternoon and past supper, making up, perhaps, for being what his older brother in Chicago calls a stupid boozer. Such a man did work there, several such men, and my grandfather told me their stories. They were, at times, a burden to employ, he said, all that guilt and anger built up inside of them. And, of course, there was the drinking. But they were hard workers. Good men.

But the story my grandfather never told was his own—he left that to others. My mother remembers that once, when she was just a young girl, she saw him collapse on the front porch stairs, drunk, and that she screamed because she thought he had polio like her grandma and that he would die. But he was never a violent drunk, she might add. She describes him as a happy, sidewalk-whistler type, a man willing to play jacks with her and her girlfriends on sunny evenings in spite of all the many hours he put in at the Garage. Just like so, on the verge of spilling forth her anger, she thinks of her father's work, his very hard work, and it will soften that anger. The belief that a man who works hard can erase all his sins runs deep into the folds of my family, and, I suspect, into the midwestern landscape in which we were all raised.

By the time I understood the redemptive power of work, I

was three months away from high school graduation, on the cusp of independence, and speculating, as high school seniors often do, that my future would hold nothing but failure and sin. Then, during one evening that March, without prompting, I called Mr. Decker, the owner of a local truck line, and asked him if I could have a job washing trucks, nothing better. He told me to just punch in, anytime.

So I showed up at Decker Truck Line the next Saturday around nine, wearing my father's old work boots, the ones he wore when he shoveled by-products at the Hormel Plant; a job that, as he proudly recalls, left bleeding sores on his hands. I punched in and walked through the huge garage, tracking in snow and dirt, nodding hello to all the mechanics and drivers, breathing cold mist. I walked up a few cement steps into a small, darker garage where the walls smelled mossy, and the long rubber hoses lay around like dead bull snakes on Highway 20, brown and flat and wet. I grabbed two cream-colored buckets, filled them with hot water from the rusty water spout, and added a squeeze or two of soap.

In memory I see my silhouette, dark against the bright light in the open garage door, boyishly thin, kneeling while the steam from the buckets warms my face from the March morning. In that pose I'm feeling, somewhere near the small of my back, that I have arrived, finally, to work. Did I recall, at that quiet moment, all those men, all those workers that haunted the winters of my childhood? Did the soapsuds in the buckets smell like so many old lemon rinds, sucked dry and scattered on the front seat of my grandfather's truck? However it really was then, I see this now: I am scrubbing the trucks furiously, washing the grime from the white metal, pausing to watch it slide down, slowly, in a gray stream, over the tires, along the cement, and, finally, into the drain as if it carries along with it all my future transgressions.

