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## Saturdays

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## Saturdays

I remember getting up early on Saturday mornings during the spring, summer and fall, months — what seemed like every weekend for the same ritual. My Dad was always the first one out. My brother Dave and I usually woke to the gulping sound of him starting up a chainsaw or the crunching of our gravel driveway as he shuffled vehicles on it. We pulled on our work jeans and laced up old boots before we headed downstairs to eat multiple bowls of Cheerios. Sitting at the counter, looking towards the sink I could see the evidence of Dad's breakfast — one glass of orange juice which he usually drank in his office.

As soon as breakfast was over I threaded my belt through the loops and hung my jackknife in its worn leather case on my right side. I never went out for a Saturday in the woods without my four-inch, stainless steel lockblade. It was one of the larger, more deliberate purchases of my youth and aside from considering it an essential tool for the day's tasks it was almost a part of my personality. I still take it out of its case today when I camp and hike — usually to spread peanut butter or something, but I don't wear it on my belt anymore. Knife in place, comfortable work clothes on, Dave and I found ourselves out on the driveway getting things ready.

It must have rained some of those days, but I only have an image of cool mornings as the morning sun started to hit our backs and dry out the dewy lawn. Standing there watching Dad tinker with the two or three chainsaws and various parts littered about on the tailgate of the F-250, not fully awake yet, we looked on with hazy expressions as the fresh morning air started to invade our sleepiness. He was tightening chains and pouring in the mixed gas from the old, green wine jug - grease and last week's sawdust already clinging to everything in the vicinity of the truck. Dad would tighten the caps and crank on the saws with all the strength in his right arm. I remember watching the muscles in his face tighten into knots, pulling his lips back and showing all his teeth, his eyes squinting tightly with every pull — and me thinking I would never be strong enough to start those saws. There is something about the gaggy-sounding chug of a chainsaw just before it hits its healthy whine that whenever I hear it, reminds me of my Dad. I watched the cloud of blue smoke envelope him once he got one going and smile because he always got one going. The saws were old (Dad applied the same

principle to chainsaws as he did to cars — never buy new) and we usually only had one working at a time, but one always worked. I realized at an early age that I was not mechanically minded (though it took a few mishaps — such as the time I disassembled most of the vital components of the riding lawnmower in an attempt to remove the blades) and I always wondered who taught him about fixing everything — what would I do some day when I had a problem with a car, or chainsaw for example? I watched closely hoping to learn something.

Once Dad was satisfied that one of the saws could perform — at least for the morning — we were off to get the tractor started. Tractor driving was an acquired ability that I was always proud of. Dave and I both loved to drive the tractor and we had inadvertently developed a rule that time in the driver's seat was to be divided exactly evenly. Although there was a time when riding in the wagon was fun, such things did not interest us nearly as much after we could drive.

The tractor became a focal point in my memory for some of the most intense conflicts of my young life. Even though we are very different, I only remember a few, rare instances in which Dave and I didn't get along; it seems like most of them had to do with unequal driving time on Saturdays. Dad tried to stay out of the competition because he knew we would take any partiality on his part as an indication that he thought one was better qualified than the other - this would be catastrophic. In our minds better qualified meant better worker, and with both of us wanting to prove greater loyalty to the day's task... Well, you can see the conflict.

My brother is three years younger but every privilege I grew into seemed to become effectual for him at the same time. To this day he gloatingly adds to any argument about who is the better worker (and we have these often), that he was driving a tractor three years earlier than I (as if it was because of some inherent "work gene" that he is blessed with). Working hard on Saturdays seemed elevated to the status of a virtue for my brother and I.

Monitoring minutes behind the wheel as placidly as we could (so Dad wouldn't see us arguing), we would go on with the work. We had two methods for laying a dead tree on the ground so it could be cut into lengths and hauled to the shed by Dave and me. The first was for dad to simply cut it down, and although this method had its own set of tricks and could provide a low level of viewing pleasure for Dave and I, the more complicated and infinitely more enjoyable option was to pull it over with the tractor.

Dad hoisted the aluminum ladder as high as it would go by pushing on the rungs with one hand and pulling down on the red cord with the other, leaning it towards the narrow trunk near the top, snapping off dead branches that rained down on us. One of us backed the tractor up into a position close enough to

attach the chain and cable. I used to think it very risky for Dad to stand at the top of the extension ladder with the limbs of those dead pine trees supporting his 225 pounds, trying to loop a heavy-duty chain around the trunk without losing his balance or snapping that crucial limb. I suppose if we still needed to go out and get wood this year Dad would have me climb up there and do it — and I wouldn't mind. Well, I wouldn't be scared, but I'm sure it would feel awkward — like I was treading on forbidden territory; there were just some jobs that only Dad could do.

There were a few other activities that we were forced to stand on the side and watch like using the chainsaws and driving the tractor to pull a tree out, but most of the Saturday morning jobs we had a chance to grow into. Our responsibility once the chain was rigged was to watch closely while sitting on the tractor hitch to provide weight as it rocked back and forth in rhythm with the conifer and then scream “timber” at its breaking point, making sure we could be heard over the drone of the engine (just in case someone unknown was in the woods). For some of the taller trees, Dad would be the only one on the tractor and we watched as he squeaked the tractor around nearby living trees that would sheild him so the dead one would miss him when it broke.

These were the interesting, exciting portions of the day and even though we wouldn't have gathered much wood for the winter, Dave and I would have been content to watch this part of the chore repeatedly. The real work began when Dad started the saw. The clouds of blue smoke and sawdust, coupled with the noisy gnawing of the chainsaw sent each of us into our own trance. As the morning sunbeams penetrated to the forest floor we would all three work steadily, in our own world — our own thoughts — lifting the logs and throwing them in the wagon, piling it high, disregarding the few that missed or fell off. That's another part of what was so great about Saturdays and outside labor. Nothing is exact, perfect, neat; things can lay where they fall and all that matters is the really big stuff like hauling the stumps and chopping the big logs, not the brush or twigs that get trampled and eventually blend back into the surroundings.

My thoughts were interrupted by the silence that flooded my world when the saw chugged to a stop. The successive *kerchunk* and *bang* of logs landing on the pile was broken by Dad's voice. “Let's quit for a coffee break and see what your mother has to eat.” Saturday mornings were usually time for Mom to get baking done for the week and we would sit on the front porch sampling most of it along with our black coffee. I wasn't particularly drawn to the flavor of the coffee itself, but it was a part of the whole experience. That was just what men did when they got firewood. Dad always drank it black (of course I followed suit) and the taste managed to grow on me.

Back down in the woods we would keep working into the early afternoon,

my brother and I, hauling logs, stacking them elsewhere, and occasionally stopping to help with the take down of another tree. We broke for a quick lunch before continuing into the afternoon. We did a variety of tasks after lunch. If Dad felt that we had gathered enough chord for the day (or if he just got distracted) we would get involved removing stumps from earlier years.

This too, was an event. I lost all track of time when working with a stubborn system of roots. Experimenting with leverage and horsepower, adjusting the chain length and location, easing off the clutch or popping it to give quick tugs, I gained new insights and experience with each one. It was a learning process that never got old. I retrieved the chain hundreds of times after it slipped off and lashed back at the bucking tractor and pushed the tires out of their self-dug trenches. Countless times draining myself physically, but never tiring mentally. That was the beauty of it. Digging around the stumps with spades, hacking away with axes and hatchets, it was easy to work until dusk without realizing it.

When the sun finally had descended in the sky it was time for the bonfire. It seemed a sacred hour. By the end of the afternoon we would have accumulated a substantial pile of debris: stumps, branches, rotten wood. All this would be dragged and dumped on the large, permanent, charcoal stain on our driveway. I went inside to get the box of matches and wait for Dad to grab the red, 5-gallon gas can out of the garage. He would walk around the pile spilling its contents on the brush until the setting sun glinted off the wet sticks.

Dad struck a match and started moving away from the heap before flicking it into the center of the pile. In an instant our eyes would light up as we felt a warm rush of air and heard the deep, quick, "woof." In one thrilling moment the entire brown stack would blaze orange and red and not a second later the flames would land again and begin their consuming task. We spent the next few hours as it got darker cleaning up the equipment and putting the saws and vehicles away. Down in the woods it was getting impossible to see, but up on the driveway the fire cast illuminating strokes around the open area. We would go back to the fire and push it together and heave it higher, keeping it compact. Our faces were red and dry from the heat. Eventually we would allow our bodies to rest just leaning on our shovels standing back from the fire. Staring into its center, mesmerized by the glow, our sappy hands stuck to the wooden handles that still read "Bednarek" from bygone church workdays. This was the end of our workday. Standing there feeling the warmth reach me I felt satisfied, full, real, alive, complete. I knew that next week I would wake up early and start the day all over again, but for now, I could stand and enjoy the day for what it really meant.

Later on, inside, the satisfaction would linger. I feel like I fail in my aim because I don't mean to say that we all felt like a hard day's work is good for the

soul — as true as it may be. In the evenings my Dad would pull a frosty Buffalo Bills mug (from their 1978, AFC Championship year — those mugs were exactly my age) from the freezer and pour a glass of beer while Dave and I would sit and guzzle grape soda, waiting for Mom to finish the pizza. Saturdays were traditional in so many ways. It wasn't just that we did things the same way every week, but that we did them together, that we had consistency. Maybe I can't tell it exactly — at least what it meant in my life, but I can share parts — images that I remember. I feel like I have to because things are different now. I am home for about five Saturday's a year, hardly consistent.

My brother still works outside around the house, sometimes with my father, most of the time by himself. He doesn't see much value in my major in college. Reading literature and writing are evils to him. For him, no amount of schoolwork could ever equal the work he does outside in an hour. When I am home and we work in the woods he seems to think that I have lost the ability to drive a tractor and toss firewood in a wagon. I can't blame him. I remember what Saturdays were like — I just never thought it could stay that simple.