

Men's Work

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Katie was up on the roof. Traditionally, that would be my job, things involving roofs and heights and tools of any kind, but I was terrified. Not of the highness of the roof, but of falling. I didn't work well with my hands either. That was another one of those man jobs that I didn't really do. So Katie was there while I sat inside and drank tea. I know, traditionally a woman's drink. Or maybe not. Maybe only recently. Didn't masculine British types drink tea, or did we now consider anyone with an accent effeminate too?

My father was a man's man. He worked as a machinist until he retired five years ago, and he used to like to tell me how you could earn a good living doing a man's work without having to go to college, as if education was some kind of failure or another thing women did to children only for as long as they needed to, until the boys turned men could get jobs, real jobs, jobs where you could lose an arm and a leg or a lung. "We did real work," my father said, as if anything involving the life of the mind was some kind of failing. My mother, a teacher herself, didn't feel the same way. "You did well, Mattie," she said of my English professor job, a job that allowed me to keep my hands soft and my legs safe. There was no danger of losing a lung.

My stomach had started to get a little soft, too soft, my father thought. "That's from all that sitting around," my father would say when he would see me and pat my stomach. I wouldn't say he did it affectionately. Instead, the gesture seemed more feudal, like a lord touching a peasant, as if to say, *I'm the one in charge here*. My father, despite his lack of education, never felt a lack of pride. "What, those liberal elite types, they think they're better than everyone, smoking their pot and mooching off the government." The economy was in free fall. It seemed like everyone was mooching off the government, but my father didn't want to hear that. He had earned. He had saved. I tried to tell him once, over a beer I choked down out of politeness, that there were no good jobs for the working class anymore. If you wanted to get a good job, you almost had to get an education.

"Bullshit," he said. "People your age don't know what it is to work anymore." If my father could see Katie up on the roof trying to plug up a leak, he would be ashamed. But I wasn't sure that there was anything I did or didn't do that didn't make him ashamed.

Katie came inside looking all sooty as if she had climbed into the roof instead of standing on top of it.

"Hey, Santa," I said.

“There’s a bird’s nest in there,” she said. “I think we need to get it out before winter.”

I wondered why the season mattered. “Shouldn’t we get it out now, so we don’t have birds coming down the chimney, wandering into our house, dropping poop like unwanted Christmas presents?”

Katie sighed. “You do it then, Matt.”

Sometimes, she was like my father. She liked to taunt me. It made her feel superior, I think, to know that she was good at work-with-your-hands kind of things like changing tires and unstopping toilets. Or it made her feel better because she didn’t have a PhD like I did.

I was good at analyzing literature, writing journal articles about it, publishing books. My last book, *Lancelot’s Last Stand* had been a critical, if not a popular, success.

My father said to me, “People want to know why you can’t buy your books in the bookstore.”

“You can order them,” I said. “Like on Amazon.”

“But they’re not there, next to Stephen King and Dean Koontz,” he argued. Those two were my father’s literary heroes. He believed that reading was for relaxation, escape. I don’t think he believed in reading non-fiction or at least not the kind of non-fiction that I wrote. Maybe he’d read Bill Bryson or man battles beast tales of the wild where you had to choose between one leg or the other, something like that. I tried to avoid talking about books with my father. It was on the long list of taboo subjects like politics (He was Republican, I was a Democrat), work, even sports. He couldn’t understand why I continued to root for the Denver Broncos, since Denver was a city in which I had never lived. In my father’s opinion, you rooted for the home team, and our home team was in Ohio. But Ohio was a falling-apart, down-on-its-luck state where people like my father couldn’t accept that there weren’t good factory jobs for life anymore. Still, most of the men like my father stayed in their shabby towns and watched them fall apart and acted like they were just as good as they ever were or not really that bad. I had gotten out as soon as I could. In other times, times when an education hadn’t been available to me, I might have joined the army to escape, but, luckily, with my scholarship to a good four-year school waiting, I didn’t have to go that far because I don’t know if I would have even made it through basic training. I think my father would have loved that, if I had joined the army. That was more of a working man’s thing. When a man’s son joined the army, it was something he could be proud of. My father talked of his own days as a medic in the army fondly.

“Times have changed,” my mother reminded him. “Look at Joey Porter’s son, who wound up dead in Iraq at 24 years old.” Joey Porter left a kid behind. Another point of contention was

that Katie and I did not have a child. I wasn't sure if Katie wanted a child, or maybe I wasn't sure if I did. It wasn't something that we talked about.

With our roles all bent backward and out of shape, who would stay home and take care of a kid? In response to the question of the birds, I said to Katie, "Fine, we can deal with the nest another day."

It wasn't long after that one of the birds did get in the house. I got it out. I felt proud. It was an almost manly duty. I texted Katie. "A bird got in the house. Chased it out with a broom."

Katie, who had been a former student a few years ago, who'd stopped by to let me know that she'd moved back to town to take over her father's car dealership after business school, tended to text back with one or two letter answers. "K," she wrote. Sometimes, she wrote a whole word. "Lunch?" she asked.

I was writing an article on medieval romances, not romances like we know today but tales of adventures about knights and ladies. I felt like I was always defensively explaining what I did, especially to my father, who seemed to purposely and stubbornly believe that when I said *romances*, I meant that I wrote about Nora Roberts and Barbara Taylor Bradford.

My mother, on the other hand, had read my books. "I tried," my father told me once, "but I didn't make it past the first page. Then, *Pawn Stars* came on, and I watched that instead." I think my father would be happier if I owned a pawn shop, conning people out of hard-earned money, or if I owned a car dealership, like Katie's father did.

I texted Katie back saying that lunch would be great.

Katie was like the best of my mother and father rolled into one. Not that I was looking for a girl like my mother. Katie was, in my opinion, modern woman glamorous. She wore makeup, but not too much makeup, no all-night curler glamour routines for her. Sometimes just a light lipstick or a blush. Sometimes, nothing at all. Still, even my father admired her.

"That girl of yours," my father said, "is something else."

Katie, dark hair, long legs, perky, perfect boobs was beautiful without much effort. Her father had believed that women should be able to take care of themselves, and Katie could. She didn't need me to come rescue her if something went wrong on the highway. She could change her own car oil and even change mine.

"What does she see in you?" My father once asked me. I don't think he was trying to be rude. He was just curious.

"Women today," I said, though I knew as I said it that I was beginning a sentence like one my father might say, "don't want a man to take care of them." I knew this wasn't true for all

women. Some women, like the ones my back-home friends had married, still wanted their husbands to make all of the money while they stayed at home and cared for the kids. Some women just wanted two or three kids, the perfect suburban number. Others wanted a more extreme number like four or five. One former friend of mine had six kids. I never heard from him anymore, and I could see why. He worked all hours of day and night so that his wife, who had become obese sometime between kids four and six, could pursue some kind of pre-feminist dream of domesticity. She friended me, and everyone she had ever met on Facebook, so she could post pictures of her perfectly beautiful, perfectly bratty kids. A life like that seemed enough to make a man want to wander off into some kind of medieval fog. I saw the guy once, a few years ago, between kids three and four and asked him if he was happy. “Sometimes, he said, “it all just seems like too much.” I nodded like I understood.

Katie and I had drifted from sex into marriage. She never pressured me to propose like some women do, the ones in lame popular culture representations, who are always asking: *When will he pop the question?* We had been living together a year when she dragged me to some chick flick movie. She did like chick flick movies. In the movie, the woman suddenly gets cancer and dies, and the man realizes how much he misses her, how much he never told her that he appreciated her. The next day, I went out and bought a ring.

Katie cried when she saw it. I gave it to her at our favorite Thai restaurant, Thai Garden where she always ordered beef pad thai, and I ordered shrimp curry. She seemed surprised and pleased by the ring. She said, “Oh, Mattie, you’re such a gem.”

But it took her three days to say yes. Then, she put the ring on and didn’t take it off. “Everyone says how tasteful it is,” she said finally, as if this was confirmation that she had made the right decision. “My father thinks it’ll be good for me to be married,” she added. That was when she took me to meet him. He was an extremely overweight bald man who tried to run his business from his home, through Katie. His house looked borderline hoarder, but I didn’t mention it, and neither did she. When we left, she looked like she might cry.

“You see why I had to come home now?” was all she said. If not for him, I thought, Katie could have been running a multi-national corporation someplace bigger, more urban like Seattle or LA, instead of in this college town, which was a nice place, named one of the best places to retire, a place with bike paths and well-maintained parks and seasonally appropriate festivals, a place to raise a family and then watch two out of three kids leave.

I thought it was ironic that the man who had taught his daughter to be independent couldn’t take care of himself, but I didn’t say so. Instead, I said, “You’re a good daughter, Katie.” And we didn’t mention it again.

Katie suggested the Thai place, the one where we had gotten engaged. I didn't know how it stayed open, to be honest. Sometimes, it was crowded with a large party of people enjoying a reunion or anniversary. Other times, we were the only ones there. Today was one of the latter times.

Katie ordered something different than she usually got (something with sweet potato and mango), and I teased her. "No pad thai today?"

She shook her head. "My stomach hurts."

Why lunch then? I wondered but didn't ask.

Between ordering and waiting, Katie finally said, "I'm pregnant," and I understood finally why it had taken her so long to say yes to the ring. Marriage was commitment, for the rest of her life. Is this what she wanted—this town, this life, me?

"I need a minute," I finally said.

"It's okay," she said. "Take your time."

I went outside and called my father. "It's about damn time," was all he said. Then I went back inside to Katie and asked her the right questions. When did she find out? How long had she known? When was she due?

"January, I think." For some reason, my mind went to the birds, how I would have to take care of them now, how I would have to take care of a lot of things, how I couldn't send my pregnant wife up on the roof.

After Katie left and I went home, I went to dig out work gloves and a ladder. My hands were sweating like they had done when I was learning to drive, but I thought the gloves would help. I climbed the rungs like someone talking his last walk from his jail cell to the execution chamber.

All the while, I kept picturing Katie Madonna-like, as in some medieval painting, holding a child, looking adoringly at him and he back at her. I remembered how my father had tried to teach me to drive, how he'd finally given up when I'd pulled over and cried and left the task to my mother. "I can't deal with his fear," my father explained.

Up on the roof, I felt shaky, unmoored. I got down on my hands and knees and tried to wish away the sweat beneath my gloves.

I reached into the chimney and fished the nest out, but there were no birds in sight. I wondered what to do with it then. If I should toss it off the roof and leave them to build a new one. But that seemed cruel. Weren't we nesting too?

Though my whole body was still shaking, I climbed down the ladder, holding the nest in one hand. I tried not to crush it. Then, I moved it to a front-yard tree.

I texted Katie. *Got the nest out of the chimney.*

She didn't respond. Maybe she didn't understand. Maybe no one would understand. Maybe I didn't understand myself.

I thought about calling my mother and telling her, but what would she say? What would she care? Had my father told her the news that she would be a grandmother? That I would be a father.

I decided to go back to working on my article, the one about medieval romances.

I thought about the role of the hero in medieval romances, how he is often meant to save the nation. What I had done was small, nothing like that at all. Still, I felt exhilarated.

Katie texted back, using full words for once: *Do you think the birds will die?*

Maybe, I wrote, *they'll find somewhere new, somewhere better. Someplace beyond what they imagined.*

I heard the phone vibrate to let me know that it was ringing. Caller ID said *Parents*. In less than a year, that would describe Katie and I. I debated whether I should pick up. Were there things they could tell me beyond what I already knew about life and death and love?

I took a breath. Then, I answered. It was my father, calling back to congratulate me. He didn't swear. He didn't tell me the way I was living my life was all wrong. Instead, it sounded like there was a catch in his throat when he said, "Your mother and I are so happy for you."

"Thanks," I said. "Katie and I are happy too."

After I hung up, I saw another text from Katie.

Matt, she wrote, *I'm still worried about the birds.*

Don't worry, I wrote. *The birds will be okay.* I resorted to Katie text and typed *K?*

She texted back and smiley face symbol.

Come home early. We can look for them, if you want.

She didn't write back for a while. While I waited, I wondered about the birds, if any of them were still in the chimney, if they would make it out, and if there was anything I could do to help guide them. Then, I thought back to my childhood, to my father teaching me to ride my bike in winter, our breath like thought bubble in the air. I remembered this one day when I was bundled up in a coat so puffy I looked like a walking pool noodle how my father had taken my training wheels off and I'd ridden my bike into the street all by myself. "You can do it, Matt," my father said with pride in his voice. And I had.