

Chainsaws & Sharks

The trunk popped open with a pair of slow beeps and a hydraulic hiss. I miss when the opening and closing of car parts sounded like good old-fashioned metal slamming against metal. A pop and a crunch that sounded like an Autobot punching a Decepticon in the face. The loud bang of metal hitting metal. A door that sounds like it could crush your hand. Metal that won't dent, no matter how hard you slam it closed. I miss those sounds. The cars our dads drove were like this. The fiberglass and plastic of today's vehicles sounds like two pieces of Tupperware falling to the floor with muffled thuds. Those doors slide open with a click and a silent hush. Today's cars sound like yesterday's toys. Or maybe the cars of today are the toys of tomorrow.

As we stand behind dad's car in my driveway watching the hydraulic trunk lid slowly reveal its contents, the beat-up and battered-but-still-intact-and-solid box becomes visible. I watch Dad watching the lid lift. Just like I have my entire life, I watch him as he gives the hydraulics an extra little push at the end to make sure the trunk stays open. Or opens a little faster maybe. Impatiently bouncing on his toes. *Hurry up and wait*, he has always said. Still says. Like the extra half a second is going to cost him the day. I catch myself saying it lately. Hurry up and wait.

Finally, the trunk fully extends. There it is. His tool of choice for chopping wood the next two or three hours. The debris from four trees that were felled in my backyard need to be cut up

and stacked on a woodpile for future access. Future campfires. His chainsaw — orange and black and scuffed with years of use. It's amazing how many things he has found to cut since acquiring this tool. Things that definitely didn't need cutting are cut for no reason other than they became an excuse. Gasoline powered. A STIHL chainsaw. Sixteen-inch blade: the Dad tool of all Dad tools. The perfect lightweight, compact blade for trimming and cutting small forests. Forests in one's backyard, front yard, and side yard. A grin spreads across my Dad's face. A look full of the knowledge of what we are about to do together. What we are about to accomplish.

"You've had that forever," I smile. No, that is not a question.

"Not too long. Just over a decade," he replies, lifting up the box. "I had a similar one before this one though."

"Looks exactly the same as the one you had when I was little."

"Yea, it does." He grins. "It's the same model. Why upgrade on perfection, right?"

He is notorious for saying this line. Whether it's about Mom's choice in men or his choice in replacing an older something he already owns. New Balance sneakers? Why change? Grass stains add character. No Nikes needed. No Reeboks even looked at. Buy the same brand, same model, same color. "*Why upgrade on perfection?*" Not sure if it's his resistance to change or his comfort in the routine, but either way he is just fine with sticking with the things that work — and have been working.

I take the box from him and place it in the wheelbarrow. Inside this battered and bruised box is his well-loved chainsaw with two extra chains. A small black plastic bottle of small-engine oil; a white container of chain, bar, and sprocket oil; and a red container filled with a mixture of gas and oil.

“Just in case.” As if I was going to ask him a question.

“50 to 1 ratio,” again he explains things I am not even wondering about.

“Why?” I ask, now curious despite being in my late-30s and never once wondering about oil-to-gas ratios. “Why not just gasoline from the gas station?”

“Jay, that would ruin your engine,” he answers like he is talking to an idiot. Then he softens a tiny bit and explains. “It would seize up and no more chainsaw.”

We walk down the driveway and into the backyard, matching our strides step for step. I am wheeling the wheelbarrow he bought for me a few Father’s Days ago. Actually, it was on his first visit to my house after we moved in when he saw my beat-to-shit, garage-sale-find and mostly rusted out, barely still-red wheelbarrow. Almost immediately, we both jumped into his 2009 Chevy Impala and headed to the hardware store. I had my pick of wheelbarrows: black, orange, or yellow. Plastic or metal. My decision, he said. I grabbed the metallic black Craftsman one and he nodded in approval.

“Excellent choice,” I felt like Indiana Jones choosing the correct Holy Grail in the *Last Crusade*.

————— // ————— // —————

Four fallen trees worth of brush lay in a huge pile in my backyard. Last week, we had a professional tree service come and take down the dead pines before a storm dropped one of them on something in our yard. So last week six guys, two skid-steer loaders, and a full day’s worth of labor went to work removing the old relics of yesteryear. Roughly six hours, maybe less. I was amazed at the speed, quickness, and thoroughness of how these guys worked. They left us the brush because we asked them to. It would have cost me extra for them to clean that up too and I

needed firewood for my fire pit anyway. The head of the crew — the one who actually looked like a true-blue lumberjack with jeans, a red and black flannel, and an award-winning beard — explained that the wood wouldn't be good for burning until the following summer, but we started burning it right away anyway. He was right. Go figure. The lumberjack was right. It was smoky as all get out for the first handful of fires we had, and the following summer the wood was perfect for burning. Instead of just leaving the brush all over our yard, they put the brush in four gigantic piles. The wood piles extended over the entirety of the back line of my yard, roughly one length of a high school swimming pool.

————— // ————— // —————

The first pile of pine brush was about one human high and two cars wide. And this is today's mission with my father. We walk through the backyard towards the pile, me pushing the wheelbarrow with the chainsaw box and him walking next to it, talking about nothing too important. The Buffalo Bills.

“What do you think of the Bills this year?” he asks. “I've been on the road with your mother, so I haven't seen much of them. Retirement has its advantages. They as good as it sounds?”

“Yea, they're good. They're fun to watch again.” My eyes blur to reminisce about the season. “The offense can score at any time. It reminds me of the good ol' days of Jim Kelly and the no-huddle offense.”

“They running no huddle?”

“No,” it comes out shorter than intended. A thing we both do. So, I soften and explain. “Well, sometimes, but not really. I just mean they look like they can score at any moment. On every play there’s that possibility. Just like the K-gun.”

The next hour or so goes by and we get into a routine. I bring the branches, lay them across two cinder blocks so it makes a sawhorse-style table of sorts. He cuts the branches into manageable chunks, and I pile them up on the pallet making a woodpile. We’re almost mechanical. Branch, cut, pile. Branch, cut, pile. The roar of the chainsaw drowns out any would-be conversation, other than the few shouted words and pointing to each other for direction. We’re on the same page. We’re clicking. Before I know it, there’s a pile of wood stacked as tall as my eight-year-old daughter.

The chainsaw stops roaring. He says he could use a break. I agree, and then I go into the house and bring out two glasses of ice water. We sit at the picnic table and look over our accomplishments thus far.

“So, it looks like your guy won.”

“Yea, he won but he’s not my guy. I just didn’t like your guy more than him.” I say this out loud, but the red warning sign starts flashing in my brain. Don’t go here. Don’t go here. Not today. Politics come up and so do the loud words. One walking away. One huffing. Some under-the-breath mumbles. I was planning on completely avoiding the recent Presidential election, but now I can’t.

The next few minutes is the usual back and forth of ideologies. The usual dismantling of each other’s views as we sit there sipping iced-cold water and looking over the stacks of firewood that we just piled up together. The usual not-really-listening-to-what-the-other-person-

is-saying type of conversation. The usual trying to one-up each other in our knowledge of how the world works. We're both to blame. We both do it. We both don't listen as much as we really should. We both get stuck in our thoughts and don't budge for the other. It's like that Dr. Seuss story — "The Zax" — the north-going Zax and the south-going Zax who won't budge an inch. The city grows around them, and the whole time they stand and stare and shout at each other to get the other one to move. As they stand there arguing the world grows around them. It's one of those stories that you read to your children, and your children immediately get it. They immediately say how stupid the Zax are and that they should have just stepped aside to let the other one pass. Then you grow up and find yourself doing the same thing. You let the stubbornness of winning an argument affect the progress that you should be focusing on instead.

And then it hits me. My father has always been this way. The I-know-what-I'm-talking-about personality type. He's always been this Alpha Male. The don't-tell-me-what-to-do type. He hasn't changed. That's when I realize it. I have changed. I'm not a little kid. I'm much more like him than I would like to admit. So, I take a breath. I have been getting upset with him for being himself. I may not agree with everything he says. I may be able to poke holes in his arguments. I may be able to argue with him about everything. Like how he just groups this together like there is one big conspiracy. But I don't. I choose to not argue with him here. Not today. It's not because I think he's right. It's because of that damn shark. I see the shark now.

————— // ————— // —————

We're standing on a Florida beach on the Atlantic Ocean side of the state. Daytona Beach to be exact, I am standing next to my father on the edge of the water watching the waves roll in. The water's edge keeps flirting with our toes, sometimes covering them, sometimes not. I am nine years old. I am approximately half the size of my Dad. Maybe one third. My brother is standing on the other side of him. He's five years older than me, twice as tall, but a lot more afraid of the ocean than his little brother. He sees the shark from *Jaws* in every crest of every wave. Even the little ones. Mom is back a ways, sitting on a beach towel lounging in the sun. Her eyes are hidden behind these huge sunglasses that take up more than half of her face. I remember telling her they looked like they were made for a giant. Or one of those aliens with humongous bug eyes.

"You see that buoy out there?" Dad's arm extends out over the water, pointing at a red or orange triangle bobbing up and down on the horizon. It's about two football fields away. Maybe one and a half.

"Nope," Mike says one word and walks away. He doesn't even give it a second thought. He knows the next sentence coming out of Dad's mouth. Mike's back is already to the both of us and he's heading towards Mom. I'm pretty sure he honestly believes that as soon as you put your face into the water and look under the surface there are hundreds of sharks just waiting for him to dip one little pinky toe into that water.

As Mike walks away, Dad and I share a look that says *he's watched Jaws too many times*. We watch him plop down on the towel next to Mom, and then we both turn to look back at the buoy.

"Let's go," he says as he walks into the water. Knee deep in an instant. "You coming?"

Hesitantly, I follow. He must have sensed my indecision. My father is already waist deep in the Atlantic when he turns his left shoulder back so he is facing me as I shuffle into ankle-deep waters of the Atlantic ocean.

“Jay, what are you scared of?” He completes the turn and now he is facing me.

As he speaks he walks into the ocean backwards. Backwards. Almost daring sharks to come and get him. There is no fear on his face. He shows his back to all of those sharks under the water and he doesn't give one single ounce of care for his safety. Its like he is daring them all to come at him and attack. His scruffy blonde beard doesn't hide his smile. It only peppers his chin for that gentleman outdoorsman look. The kind of beard hipsters groom these days to manage the perfect mixture of stubble and beard. With my Dad, there was no effort in the beard. It just happened. Some days it was scruffier, some days not. His lack of effort made it that much cooler than what any groomed beard could achieve. Luckily, I have inherited his beard. In fact, I tell him when I'm older that I perfected his disheveled-yet-clean hippie look, but he always disagrees with a smirk. His whole body minus his head is now under the water. He is a floating head in the sea of sharks and other monsters of the deep. No sign of *Jaws* yet.

“You coming or what?”

“I dunno, Dad.” I pause. “That's pretty far.”

My eyes go back to the buoy. It looks like it floated halfway into the ocean since the last time I looked at it.

“There's nothing to be afraid of.”

I beg to differ. I have now seen the movie *Jaws* like six times, maybe seven. I have seen that movie with the killer orca. I think it was called *Orca*. I have watched the Freddy and Jason

and Michael Myers movies. And I know there is a lot to be afraid of. Everywhere. Take all the Freddies and Jasons and Michael Myers and everything else and double, triple that number when you're in the ocean. The ocean is full of things that want to eat you.

“You worried about sharks?” It's like he's reading my mind. “Don't be afraid of them. They're afraid of me.”

He says it with a straight face. And my nine-year-old brain processes it as he says it. I look at him, then at the water around him. I'm looking for shadows of sharks on the surface. I think I'm awaiting my Dad's murder by shark attack. But that murder never comes. I look back to the buoy bobbing in the water.

“Look,” he says. “Jay, if a shark comes, I will just punch it in the nose. Then it will leave us alone.” Just punch it in the nose? Did he just say he'll punch a shark in the nose and that will make it swim away? My brain short circuits. Just punch it in the nose? Just like that, huh? Just punch it in the nose. Like most things in my Dad's life, if it comes at you and threatens you, just punch it in the nose.

I proceeded to get into the water, climb on my Dad's back for a bit, and he carried the both of us about halfway out to that floating buoy. My Dad swam a football field with a nine-year-old holding onto his neck like a life raft. The buoy that seemed to be half an ocean away turned out to be not that far at all. About halfway there, he made me get off him and I swam for a bit so he could catch his breath. Once he did, maybe too soon even, I climbed back on his back and he beginner-butterflied his way towards that red triangle.

We both reached out and touched the buoy. Touchdown. Mission accomplished.

He lifted me up to hold onto a ladder. I didn't even think to wonder why there was a ladder on a buoy, because looking around at the surrounding ocean, it was absolutely breathtaking. On the beach, Mom and Mike looked like miniature dolls sitting on their safety blankets. No, not even dolls. Micro Machine drivers. Those tiny little cars that you could fit about ten in each hand. Those Micro Machines. The ocean itself was beautiful. We were out past the waves so it just looked like a sheet of glass. Blue glass. The bluest glass I have ever seen. White birds were flying overhead, clouds peppering the sky like a Bob Ross painting. A splash nearby was not a shark. It was simply a fish. I saw this and relaxed a bit. We were beyond the waves. As close to the middle of the ocean as I have ever been without a boat.

Just us and the ocean. Nothing else.

"See? No sharks," his smile takes up his whole face. "I told you they're scared of me."

Why did he have to say sharks? Now my brain is back at the word. My eyes scan the waters for a fin. He sees this. My head turns left and right looking for that fin. Looking for the moment when everything changes.

"It's okay, Jay. You are fine."

"We're not supposed to be out this far."

"Says who?"

I answer with some sort of answer, and my Dad completes my thought with a lesson. Live your life how you want to live it. Don't let anyone tell you what you can or cannot do. And definitely don't be afraid of something like sharks.

Just my dad and me in the ocean. Nothing else. No one else. Just two guys hanging out on a buoy way too far from shore.

It wasn't until about a decade later that I realized that he was right about sharks. According to a documentary on Discovery Channel's *Shark Week*, a shark has what's called the ampullae of Lorenzini, which gives the shark its electroreception. These are small electrically sensitive receptor cells under the skin of the shark's head. And where are the majority of them located? The nose. What does this mean? If you are attacked by a shark, guess what you are supposed to do?

Punch it in the nose.

————— // ————— // —————

“Just punch it in the nose, huh?” I pick up my beaten leather work gloves and slide them on my hands. Its time to get back to work.

“Yup. Just punch it in the nose,” he repeats. “A lot of things can be solved with a good punch in the nose.”

We get off the picnic table and start walking over to the brush pile.

“You know you're right, right?”

“About what?” He asks and then I inform him of that *Shark Week* episode and the Ampullae of Lorenzini and all the scientific mumbo jumbo. He shakes his head and says one thing that sticks with me.

“No, I'm not right because of all that.” He smiles. “It's just common sense.”

And then we fall back into the routine of branch, cut, pile. Branch, cut, pile. The father-and-son machine conquers the pile of pine brush that day. That summer afternoon was full of chainsaw and sharks with a side of wood chips and sweat.