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A Concrete Memory

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I knew Larry for only two years. He was a cement man and he'd tell you so. In fact, I heard him speak those words more times than I could count. I was twenty years old when I started my brief career as a cement man. With soft pink hands covered with cuts and blisters, sore back, muscles, and pride, I took my turn being the "young apprentice," as Larry would call me. It definitely wasn't my first choice in jobs, nor my second or third, but it paid well, and that was my only motivation for the long months to follow.

I think I laughed out loud the first time I saw him. He was wearing a hard hat, as were the rest of us, but his was orange and it had a rim around it that made it look as though he were going on a safari. His glasses were big and square, and they turned dark in the sunlight. With a few rare exceptions, dark blue plain pocket jeans with identical holes in each knee, along with a faded and threadbare Hane's pocket T--usually baby blue or yellow--made up his dress every time that I saw him. There he stood, knees locked, arms folded atop a beer belly stretched religiously by a twelve pack every night after work.

"The hell you lookin' at?" he inquired, barely opening his lips.

I kept on shoveling, nursing the handle in my aching hands.

I survived the first week of eleven-hour days, lifting forms, pounding pins, pouring concrete, and shoveling. The second week wasn't any easier; in fact, it never got easier. Eventually the novelty of my inexperience wore off, and I found myself accepted into a family of beer-drinking, cigarette-smoking, swearing, blue-collar, redneck cement men. Larry was the "old man" and everybody told him so. At 43, Larry could work circles around most of the guys on our crew, and we heard about it daily. That's what Larry was proud of, and aside from his bright red Chevy, there wasn't much else.

For some reason, Larry decided to take me under his wing. He would start talking to me while we worked, explaining what he was doing and showing me how things should be done. Many days I grew tired of listening to Larry drone on about the "nature" of concrete. Larry would stand bent at the waist, nearly folded in half, and begin smacking the hardening curbs with his hand tools. I listened to him mumble and slowly learned bits of his wisdom. My interest in what Larry said was not due to my thirst for knowledge. I listened to Larry because I respected him. Larry worked harder than anyone I knew--and definitely harder than I ever wanted to.

As the months passed, my opinion of my new occupation worsened. "This is definitely not how I want to spend the rest of my days," I thought to myself. Still Larry kept talking and teaching, oblivious to my feelings about the job we shared. I couldn't tell him. What we did meant too much to him. I would daydream, trying to imagine the other things I could have been doing. Larry would notice and look at me over his darkened glasses. I would start working again, still dreaming.

"You ever think about school, Larry," I asked him one day.

"Not really. Even when I was there," he said smiling.
"No, I mean college."

"College? Hell no! I was in Vietnam when I was that age."


Larry put his hand on his hip, locked his knees, and rolled the upper plate of his dentures nearly out of his mouth. "Cement. I was a cement man."

"Cement?" I asked, surprised.

"That's what I said. I was a Seabee." He went on to describe to me what it was that he did. He described clearing jungles to put in runways and roads. His crew built bridges and fortifications. Larry became a cement man. When he came back from Vietnam, he was still a cement man. This job that I hated was everything to him.

Another six months passed. It was fall and I had decided to go back to school for the winter semester. I hadn't said anything to Larry yet, but I was done with cement work. Our seasonal layoff notice would come any day. When that day fell, it would be my last. Brown leaves swirled with snowflakes, and layers of flannel fought fierce fall winds. Larry and I sat in his Chevy on our break and drank lukewarm coffee from dusty Styrofoam.

"You're not comin' back this spring, are you, Steve?"

I sat with my nose in my cup; I inhaled what little steam it gave off. "I don't think so, Larry," I said quietly.

The truck was silent for several minutes. We looked out windows and sipped. "It's not what I want to do," I told him.

Larry sat still for a few more minutes without saying anything; then he finally spoke. "It's not what I wanted to do either when I think back on it. I learned it. I had to learn it. Now I couldn't forget it if I tried." Larry opened the door of his truck to get out. He turned to me with a faint grin on his lips as I sat watching him exit. "The hell you lookin' at?" he grumbled.

"Cement man?" I inquired.

"Damn right," he said, slamming the door.

I sat by myself as he walked away, trying to decide if he was mad, disappointed, or depressed. Whatever he felt, there was one thing we shared. Neither of us would ever forget about cement.

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