

DAVID J. HORN'S

HARD LABOR



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For all the working stiffs  
who can't stand working.



# HARD LABOR

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## BARBECUED

The relationship with my father-in-law could be described as *quiet*. We didn't have much to say to each other. One of the first times he had actually spoken to me was one muggy summer night, before Jenny and I tied the knot. It was one of those whiskey sipping man-to-man talks. We were sitting on the porch, swatting mosquitoes, watching the fireflies in the moonlight. Jenny and her mom were inside chatting about the wedding. My soon to be father-in-law asked, "Why don't you two slow down? Take a year off from one another and then see where you stand?"

I sipped my whiskey and didn't say anything. It was

clear that he didn't want me for a son-in-law. I thought the best policy was a smile and silence - to remain mysteriously aloof. So that's what I did. I smiled and sipped my whiskey.

Anyway, who the hell was he to tell me what to do with Jenny? He wasn't even her real father. He was just a step-dad. I ignored his advice; Jenny and I got married, and the next thing I knew she was inviting them over every weekend. They came for supper, to watch *M.A.S.H.* reruns, to play euchre and Monopoly.

Their visits were worse than hell. I just wanted to watch TV and relax, maybe have a beer or two after work. But my father-in-law had other plans. He liked to play a little game called *Master and Servant*. He would usually show up with his toolbox and then inspect the apartment, looking for things to fix. My role in this drama was the *flashlight man*. I would follow him with the flashlight; just in case we ran into some stubborn darkness. He made it painfully clear during these little exercises that he thought I was useless. I couldn't even operate the flashlight properly. He would always curse, "Damn it, keep the light steady. A little to the left. More to the right. When was the last time you changed the batteries in that flashlight?"

Hanging out with him was like hanging out with a bad rash. He was acutely irritated during these little fix-it sprees because he couldn't understand why I didn't go

around fixing stuff on my own.

He had decided I was lazy at some point in our quiet relationship, or at least he would ask me questions that suggested that he thought I was lazy. He always asked me, whenever he saw me, regardless of the time of day, “Did you just wake up?”

Once he asked me while I shined the flashlight and he screwed a screw, “You're not too good with the tools, eh?” I didn't know if he was referring to screwdrivers and hammers or if he was really referring to the lack of grandchildren. Jenny's mother was always wondering aloud about grandchildren. “When are you going to have some children? That's what this place needs, the patter of little feet.” Etc. Whenever she would talk about the absence of grandchildren, which was always, she would give me a concerned, sorrowful look. I never completely understood that look. But it seemed to me that she had concluded I was the kink in her desire to be a grandmother.

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One sunny weekend Jenny announced, “Tomorrow, when Mom and Dad come over, I thought we could do a barbecue.”

“We don't have a barbecue,” I yawned.

“We do now.” Jenny took my hand and led me to the balcony. She was thrilled. Standing on our little balcony

was a brand new barbecue. It was black and bulbous with skinny silver legs and a curved dish for collecting the ashes. Jenny had even bought me a set of grilling utensils – spatulas, tongs, a brillo pad on a long stick for cleaning the grill. She gave me a big happy kiss.

“But I've never barbecued anything before.”

“My dad will show you how,” she said walking away.

Whoa. A grilling lesson from my father-in-law sounded like an awful way to spend Sunday. Men don't go to other men for lessons about grilling meat. Asking for a lesson about sticking meat in a fire was like admitting that you had a foot fetish or that you liked showering with other men. It was unthinkable. Our neanderthal forefathers had invented the barbecue after all. It was supposed to be in my DNA.

The next day her parents came over around 11:30. Jenny announced that we were grilling steaks for lunch. She had bought 4 enormous porterhouse steaks and some corn on the cob. I was outside on the balcony hoping for rain.

“You aren't planning to grill up here are you?” asked my father-in-law. I hadn't given it much thought, to be honest.

“You can't grill on your balcony, you need to take the grill down to the courtyard. If you want, I'll help you,” my father-in-law had been prepped by Jenny to offer his help.

“No, don't worry. They used to call me the Grill Master when I was at the university,” I lied. This barbecue was bigger than meat, charcoal and flames. This was about manhood: my manhood. Actually, it was about my father-in-laws perception of my manhood.

The elevator was out of service, so I had to carry the grill down the stairs. My father-in-law followed behind me with a six pack of beers. Around the second floor I lost grip of the grill and it crashed down the remaining stairs. My father-in-law seized the moment, "What the hell happened? The thing only weighs 10 pounds?"

I ignored him and put the grill back together. That's when I saw that one of its three legs was badly injured. The grill couldn't even stand straight any more. It leaned severely to one side. I didn't let this phase me though. I got the grill outside and around twelve the grill was ready.

Jenny didn't buy any lighter fluid because she didn't believe in lighter fluid. It made the food taste funny, she had told me. So, I stacked the charcoal on some wadded up balls of newspaper. I put a match to the pyramid of coals and there was fire. There was nothing to it. Kids stuff. Hell, if cavemen could do it, I could do it. I sat at a picnic table near the grill and opened a beer. My father-in-law reluctantly joined me. I drank and tried to enjoy the sunlight.

But I soon learned that keeping the fire lit was

trickier than it seemed. After about 10 minutes of irritated silence, my father-in-law grunted, “Hey, Grill Master, the fire's been out for the last five minutes.” I looked over at the grill. There was an absence of both flame and smoke. I went over and poked the coals with my tongs. There was nothing happening. The newspaper was ash.

I pretended to study the bag of charcoal. “Yeah, this stuff always gives me problems staying lit. It just needs a little extra fuel.” My father-in-law watched me, shaking his head. I wadded up the entire Sunday morning paper. I added more charcoal. This time I added some grass clippings from the lawn for good measure. I scanned the courtyard for other flammable items. One of the ground floor tenants' children had left a Sesame Street doll on their patio. Grover. I thought for a second about putting Grover in the grill. I decided it probably wasn't a good idea. I put a match to it. Flames and smoke. Plumes of smoke. I stood at the grill watching the fire through the smoke, silently hoping that it would stay lit. Soon, though, the flames began to dip, then there were no flames, only some sad puffs of smoke. “You might want to blow on the fire,” said my father-in-law. I thought he was still sitting at the picnic table, but he was at my elbow. I took his advice and blew. We both blew. Then he threw in some dried twigs, and slowly the flames returned. Soon everything seemed to be under control.

“Well the coals should be ready soon,” I was trying to be optimistic.

“In about a half hour or so.”

He was a God damned know it all.

I got another beer. Drinking helped me cope with their visits, but today I felt that I needed extra fuel because I was being heavily scrutinized. I finished my beer in silence. My father-in-law was at the grill with the tongs in his hands. He had usurped my role as *grill master*. I tried not to care, but I couldn't help feel a little angry. After all, his handy man routine, and now his handling of the grill, were acts of aggression. He had been sending me the message loud and clear: I would always be Mr. Flashlight, following his lead. He was the man of the house. I was the boy. I found the whole dynamic of being a son-in-law depressing. So, I finished my beer and took the three remaining beers back to the apartment. I retired to the living room to watch a little TV.

Two beers later, Jenny came into the living room with a platter of steaks, “Why aren't you outside at the grill?”

“I'm not a griller, Jenny. The whole act of putting meat in fire seems so...so primitive.”

Jenny glared at me.

“The whole experience has made me reconsider being a carnivore.”

She turned the TV off and pushed the platter of steaks at me.

“Stop being so melodramatic and go grill the steaks.”

I sighed, took the platter and marched back to the grill, a prisoner of war.

On seeing me, my father-in-law barked, “Where the hell have you been, *Grill Master?*”

I said nothing. He handed me the tongs and I pushed the coals this way and that. I could only keep my hands over the coals for about a half of a second before they began to burn. It was a damn hot fire.

“You've got too many coals. The fire's too hot,” he told me.

Then I put the steaks on the grill. Flames began to leap from the coals. After a couple of seconds, the flames attacked the steaks like lions ravaging a wildebeest. I pulled a couple of steaks away from the flames. More flames.

“Put the damn lid on the grill,” instructed my father-in-law. I put the lid on the grill. Smoke started to billow out the smoke holes on the top of the lid. It was one of those lazy breeze Sunday afternoons, and the whole courtyard was quickly filled with smoke. I was waving the smoke away. My eyes burned and watered. I smelled like I had just escaped from a burning building.

We stood at the grill, not speaking. A squirrel scampered by and raced up a tree. My father-in-law watched the squirrel intently. "Squirrels are pretty interesting," I offered.

"They're God damned rodents. Rats with bushy tails." I was appalled. I had never met someone who didn't like squirrels. They're so cute. I was shocked. How can anyone not like squirrels?

I decided that it was better not to say anything else. After a couple of minutes, I pulled the lid off the grill to see what the hell was happening. Smoke swarmed out of the grill.

"I told you the fire was too hot." It was like hanging out with a bad vibe vortex. He spewed negative energy and blame. "You should have banked the coals, so that the steaks wouldn't be directly over the fire."

I did my best to ignore him and flipped the steaks. All of the steaks had turned greyish, and all the fat around the edges had been burned black. The flames started to leap again. I put the lid back on the grill.

"Do you think you could get me a beer?"

"Don't you think you're drinking too much?" he snapped back.

I assumed it was a rhetorical question and didn't answer. After a while he wandered into the apartment complex. By the time he came back with the beer, I had

flipped the steaks and had put the lid back on the grill. He handed me the beer and I drank it in one gulp.

Jenny shouted down from the balcony, "How is everything?" She was pretending to be excited about the barbecue. She was probably hoping that me and my father-in-law were doing some good old fashion grill side bonding. If she only knew.

"Everything's under control," I said.

"The steaks are already burned," added my father-in-law.

Jenny smiled and went back inside the apartment.

"How do you like your steak?" I asked.

"What difference does it make," he shot back.

We stood in silence at the grill. My father-in-law was brooding about something. I could see his jaws clench and unclench. "Don't you think we should check the steaks?" he asked.

It was at this point that I began to feel the weight of the drink. Standing completely motionless was impossible. I was having trouble standing still. Every now and then I would lose my balance and stagger to the right or left.

Being drunk, I also felt chatty, and I had the sudden and rather poignant urge to elaborate my theory on the utility of socks. I am not sure why I wanted to talk about socks, perhaps it was because my father-in-law always wore black socks with his white tennis shoes. I had lost all

sense of audience, and so without any forethought I launched into my story.

“One time my dad and me had painted his friend's house. We had painted all day, so this guy's wife made us supper. Really greasy hamburgers with some sort of garlic salad. We ate and then painted a little more.

“Anyway, on the way home my stomach began to act up. It began to gurgle and I had really bad gas. The guy lived out in the boonies. In the middle of nowhere. So, as we were driving I told my dad to stop the car. I raced out and slid down a hill and found myself in a small grove of sycamore trees. I dropped my pants and had this awful diarrhea. The Hershey squirts. You know when you have a bottle of Hershey's syrup and there's not much left in it. You squeeze and squeeze and the bottle spits and wheezes out chocolate syrup. When I was done, I tried to wipe myself with sycamore leaves. It hurt a bit and it was really messy, if you know what I mean. So, I used my underwear. I ditched them there in the grove of trees. No sooner did I have pants buttoned, my stomach began to rumble. I began to worry. What would I do if I had another emergency crap? And that's when I thought, I still have my socks. I was never so happy that I had socks as I was on that day.”

My father-in-law looked down at his socked feet. I looked at his socks as well. Then he squinted at me and

asked, "What are you trying to say, you want to wipe your ass with my socks?"

"No, of course not," he had missed the point. "I just wanted...I was just trying to say..." I really had no idea what I was trying to say.

He gave me a long benumbing look and added, "I'll go see if Jenny needs any help in the kitchen."

He stomped off to the house. I shifted left then right and thought to myself, *What an asshole.* Once he was gone, I pulled off the lid of the grill. I fought the smoke and saw the steaks. I flipped them. They looked awful: mostly black with grey brown spots that had not been burned completely. I decided to leave the lid off the grill and let them cook in the open air for a while. I tried to be optimistic, *What the hell,* I thought, *there are some people that liked to eat burned food. Maybe Jenny's mother would like burned steak?*

That's when my neighbor's wife, I couldn't remember her name but her husband was named Roger or Rubin Harper, came meandering into the courtyard. Mrs. Roger or Rubin Harper was dressed in a skimpy yellow sundress and she carried a small plastic bag. She, didn't see me as she leisurely wandered about the yard. She found something in the grass, but instead of squatting to pick it up, she bent over and I came face to face with Mrs. Roger or Rubin Harper's black thong.

She stood back up and I looked away. Trying to act nonchalant. I concealed myself a little better behind a bush near the grill and continued to watch, hoping she would find something else to pick up.

I don't know how long I was watching, but as I was standing behind the bush my father-in-law sneaked up on me. "When are you going to bring the God damned steaks in?"

I was startled by his sudden interruption, and before I managed to say anything he was looking in the direction of Mrs. Roger or Rubin Harper. "You forgot about the steaks because you're gawking at your neighbor?"

"I wasn't gawking. I was watching her...I think she's collecting rocks or something."

"Fascinating," hissed my father-in-law.

Mrs. Roger or Rubin Harper bent over. My father-in-law raised his eyebrows, "Watching her collect rocks, huh?" He walked back inside the apartment complex.

I pulled the steaks off the grill and brought them inside. The other food was ready. Baked potatoes were buttered, golden corn on the cob. Jenny and her parents met me at the table. When Jenny saw the steaks, her excitement shriveled and died. "What happened to the steaks?" I explained my theory about burned food to Jenny, "Some people, myself included, like to eat steaks this way. I like my steak a little burned."

Jenny seemed more than a little troubled.

“My father said that you were gawking at Julia.”

“Who?”

“Julia, our neighbor.”

“Rubin's wife?”

“Richard's wife.”

“Richard Harper?”

“Richard Horton and Julia Horton, Jamie. Our next door neighbors.”

“You don't even know the names of your own neighbors?” guffawed my father-in-law.

“I was watching her collect rocks, that was all.”

The dining room was suffocating with silence.

“Let's eat,” I pretended I was excited about the meal.

I got myself another beer. I returned to the dining room and sat down, nearly missing the chair.

“We really don't need to eat the steaks,” said Jenny. She seemed to be taking my grilling failure pretty hard. She spoke to no one, she just stared blankly at the potatoes.

“What are you talking about?” I said. “These steaks look great.”

I opened the beer and took a sip. Jenny's father had a smug look on his face. He liked to watch me fail, and he especially liked it when Jenny also saw me fail.

“I like my steak a little crunchy,” I said and I took the steak on top of the plate.

Jenny took a steak, Jenny's mother investigated the two steaks that were left, trying to find one that was the least burned, but they were both equally charred. She gave up and just took the smallest steak she could find. My father-in-law refused the last steak, “I'll stick to the corn and potatoes.”

I cut into my steak. Beneath the burned and charred bits the meat was red and bloody. I cut a piece and popped it into my mouth. It was cold and raw and chewy. It was like eating a bloody rubber band that had been served in an ashtray. I washed down the mouthful with a long drink of beer.

My mother-in-law cut into her steak. “Mine is a bit raw on the inside.”

“Do you want me to put it back on the grill?”

She looked terrified.

“We have some leftovers from last night. I'll warm those up,” said Jenny.

She dashed off to the kitchen. There was an uncomfortable silence. I chewed my mouthful of steak. Somewhere in the room a fly was buzzing.

My father-in-law, cleared his throat, “So, Grill Master, what's on the menu for next weekend?”

Jenny's mother gasped, “Henry. Stop it.”

My mind was a flood land of bad ideas. I took a long drink from my beer and I looked my-father-law in his eyes. I had never really paid much attention to his eyes before and I realized that he had beady black little eyes. "Why don't you bring your dog over next weekend, Henry?"

Jenny's mother gasped. My father-in-law threw his napkin on the table, "DID YOU JUST THREATEN TO GRILL MY DOG?"

Jenny ran back into the dining room for damage control, "What's going on here?"

"Your husband just threatened to barbecue Jonesy," spat my father-in-law.

Jenny looked at me like I was some sort of hideous circus freak or something.

"Listen, I didn't threaten to barbecue anything. I just asked if they would bring the dog over next weekend."

"I asked him what he was going to barbecue and he told me to bring over Jonesy."

Jenny's face was a storm of anger: lightning and brutal rain. She crossed her arms and asked, "Why would you threaten to barbecue my father's dog?"

"The vietnamese eat dog," I had no idea what I was saying. Thankfully, Jenny ignored me. "And why would you tell my father that awful story about wiping yourself with your socks."

I had been betrayed.

“I never wiped myself with my socks,” I mumbled.

I felt like I was six years old again and was being scolded by my parents for the time I ran away from home and hid in a church for a couple of hours. Jenny was flanked by her mother and father. A triad of hostile faces.

“So?” asked Jenny.

“OK, it wasn't a good idea I guess. But I swear I was just making a joke. I mean, I could never kill a dog. I wouldn't even barbecue a dog if I found it dead in the street. I wouldn't actually barbecue Bonesy,” I was beginning to babble.

My father-in-law stared me down, “You've been married to my daughter for three years, and you don't know the name of our dog?”

“He doesn't even know the names of his own neighbors,” whispered Jenny's mother.

“It's Bonesy,” I looked to Jenny for help, but she looked away and shook her head.

“Jonesy,” huffed my father-in-law, “The dog's name is Jonesy.”

“Jonesy,” I repeated dutifully although drunkenly.

And that's when I blacked out.

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I'm not sure what happened after that, and I'll never know. The next morning Jenny was sulking in her baggy

pajamas. She was sipping coffee, trying hard to pretend that I didn't exist. I was sure that it all had to do with the grilling failure. And that pissed me off. She was always upset when I didn't live up to her expectations. There was no way I was going to apologize for over cooking some steaks and then making a joke about cooking her stepfather's dog. He was asking for it after all, with all his hyper aggressivity.

"So you're not talking to me?"

She said nothing.

"Is this about what I said about Jonesy?"

Not a word.

"Are you upset about the story of me wiping myself with my underwear?" I felt I needed to set the story straight, "I never wiped myself with my socks, Jenny. And I sure as hell didn't want to myself with your step-father's socks."

She looked at me with cold contempt.

"Is this about me looking at Mrs. Horton?"

She got up and put her coffee cup in the kitchen. "Her name is Julia Horton, Jamie. And no, it is not about her," her eyes filled with tears her lips quivered as she spoke, "How could you say those things to my father?"

"About the dog?" I had no idea what she was talking about.

She pushed past me and stamped off to the bedroom.

I had obviously said something else. But I had no idea what.

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After the barbecue, my in-laws stopped coming over. The place felt lonely without them. I don't know. I didn't really miss them. Maybe it was my guilt that made me feel that way. Jenny was always preoccupied and unhappy. She flitted around the house like an passive aggressive ghost.

I tried to talk to Jenny about that night a million times, but she wasn't interested. She even told me once, "Why don't you apologize to my father?"

"For what? I honestly don't know what I did." I begged her to tell me. It is difficult being the cause of so much misery, but even worse when you don't even know how you actually managed to cause so much pain. I begged her, "Just tell me what I've done wrong."