

LUNCHBOXING

- Me: How many years did you work for Aladdin?
 Dad: Too many.
 Me: On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your work ethic?
 Dad: Nine to five.
 Me: Do you ever regret how things turned out?
 Dad: Some men are destined for greatness. Others are doomed to facilitate it.
 Me: If you could do it over—
 Dad: I wouldn't change a thing. Is that the line you're fishing for?
 Me: What was your greatest accomplishment?
 Dad: You.
 Me: That's flattering, Dad. But don't dodge the question.
 Dad: What are you getting at?
 Me: Lunchboxes. I'm writing about lunchboxes. But I don't know where to start.
 Dad: Don't start with lunchboxes. They're boring. How about a sandwich?
 Lunch does start with a sandwich.

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- 1765 John Montagu, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, orders roast beef between slices of toast.
 1800 Mothers pack “sandwiches” into empty tobacco tins and send their children to school. Fathers, most of them factory workers, carry their lunches to work in stacking pails.
 1907 The first American vacuum bottle is manufactured in Brooklyn, New York, by American Thermos. “Thermos” eventually becomes a household word for any vacuum bottle.

- 1908 Aladdin Industries is formed in Victor Johnson's basement in Chicago, Illinois. His bread-and-butter product is a kerosene lamp, hence the name, Aladdin.
- 1911 American Thermos develops the first workman's lunch kit.
- 1918 Aladdin develops a vacuum flask for the military, underbidding American Thermos.
- 1920 American Thermos develops the first children's lunch kit.
- 1930 Most American households are equipped with electricity. Aladdin deemphasizes production of kerosene lamps.
- 1939 A lunch pail shaped like a little suitcase debuts at the World's Fair.
- 1945 My granddad runs out of ammunition, surrendering from his machinegun nest after only one week of combat. He spends three months as a prisoner-of-war in Baden-Baden, Germany, surviving on a diet of insects and backwash from a vacuum flask designed by Aladdin Industries. That July, my grandma receives a telegram pronouncing him MIA. In August, she gives birth to my dad. My granddad returns unexpectedly that September.
- 1946 Robert "Bob" Burton, who designed the red and white logo for Kentucky Fried Chicken, is hired as the first art director of Aladdin Industries, now specializing in vacuum bottles, second only to American Thermos.
- 1950 In a ploy to trump American Thermos in vacuum bottle sales, Aladdin converts a Bob Burton watercolor into a four-inch decal, producing the first steel lunchbox (with matching thermos) to bear the image of a licensed TV character: beloved cowboy Hopalong Cassidy. Designed with the dimensions of a TV, 600,000 units sell in the first year, transforming the industry and inaugurating what would be remembered as "The Golden Age of the Lunchbox." My granddad gives my dad a Hopalong Cassidy lunchbox, which he carries to kindergarten.
- 1951 Elmer Lehnhardt, one of TV's first wrestlers, becomes a freelance commercial artist. His talent for painting portraits impresses Bob

- Burton, who hires Lehnhardt to work at his Chicago studio as a finishing artist.
- 1952 Aladdin's second licensed model, forged in the heat of the Cold War, features Tom Corbett the Space Cadet. Bob Burton paints himself as a fellow astronaut floating above the moon. An irate sales manager forces him to remove his picture. The profits allow Aladdin to build a new plant in Nashville, Tennessee. When the company moves to Nashville, so does Lehnhardt, serving as a liaison between Aladdin and Burton's studio.
- 1953 American Thermos releases the lithographed lunchbox, licensing rival cowboy Roy Rogers to compete with Aladdin's Hopalong Cassidy. This incites the so-called "Lunchbox Wars."
- 1954 Aladdin stops the conveyor belt long enough to replace their decals with lithographs.
- 1956 After a fierce bidding battle, Disney turns their licenses over to Aladdin.
- 1960 American Thermos is bought by King Seeley to become King Seeley Thermos (KST).
- 1961 Elmer Lehnhardt succeeds Bob Burton as Aladdin's art director and devotes himself to giving Aladdin a competitive edge over KST. Many of Lehnhardt best boxes showcase his sense of humor and wrestler's physicality (which he demonstrates during coffee breaks by choke-holding interns). These boxes include The Beverly Hillbillies, Gomer Pyle, Laugh-In, Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea, and The Flying Nun. Following in the footsteps of his mentor, Lehnhardt's Land of the Giants box features his self-portrait as the spectacled giant "goochi gooing" tiny marooned sailors in the palm of his hand. This is his crowning achievement.
- 1962 As an ex-wrestler, Elmer Lehnhardt is frustrated by the flatness of action characters on his lunchbox art. As a solution, Aladdin trademarks 3-D embossing, a Braille effect.
- 1963 Spending his savings on tuition, my dad enrolls at Auburn University.

- 1965 Accompanying his fraternity brother on a blind double date, my dad meets my mom.
- 1967 My dad graduates from Auburn University with a degree in Industrial Design.
- 1968 My mom and dad marry.
- 1972 Children use lunchboxes to defend themselves against bullies. Due to reports of permanent head injury, a gaggle of Floridian mothers marches to the state legislature, decrying lunchboxes as “lethal weapons.” Companies gradually phase out the production of steel lunchboxes as the ban spreads nationwide during the 1970s, an era that comes to be known as “The Dark Age of the Lunchbox.” To save Aladdin from bankruptcy, my dad goes back to the drawing board, designing a plastic mold from the steel original. He is sent to his first New Year’s trade show, where he is approached by a KST representative who offers to buy the prototype.

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In ’72, my dad grew a red handlebar mustache. His colleagues ridiculed him not because of the mustache per se, but because he resembled Yosemite Sam, a character licensed by KST that very year.

“My biscuits are burnin’!” they would quote the cartoon, poking their heads into his office.

Maybe they were jealous that Mr. Johnson had decided to send my dad, of all people, to the New Year’s trade show. After all, he had been working at Aladdin for only three years. Instead of his usual bellbottoms, he bought a maroon blazer, plaid pants without pleats, and a wide-knotted tie. The blazer fit loosely about his shoulders and a touch long on the cuff. He would grow into it.

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New York was a world apart from Nashville. The towers. The taxis. The snow and black ice. He cut through Central Park to the Jacob K. Javits

Convention Center, where he stood behind a booth amid dozens of other booths where aggressive young men and attractive young women handed out brochures and finger food. Aladdin's booth was lined with lunchboxes, as was KST's, which stood catty-corner. The employee manning the KST booth distributed boxes that bore the company's name in bold above the impending year, but he wasn't there to sell anything other than himself. He shook hands with anyone who stopped to speak with him, but kept an eye on my dad, who, unsettled by the man's vigilance, put his hand in his pocket to assure himself that it was still there: the annotated sketch of a plastic lunchbox.

By the end of day one, my dad's feet were sore from standing eight straight hours on a thinly-carpeted concrete floor. When he got back to the hotel he ordered room service, called my mom to say goodnight, and turned on the TV to drown out the noise of a party next door.

He awoke to the static sound of the TV. He was late. He stepped into his plaid pants and tied a knot in his tie, then rushed out into the sunlight, which was brighter on account of the snow. Instead of cutting through Central Park, he caught a cab to the convention center. The rest of that day was as grueling as the first. By the time that KST representative approached him at the end of day two, my dad's face hurt from smiling, his feet hurt from standing, and his fingers hurt from shaking hands.

"I didn't see you last night," said the KST rep, extending his hand. My dad shook it, sizing up the stranger. He stood an imposing six-foot-five, with salt-and-pepper hair, and emanated an intoxicating scent. Maybe it was cologne. Maybe it was body odor. Maybe it was alcohol working its way out of his system.

"What was last night?" my dad asked.

"New Year's Eve, Eve," said the KST rep, sort of smiling. "But that was just a warm-up for the Annual Hospitality Hop."

"Haven't heard of it."

"It's like barhopping. Every company here, even yours, has a hospitality suite with free drinks. A group of us get together each year. We stop for a drink at every room. You're welcome to come along. If you can hold your liquor."

“Hold my liquor?” my dad bantered back, hoping to make light of their unspoken rivalry. “Isn’t that what thermoses are for?”

They laughed together and put their hands in their pockets; my dad could feel the sketch. The convention center was closing down. Visitors were stumbling out with free merchandise. The KST rep wound a scarf around his neck and joined the rush.

“Eight o’ clock in the lobby bar.”

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My dad felt more comfortable in his bellbottoms. When the elevator opened, he saw the KST rep hunched at a stool. My dad sat down beside him. The KST rep nodded first at my dad and then at the bartender. On cue, the bartender placed two tumblers in front of them, reaching to the top shelf for a bottle in a purple pouch. He pulled the gold drawstring and mixed Manhattans while the two men sat there, not knowing what to say. The KST rep checked his watch. It was an expensive watch with Roman numerals—the kind a company gave to its time-honored employees.

“Ready to wet your whistle?” he slapped his knees and stood, taking his drink to go. “Lot of ground to cover.”

They met the other men upstairs on the umpteenth floor. The more they drank, the more the rooms looked the same, except the corner rooms that were bigger, with a better view of the Big Apple. By and by, they reached the penthouse, KST’s hospitality suite, where they would watch the ball drop.

“When will you let the cat out of the bag?” the KST rep asked, mixing himself a drink. He didn’t wait for anyone to offer. This was his home turf.

“What cat?” My dad was waiting for someone to offer him a cocktail. No one did.

“The plastic cat,” the KST rep said casually.

My dad thrust his hand into his pocket; it was still there.

“Who told you?”

“A little bird.”

“Sounds more like a rat.”

The KST rep laughed. “Do you think everyone who works for Victor Johnson works for Victor Johnson?”

The other men gathered around them, eyeing each other expectantly. My dad mistook this huddle for the culmination of a conspiracy, when in reality it was the culmination of the fiscal year.

“This is no way to do business.”

“You’re right.” The KST rep set down his drink. “We should stop talking words and start talking numbers.” He drew a Mont Blanc pen from the breast pocket of his suit and scribbled something on a cocktail napkin.

My dad took a look at the napkin. “What is this?”

“It’s a one-time offer.”

The rest of the room started counting down.

Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six.

My dad saw a life flash behind his eyes—a life of big boats and houses. But it wasn’t his life.

Five. Four. Three. Two.

“I’ve got an early plane to catch.” My dad let the cocktail napkin fall to the floor. “Happy New Years.” He elbowed his way through the partygoers, who were singing and kissing each other under a shower of confetti.

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- 1975 With the initial success of the plastic lunchbox, my dad is promoted to Director of Research & Development at Aladdin.
- 1981 I am born in Nashville, Tennessee.
- 1982 Lee Garner coins the term “pailleontology” to describe the collecting and studying of lunch pails (adapted from paleontology—the study of ancient life). Garner proceeds to found *Paileontologists Retort*, an esoteric periodical dedicated exclusively to lunchbox collecting. The *Retort* justifies his maverick position vis-à-vis popular culture: “To salvage/rescue/preserve some small portion of our culture not yet valued; understanding its brief flirtation with our

history; uncovering facts that are rapidly diminishing; and preserving artifacts that are inexorably deteriorating under the ravages of time and man.”

- 1985 Elmer Lehnhardt dies. The mortician makes him look alive. His grandchildren gather around the coffin, waiting for Grandpa Elmer to say “boo” and “goochi goo” them. But, for once, this isn’t a prank.
- 1986 Aladdin stops making steel boxes (officially), burying them in the basement, which the employees call “the morgue.” Aladdin executives encourage employees to take the steel lunchboxes home since they are now unmarketable. My dad works overtime to keep Aladdin afloat. Short on time and money, he brings home leftover lunchboxes (aka “corpses”) on occasion—Christmas, birthdays, back-to-school.
- 1987 KST stops making steel boxes. The last one features Sylvester Stalone as Rambo. All of the original art from the ’50s through the ’70s is, in the words of lunchbox aficionado Scott Bruce, “thrown into a dumpster on a black November day.”
- 1988 An article titled “Forget Stocks; Invest in Old Lunch Boxes” is published in the *Wall Street Journal*. Vintage boxes are increasing in value at a rate of 100% a year. Unfortunately, my dad does not subscribe to the *Wall Street Journal*. Boasting a collection of 1,500 boxes, Scott Bruce surpasses Lee Garner as the nation’s foremost expert. Bruce publishes a quarterly newsletter titled *HOT BOXING*, wherein he proposes a ranking system that allows box collectors (aka “boxers”) to position themselves in relation to each other: a bantamweight has 0-100 boxes; a middleweight, 100-300; a heavyweight, 300-500. “Presently,” says Bruce, “there are a score [of] heavyweight contenders in North America.”
- 1989 Before my first day in the third grade, my dad resurrects The Incredible Hulk (?80) from “the morgue.” Eerily, the art is by Elmer Lehnhardt.

“My dad is richer than your dad,” chanted Matt Montalbano. He was bigger than me because he had been held back in school. His brow was a bluff and his eyes, so dark and deep-set, seemed to be watching the world from a cave. He was hairy for a nine-year-old, resembling the infamous gorilla from a movie my dad refused to watch since the character had been licensed by his nemesis, KST.

Matt’s dad *was* richer. Everyone said so after my dad accompanied me on Career Day, standing before my bright-eyed classmates in his regular work attire: a starched shirt and loafers without a penny to spare. My dad was old, old enough to be my granddad. There were sandbags under his eyes and no slack in his tie. He had a dimple in his chin, but not in his cheek, and his rusty mustache, red in old snapshots, was groomed neatly now. Miss Roper, my moley homeroom teacher, introduced him as the Director of Research & Development at Aladdin Industries. Due to time constraints and the brevity of a third-grader’s attention span, he skipped the evolution of the lunchbox to share a number of striking statistics. Since the lunchbox hit the shelves in 1950, Aladdin had sold a quarter billion. That amounted to more than four million per year, twelve thousand per day, eight per minute. There were, however, several facts my dad didn’t disclose. For instance, he didn’t disclose that he and his division had designed the plastic prototype, that he had co-filed the original patent, that he could have sold the mold to KST, but had instead honored the fine print of a contract prohibiting him from receiving a penny in residuals for any products produced with company resources. Of the quarter billion bought and sold, approximately half were plastic. With that figure in mind, my dad could have broken off a bit of chalk and done a quick math lesson on the board, seeking the product of one hundred twenty five million and the modest royalty rate of, let’s say, a nickel. Miss Roper wouldn’t have minded; after all, we were studying multiplication.

$$\{5¢ \times 125,000,000\} = \$6,250,000$$

My dad had a knack for numbers. He had the brains for business, but the heart of an artist. He spent hours of overtime in the moonlight of his office, like Newton in the orchard, where equations struck him upside the head like

ripe red apples. He was ambidextrous, drafting with one hand while taking dimensions with the other. I imagine the neurons racing across his corpus callosum, a freeway bridging his left and right brain, only this freeway wasn't congested like I-40, the route he drove twice a day, five days a week, rain or shine, exiting onto Murfreesboro Road, a straight-shot through a bustling industrial park. I went with him whenever school was cancelled on account of snow. He had his own parking spot and a front office a stone's throw from the plant, which was the heartbeat that pulsed through Aladdin's corporate appendages. The focal point of his office was a drawing board with a giant protractor and a retractable magnifying glass. Rather than pictures of his own children, the walls were covered with posters of Cabbage Patch Kids, whom Aladdin had licensed for their latest line of lunchboxes.

In a vestibule between his office and the revolving door, an elderly secretary with beehive hair sat behind a semicircle desk, one hand on a boisterous rotary phone. With her free hand, she offered me Werther's from a fishbowl.

We wore goggles to take a tour of the plant.

Danger. My dad held the door. *Hardhat Area.* Across the hall from the door labeled *Danger* was a door with a red arrow, pointing down.

"Where does that door lead to?" I asked.

"To the morgue."

"What is a morgue?"

"It's a place where things go when they're done with."

He made me wear a hardhat but didn't wear one himself.

I stepped through the threshold, into an eternal fluorescent twilight. The plant droned like a cornfield come harvest, long rows of machines infested with bug-eyed beings. A begoggled man sat in the bowels of a forklift, rearranging cardboard boxes. A conveyor belt carried lunchboxes by, clamping then stamping them with lithographs. That nexus of rude machinery passed gas at regular intervals, an odorless flatulence that lingered in the rafters. There were bins of byproducts waiting to be melted down: defective handles

and hinges, scraps of warped plastic. But Aladdin made more than mere lunchboxes; they made lids and straws and insulated coffee mugs soon to be injected with polyurethane, vaccinations against the common cold.

Occasionally a door would roll open, blustering with sleet until a truck reversed into the loading dock, beeping all the while. If you stood there long enough someone might notice you, for they crawled out from their crannies when a horn sounded, sharing cigarettes and a sleepy camaraderie. Unlike the corporate sector, comprised of white males mostly, here there was an air of equal opportunity, and it smelled like menthol. I was surprised to see women wearing hardhats, which they tipped, ladies *and* gentleman, when my dad made his morning rounds. They called him “sir” but he called them by their first names. The foreman was no exception.

“Morning, Kent.” My dad proudly pushed me out in front of him. “Have you met my son?”

“No sir.” The foreman knelt on the filthy cement. “Nice to meet you, sir,” he said, his hand swallowing mine. He stood up and resumed barking orders over the static of his walkie-talkie, catching himself before cussing in my presence. He was pointing at an unsecured rolling ladder. I wondered if that was the “corporate ladder” my dad always talked about.

The door labeled *Danger* swung open. In stepped Viktor Johnson III, grandson of the founder. As he made his way through the maze of moving parts, those taking a cigarette break stomped the butts and went back to work.

“Morning,” he hailed my dad as he approached, navigating puddles of polyurethane. “This must be your boy.” Though his hand was not nearly as callused, his grip was firmer than the foreman’s. “I’ve been meaning to mention,” he cleared his throat, “there’s been a change in plans. My father has decided to send *me* to the New Year’s trade show.”

“But I already bought my ticket.”

“Check with the airline. I’m sure it’s refundable.”

“Did your grandfather approve of this?”

“My grandfather doesn’t approve of anything. He’s old.”

My dad put his hands on his hips. Those cotton slacks, having shrunk from too many cycles in the dryer, hugged his thighs. “Not to complain, *sir*, but I haven’t missed a trade show in going on twenty years.”

“Time to pass the torch, then, wouldn’t you say?”

Viktor’s sense of entitlement reminded me of Matt’s dad, who interrupted *my* dad on Career Day. No matter how close he shaved, come happy hour, that lawyer’s Sicilian face would be eclipsed by a shadow that looked and probably felt like Velcro. Bored with the mundane topic of lunchboxes, my classmates’ owlish heads unscrewed to see *who* was next, sitting square in their seats yet looking backwards at that flashy man with slick hair and silver jewelry, including a pocket watch strung in his vest. Come to find, he was a defense attorney—the kind that helps criminals get away with crime. Miss Roper thanked my dad mid-sentence, then introduced the man in the doorway as “Mr. Montalbano” and told us that his time was valuable.

“See?” said Matt, trying his hardest to get a rise out of me. “My dad is richer than your dad.”

At pickup, I found the family Ford wheezing in the otherwise healthy traffic of European automobiles. Behind the wheel, my dad had yet to loosen his tie. I saw the sweat stains under his arm when he reached to unlock my door.

“Learn anything today?”

I scratched my head.

“Have any homework?”

I nodded.

“Finish it in time,” he said, “and we’ll watch our shows.” I always watched sitcoms before supper. My dad watched them with me but he didn’t laugh. He didn’t even laugh at the cartoons that we watched together every Saturday morning while my mom was off at garage sales. I would lie on the sofa and my dad would sit in an armchair facing me instead of the TV. If I laughed, he would make a check on his notepad. If I didn’t, he would make an X. If I fell off the sofa laughing, he would make a phone call to a colleague in the licensing department.

After supper, I pulled my pajamas on and plucked my toothbrush from the glass at the sink. When my teeth were clean, I held that glass sideways against my parents' door and put my ear to the bottom, eavesdropping.

"There's not enough to go around. Not enough time or money or new ideas."

"You saved their asses in '72, and this is how they repay you? Another pay cut."

"A lunchbox was a work of art then. Now it's just another product."

The hall shifted with the shadows of an old oak tree. A line of light lay at my feet, darkened now and then by my dad's footfall. He was pacing. My mom must have been in bed.

"And the kid," he continued. "How will we put him through college?"

"He'll earn some sort of scholarship. If not, he can take out loans, like we did. You should be worrying about the long run."

"The long run?"

"At this rate, you'll die before you retire."

"Nobody will retire from Aladdin. Not before the company is gobbled up by a conglomerate. It's only a matter of time. The Johnsons are savvy. Savvy enough to sell the ship before it sinks."

"And when the ship is sunk?"

"Cutbacks. Layoffs. Who the hell knows? We'll be at the whim of stockbrokers."

"You should have sold that blueprint."

"It was a prototype. And don't start with that."

With a *click*, the line of light was gone. I put the toothbrush in the glass and tiptoed back to my bedroom.

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The girls sat at one table; the boys sat at another. I sat at the far end, enjoying the company of an imaginary friend until Matt Montalbano slid onto the bench across from us, popping the lock of a plastic lunchbox defaced with magic marker. He started his chant, "My dad—"

“My dad,” I interrupted, “invented that.”

“So?” he said. “How hard is it to invent a box?”

“Harder than you think.”

“If your dad is so smart, why aren’t you rich?”

“Who says I’m not?”

“My dad says your dad gives free merchandise to the fundraisers. That’s why they let you go to school here.”

“Shut up!” I catapulted a spoonful of Jell-O. It bounced off his shirt without leaving a stain.

Matt retaliated by spitting Jungle Juice. That, on the other hand, did stain.

Someone shouted “Food fight!” and the cafeteria became a battlefield. They were shooting peas through their straws and lobbing fruit like hand grenades. Unfortunately for the janitor, Tuesday’s menu featured sloppy joes. Come to think of it, they were always serving sloppy joes.

I stood up.

Matt stood up.

His single eyebrow turned inward, forming a V. His fists swung at his knees. His nostrils flared. Now more than ever, he resembled that gorilla. But he didn’t scare me. I felt myself turn green, swelling into a hulk of scar tissue until my shirt split at the seams. It didn’t happen that way. But, as a boy, I thought it might.

Before he could throw a punch, I struck him over the head with my lunchbox, which was heavy since I hadn’t had an appetite. I’m lucky his mother didn’t march to the state legislature, gathering other mothers en route. The media would weasel its way into the courthouse, outdoing each other with eye-catching headlines:

“*Heavy Metal Leads to Head Banging*” and “*Lunchboxing: Is Your Child in the Ring?*”

But the blow didn’t do any damage. It only stunned Matt long enough for me to feed him a knuckle sandwich.

Miss Roper dragged me by the ear toward the principal’s office, where she conferred with Dr. Willard, a woman who wore pants and shoulder pads. Watching them through the window was like playing charades. Dr. Willard

placed the phone on the receiver and greeted Miss Roper. Miss Roper pointed at me through the glass. Dr. Willard nodded, shook her head, nodded again. She reached for the phone.

Miss Roper arched her eyebrow as she passed through a swinging door into the forbidden teachers' lounge. I caught a glimpse of them lounging and laminating vowels. I couldn't distinguish their voices over the grumbling gastrointestinal sounds of the coffeemaker. Across the hall, in the infirmary, the nurse was plugging Matt's nostrils with cotton balls.

Fifth period passed before Dr. Willard paged the secretary, summoning me into the principal's office. She didn't scold me. She just sat behind her desk in a corner of the room—crayon colorings on one wall, various degrees on the other—studying me until my eyes singed.

"Why?" she asked. Dr. Willard was not only the principal, she was a licensed psychologist. Parents paid per hour for her counsel. I had her undivided attention. And here I was, speechless. One of the nine phone lines began to blink. Dr. Willard pressed the intercom. "Show him in," she said, shuffling her papers.

The secretary left my dad at the doorway. Dr. Willard offered him a seat, but my dad preferred to stand.

"What happened?" He folded his arms across his chest.

"He picked a fight."

"I didn't pick it," I said.

"A fight picked him." Dr. Willard winked at my dad.

"Regardless," my dad said.

"Are we poor?"

"What? No."

"Are we rich?"

My dad glanced at Dr. Willard. He put his hands in his pockets. "No."

"Then what are we?"

"We're somewhere in between. Why?"

"Will I go to college?"

Dr. Willard reclined in her seat, watching me and my dad with a curious expression.

My dad didn't have an answer for that. He signed whatever he had to sign and took me home.

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1990 With *Paileontologists Retort* and *HOT BOXING* to rally around, collectors have grown into an underground community, meeting by chance at garage sales, flea markets, and antique shows. Scott Bruce says of fellow boxers, "You often hear stories of individuals purportedly abducted by UFOs seeking out each other's company for consolation. The same is true of [us]." In regard to garage sales, Bruce advises, "newly constructed houses or condos are not worth the trouble. Older neighborhoods, where aging parents of baby boomers may live, are much more promising." In addition to swindling the elderly, Bruce recommends flea markets as "great places to pick up a rare box for \$10 or \$20. As a rule the dealer has no idea of the current value." But beware of brats, Bruce warns, for they pose the toughest competition. "If you come across a box being examined by a kid, don't panic. In a loud voice say something like, 'Aren't you a little old for that?'" and hope the kid isn't clever enough to turn the question on you.

1998 The Johnson family sells Aladdin Temp-Rite, the most productive division of Aladdin Industries, to Berisford Limited for \$64,000,000. The Consumer Products Division, however, remains intact. Thus, the lunchbox survives. Later that year, my overworked dad suffers a massive heart attack but is resuscitated after six cardiac arrests. Thus, my dad survives.

1999 As the new millennium approaches, steel lunchboxes make a modest comeback. KST reissues several classics, including Spider Man. This renaissance proves to be a passing fad.

2000 Berisford Limited stocks plummet. For the second consecutive year, they fire fifteen percent of their employees. I enroll at Arizona State University, without the means to attend.

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I was a good student, but I wasn't the valedictorian. I was a good quarterback, but I wasn't all-state. I was trying my hardest, but I wasn't going to get a scholarship.

I hadn't stepped foot in Aladdin since I was a boy. I had been preoccupied with schoolwork and sports. I wouldn't have gone back if my high school hadn't required us to take an internship during the spring of our senior year. Instead of applying all over Nashville, I took the path of least resistance and interned for my dad. He warned me that it wouldn't be like I remembered it. He was right. I locked the doors upon exiting I-40. Up and down Murfreesboro Road, I saw women with fishnet stockings and men with stolen shopping carts. With plenty of abandoned buildings, the industrial park had become a red-light district.

I was issued a visitor's pass that I wore around my neck so I wouldn't be bothered. My dad introduced me to what was left of his division, which amounted to a few men and women with defeated smiles and blue moons under their eyes. The youngest Mr. Johnson, now in charge, had reappointed my dad's secretary, assigning her to himself. She had obeyed without complaint, for she was a family friend, having returned from retirement not once but twice, because she was loyal and stir-crazy. She sat before the revolving door at that same semicircle desk—her timeless workspace—hunting and pecking on a black typewriter. The sky could have fallen, along with the walls, and she would still be there, one hand on the rotary phone, offering you Werther's from a fishbowl.

My dad's workspace was not an office anymore but a corkboard cubicle. On his desk, sat an outdated computer and a photograph of me playing t-ball. He was beyond the age of retirement but he went on working. I think that photograph had something to do with it.

Having cleared a cubicle where I would work, he couldn't find much for me to do other than sending and receiving the occasional fax, which spat out slowly. I spent most of my time wandering aimlessly through the vast

headquarters—in between the barricaded corridors of the corporate sector and the plant, where the factory workers loafed and the fluorescence seemed dimmer every day.

I asked one of them, “Is Kent still around?”

“Who?”

“The foreman.”

“Kent works for Thermos,” said a veteran worker, wiping his forehead with an oil rag. “That rat always did.”

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By the end of spring I had explored the place from top to bottom, except for one locked door with a red arrow. One Saturday, while my mom drove the suburbs in search of a garage sale, my dad asked me to run an errand with him, now that I was too old for cartoons. My mom had taken the family Ford, so we squeezed into my granddad’s pickup, the only thing he’d left in his will. My dad rooted around his cubicle in search of his wallet. He said he must have left it when he clocked out yesterday. He retraced his steps to no avail.

“Did you check your coat pocket?” I pointed to the windbreaker that hung from his chair.

“Of course I checked my pocket. Pockets are the first place you check.”

When the wallet didn’t turn up right away, the hunt took a desperate turn. My dad insisted we split up and search the premises, even places where it couldn’t possibly be. He unhooked the skeleton key from his belt loop, instructing me to check the morgue while he checked the factory.

“The morgue?” I said, gulping loudly, or so it seemed.

“The wallet won’t be down there. But check anyway. Just in case.” His upper lip was beaded with nervous sweat. He had shaved his mustache years ago. No longer did they tell him that his biscuits were burning.

We walked the length of the empty corridor, followed by the hollow sound of our own footsteps. Eventually, we came to the two doors: one labeled *Danger*, the other with a red arrow. The skeleton key wasn’t shaped like a skull-and-crossbones. It looked like any other key. The door slammed

metallically as I stood at the summit, staring down into an abyss of stairs. There was a flutter in my chest. I mustered my bravado, laughing at myself. Laughing out loud, so whoever or whatever it was or wasn't could hear that I was unafraid.

I was relieved to find that the morgue was just a basement. There was nothing down there but shelves and cement walls. I climbed the stairwell, ascending from the morgue a braver man. My dad was waiting with his windbreaker on.

“Did you find it?” I asked. He nodded withholding. “Where was it?”

“What does that matter? I found it. Let's go.”

“It was in your coat pocket, wasn't it?”

He didn't answer.

I followed a step behind him, wanting to say, “I told you so.”

My mom beat us home. She was in the driveway unloading the family Ford.

“Wonder what kind of crap she bought today.” My dad parked my granddad's truck, which ticked like a time bomb before backfiring and startling my mom.

“Mind lending me a hand?” she asked, though it was more of a command than a question.

We were forced to haul her lampshades and plastic plants into the house.

“Guess who I bumped into this morning?” She didn't wait for us to guess. “Elmer Lehnhardt.”

My dad stopped in the doorway, peering at her through the foliage of the fern he was hugging.

“Not in the flesh, of course.” She slammed the trunk. “The lunchbox. You know, the one with him as a giant. With the people in the palm of his hand.”

My dad nodded, making his way indoors.

“I almost bought it,” my mom went on. “But they wanted one hundred dollars. I tried to talk them down, but they wouldn't budge. Imagine that. One hundred dollars for an old lunchbox.”

My dad stood square on the welcome mat. He was still peering at my mom through the fern. He hadn't paid this much attention to her in longer than I could remember. He dumped the fern and took me by the arm, rushing into the garage, where we couldn't park due to the jungle of junk my mom had accumulated over the years. Hiking into the brush, my dad called out, "Do you remember what you asked me that day in the principal's office?"

"In the principal's office?" I whispered, echoing my dad. And much like echoes, the memories came back to me, faint and fleeting, across a dark gulf of time: Career Day, the food fight, the whites of Dr. Willard's eyes, seemingly equipped with x-ray vision. But the loudest echo of all, and the most enduring, was Matt Montalbano's boastful chant. "I remember," I said, channeling the voice of my inner-child: "Will I go to college?"

My dad emerged from the brush for a moment then jumped back in, dragging cardboard boxes into plain view. When we were surrounded by them, he stabbed one with his skeleton key, running it lengthwise along the masking tape until the laceration left the box ready to be opened. "I forgot," he said. "How could I forget? With all the hype. Vintage this. Vintage that. There must be a hundred. Maybe more. Most of them in mint condition."

I didn't need to see them in order to remember. Inside those big cardboard boxes were smaller steel boxes my dad had given to me on birthdays and holidays and any other day that called for a gift—a treasure trove of memorabilia. Maybe it was fate. Maybe it was luck. Maybe it was Elmer Lehnhardt playing a prank from the grave.

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That night, while my mom made posters, my dad and I doctored the merchandise. If a sticker or tape wouldn't peel off, we soaked the area with a sponge then let it dry before applying rubbing alcohol to remove the gunk. We couldn't submerge the box in water or it would rust. Dings and dents didn't pose as much of a problem. We found we could push them out with our thumbs.

If that Saturday was my dad's finest hour, my mom's was the following Saturday. At last, she held a garage sale of her own, though it became more of an auction. To guarantee a turnout, she had placed an ad not only in the *Tennessean* but also in a newsletter called *HOT BOXING*. I watched the way she worked the crowd, coaxing casual browsers toward the most expensive items.

A neo-cowboy with a gaudy belt buckle and a price guide examined Hopalong Cassidy ('50) in a quiet corner of the garage where no one could look over his shoulder. Eventually, he stopped stroking his fu-manchu and said, "All righty. I'll give ya fifty for this-un."

"Who do you think you're fooling Eastwood? This box is a blue chipper." My dad tried to take the box back, but the cowboy couldn't let go.

"Fair enough," he said, "name your price." My dad pointed to the tag, but the cowboy tried to talk him down.

"Not Hoppy." My dad shook his head. "This one is non-negotiable."

The cowboy paid the full amount and left moping. My dad looked just as sad.

I guess we all had our favorites. The Incredible Hulk ('80) was mine. The buyer, a boy and his older brother, would never know that I had thumbed quite a dent out of that one.

The sun was gone before we saw it set and the people had gone with it; most of the lunchboxes were gone, too. We gathered around the lockbox to see how we had made out. I watched my mom's mouth make shapes as she counted the cash. My dad counted over her shoulder, impatient since she was slow about it and had faltered a time or two. My mom recounted, doubling a rubber band around the wad, then handed it to my dad, unceremoniously.

"This will get you there." My dad gave the wad to me. "The rest is up to you."

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- 2001 Berisford Limited sells Aladdin Temp-Rite to a company called Ali Group at a \$20,000,000 loss. The jobs are outsourced to Italy.
- 2002 The value of vintage lunchboxes peaks when a mint-condition

- Superman (’54) auctions for a grand total of \$13,225. The model originally retailed for \$2.39.
- 2003 The Johnson family sells the last division of Aladdin (the Consumer Products Division) to a Chinese importer based in Seattle, Washington. To the untrained eye, the lunchboxes look the same. They are made from the same mold. They have the same dimensions. They even say Aladdin on the bottom. There is only one difference. Instead of “Made in America,” they are “Made in China.” The Research & Development department is shut down. Since he is familiar with the product line, my dad is retained as a marketing consultant. He and a few Aladdin loyalists start a “skunk works” R&D department in their spare time. Most of the work is done in our garage, the same way the company started. Nothing comes of it.
- 2004 Having earned an academic scholarship sophomore year, I graduate from Arizona State University.
- 2005 My dad retires. Finally, he has free time and disposable income. My mom drags him to garage sales each weekend. He stops sulking eventually and bides his time rummaging through second-hand memories to buy back a few of his own.
- 2007 These days, most schoolchildren buy lunch or bring it in a brown paper bag, rendering the lunchbox obsolete. Twenty-five American manufacturers and lithographers were involved in the production of lunchboxes during the twentieth century. Only one, King Seeley Thermos, is still in the business. Aladdin has become an archive by default. A “Property for Sale” sign is posted in the overgrown lawn, listing the number to a rotary phone. Aside from a roaming security guard, the only employee still on payroll is an ancient secretary who sits in the vacated headquarters on Murfreesboro Road, within the circumference of a kerosene lamp, for the electricity has long been cut. The offices are empty. The plant is haunted by the shadows of inert machines. Having filed the last pension plan, she waits with her fishbowl of Werther’s, one hand on the rotary phone. If and when it rings, Aladdin Industries will be but a memory.

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