

Spent

Mark swore up and down that the ridges of quarters used to be smoother, more satisfying to rub against the tip of the thumb. And if there's anyone who would know, it's him. As a young man – just a boy still, really– he went with his friends to a local corner store almost every day after school, itching to spend the loose change they'd been tossing around in their pockets. The owner of O'Doul's Market was a kind man who would sometimes hand out candy to the younger children, especially little girls with saucer eyes and pristine manners. One sunny Thursday, Mark sauntered past the boxes off-brand corn flakes and bottles of soda, deciding on a scoop of strawberry ice cream. He had had a long day and felt an urge for a sugar rush. He still remembers the weight of the coins in his cupped palm as he passed his meager allowance over to Mr. O'Doul. On the walk home he felt emptier, his pockets lighter. Then he must've caught the wind just wrong because the scoop toppled from the cone and plopped onto the road, sending up a small cough of dust. He stood there staring at the mound of ice cream as it puddled and seeped into the dirt, feeling the blood rush into his cheeks, burning with frustration and disappointment. Then he stepped over his mess and continued toward home, eating the plain sugar cone, even though it left his tongue drier than the gravel road.

The day he'd received his first real paycheck he'd stopped in at local bar to buy himself a beer, a toast to adulthood. It had only been a three-week stint as an office temp, but still. A bottle in the city cost almost twice as much one in his little town, but he decided it was a special occasion, so he bought himself another beer as soon as he knocked back the first. After all, a man deserves a few when he finally starts making real money. On the way back to his apartment he'd stumbled across a curb and smashed his shin on a fire hydrant. He woke up in a hospital bed the next morning with a fat hospital bill on his lap and a bright blue cast on his left leg.

Summer after his senior year in high school Mark worked as a lifeguard at the public pool, lecturing reckless little kids about the dangers of slick concrete and counting down the seconds to adult swim time. He earned mere ducats for dozens of hours in a hot southern sun, but he saved enough to buy his first car. Mr. Kemp, who owned the car lot down on 5th street, cut Mark a deal on a used Ford, on account of Mr. Kemp and Mark's dad went way back. Mark paraded his jalopy around town till a film of white dust permanently coated the windshield. Then Mark's dad asked him to pick up a prescription from the pharmacy. When Mark got back behind the wheel, the brown sack of ambiguous medication in hand, the ignition wouldn't start. Mark kept at it, turning the engine over and over, but his little Ford just wouldn't go. Mark's buddy was a mechanic, and he said he could fix it, but the damn thing was probably worth more as scrap metal than wheels.

When the doctors diagnosed his dad with advanced Alzheimer's disease, they handed Mark a pamphlet of nearby nursing homes that offer appropriate care for someone with such advanced symptoms of dementia. They gave him only a few months to live, but Mark cut a check to Summerville Elderly Clinic every month for 57 months.

When he finally decided to propose, he bought a neatly cut stone and made a reservation for two at a well-reviewed yet practical restaurant. Velvet box and white tablecloth, he did the whole rigmarole. He was relieved to finally have everything all settled. No more first dates and no more one-month-anniversary presents. He was pretty sure Katherine would only expect gifts on her birthday and Christmas, and since she had a June birthday, he would have plenty of time to balance the sheets between. They'd talked about it and both decided to have a small wedding, a quiet chapel affair and a quaint reception in the gazebo by the duck pond just east of his hometown. He had expected to pay for calligraphy invitations, fresh bouquets, and even one of those big white tents you can rent by the hour, but then Kathy got her heart set on a honeymoon abroad. He tried to talk her down to Niagara Falls, but she was hell-bent on Madrid. In the end they went to Hawai'i because Mark refused to take an extra day off to visit the passport office. Domestic flights are far more reasonable, anyway. It took him almost four months to pay off that vacation.

As an undergrad, Mark spent the months between terms interning at a local congressman's office, pitching in countless hours toward the Cause. The congressman would sometimes pop into their dingy breakroom and make a threadbare speech about "duty" and "community," while the interns sipped Styrofoamed coffee and imagined how flush their resumes would look if he became governor one day. When he wasn't sending out mailers or discussing the minutiae of local landscaping ordinances with embittered spinsters, Mark trailed April Day around the office. April was a few years older and from out of state. She let Mark take her out to dinner and buy her flowers, and she even pranced around the office every single day in the fur coat her gave her. Then in November, after their congressman lost the race for reelection, she flew home. Mark drove her to the airport. Last he heard April Day was working for practically nothing at some charity out West. Mark guessed he was lucky he didn't strap himself to her forever, or he would still be bankrolling her bleeding heart.

The biggest fight he ever had with Kathy was about private school. She insisted the girls go to Catholic school, but those nuns showed their Christian mercy by charging an arm and a leg for tuition. "I went to public school and I turned out just fine. The girls are a little soft, maybe some exposure would be good for them. Maybe they'd learn a thing or two more than just arithmetic at the neighborhood school."

"Don't pretend you care about the quality of their education. You just can't bear the thought of shelling out tuition every year."

"Kathy, be reasonable. It's not just the tuition, but it's the uniform and the books. One of them would probably sign up for some absurdly expensive hobby like oboe lessons or the tennis team."

Mark's mom had died when he was still pretty young. Since he wasn't old enough to stay home alone, Mark had to tag along with his dad as he prepared for the funeral. That week is mostly fog in his memory, but he still remembers the smell of the funeral home where his dad chose the casket. Sometimes he still has dreams of walking the aisles giant looming coffins, breathing in the

acid smell of wood polish and squinting through the yellow light spewing from the outdated overhead fixtures. The caskets seem unbearably large. How could his mother possibly need one that big? She'd been down to practically nothing by the time she kicked it. His dad marched to the back of the store, where they kept the simplest, most practical caskets. "No one is going to have to stare at it for very long. The service is 45 minutes and then its underground. It's not like she's going to mind."

Kathy was always nagging him to visit his father, even though visiting hours were right in the middle of the workday. Those bozos at the clinic obviously didn't consider the schedules of people who had real jobs. She also nagged him about buying the girls new clothes or paying for braces. A ceaseless stream of money changing hands, constantly signing his name on checks. He gave up on filling in the memo line because he couldn't keep track of all the reasons she had for draining his bank account. "Look, I write the checks, so I'll decide when I need to visit him, okay? Besides, he's my own damn father." Every time he opened his wallet, he felt an ache at the bottom of his gut.

When he was a kid, Mark mowed lawns for money. A lot of the boys did, but everyone knew Mark mowed the best, making sure to get all the corners and the patches of grass between the flower beds. Plus, he made sure to charge just a little bit less than the other boys. He got paid in cash, which he counted every Sunday night then stored away in a beat-up Saks box that his mother had given him.

When his dad eventually died, Mark had to go home and sort through all the old junk that had piled up in his childhood home as his father descended further into his illness. That faded yellow box was still there in the back of the closet, stuffed full of dollar bills and loose change. Mark scooped up a handful and fingered the edges of the coins, releasing a long breath out. The cool rivets had always calmed him, anchoring him in a reality that made sense to him, but that morning, and forever afterward, the coins left him unmoored and grasping at the frayed edges of his life.