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**Pathfinder**

**T**here's a hatchet on the wall over my writing desk. It's next to the framed diploma from the University of Akron and some second and third-place certificates from the local writing contest I participate in every year.

The hatchet was made by the Helko company in Germany. It's a Pathfinder model and a real beauty—the open-faced head is drop forged from high-grade German carbon steel. Drop forging is when a blacksmith pounds steel on an anvil while holding it in a pair of tongs. This is Renaissance-period craftsmanship. Master blacksmiths hand their skills down to apprentices year after year. It's been going on that way at Helko since the 1800's.

The light-brown handle is made from exported American hickory that's shaped and handcrafted in Switzerland. Each handle is unique. Two axes made the same day, at roughly the same time, in the same location, look and feel different. The balance is exquisite.

I contacted the Helko company directly a few years back but none of the smiths spoke English. There are, of course, distributors here in the States, but I was hoping to talk directly with the guys forging the steel. A salesman from a local supply company told me that the axe heads are forged to 53-56 Rockwell hardness. He didn't have any other information.

The paradox of the unified craftsmanship and beauty, opposed to the splitting function of the hatchet, is profound. Firearms can be like that too, but I don't do guns.

One time, I stuck a Post-It note on the wall next to the Helko that read, "This is not an axe." My daughter Jennifer laughed out loud. We had a brief discussion about Art after that. She argued that it was just a hatchet, not a piece of art. I countered with some of the finer points of the handle, the blade edge, and the process it takes to make such a hatchet . . . she wasn't buying any of it.

The Helko smiths have spent hundreds of years perfecting the hardening and tempering of their axe heads. As far as the handles go, American hickory is known for its coarse texture and straight grains—the perfect canvas for staining. The sapwood is mostly white with shades of brown, while the heartwood is pale and reddish brown. These 100-120 foot hickory trees are sustainably sourced and hand selected in batches—who am I to say this perfectly balanced object, a unified expression of earth, sky, fire and metal is not art?

There are two stories about the hatchet. Oftentimes, one of them rises into shape from the nebulous region of memory—sometimes just before I doze off for a nap. It speaks in whispers. I rarely think of the second event.

The first hatchet story has changed quite a bit over the decades, as the teller has changed. The second has never been told or mentioned in all these years. One starts out with a small family of five going camping in New York's Allegheny State Park in the autumn of 1978; and two boys—8 and 10—who find themselves on a hiking trail with their father's new hatchet, the Helko Pathfinder:

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"You know, Dad said for me to carry it, to not even let you hold it for a minute," said the older brother Danny.

"Yeah, I know," replied younger Tommy.  
"He thinks you're too young."

Tommy was silent and thought about his birthday coming up in a few months. It was the only time of the year that Danny was one year older than him and it only lasted for a month, until Danny's birthday came again. "I'm a year younger than you when it's October."

"Don't be smart. That's a technicality. I told him I wouldn't let you have it."

"C'mon! Just let me hold it. I've never even held a hatchet," said Tommy.

"You should've joined Boy Scouts. We get to do all kinds of cool things there. See the back part of this hatchet? You can use that like a hammer to pound tent stakes into the ground."

"Boy Scouts is dumb," flaunted Tommy.

"Hey! I'm a Boy Scout. And if it's so dumb, why does Dad only want me to hold this?"

"I don't know. I don't really care. I bet I'm better with a dumb hatchet than you are."

"Oh, you think so, eh?" asked Danny.

"I bet I am, yep."

"Alright, let's just see about that." Danny looked around for a fallen tree on the forest floor. "There," he pointed to an old elm branch that had split off from its trunk and now rested on the ground next to it. "Pull that branch over here," he ordered.

Tommy's face beamed. He was going to get to use the hatchet! He walked over to the elm branch and pulled at it but saw that part of it was still attached to the trunk. "Hey, let me see that hatchet. This branch isn't all the way off."

"No way." Danny walked over to the tree and surveyed the situation. The tree must have been hit by lightning and the branch was split away from the trunk—but not all the way. A few hatchet strokes would probably finish the job. "All right. I'll take care of this. And then we'll see who's better with a hatchet." Danny unsheathed the Helko and tossed the leather case to Tommy. He then lined the head up with the tendrils that still connected the branch to the trunk. He swung the hatchet down hard on the branch and the sound echoed through the woods. Brown swallows shuffled high in the trees, some of them flying away.

"Did it cut through it?"

"Not yet. It takes more than one swing, dummy."

Danny pulled the hatchet up towards his ear, arm at a right angle, then brought it down several times against the branch. In a couple minutes, he

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had separated the branch from the tree. Now he could have his little contest. "Come on, help me drag this over there, away from the trunk."

A woodpecker's rat-tat-tat sounded close by and a squirrel scurried off in the distance.

When they moved the branch to a flat area, Danny held the hatchet out for Tommy to take.

"Alright, You go first. I'll time you," he said, showing the younger boy his watch.

Danny figured the branch was no more than 7 or 8 inches in diameter. It wouldn't take him that long to cut through it. He also estimated Tommy would have a harder time, because he was smaller.

Tommy held the hatchet and thought of the armored dwarves from the Lord of the Rings who carried huge double-sided battle axes over their lumbering shoulders. Maybe he wasn't a dwarf warrior, but he sure did like the way that hatchet felt in his hands and he was darn sure that he could cut faster and better than his stupid Boy Scout brother.

He stood over the branch and started eagerly, bringing the hatchet all the way over his head and slamming it down hard and fast on the branch. Chips flew wildly. He held the hatchet in both hands and did not stop for anything.

"Through!" He yelled triumphantly. "What's my time?"

"Seven minutes!" Danny was enthusiastic. He was a little surprised by his brother's energy. "You're a Wildman!"

"Step aside for the dwarf warrior." Tommy walked over and handed the hatchet back to Danny, handle first. "Your turn, Boy Scout." He spit on his hands, wiped them several times against each other, then patted them on his jeans.

"All right, here's the watch."

Danny took the hatchet and began chopping. He knew that he wouldn't be able to do that Wildman stuff Tommy did, but he was hoping precision cuts would be more effective, so he aimed carefully every hatchet stroke and brought the forged head down as fast and as hard as he could.

The cuts were clean and he was making progress, but Tommy moved into his view and held up eight fingers with a wry smile.

Danny threw the hatchet on the ground. It landed with a thud and skidded a few feet.

"Dad would kill you if he saw you throw that hatchet like that," said Tommy.

"I don't care. He's not here," Danny shot back.

"Sore loser."

Danny grabbed Tommy's arm and raised a fist. "I'll give you sore loser."

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Tommy pushed himself away from his brother's grasp.

"All right, Wildman. You're so good with that thing. Let's see what you can really do. How about you try to chop down an actual tree?" Danny's face was flush.

"Show me the tree."

Danny pointed to a pine tree a few feet away with roughly a 10 inch diameter. The tree was tall, maybe 30-40 feet high.

Tommy picked the hatchet up off the forest floor and stood before the towering pine ...

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There is a Sequoia tree in Sequoia National Park that's over a thousand years old. It's not the tallest living tree, but scientists estimate with all the branches, the trunk, and roots, it's the largest tree in the world in terms of biomass. It's named The President and has an estimated 1 billion leaves. There are, too, old films that show a pair of flanneled lumberjacks alternating axe strikes into the trunk of massive redwoods with trunk diameters that reached 30 feet, you'd swear it would take these two men a week to cut down just one tree.

One of these old promotional films is celebrating man's mastery over the natural world and the abundance of natural resources available. There are new films out now that discuss the wholesale decimation of these forests that took place, stating that 90% of the trees have been eradicated by man—gone forever.

Several years ago, David Milarch, a nurseryman from Michigan, had a near death experience. He's since made it his life's mission to save these giant trees, working with geneticists in the hopes of cloning them—trees like The President—to repopulate the species. He's guided by angels, says that they are aware of the state of the environment and of the jeopardy the earth is in.

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The width and height of the pine tree the boys were looking at varied through the years, from telling to telling. One time it was a forty-footer on a high hill. Another time, it was a sickly, Charlie Brown Christmas tree near a trickling stream. Oftentimes it depended on the teller.

What the boys were looking at back in 1978 was a Pitch Pine (*pinus rigida*). They're common to Western New York, have a relatively thin trunk and distinct bunched needles.

Tommy's hands sweated and the hatchet cut deeper and deeper, throwing chips wildly into the air.

Whether it took 10 minutes or 30 is hard to say, but eventually the tree fell accompanied by a victorious cry of timber. Tommy wiped the sweat from his forehead. Danny, shocked at his brother's success, felt oddly proud. He also laughed to himself knowing that Tommy was going to get in trouble. All he had to do was tell.

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Long-term memory is a shapeshifter. Was I really the boy who chopped down that tree or was it the other way around? Did the older boy cut down the tree and blame me outright? I call my brother in Arkansas to talk about it, to talk about things in general, but he doesn't remember. He wants to talk about his career, how we will go about caring for our aging parents. He thinks I think too much.

Still, there is a hatchet on my wall. There it is—this is not an axe.

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When the boys arrive back in camp, their mother is bottle-feeding the baby and their father is sitting in a lawn chair having a beer.

"Where's the kindling?" asks the father.

"He chopped down a pine tree," blurts out Danny as he points a finger at Tommy.

"Shit!" cries Tommy.

The father clarified the situation—the ramifications of which the boys didn't fully understand. That chopping down trees in a New York State park was illegal was not known to them before they left on their journey. Father conferred with mother and both the boys were grounded to the tent for the rest of the day. First, however, they'd have to show their father where the tree was and help him move it off the trail.

In one telling of this story, the father then brings the boys to the ranger station and has them admit their infraction. In another, the three of them tug the tree off the path and hide it in the nearby underbrush. A third version says that a ranger actually witnessed the crime and that it was he who brought the kids back to camp. One time told, it's a story of a great boyhood triumph. Another time, it's woven as a tale of brotherly betrayal.

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There's another family story about the Helko Pathfinder hatchet, a second story that's more alarming than the first.

There was a tin hamper in one of our bedrooms. It was a red, white and blue, decorated with the American flag and a triumvirate of marching revolutionaries—a drummer, a flag bearer and a man playing a fife. The hamper was purchased around 1976 as the country's bicentennial generated an uptick of patriotic items on the shelves of Twin Fair and Two Guys.

The hamper was situated at the end of the bed and we often took turns dumping out the clothes it contained onto the floor and climbing into it. A small boy could nestle himself in the oval-shaped hamper sideways and have another kid rock him to and fro in a wobbly way that was fun. We didn't have video games then, so now it's much like looking back on those old photos of kids running down the street keeping a large wagon wheel moving with a stick.

Us boys were up playing in the bedroom, jumping on the bed, rolling each other over in the hamper—all kinds of rambunctious type play that

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today would probably be diagnosed as hyperactivity or AD/HD, or tagged with some current trendy psychological nomenclature. Back then we just called it being boys.

At one point, my older brother got himself in the hamper and began rocking back and forth. His head protruded above the metal casing's rim and he tipped too far. The hamper, and boy within, teetered in slow motion towards the bed frame. He must have known he had gone past a point of no return because he opened his mouth to scream. That's when his face smashed into the bed frame—teeth first.

In a moment, there was blood, crying, and parents running up the stairs into the bedroom. In the blur of the action, through the blood and chaos, I could only discern one thing—my brother's missing tooth.

Hearing the loud crash, my parents ran into the room. My father held my brother as my mother applied a towel to his face. They quickly moved him from room to car and my mother drove him to the local hospital while my father stayed behind to watch me. I was interested in the contrast of play, noise and emergency changing into total silence. It fascinated me how fast one thing could become another, in just one instant. Our home was like that a lot.

My brother hadn't actually lost his front tooth. The fall into the bed frame jammed one of his central incisors back up into his gum line.

The injury itself would cost a fortune in dental and orthodontic care for the rest of my brother's childhood and much of his adult life. Eventually, in his 40's, he finally had the tooth removed and now wears a fake replacement—you really can't tell the difference between the two front teeth. Sometimes, when he takes the artificial tooth out, he looks like Larry Playfair or George Shultz, one of those old 70's hockey enforcer types. I'm sure that "hockey look" eventually helped my brother make peace with his wound. Now and again, he'll take the falsey out for a picture just for fun.

The next day there was a new rule at 401 Stanley Street: No Playing in the Hamper! It was a good rule, one we could get behind because we understood the ramifications of not obeying. Plus, Dad had his own way of enforcing rules, especially ones that could affect our well-being.

Sometimes wounds heal so well, scars become so familiar, that emergencies become lost to distant memory. The trauma of the great Hamper-Tooth Smash of '76 soon vanished and the hamper restrictions softened.

We eventually took to bouncing around that bedroom once more. Now the third brother was 4-years-old. Once again, we jumped on the bed, wrestled with each other and tossed the youngest brother into a wall of pillows.

Someone convinced the youngest brother to get into the hamper so we could rock him back and forth. In a strange coincidental repeating of traumatic events, the youngster and the hamper crashed into the end of the wooden bed frame, just as it had for the oldest brother several years earlier. This time instead of a tooth, the youngest brother's skull split open.

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There was another trip to the hospital and stitches.

While my mother was at the hospital with my brothers, my father calmly came into the room and picked up the hamper. His face appeared different than I had ever seen it. He put the hamper under his arm and walked down the stairs. I instinctively knew to not follow. But, I could hear his footsteps as he went down the second flight and out the side door.

I heard the door slam shut and then quiet for a few moments. He must have gone to the shed out back.

I stood in silence, straining to hear what was happening.

A couple of minutes passed and I heard a loud metallic, slicing noise from the backyard. It sounded like chopping wood. The noise repeated. I ran to the bathroom window and looked out to our backyard to see my father hatcheting the hamper into shreds.

The next day was garbage day and I recall the mutilated hamper out at the curb and feeling strangely proud and terrified of my father at the same time.

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It's Saturday and the cold November sky is low and heavy, threatening the season's first snowfall. The leaves have passed from October's bursting oranges, yellows and reds, lapsed into a drab brown and faint yellow canvas familiar this time of year. There's a slight draft in the room that tells of winter. I finish my coffee and smoke a cigarette, then go to the closet for my Carhartt jacket and black wool hat. I lace up my boots and step into the den to remove the hatchet from the wall. In my world of laptops, Post-It Notes and smartphones, the wood handle feels good in my hands—true. I exit the side door and walk back to the woodshed where I grab some logs and toss them next to the old oak stump. I begin swinging the hatchet and my forearm feels warm and strong. It's good to move like this, to feel alive. Somewhere close-by, there is a fire burning, I smell the sooty leaves, though I see no smoke. I begin swinging the hatchet and continue splitting the wood for a half hour.

When I stop to take a break, I glance back at the house and hear the side door slam. Jennifer steps out, looks my way and waves. She turns down the driveway and walks away. I cup my hands to my face and breathe warm into them. Soon I'll bring the firewood into the house and hang the Helko Werks Pathfinder hatchet back in its place above my desk, next to the second and third place awards from the local writing contest.