



# THE CANOE

## A Short Story

luke t.  
bergeron

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“What are you talking about?” Ken said. My stepbrother did his best to feign ignorance, but it didn’t look like anyone was buying it.

“It wasn’t hard to put two and two together,” my stepmom said. I felt like they were just leading us now, trying to get us to confess. But I wasn’t going to be the one to speak first.

“Maryann called me at work,” Uncle Scott said. “She told me she saw some boys in my shed. One was wearing an army jacket.” He looked at Chris, my stepbrother’s friend. “She said they were in a silver canoe. What color is your canoe, Dan?”

“Silver,” my father said. “All bright and shiny.” He looked at Uncle Scott, then back at us.

I didn’t say anything. I just cowered behind Ken and Chris. Both were taller than me and it was better if I didn’t have to meet my father’s eyes.

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When we were young my father and stepmother encouraged us to sleep down by the water. It was an easy way to get three adolescent boys out of the house on hot summer evenings. My brothers and I would spread out the small blue pup tent on the makeshift beach my father had trucked down to the lake in a big dump truck. Sometimes we’d start a fire in the firepit and roast marshmallows late into the night, laughing and listening to throaty bullfrog mating calls.

My stepbrother Ken was the oldest and he led our gang. He was half white and half Cherokee, and he was a talker, if you know what I mean. He loved to convince people he knew more than he did, and that he was more important than he was. Like one time Ken taught me and Jay his “secret Indian hunting traps” – he Tom Sawyered us into digging holes and covering them with leaves in the woods near our house. It took hours. When my father tripped over one and almost fell, Ken got lectured, even though he hadn’t actually done any of the digging. My father was a guy Ken could never convince. But Ken still did his best to talk his way out of it anyway.

I had been the oldest, and the leader, until Ken came along when my father remarried. My younger brother Jay was the youngest out of the three of us, and, somehow, the voice of reason. Or maybe it was just fear. I’m not sure.

Anyway, we loved to camp down by the water, and did it for months straight, almost every summer. We’d spend all night telling dirty jokes and ghost stories. Sometimes we’d swim in the water at night, even though we couldn’t see the rocks after dark. But the water was always still warm from the Maine sun, so it was a great time to swim.

It wasn’t until the summer I turned eleven, Ken fourteen, and Jay nine, that we started sneaking across the lake at night.

We'd discovered the campground on the other side of the water, but more importantly, we'd discovered the girls there. They were camping with their parents. Some would stay all summer.

So my brother and I would wait until the lights up at the house went dark, the signal that our parents were sleeping, then lift the big silver aluminum canoe up from the sand and wade into the water with it. We didn't set it down until it was clear of the shore. We knew that the sound of the canoe carried all the way up to the house if it scraped against the rocks. We were careful not to let that happen. That was an easy way to get caught. Once we were in we'd set off across the lake, breaking our wooden paddles through the dark glass of the water.

We prided ourselves on being successful. We were sneaking out. We were hanging out with girls. We were smarter than our parents.

After a few weeks of success, one night we got cocky and just slid the canoe across the beach sand down to the water. We spent a few hours talking with the girls at the campground and then headed for home.

My father was waiting for us on the beach when we got back, sitting by the burnt out embers of our campfire, drinking a beer and watching the shore. We couldn't see him when we pulled the canoe up, our hurried whispers about who got kissed that night distracting us - Ken always did the best with the girls. Jay usually just sat at a picnic table until it was time to go home.

"Welcome back boys," my father said, startling us as he stood. "Did ya have fun?"

I froze with my paddle held over the side of the canoe. It was dripping into the dark water. My father had a way of asking the buddy-buddy questions first before he got angry. The year before he'd caught me smoking. First he asked if I like it. Then he grounded me for a month, even though I told him I didn't, really.

Ken fell for the buddy-buddy act. “Aww, Dan,” he said, grinning a stupid grin. “You shoulda seen this girl I was talking to over there.” He whistled, as if that was enough of a description.

I knew we were screwed. Jay did, too. He cowered in the middle of the canoe, sitting on a cushion of life jackets and trying to squish down as low as possible. I could tell he was too scared to stammer out that he hadn’t wanted to go anyway. Ken and I always talked him into it in case we got in trouble, so there would be three people to take the blame, instead of just two. We learned that lesson after we’d taken out the three-wheeler without permission earlier that summer. Since then we’d brought Jay along on our adventures. Jay always came, even though he always complained.

“Oh really?” my father asked. I could hear him smiling as he pulled the bow of the canoe up onto the sand, leaving us rocking precariously. When one end of a canoe is on land it off-balances the whole thing. The canoe shivered halfway up the shore, unwieldy. Listening to my father, I knew how the canoe felt.

“Sure, Dan, she was great. You shoulda seen the rack she-” Ken grabbed the air in front of his chest, holding imaginary grapefruits.

My father cut Ken off, “I hope you got your fill of it, coz this is the last time it’s gonna happen.” He quickly pulled the canoe up further with tight movements of his arms. His carpenter hand’s gripped the bow. When my father was mad, he always moved a little too fast. His quick jerk on the canoe forced us to jump out before it tipped over.

I got my sneakers wet in the shallow water, but it was better than getting soaked completely.

“I don’t want you sneaking out again. You can’t take the canoe out on the lake at night without a light – the game warden would have my ass if he found out I let you do that. You could get hit by another boat.”

Once the canoe was fully up on the sand my father collected the paddles. He pointed one of the paddles like a finger. “Don’t let me catch you again.” He turned and walked away, up the path to the house, a wooden paddle in each hand. He was whistling.

Our reactions were mixed as we rekindled the fire and talked about what happened. I sat on the front bow of the canoe. It lifted the other end up in the air.

Ken was livid – he couldn’t believe my father was taking away his freedom to go visit the girls. “Just when I was finally getting somewhere with Heather,” he fumed. “This is just great. Just. Great.”

“I’m never gonna do that again,” Jay squeaked, poking the fire with a stick and looking sheepish. He pushed his oversized glasses up his nose. I imagined he was a cartoon mouse. “I don’t wanna get in trouble.”

I just smiled and idly kicked some sand into the fire. I saw what Jay and Ken didn’t, they were overlooking the beauty of our present situation. We’d gotten away with it. Sure, we couldn’t do it again, you can’t move a canoe without paddles, but it looked like we weren’t going to get punished.

That was just fine with me.

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The next day on the back deck my stepmom ripped into us. She told us we’d be grounded for a month if we ever did anything like that again.

“You’ll catch hell if you try,” she warned. “So you better not.”

My father just grinned and drank his morning coffee. I guess he musta thought the whole thing was kinda funny. She smacked him on the shoulder and went inside when he started to tell us about the time he’d done the same thing with his friend Pete when he was our age.

“My old man tanned my hide with a switch,” he told us, raising one eyebrow in warning.

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Two nights later we set off again with 2x4’s instead of paddles. We took them from scraps my father brought home from a framing job he’d finished. He kept scraps like that in the

garage and sometimes we'd use them to make forts in the woods. It was my idea to use them as paddles. Ken provided the courage to get the plan moving, and Jay brought up the rear, complaining about getting in trouble.

The thick boards weren't as efficient as the wide bladed paddles and Ken and I got into an argument when I got a splinter and stopped paddling in the middle of the lake to try to take it out of my palm. Jay huddled in the center of the canoe, shushing us.

"I don't wanna get in trouble," he said. "I don't even want to come."

"C'mon Jay," Ken silenced him. "What about Lisa? She's gonna be waiting for ya. Don't you wanna see her?"

Jay said nothing. I don't think he cared about any of that. He just pushed his oversized glasses up his nose.

After a night talking to the girls we scrambled back to the canoe and pushed off shore with our 2x4's, just as the campground manager was making his nightly rounds on his four-wheeler. My father wasn't the only one that didn't want us sneaking into the campground at night. But the manager didn't catch us.

A fog had fallen around the shores of the lake, but the moon was full, so it was easy to see once we paddled out into the center. Close to home, grunting with the effort of paddling with the 2x4's, Ken and I arguing again – this time it was him that wasn't paddling and I was pissed about that – we slowed the canoe down, searching for our beach. The fog was so thick it was difficult to see exactly where we were headed. We were pretty sure we were in the right area, we knew the lake well, even in the dark, but we couldn't tell how far away from shore we were. A black blur of trees through the fog was our only clue.

"We have to be quiet," I said. "We can't let the canoe hit the rocks – it'll be really noisy. Dad'll catch us."

“We’ll be fine, just keep your eyes open,” Ken said. “Hey Jay, stick your hand in the water, see if you can tell how deep it is.” Jay leaned far over the side to check. The water streamed through his fingers with a gushing sound.

Suddenly a bright beam of light smacked me in the face. A booming voice startled me into dropping my 2x4. It clanged against the bow and fell overboard with a splash. Jay almost fell over the side of the canoe into the water.

“Hello Boys!” Crap. We were caught.

We squinted in the bright beam of light. My father stood on the shore ten feet in front of us, brandishing a huge 9V flashlight. He moved it over each of our faces, blinding us. “What are you doing out in the canoe? Bring it up on the beach.” His voice held a mix of humor and anger. I don’t know why he asked. He knew what we were doing.

I gave into it then, that feeling of shame bubbling up in me. I knew we were really screwed this time. Sometimes you almost relish getting punished if you know you should be, and that’s the feeling that rose in me as I got out of the canoe and pushed it the rest of the way to the shore. The bubble popped when I stepped onto the beach sand.

“Go on up to bed, boys. I’ll deal with you later.”

We started up the path to the house. I tripped over a tree root and stubbed my toe. I was still a bit blind from the flashlight. I heard my father stowing the canoe in its usual spot under the blueberry bushes that lined the beach and chuckling about the 2x4’s, before following us up the path to the house. I could almost hear him shaking his head in the dark and grinning.

We went straight to bed without brushing our teeth, hoping to feign sleep as quick as possible and avoid a lecture. After the house quieted down, I heard Jay whisper through the darkness of our bedroom. “I told you I didn’t want to get into trouble.”

“Shut up, Jay,” Ken mumbled and rolled over. “Just go to sleep.”

In the morning my stepmother woke us up early with a screeching voice that reminded me of the Wicked Witch of the West. She made us clean the whole house – vacuuming, sweeping, dusting, even wiping down the windows in the loft upstairs.

She let Jay off midmorning. I sure she knew Ken and I masterminded the plan. The two of us cleaned until early afternoon. She fed us lunch then handed us the canoe paddles and told us we should take a canoe ride since we'd done such a good job. We couldn't believe it. But we didn't need to be told twice.

Grinning like jackals, Ken and I rushed down the path to the water. We were eager to get out of the house before she realized we hadn't done the dishes. The paddles hung from our hands like scepters. We were excited. We were kings.

“Came you believe it?” Ken asked me.

I told him it was too good to be true.

Down by the water, we found out it was. The canoe was chained to a gigantic oak tree, a big silver padlock completing the link around the tree and one of the crossbeams.

“What's the matter, boys?” my stepmother yelled down from the back deck. “Aren't you going to take a ride?” She laughed as we stood there by the canoe, paddles in hand.

“We can't,” I yelled back up to her. “Dad chained up the canoe.”

“I wonder why,” she yelled back down. She laughed again and went inside the house.

My father didn't say anything to us about the chained up canoe that night when he got home from work. He just chuckled when my stepmother related the story to him.

It was two weeks before they let us camp down by the shore again, but the canoe stayed chained to the tree. Nothing else was said about it, and we knew better than to ask. We were pretty sure we'd gotten off easy.

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One night my stepmother brought a boy home from a meeting, a red-headed kid named Chris. She was a Jehovah's Witness and went to meetings several times a week. Sometimes we

went with her, but most times we didn't, especially during the summer. There was too much to do, between the lake and the woods, to sit in a hot room in stuffy dress clothes.

"This is Chris," she introduced us to him. "He's Sister LaJames' son. He's a good boy. You boys could benefit from some good association. He's here to camp out with you boys." Chris was thirteen, and slightly taller than me. He had a babyface that made me want to pop him right in his goody-two-shoes mouth.

We spent the rest of the night fishing off the dock for sunperch, using plastic worms as bait. Chris slept out in the pup tent with Ken and me that night, but Jay stayed up in the house. The next morning, after a breakfast of blueberries from the bushes surrounding the beach, Chris asked us about the canoe.

"My Dad chained it up two weeks ago," I told him. I skipped a flat stone across the water. It only jumped two times. "Coz we got caught sneaking out to the campground."

"Oh, man, that's a drag," Chris said. "It would be fun to go fishing out on the water."

"Yeah," Ken said. "But we can't." Ken was glum.

"Why don't you just cut the chain?" Chris asked. "Your Dad is a carpenter, right? Doesn't he have bolt cutters?"

"I thought you were a goody-goody," I said.

"Nah." He skipped a stone out into the water. His stone jumped five times. "My Mom just doesn't know the stuff I do. I don't get caught like you guys." He sniggered.

That snigger was enough. After my father left for work, I distracted my stepmom with questions about her meeting that night while Ken found the bolt cutters in the garage. They were old and rusty, so it took us three tries to cut through the shiny new chain. It finally snapped with a delicious pop, leaving a pile of shiny chain at the base of the tree. Ken and I grinned at each other like convicts after a prison break. Chris just tried to act cool and bored.

We were out on the lake before Jay or my stepmom noticed, quickly clearing the first cove to out of sight of the house as soon as possible.

Even though we'd intended to go fishing, we didn't think to bring any fishing equipment in our hasty escape. So mostly we just talked to Chris about his army surplus jacket and asked him about other things he'd gotten away with.

His best story was about setting off firecrackers in the abandoned fire watchtower in the woods behind his house. It used to be manned back in the 70's when the paper company owned the land, but not anymore.

"It's all boarded up," he said. "The blackcats I set off in there were wicked loud. It almost started a fire."

"I wish we had some fireworks now," I said. "That would be awesome."

"We could make a bomb," Ken said. "We could use the gas from the garage and a coffee can."

"Yeah!" I said.

"We'd need a fuse, though," Chris said, pulling out the lapels of his army surplus jacket like he knew about bombs.

We soon made it all the way to the other end of the lake, over by the summer camps – small cabins that rich people owned, but rarely visited. Half of the lake had little camps like that. Most of the people who could afford to have a place on the water needed to live in a city to support the place. My father was a rare exception. But he'd built the house himself.

The camps slept on the edge of the water. They looked bright and pretty, places we were too poor to go. We weren't allowed there.

"Hey, isn't that Uncle Scott's cabin?" I pointed out a chocolate brown camp in the middle of a chain of camps.

"Nah, it's that one," Ken pointed next door.

"Let's go visit them to see if they're home." I said.

It seemed a good idea. We'd learned from the three wheeler episode that when you sneak out like this, you're gonna be in huge trouble when you get home no matter what you do. So it's

best to stay out all day and enjoy it. But once the excitement of sneaking out wears off, it's a lot of empty hours to fill, especially since you already know you're cooked. We wanted to make a bomb, but that meant going home and facing the music. So stopping by Uncle Scott and Aunt Lucy's cabin was a good way to kill time.

We pulled up the canoe against the dock and tied it off with a rope that was curled around one of the metal poles keeping dock out of the water. We went up to the camp, Ken leading the way, me following, Chris in back.

The brown camp was built half buried in the ground, the front door up by the dirt road and the back door on a deck facing the water. Under the deck, the first floor of the camp was more like a shed than a basement. A pair of white lawn chairs sat on the grass, empty and looking out toward the water.

The front and back doors were locked and there wasn't a car up by the road. We looked in through the windows and saw the polished wood floors and gas refrigerator, but couldn't see anyone there.

"I guess they're not home," Ken said.

"Yeah," I said, kicking at a stone. "That's a drag."

My face brightened. Ideas always came quickly to me and burst out of my mouth just as quickly. I didn't think about them before I said them. "Hey wouldn't it be cool if they had a secret passage from their shed up to their house? If I had a camp I'd build a secret passage like that."

We squinted through the windows of the camp again, searching the wooden floor for the square shape that could be a trap door. We couldn't see one, but there was a big woven rug in the middle of the floor that looked pretty suspicious.

"Let's check the shed," Ken started down the grass slope toward the back.

The shed under the camp was unlocked, but we found no trap door leading up into the camp. But the shed was full of junk and treasures.

We found a tiki torch and a bottle of lamp oil, sitting on a shelf over an old lawnmower. Ken picked up the torch and oil and started out of the shed with them.

“What are you doing?” I asked him. I normally hatched the plots, not him. Plus, I didn’t like the idea of taking things from my Uncle Scott.

“These are for our bomb,” he said, glancing around just outside the shed to see if anyone was around.

“This’ll be wicked,” Chris said. I found myself wishing Jay was there. We needed a voice of reason.

We were still loading the lamp and the bottle of oil into the canoe when a neighbor yelled at us from the next camp over, the camp I originally thought was my Uncle’s. The shed door was still standing open behind us.

“What are you doing?” she asked us. Her white hair shook with her words. She was still dressed in a nightgown, like a bright white sheet. She looked like an old ghost. “Who are you and why are you taking those?”

Ken, ever the shyster, spoke first. “We’re borrowing them,” he said, sounding perfectly natural. “Scott said we could. It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Now wait just a minute there, you boys, I’m going to go call Scott and ask them if that’s alright. Don’t you move from that spot.” She turned to leave, walking back toward her camp, holding her arms out for balance on the wet grass.

When she spun, we made a break for it. We all jumped in the canoe and untied the rope, leaving it spread across the dock like a dead snake. Ken and I paddled extra fast to get out into the water where the woman couldn’t catch us.

She noticed pretty quickly. “Hey! Stop!”

But we didn’t listen and just paddled faster, leaving her standing on Uncle Scott’s dock yelling at us, her nightgown blowing in the breeze like the sail of a giant ship.

“Sorry, lady! Gotta go!” Ken yelled, as we passed the first bend, into the next cove. Her yells faded until they were gone.

We paddled home slowly, keeping to the shoreline so the woman wouldn’t see us out in the middle of the lake. Pine and maple trees hid us from the houses by the water.

“Maybe they won’t notice we left,” I said as we rounded the last bend for home. I wasn’t much, but I knew we were in trouble and I was trying to clutch at anything. I’m positive like that.

As quick as we could, we dragged the canoe up on the beach, put it in back in the place by the tree, and pulled the chain back through the cross beam. It was impossible to fix the broken link, so we just left it hanging over the beam, like the lock was down in the canoe. It was enough to fool any casual inspection. Of course, if my Dad looked, he’d find the cut chain.

We stowed the rusty bolt cutters, tiki torch, and lamp oil in a nearby blueberry bush for later and walked back up to the house, grinning stupidly.

We waited inside our room, unsure if we were going to get away with it. Jay was in the room playing with action figures. “Where did you guys go?” he asked.

“Nowhere. Shut up,” Ken said.

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While we were waiting to see if we’d been caught, we read the tiny chemical labels in Ken’s chemistry set and paged through the experiment manual that came with it to see if there was anything that could be used in our bomb. We found a few likely candidates and put them aside to combine with the lamp oil later.

“We can probably get a fuse from the torch. We can mix these chemicals with gas and lamp oil. It’ll make a great explosion,” Ken said.

“What lamp oil?” Jay asked.

Ken opened his mouth to answer, but a voice calling us upstairs drowned him out. We looked at each other and grimaced. I felt a lump rising in my throat. My palms started to sweat. We slowly trudged up the stairs, trying to take as much time as possible. Jay followed us up.

Upstairs we found Uncle Scott talking to my father at the dining room table. Both looked angry. They stopped talking when we came up the stairs. My stepmother was standing nearby, her arms crossed, a scowl on her face.

My father spoke first. He got right to the point. "We know what you boys did today. What do you have to say for yourselves?"

"What are you talking about?" Ken said. My stepbrother did his best to feign ignorance, but it didn't look like anyone was buying it.

"It wasn't hard to put two and two together," my stepmom said. I felt like they were just leading us now, trying to get us to confess. But I wasn't going to be the one to speak first.

"Maryann called me at work," Uncle Scott said. "She told me she saw some boys in my shed. One was wearing an army jacket." He looked at Chris, my stepbrother's friend. "She said they were in a silver canoe. What color is your canoe, Dan?"

"Silver," my father said. "All bright and shiny." He looked at Uncle Scott, then back at us.

I didn't say anything. I just cowered behind Ken and Chris. Both were taller than me and it was better if I didn't have to meet my father's eyes.

"Come out here," he said to me. "Don't just stand behind them. Look at me. I wanna know why you did this." His voice seethed. He wasn't joking anymore.

"I don't know," I stammered out. "We're sorry."

"I want to know why you didn't listen to me. Twice, even. I told you not to go out in the canoe again. I even chained it up. How did you get it unlocked?"

Ken mumbled something inaudible.

"What?"

"I said we cut the chain."

The conversation went on like that, my father asking us questions, us mumbling short answers. Uncle Scott asked us a few questions. My stepmother just scowled, tapping under her

chin with the flat back of her hand. Jay stood off to the side. It looked like he could tell what was going on, but he wasn't in trouble, so he didn't look worried. I just stared at my feet most of the time, kicking at my untied shoelaces, unable to look up.

"Well," my stepmother said finally, unfolding her arms. "The first thing that's going to happen is you're going to give Scott back the things you took from him. Then you're going to use your allowance to buy him a new bottle of lamp oil, which you'll send to his house with an apology letter. You're grounded for a month, no swimming, no TV, no camp outs. You boys need to learn that you can't just go around doing what you want all the time. You have to think of other people."

"Yes'm," Ken and I mumbled in unison.

My father uncoiled his arms. "I outta tan your hides with a switch." He cocked his head at Uncle Scott. "Or maybe I should let Scott do it."

My stepmother continued as if she hadn't heard my father. "Chris, I'm really surprised at you. What would your mother say if she knew about this?"

"I don't know," he said.

We stood there quivering like jello. My knees felt weak. I kept trying to slide behind Ken and Chris, but every time I moved a little my father glared at me.

Finally, Uncle Scott stood up. "Well, I've got to get home and tell Lucy about this." He looked at us. "I'll be expecting a visit later so you boys can return my things."

We nodded.

Later that night, after more lecture, I walked down the path alone to write my letter to Uncle Scott. I passed by the canoe - the padlock was moved higher up the chain to complete the link again. I sat down on the dock and dangled my feet in the water. I wasn't supposed to go swimming, but my stepmom hadn't said anything about not putting my feet in the water.

A notebook balanced over my knees. The sun was going down, casting oranges and reds over the lake, but there was still enough light to write by.

I tried to collect my thoughts, to think about what I'd learned from the whole thing, about the canoe, about people's things, about everything. The fish in the lake started to feed, creating ripples on the surface of the water.

It was about freedom, I thought. The canoe gave me freedom. It was about movement. It was about other things, too, other things that I wouldn't understand until years after that summer with the canoe.

The dock creaked under me. I'd used my freedom for the wrong things, and for the wrong reasons. Just because I could, didn't mean I should. That was what I had to tell Uncle Scott.

The sun was going down quickly.

I looked over at the canoe again and began my letter.

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Note: This story is non-fiction, or as nonfiction as any story remembered from childhood can be. I'm sure there are details I misremembered, but alas, the people involved probably don't remember this stuff any better than I do. It was a long time ago and memory is funny. In interests of cramming more stuff in here to illustrate my point, here is a poem I wrote a few years ago about memory and how we all gloss over old memories the more we think about them.

### **varnishing**

on the back deck i pry open  
the can with a chipped flathead  
screwdriver. barely 8 a.m.  
already the day is heating up.

i clear away the green  
plastic chairs, old wooden tubs  
of dirt, and rusted grill that  
once was new and shiny,  
the deck looks empty and dry -  
a husk of its former self.

i get down on my knees to sand  
the rough boards of old debris -  
black and grey shapes lay tattooed  
on the wood - round marks from  
the potted dirt, a rectangle  
from the rusty grill.

i feel meticulous - eager to save

every tiny detail from the coming  
years of rain, snow, and stomping  
feet.

all day i toil in the sun to  
preserve the old deck, filling  
in the empty cracks in the aged  
wood, glossing over the stains  
of objects left untouched too  
long. my bare skin becomes the  
color of varnish, golden and  
brown. between the handrails  
i lay the syrup, careful to  
worry it into the smallest cracks.

i wipe my brow.  
the varnish drips off  
the brush, reminiscent of  
honey drizzled over wheat bread.

the stains remain underneath  
the fresh varnish as it dries  
in the beating sun. you can  
never tell if the stains  
will to show through  
until the wet coat dries.

my back aches. i'll try  
re-sanding again tomorrow.

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Thanks for reading.