

Woodwork

by

Michael Cowgill

Henry's in-laws Fran and Albert had been there for three days with their continuing and obvious contempt for Henry. Home on summer break from his teaching job, he hid in his shop in the basement in between meals, tinkering on small woodworking projects, trying not to obsess about them. Maggie worked every day, while he stayed in the basement and prayed for a sudden illness, a blight on their garden, anything to call them home, immediately.

Now he heard Albert's measured footsteps on the stairs. He flipped off the light in the shop, hoping Albert would think he wasn't there, but he could smell the hint of cigar that usually clung to Albert's clothes after he'd smoked. He opened the door, and Albert smiled back.

"Albert," Henry said in mock surprise. "I was just on my way up."

"Oh. How's the woodworking?"

"I need a break," Henry said. "Maggie should be home any minute."

"No," Albert said. "She has a late meeting."

"Really?"

"I'm sure she told us all about it last night."

Here we go, Henry thought.

"You might have been paying attention to the news," Albert said, "while *we* were talking."

Henry nodded.

"Well," he said, "I want to get upstairs."

Albert stepped out of the way, trying to peer into the darkened shop.

"Really would like to see what you do in there sometime."

Henry shut the door and locked it.

"Trust me," Henry said. "It's more interesting when it's finished."

Upstairs, Henry took his usual chair and opened the newspaper, snapping it several times to straighten out its wrinkles. Albert sat in another chair instead of on the couch with Fran. She watched them with her cold blue eyes over the edge of a *Good Housekeeping*, her long, thin fingers twitching ever just enough to tap the pages with her fingernails. No one said anything.

Henry made it to the second paragraph of a story when Fran apparently couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"You know what I just read here, Henry?" she said in a louder-than-necessary voice. "You'll find this interesting. It says fathers should help their children with projects."

"Francine," Albert interrupted.

"Hush," she said. "Henry, are you listening?"

He looked around the edge of the paper, nodded, and tried to find his place again.

"Projects like gingerbread houses," she continued. "It says men who know more about math and the like could help their children build more stable gingerbread houses."

"Probably true," Henry mumbled from behind the paper.

She started again when he'd reached the end of the third paragraph.

"It makes perfect sense really."

"Fran," Albert said, "he's reading."

"Oh, he knows all that, she said. "This will be important if they have children."

"Yes, *if* they have children."

Fran didn't respond. Henry glanced around the paper long enough to see the glint of malice in her eyes. She smiled and adjusted her position on the sofa. He made it through half of the article.

"The birds are nice this year."

Henry reappeared from behind the paper. Albert dropped a *National Geographic* on his lap.

"The cardinals seem especially red."

"What *are* you talking about?" Albert asked.

As they continued, Henry dozed off, the paper dropping to his chest. He could still hear their voices, but he couldn't tell what they said. They seemed to come from a great distance like barking dogs from another subdivision. The thought struck him as funny, the image of them as dogs, and he woke up.

"Henry," Fran said, "do you think it's impossible the cardinals could be redder?"

"I – "

"They certainly seem redder."

"I'm going to try to finish the paper now," he said.

"You go right ahead," she said, then continued more quietly, almost to herself, "I swear, people don't talk to each other like they used to."

Henry waited a minute.

No one spoke.

Hesitantly, he began to read.

Fran inhaled.

"It seems to me that birds can change color."

Behind the paper Henry was changing color, his limited politeness and patience draining away just as quickly.

"You'd think the sun might affect their color," Fran said, "wouldn't you, Henry?"

He threw the paper down, pages scattering in front of him. He rose, kicking the pages, and yelled, "I don't care!"

Maggie had just walked through the front door.

Maggie already lay in bed with the lights off when Henry came in. He shut the door, sat down on the edge of the bed, and untied his shoes.

"She's my mother," she said.

He took off his socks.

"You yelled at my mother."

He pulled his shirt off, folded it to wear again the next day.

"I don't even yell at my mother."

He stood up, took off his belt, unzipped his jeans, dropped them to the floor, and climbed under the sheets. She got out of bed and went into the bathroom. She began brushing her teeth.

"Fine," she said taking the brush out of her mouth, "hide from them in your little shop, but you can't hide from me."

He was pleased that she was arguing, though he thought his actions were completely justified. Her tendency toward shyness, something she'd gradually overcome during their marriage, usually increased when her parents visited. He rolled on his side and watched her. The bathroom light made her nightgown almost transparent, revealing the curves of her naked body. Her long brown hair swayed slightly between her shoulder blades with the brushing motions.

"It's – " he started, feeling he'd let the silence continue long enough for its desired effect.

She spat toothpaste into the sink.

"Don't bother," she said, flipping the bathroom light off, becoming shapeless again. "There's no excuse."

She got back in bed.

"She is so – "

"She's my mother," Maggie said. "I didn't yell at your father."

"He wasn't your mother."

"He wasn't a peach either."

"Your father was yelling at her first."

"He never."

"Shocking, I know," he said. "And Fran didn't say a word. She was having too much fun."

She stayed silent.

"Maggie?"

"Do you think something's wrong?" she said. "They seem different. It's like they're talking *at* each other."

"They've been sleeping in separate beds for ten years."

"They have different sleep schedules."

"I think your father finally got some balls."

She sighed and turned her back to him. He listened to her breathe and hoped she wouldn't cry. When she cried, his opinions died. He thought he heard a snuffle.

"Are you crying?"

"She's my mother," she said in a wavering voice.

He sat up, his back against the headboard. The summer noises of crickets and frogs seemed to grow louder, and he knew he wouldn't sleep for hours. He dressed again, leaned across the bed, touched her face, felt the tears there, and kissed her on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

He whittled in the basement, the TV on low, late-night sports. He wouldn't apologize to Fran. *She* didn't deserve an apology from anyone. She couldn't have always been that annoying. Albert had married her for some reason. Not that he was much better. Not annoying – condescending, boring. He'd never touched a power tool in his life. He couldn't judge distances, and Henry had personally seen him clip two cars trying to park. All of his joys were sedentary – listening to classical music, playing the bassoon, cross-stitch.

Still Henry would have to keep on his best behavior for Maggie. They didn't fight often, and he preferred to keep it that way. Though he liked to see that spark in her, his temper could get the best of him, and he didn't want to put Maggie through that. So he would emerge from the basement in the morning, join them for breakfast, spend the day in the same room with them, listen to Fran's prattling. He only had to deal with them for a few more days, but it would be a long few days. He hated pretending, and this required it continually.

He put the knife down and looked at his handiwork, the beginning of a head. He held the carving in one hand, the remote in the other and fell asleep sitting up. Around 3:00 he woke up, went upstairs, and crawled back in bed beside Maggie. He drifted back to sleep listening to her mumble.

Maggie took the day off and went shopping with Fran. Albert and Henry watched them drive to the bottom of the street. Albert smoked a cigar, supposedly a Cuban. Henry smiled weakly and went to the garage. Albert followed. He hovered around Henry, who rummaged through some cardboard boxes. Henry finally had to look at Albert.

"Something you need?"

"I – it's silly."

"OK."

Henry returned to his boxes, digging out a group of hand-sized American flags.

"It's – " Albert began, "can you maybe show me a thing or two about carpentry?"

Henry looked at him again and tried to push past with his bundle of flags.

"I don't really know what I could show you in an afternoon."

"I don't want to know how to build a house, Henry," Albert said. "It – I'm just interested."

Henry tried to keep a sigh in and returned the flags to their box.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "Let's go to the basement."

As they went inside, Henry told himself to treat Albert as if he were a sixth grader. Take it nice and easy. Be patient. In the shop, he pulled a stool up for Albert.

"The thing I like about carpentry is the certainty," he said. "There are very few uncertainties. The quality of the wood, how well you drive a nail, but once you have those down it's all angles and measurements. Math, precision."

"Like playing music."

Henry looked at him, confused.

"There are certain physical skills needed," Albert explained, "but once you have those, it's a matter of following the beat. It's always there and hopefully constant, and the notes on the page are always the same. The uncertainty is in the execution."

"I never thought of music like that," Henry said.

"Can we – " Albert started, half smiling, "can we build something?"

Henry picked up a piece of wood and turned it in his hands.

"Something small," Albert added.

Henry reminded himself of his promise to be more accommodating.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know," Albert said. "I just have this urge to get my hands dirty. S-something useful?"

Henry sat on another stool and thought. Albert's sudden interest in carpentry had thrown him – a man wearing a sweater in July for God's sake.

"How about a music stand?" he asked finally.

"Perfect," Albert said.

"We'll have to draw up some plans," Henry said, "shop for the right lumber and materials."

"This will be fun."

Henry still wasn't so sure.

They leaned over a large piece of thin pine. Henry held a flat carpenter's pencil and a metal carpenter's square. He made four quick measurements, marking each one with the pencil. He set down the carpenter's square and picked up a T-square.

"I like to use a T-square to draw my lines," he said. "Some people just use a yardstick, but the T-square's a guarantee."

He connected the four marks. Albert watched intently. Using a compass, Henry made more measurements and in a few minutes had drawn four perfectly curved corners.

"I can see it taking shape," Albert said.

Henry nodded, happy for the attention but unexcited by the event. He double-checked his marks and plugged in the jigsaw. Albert lowered his safety goggles.

"All right," Henry said. "You get to tackle the saw. For the curves, if you want to try them, adjust your angle slowly. This thing doesn't turn on a dime."

Albert started the saw near the edge of the wood. The blade jumped up and down and became a blur. Albert edged toward the lines, but the saw jammed, jarring him. He shut it off, and the wood closed around the blade.

"Has a life of its own," he said backing up, trying to laugh it off.

Henry unjammed it.

"Ready to try again?" he said.

"Well," Albert said, "I'll give it a shot."

He started in but rushed it again. Some of the wood splintered, and Henry came to the rescue.

"Will it be OK?" Albert asked.

"We can sand that out," Henry said. "Now don't be in such a hurry."

But he was.

"Ahh, Christmas!" Albert said waving his hand in disgust. "I don't have the knack."

Henry started to agree but remembered what he'd do in class.

"Try it again," he said. "Take it slow. Carpentry needs patience."

He remembered what his college mentor had once told him about teaching – find a way to connect what the student knew to what you were teaching.

"Maybe find a rhythm to saw to," he said.

Albert took the saw again and began, tapping his foot as if to a dirge. Henry watched over his shoulder. Albert was a natural, even taking the curves right on the line. A few minutes later he'd made it around the whole board with only a few minor hang-ups. He turned the saw off and grinned, wiping sweat from his brow.

"This calls for a Cuban," he said. "You want one?"

"Why not?" Henry said. "I'll meet you out back."

Albert hurried up the stairs, and Henry carried the finished piece out with some sandpaper. Albert brought two out cans of beer, and they smoked, drank, and took turns sanding.

"You have a talent for this, Albert," Henry said, "and I'm not just saying that."

"I think I do," Albert said.

"Mr. Modesty," Henry said.

Albert laughed.

"I'm sure I have a long way to go," he said, "but maybe I'll buy some tools of my own. Every time I play my bassoon I'm overwhelmed by the skill that must have gone into making it, finding just the right wood, the right tools."

"It's like a good marriage," Henry said.

"What do you mean?"

"You watch good marriages and they seem seamless," Henry said, "but underneath, there's a lot of work that makes it certain. Maggie and me, we're at a point where when we fight we always know the right thing to say to make it better. We have the tools, so we go through the motions, but I don't really worry."

He inhaled sucked in some cigar smoke and swirled it around his mouth before letting out. Cuban or not, it was a damn good cigar.

"You and Fran must have that too," he said, "huh?"

"That's kind," Albert said, looking at his beer can.

"You have fights," Henry said, "but you always bring things back together."

Albert smiled.

"She's leaving me," he said.

"I – "

Albert gave him a sharp look.

"I know you don't think much of her," he said, "but there is something."

He crunched his beer can and dropped it.

"Or there was."

He stood up and looked out at the woods behind the house. Someone hammered something on one of the neighboring streets, the sound echoing through the subdivision. The sun was sinking.

"A few months ago," he continued, "after you and Maggie came to see us, I realized what she did. She made you feel stupid, Maggie feel guilty, and made me a party to it all. So I yelled at her. First time ever really. I mean, really yelled, really let her have it. It was so strange, the sound rising out of somewhere like my stomach without a thought. Of course, she stood her ground like yesterday, but I kept trying."

He kicked the beer can into the yard.

"She wouldn't or couldn't change."

Henry didn't know what to say or do. He stood up, but Albert didn't seem to notice.

"We had a lot of fights," Albert said. "Then last night, I tried to get in the bed with her, so damn tired of sleeping alone, and she said no. Said, 'It's finished.' That was it."

Henry touched Albert's shoulder. Albert reached across his chest with his other hand and placed it on Henry's.

"I couldn't stand being alone, and now... "

They heard a car pull in the driveway. One door slammed. Maggie found them a moment later. She looked in her father's eyes.

"Daddy," she whispered.

Henry left them and walked around the house. Fran waited in the car. He started to head for the car but stopped. She rolled down the window, never looking at him.

"I suppose he's told you," she said.

"Yes ma'am."

She snapped her head and focused those blue eyes on him.

"Well," she said, "aren't you going to yell at me?"

He shook his head, looked away from her.

"Your wife has."

"It's not my fight."

He walked toward the front door. As he put his hand on the knob, she spoke again.

"Afraid of what she'll say? She is my daughter."

"No," he said, "she's not."

He went inside. Maggie passed him with her mother's suitcase. She kissed his cheek.

"We'll talk later," he said.

"Yes."

She opened the door and was about to leave when Henry stepped closer.

"Maggie?"

"What is it?" she asked, turning to face him.

"Are – " he started, "are you OK?"

"I'll be fine," she said.

She touched his arm.

"She has a plane to catch."

For the second time that day, he had no idea what to say, only that he should say something, that he wanted to make things right for her. Her eyes were wide, her mouth slightly open, her hand still on his arm. Oddly, she seemed like the strong one at this moment that should have weakened her.

"Stay with Daddy?" she said.

"Yes," he said.

She turned and moved across the threshold.