

## ONE

Somehow each new day, year after year, the plywood seemed heavier while the quality seemed crappier - just like my body, Wally was thinking. Awkwardly balanced on the ladder, Wally pushed a raggedy 4 by 8 foot panel up toward the roof. Sweat trickled down the hairs of Wally's armpits and dripped to the second story subfloor, fourteen feet below. He supported the plywood with the top of his belly - a splinter digging into his flesh - as he shifted his grip.

Standing above Wally, straddling two roof trusses, Juke was ready. While Juke took hold of the top and lifted from above, Wally pushed the plywood from below.

Wally's arms trembled.

They both saw it.

"Fork it, boss," Juke said. "You're too old for this."

"Respect -" Wally said, panting, "- your elders." Wally was 55. He was wearing a faded black T shirt with the sleeves ripped off, gray hair tied back in a ponytail.

Juke, less formal, wore no shirt at all, just cutoff shorts, steel-toed boots, and a living mural of tattoos. Laying the plywood over the trusses, squinting a practiced eye, Juke lined up the edge and set to work with the nail gun. Phap phap phap.

"No bounce-nailing," Wally said as he climbed down the ladder.

"Yes, sir, fork you, sir," Juke said indifferently as he concentrated on the nailing. Phap phap phap phap phap. "And fork your mother, too, sir."

"Bounce-nail, go to jail," Wally said, equally without passion.

"And I tender my forkin' resignation." Juke shifted his weight over the nailer. Phap phap phap phap phap phap phap.

It was a well-polished conversation, abbreviated from years of practice.

In bounce-nailing, a skilled operator - and Juke was as nimble as they came - could bounce the pneumatic nailer down a sheet of plywood, driving a nail each time the tip of the gun made contact with the surface of the wood. It was like precision dribbling of a basketball. In fact, watching Juke on a roof reminded Wally of a Harlem Globetrotters warm-up routine. Instead of a ball, Juke bounced a Duo-Fast nailer they named Debbie Doofus, a venerable tool, indestructible like a block of concrete, too heavy for most carpenters - but not for Juke.

Wally hated bounce-nailing, though it was common practice in the industry. Since the trigger was permanently on, the nail gun would fire on contact with anything. Besides the danger, in the hands of an amateur it left a sloppy line of nails. Wally had tried to ban it, years ago, but Juke threw a legendary shit-fit which ended with Juke shouting, "I tender my forkin' resignation." So Wally gave in - but only if Juke agreed to wear safety glasses. Juke hated the glasses, but that was the deal.

Wally had a head for business, caution, and social skills. Juke had a head for craft, speed, and trashy women.

Phap phap phap. "Who you gonna hire?" Juke called down from the roof. Phap phap.

"Had a guy," Wally said, sliding the next sheet of 19/32 CDX ply up the ladder. "Maybe you saw him. Showed up yesterday morning, supposed to start -"

"Yeah, saw him." Juke reached down for the plywood which was still below his grasp. "Blue forkin' Dodge with side boxes."

"- and he's holding a beer can in one hand and a joint in the other. At eight in the morning." Wally, now at the top of the ladder, raised the sheet above the angle of the truss.

"So I guess you fired his ass." Juke was no stranger to alcohol - or marijuana - or just about any method of impairing one's brain - but he knew Wally's Laws, plain and simple. Wally's Law #14: GET WASTED AFTER WORK. Juke could abide. He liked working for Wally.

Still leaning down, Juke grasped the top of the plywood with his fingers and pulled.

And at that moment on that hillside where the frame of a house was rising among live oaks and wild oats with a red-tailed hawk soaring above, the world stirred. On this calm day with neither Juke nor Wally noticing, clouds had formed. The oak branches bent. The oats flattened. The hawk shot out of sight.

Juke was just turning sideways when the wind hit. Suddenly from out of nowhere a bolt of air was pulling the plywood - and Juke along with it - like a big stiff kite.

Down below, meanwhile, Wally still had a hand on the plywood in addition to supporting it with his belly and - for one brief moment - no grip on the ladder. The updraft whipped the plywood out of his fingers and knocked his body off balance. Instinctively, Wally shifted his weight.

The ladder shifted, reacting to Wally's sudden move.

Up above, Juke realized that if he didn't let go, he would be lifted hang-

gliding into the sky under a 4 by 8 panel of plywood. So he let go. The rough edge of the sheet ripped the tips of his fingers and sailed away. Juke fell back against Debbie the Duo-Fast, which started to slide down the slope of the roof decking. Juke with raw bleeding fingertips reached for the nail gun and at the same time saw that Wally had lost balance on the ladder just below.

Their eyes locked.

Wally was fourteen feet up a ladder that was moving to the right while his body was twisting to the left. Juke lunged for Wally's hand just as Wally, whose body had now spiraled 180 degrees, was desperately reaching over and behind his head to grab the king post of the truss. Juke had the nailer in his grip. All three - nail gun, Wally's hand, king post - met at the same moment.

Phap.

For Wally, it was a moment of absolute clarity. He felt - and even smelled - the puff of compressed air, stale from a hundred feet of hose, that had driven the nail through his wrist. He felt Juke's hand grabbing his own free left hand, the one that wasn't nailed to the post. He heard the sliding of the ladder and then the clatter as it hit the floor below. He heard a mighty thud and a splintering of wood as the nail gun, dropped by Juke, struck the floor a moment later, and he even had time for the passing thought that the damage had been to the subfloor, not to Debbie Doofus. He kicked his feet in a broad arc searching for support even though he knew that nothing was there.

"JESUS FUCK!" Juke shouted from above.

And there was a woman. Where she had come from Wally had no idea. Already she was lifting the fallen ladder, but she wasn't strong and the ladder was

heavy.

Inside the nailed wrist, Wally felt two separate bones grinding against the nail. Or maybe the nail had shot right through one bone, splitting it in two. He couldn't tell. All he knew was that inside his body, bone was in contact with steel, that the bone and nail and flesh were supporting the weight of his body, that the flesh was ripping as he wriggled, that the nail felt solid and unforgiving, that the bone felt as if it was bending and would be torn from its little sockets and pop like a broken spring out of his skin. Weird explosive shock waves were racing up the nerves of his arm to overload and confuse his brain. Even more urgent, rising into Wally's awareness above the flood of pain: He couldn't breathe. The weight of his body was stretching the muscles across his chest so that only with a supreme effort could he exhale making quick ineffective puffs. With rapidly de-oxygenating air in his lungs, he was suffocating.

Juke, still holding Wally's left hand in one of his own, lay down flat on the roof decking and placed his free hand under Wally's armpit. When he had a solid grip, he moved his other hand to Wally's other armpit, supporting all of Wally's weight.

With an explosion of fusty air Wally exhaled, coughing, and then sucked a deep gasp of breath.

Juke's face was now pressed up against Wally's, cheek to cheek, stubble to stubble, sweat to sweat.

Wally was panting, catching up on oxygen.

Meanwhile down below, the woman couldn't lift the ladder. Whoever she was, she'd never before dealt with the unwieldy heft of an OSHA Type A Louisville

fiberglass extension ladder.

Juke called down to the woman: "You - uh - you -"

Wally could feel Juke's jaw moving against his own.

"You gotta -" Juke was trying to tell the woman how to raise the ladder, but he was handicapped by his speech impediment - an inability to open his mouth without cussing. Juke's personal law of carpenter etiquette wouldn't allow him to swear in the presence of a lady. He might be rough, but he was gallant. Or if not gallant, at least fearful: Juke still had nightmares starring angry nuns.

"Walk it up," Wally said in a voice that sounded strangely high-pitched to his own ears.

The woman, confused, raised her face toward Wally. "What?"

For an instant, Wally stared. Her eyes, even at this distance: the eyes of a puppy, luminous and brown.

Juke, meanwhile, stared as well. He could see right down the front of her jersey. Nice rack.

"Grab one end," Wally squeaked, trying not to screech, to remain calm, to ignore the electric buzz that was running up his arm. "Place the tip against the wall, and then walk under the ladder, lifting it higher as you go, keeping one end against the wall. Can you do that, please?"

The "please" came out a little higher than Wally had intended. Screechy high.

The woman tried. She raised the ladder half way, sliding it up the studs. A moment of extended arms, trembling. As she tried to shift her grip, she lost it. The side of the ladder bounced against her shoulder and then rattled to the floor.

"I'm sorry," she said. Briefly she laid a hand on her shoulder, wincing.

"You all right?" Wally said.

"My God. What a thing for you to ask right now." Already she was trying again. This time she seemed to get a better angle on it, walking the ladder up the frame of 2 by 4s without overextending her arms.

With something like a ballet move, Wally was able to arch his potbellied body and swing his legs sideways while the woman slid the ladder until his foot - and then two feet - were once again supporting his weight.

Juke could now let go of Wally. There were bloody fingerprints on Wally's arm. Wally's body was blocking Juke's access to the ladder. Juke whispered, "Now what, boss?"

Wally spoke to the woman below. "See that saw? No, behind you. The Milwaukee. There. Yes, that. Can you bring it up the ladder and give it to my partner here? You'll have to reach around my body - no - better idea - I've got a free hand - you hand it to me and I'll hand it to him. Carry it by the handle so you don't touch the trigger." Always Mr. Safety. "Make sure it stays plugged into the extension cord. Okay?"

Oops. His voice had squeaked again on the "okay."

Juke whispered, "No, boss. I ain't cuttin' your hand off."

"Cut the post," Wally said.

And that's exactly what Juke did.

Wally walked on his own two feet out of the house and straight to his truck, his hair powdered with fresh sawdust, his left hand cradling an 18 inch piece of 2 by 4 douglas fir which was still nailed to his right wrist, trailing blood. But then as

Wally reached for the door handle, his knees buckled.

Juke grabbed him by the belt.

"How about my car?" the woman said. "He could lie down."

And so it came to pass that Wally lay in the rear of an old Subaru wagon on a blanket smelling of dog, driven to the emergency room by a woman he'd never seen before, a woman with thick rich chestnut hair gathered loosely in a blue ribbon. Juke was riding shotgun, silent, stiff, nervously beating his knee with his fist and glancing to the rear where two golden retrievers were wagging their tails and taking turns licking Wally's face.

"By the way, I'm Wally," Wally said from beneath the slobber of a dog.

"And this is my partner Juke."

"I'm Opal." The woman flashed a smile. "Pleased to meet you. Well. You know what I mean."

"Nice to meet you," Wally said. He was glad that his voice was no longer screeching, though the pain which had moved temporarily to the background while he was arranging his rescue was now coming full blast. There were two separate tortures: one from the specific point where the head of the nail was embedded in his flesh up against the bone, the other a more general agony that made his brain throb.

Juke said nothing.

Wally wished he could have another look at Opal's face - into those puppy eyes. He said, "If you don't mind my asking, what are you -"

"I'm a photographer," Opal replied without turning around. "For the belt sanding? At lunch time? Guess I was late. Sorry."

Fridays, they raced belt sanders. Word had spread, and lately every Friday at lunch a small but rowdy crowd would gather at the construction site. Some came to watch, some to bet, and some came to match their own belt sanders against Wally and Juke and anyone else who happened to be on the construction crew that day. This particular Friday, a newspaper reporter came, too, but his photographer never showed up, so he didn't think the editor would run the article.

"Maybe," Wally said, "you were just in time."

Juke relaxed slightly. This was no lady. This was a photographer. He turned to face Wally: "Hey boss, I am so forkin' sorry -"

"At least you missed my heart," Wally said.

"Yeah, boss, missed your brain, too," Juke said. "Speaking of brains, you hear about that forkhead who was unjamming his nail gun, had it cradled in his forkin' lap, still had the forkin' air hose connected, and -"

"Agggh," Wally gargled, instinctively crossing his legs.

At the sound of Wally's agggh, the golden retrievers intensified their licking.

"Leary! Timothy!" Opal turned to the dogs. "Leave the poor man alone."

Wow. Those eyes. Combined with that chestnut hair she reminded Wally of a dog he once had, high-strung and high-joy, a nervous playful mostly-Irish-setter pup. "Too bad," Wally said, "you didn't get your picture."

Opal faced the road again. "Got one," she said.

## TWO

Opal gave Juke a ride back to the construction site. She'd pitied him in the hospital waiting room, flopping about like a fish in a bucket. Clearly, he was not a man to be confined. Or to make small talk. He was lanky, awkward like an overgrown kid, tongue-tied in the presence of unfamiliar women, nearly indecent wearing boots and cutoff shorts, no shirt, with red chest hair and vibrant tattoos. Not cute, but she knew plenty of women who would find Juke irresistibly sexy: strong, wild with a hint of danger, a stallion in need of a bridle.

In the Subaru they rode in silence, side by side, up the long winding road from the flatlands into the hills overlooking the Silicon Valley. Juke fidgeted. The dogs panted in the rear. She wanted to ask Juke about Wally, an odd mixture of a man, this fellow with the face of a scholar who wore a tool belt patched with duct tape, a man who while hanging nailed to a board asked her if she was all right.

Finally she said, "Should we call somebody? His family?"

Juke shook his head.

"He has no family?"

"Kids gone. Just the wife."

"He has a wife?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then shouldn't somebody call her?"

"No, ma'am."

"They're divorced?"

"Uh, no. No, ma'am."

"Separated?"

Juke stopped fidgeting for a moment and looked her straight in the eye. He seemed angry. "She ain't forkin' there, ma'am. Okay?"

"Okay, gotcha," Opal said, blushing. She hated being transparent. Even this roughneck carpenter could see what she was up to, probably better than she knew herself. What was she up to, anyway? And why did she have the feeling that Juke was trying to protect Wally from something? From her? "I mean," she said, "I figured, like with a man you never know, but since he wasn't wearing a wedding ring -"

"He's still married," Juke said. "Can't wear a ring in construction. Catches on shit. Rip your finger off. Writes a letter to her. Every forkin' day."

She discerned an almost imperceptible pause - a slight pursing of lip - a tiny tension before the word "forkin'." A filter at work. It reassured her to find a hint of civility in this man who - face it - had probably never, ever, flossed his teeth.

"A letter?" Opal said. "That's sweet. Where is she?"

"She's gone."

"She left him? Is that it?"

"No, ma'am."

Opal tried to drop it. She told herself, please, just once in your life, leave somebody's relationships unexplained. But about a minute later she said, "Couldn't he call her sometimes? Send email?"

"You don't get it."

"My God. Is she in jail?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then why can't she -? I mean where would -? Antarctica?"

Juke sighed. "She's dead, ma'am."

"Oh, how awful." And yet somehow, Opal was relieved.

"He's still married, ma'am. Writes her a letter, every forkin' day."

"Does he mail it?"

"No, ma'am. He ain't psycho."

### THREE

The sun was setting as Juke stepped out of the Subaru. Alert for movement - thieves, vandals - he crossed the construction site. In the panic they'd left their tools out, unguarded. The rest of the crew had gone home after the belt sander races, something Wally let them do every Friday. Only Juke had stayed with Wally to help finish off the roof decking.

Some coals were still glowing in the barbecue. One of the crew, a big man named Steamboat, always brought a barbecue to the site and cooked himself some lunch. Fridays, he made ribs for everybody. Finger-sucking good ribs.

Twice before, the site had been vandalized. Snotty-ass kids. Somebody had spray-painted THIS HOUSE SUCKS on the foundation wall, and another time somebody had slashed twenty-two sacks of ready-mix concrete and then pissed over them spelling out what looked like a raggedy "Beelze," which had hardened over a weekend into concrete graffiti. And then there was the uphill neighbor, a guy named Pilpont, big shot stockbroker who kept filing bullshit lawsuits trying to stop the construction, keep the view, preserve the land as open space. Everybody suspected Pilpont had something to do with the spray paint, not that the man would do it himself in any way that could be traced to him.

Right now, though, the site was calm. There was a smell of fresh-cut wood borne on gusts of wind. The sky was orange, visible through the skeleton of the house. To Juke a fully framed house was a thing of beauty - lovely like a woman, sensual, strong and yet oh so vulnerable, naked to the weather, the vandals.

Gotta button up fast now, roof and siding before she gets hurt. This house

sucks? Plumb and true, each and every stick, and solid as granite. No gaps in these joints, no bow in these boards.

"Forkin' tight, boss," Juke said to himself.

A rustle.

The sound of his voice had flushed some creature - or some person. Where? Juke, a born hunter, stood absolutely still, listening. Shadows, a slight motion behind a stack of insulation batts. Juke crept closer. He dove. Tackled. Legs, blue jeans. Got 'em.

A scream. Kicking. "Let me go, let me go!" It was a girl. Teenager. Zit face.

Surprised, Juke let go.

And immediately something solid like a steel pipe smashed him on the neck.

"Hey!"

She was running.

Juke leaped to his feet and chased. The first floor was a maze of 2 by 4s, the bones of walls you could pass right through or dodge around. The girl scrambled between studs and leaped to the ground. Juke hurdled through the six-foot frame of a window and raced after her.

She was quick.

He was quicker. Caught her arm. Held on. "You," Juke said. "You -"

"Let me go!"

"No. You..."

She gave up struggling. She was panting. A big girl. Stocky. Clouds of breath in the evening air. In her hand, a long black Mag-Lite, switched off.

Juke tried again. "You - uh - you..."

She looked scared. Juke still had a hand clamped over her parka. She said, "Please don't hurt me."

"I ain't."

"Please."

"You. Uh. Look. You. Hey. Uh."

Juke had the feeling she was studying him, sizing him up. He tried again: "You..."

Pause.

"You. Hey."

Suddenly she looked defiant. "What's the matter, can't you talk?"

"Yeah. You..."

"Would you please let go of my arm?"

"No."

Her eyes narrowed. "So what am I supposed to do - suck your dick?"

Juke drew a deep breath. "Forkin' little bitch. I oughta call the cops."

Again she looked scared. "Please don't."

"I oughta."

"I didn't do anything."

"Then what in holy horseshit are you doing here?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah? You ran."

"Because you scared me."

"You bashed me. With the forkin' flashlight."

"Because you tackled me."

"You were hiding."

"Because you look like a creep."

"I work here. You're trespassing."

"You assaulted me."

It stopped him. He held on, silent, glaring.

She glared back. "What do you want?"

"Somebody's been jacking this place. Spray paint. Tore open the ready-mix and pissed on -"

"I didn't do that. Jeezo. You think I -? Jeezo. I chased them away."

"You chased them?"

"Yes."

"You know them?"

"No."

"Kids?"

"Yes."

"So you been here before?"

"Yes."

"You live around here?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Yes. I live around here."

Juke let go of her arm.

She didn't bolt. She shivered, shaking from head to foot like a dog shaking

off water. But she stayed.

He should talk to her parents. Yeah. Right. And say what? Juke knew how he'd appear to the people in this neighborhood of electric gates and security cameras. He could build a house on their street, but he'd better not knock on their doors. Around here 20 acres was considered a small plot and guys like Pilpont, if they didn't like how you landscaped your estate, they'd file a lawsuit. Juke came from a place where nobody had landscape, just parking space, and if you had a dispute with your neighbor, you shot out his windows.

"What's your name?"

"FrogGirl."

"What?"

"Frog. Girl."

"What kind of a name is that?"

"Mine. It's my name." She ran a hand through her hair, which was red, curly, short.

"Hey," Juke said. "I get it. You're french?"

"No."

"So then. What?"

"Look. I don't have to explain my name."

Juke squinted, studying her. "You don't look that much like a frog."

"Thank you."

"No. I mean."

"I know what you mean. It's all right. We can't all be cute."

"Yeah. I mean."

"Yes."

Two uncute people. Their eyes met briefly. Hers were dark green and at the same time bright. An angry teenager from a rich neighborhood. And Juke was a convicted felon. Not to mention what he wasn't convicted of, what he wasn't even suspected of, what the law didn't know and Juke wasn't telling. He could see who had the power here. Big danger. Assaulted her. Shit. And yet something about her seemed okay. Like he knew her. Like she was a kid sister, a troublemaker, but kin.

"Okay, hey," Juke said, looking away. "Just don't come messing around here again."

"Nobody took your tools. I made sure."

"Uh, hey. Thanks."

"No problem." She started to walk away. It was almost dark now. "Cool house," she called, looking back. "Forkin' tight, boss." She flashed a smile that lit up the twilight. Then she turned away.

Juke noted her walking: Like a man. No waddle to her butt.

She never turned on the Mag-Lite. She simply disappeared into the deepening shadows.