

The Last Nail

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Clifton shook his head in disgust and marveled at his current situation. Here he was, stuck for most of the day cutting boards and pounding nails, while not ten miles away a record breaking minus tide was revealing the type of abalone that are spoken of in wives tales and legends. He had pleaded with his father to let him finish framing these walls tomorrow, but the old man was relentless. It had to be finished today. When Gilbert Bruce said something had to be finished it meant down to the last nail. Every board and every block, every fastener in place. It all had to be done before Clifton was allowed to leave for the coast and he was fuming.

The work had been progressing as smoothly as could be expected with his brother DJ pushing his weight around the jobsite all morning. DJ was irritable most all the time. The fact that they had managed to finish the floor sheathing, and frame three of the four walls without killing each other, was nothing short of a miracle. It wasn't as if either of them wished the other lasting bodily harm, but they relentlessly picked at one another and the result was sometimes quite violent.

The thing about getting violent with a young man like DJ, was that it could turn out bad for a person real quick. Entering into his eighteenth year DJ stood six foot four and weighed every bit of two hundred and fifty pounds. As a child of nine or ten, he had studied advertisements for the Charles Atlas bodybuilding system in the back of comic books, he had known then he never wanted sand kicked in his face. In the years that followed DJ turned bodybuilding into an obsession, he was rarely seen around the house without a dumbbell in his hand. That obsession coupled with the fact that their father had dragged him to work every day logging in the woods of Northern California, had transformed DJ's body into a solid mass of muscle. He was a force of nature.

While DJ was built in the model of the men on his father's side of the family, Clifton was framed much more closely in the vein of the men on their mother's side. He was sixteen years old, five foot ten and weighed one hundred fifty-five pounds. Clifton was slim, but wide in the shoulders and appeared to be constructed of sinew and rawhide. Though he considered himself a powerful man, Clifton found it wise to give his brother a wide berth. If DJ got ahold of a person there was no matching his brute strength.

Three more studs and finishing the window frame was all that stood between Clifton and the belly full of abalone he had been dreaming about. He could put up with his brother for that much longer he hoped. As Clifton bent to reach for one of the final three studs he felt a blunt powerful impact blossom against his ass. He fell sharply forward landing on his head and shoulder. "I will finish with those, you take care of the window" DJ said with a grin. The smug look on DJ's face paired with the growing pain in Clifton's forehead and ass, drove him to rage. Clifton's face flushed a dark deep red and he felt his pulse begin to pound between his temples,

his body tensed until it was hard as iron. Clifton forced himself to swallow that fury and slowly exhaled.

Fighting a man with DJ's raw physicality was something anyone with more than two brain cells would avoid like the clap. Clifton had learned to exact vengeance when the odds were in his favor and this was not that time. "You could have just said so you big stupid ox. There's no need to bruise my ass, I won't be able to sit for a week" Clifton spat. This whole day's a shitshow he thought to himself. I could have been picking abalone off Duffy Reef hours ago, the tide is so low I'd barely get wet. But he was stuck here, stuck taking DJ's shit while he could practically hear the waves lapping and smell the sea in the air. When he finished this window, he was going rock picking. He was really looking forward to feasting on the bounty.

Clifton climbed to his feet and headed for the pile of lumber. There are a lot more pieces involved in framing this window than there are studs left to pound he thought. This was going to take longer than he felt like being here, but he was going to get it done. As much of a literal pain in the ass DJ was, it was nothing compared to the wrath of their father if the job was left incomplete. Clifton pounded in two king studs while DJ nailed his final three boards to the bottom plate. By the time Clifton had attached the two trimmers that hold up the sill plates, DJ was moving to nail the studs to the top plate. Clifton was quietly irate. He had the nails they had left to pound counted, there were twenty-two for him and DJ had nine.

When framing the rough opening of a window, there are two sill plates laid to support the eventual window and window sill. Clifton had two nails in one side of the lower of those two plates, he was moving to put nails in the other side when DJ put his hand squarely in the way. DJ was using the board to support himself while standing atop a short ladder. He was trying to gain enough height to nail down through the top plate into the studs. "Hey there Atlas, move your hand would you, I need to nail this down". DJ who standing on top of the ladder was well over eight feet tall, sneered down at his brother "When I am goddam ready, that's when I'll move my hand".

Clifton was clinging desperately to the last bit of patience a sixteen-year-old kid, who high on the promise of a minus tide and stuck at work could muster. He looked longingly out what would soon be the living room window, it faced a driveway that cut through a three-acre patch of pretty green meadow surrounded by tall oak and fir trees. Clifton did not see the beauty of the landscape, all he saw was DJ's hand. It was a hand befitting a man of DJ's stature. Being spread out as it was gripping the sill plate, it was as wide and thick as a catcher's mitt.

Clifton looked up at his brother, "C'mon Goliath, move your hand I want to get this done". DJ, without taking his eyes from his work replied disgustedly, "When I'm goddam ready, Peckerwood". The tool DJ had been using to drive nails that day was a long handled roofing hatchet with a blade on one side and a hammerhead on the other. Standing atop that ladder hatchet in hand, he cut an imposing figure. The hatchet was great for pounding nails but would never be so great for pulling them. Clifton placed one of his sixteen penny nails an eighth inch above his brother's offending hand. The nail was pointed dead center, an inch back from

the two middle knuckles right between the bones. Clifton swung the hammer viciously, and with a swiftness and accuracy that drove the nail clean through DJ's paw and deep into the sill plate.

Then he ran.

Clifton ran as fast as he could, out the door down the steps and through the yard. He flew around the corner of his jeep, flung open the door and jumped inside. Clifton was proud of that jeep, it was a nineteen fifty-two flat fender Willy's. Underneath the hood instead of the puny "Atomic" Four cylinder, he had tucked in a hopped-up Chevy 327 with a four-barrel carb. He had stuffed taller than stock gears in the rear end and when he put his right foot down, she would really roll.

Clifton could hear DJ roaring and chopping furiously at the sill plate with his hatchet. He keyed the ignition and the sound of eight cylinders roaring to life filled his heart with a sense of freedom and relief. He popped the clutch and pushed the gas to the floor. For the first hundred yards he kept his vision focused forward and the pedal down. Then Clifton eased off the throttle and glanced in the rearview mirror. DJ was chasing him down the road, with two feet of sill plate still nailed to his left hand and the roofing hatchet gripped firmly in the right.

He was running fast.

Clifton opened the throttle and shook his head, it would not take DJ long to pry that board loose from his hand and mount a pursuit. Clifton was no longer confident that he would be dining tonight on an illegally glutinous amount of his favorite gastropod. He was however supremely confident in the fact that he wasn't coming home for a while. Clifton was leaving, and he was leaving in a hurry.