

The Lumber Yard

Snap!

Dan Harman's right ear started ringing. The sound was a projectile, dropping his jaw and punching his chin hard to the left. Under the ringing he felt the rumble of toppling lumber. He didn't see the stack of freshly milled Canadian 2x4s collapsing over him, but he knew what was happening. For a sliver of a moment, the open mouth of Greg Towart—his supervisor, shouting from the loading bay across the stacks of wood—fractured into pixels through the matrix of lumber and light. As the wave of spruce closed out the world, the ringing faded into the hiss of white noise and then into silence. He felt his teeth clack hard together as his head was shoved into icy Montana dirt, pain shooting down his neck. The world blurred and darkened.

A sucking gasp and a throbbing in his right thigh drew him from the black into a blurry kaleidoscope. His left ear, pressed hard into the ground and packed with snow, began to peel with a sharp, cold pain. His body was a crumpled mess, pinned to the ground. He was on his left side, his right hand inches from his nose. He didn't know where his left arm was, couldn't feel it.

Through watery eyes, images melted into one another, blurred, formed again, became sharper. *One band*, he thought, half conscious. Someone wrapped a bunk of two hundred-odd studs with one steel band. *Stupid. Lazy*. Frozen wood expands in sunlight. It's more than one band can handle. *Wrong time. Wrong place*. He thought of screaming, but surges of pain drained his strength, his breath.

The house was hot that night, eleven months ago. Stifling. Sara had started the fire early and kept it going while she prepared for the party. Roy's crew would be there, Dan and the rest, as well as a few of her girlfriends from the bank. She knew the girls wouldn't hang around long as the lumber yard guys got drunk, so she prepared herself for a long night of listening and ignoring and cleaning. By the time she finished the sausages and pies, the house was a sweat box. Sara didn't mind, but when Roy came in with the beer and wine, he raged through the house, slamming open doors and windows. He cursed her for letting it get so hot and for wasting firewood, and any other little thing he could pick on. His attitude told her he'd already had a few.

They say your life flashes before your mind in such moments. Dan thought only of Roy. And Sara. Roy would be somewhere outside this disheveled catacomb, picking through the pile with four or five others. The guys he works with. His friends. Roy would be trying to save his

life. But that was only because Roy didn't know. He didn't know that last New Year's Eve Dan slept with Roy's wife.

She wondered if Roy thought much of her anymore. He only ever talked about sports and work. His tone had grown cold toward her. She couldn't remember when that started. Why hadn't she noticed? Her stomach fluttered with a bit of anxiety when she thought about it. She couldn't bring it up, not with Roy. *Could things go on like this?* She thought of asking Dan how she might act differently, or whether she should even waste the energy. Dan always seemed to shoot straight with her.

The pile creaked and whined in the warming sun and then shifted, letting a beam of winter's sunlight glare into Dan's now-bloodshot right eye. His head began to lilt slowly as the snow melted beneath it. Dan's face was numb, but he felt the start of a painful kink in his neck that became worse each following moment. He should try, he decided, to scream. The air escaped muffled and watery. More of a cough than a cry. The spasm sent pain shooting through his unfortunately angled neck. Snot and blood dripped from his mouth. Fear squeezed his stomach when he couldn't inhale. He thought his lungs had collapsed. *I won't make it now.* The thought flashed like neon.

Sara had been the best of girls. When she was a kid her mom had to make her stop giving her toys away to the poor kids at school. She was one of only three girls from her high school that didn't end up pregnant before graduation. She was proud of that, despite the backwards rural idea that pregnancy is a badge of honor. When she grew up she was always involved in some church or community function. The two kids she eventually had were always well-behaved even though Sara was a soft-hearted parent. Her mother called it luck. Sara thought she just displayed enough compassion that they couldn't help but follow her lead. Roy wasn't her high school sweetheart, but pretty close. They were sixteen when they met, but twenty before they started dating. Dan and Roy had been friends since elementary school. Sara was close with both of them, but was disposed to treat them more like brothers than beaux. She didn't want to get pregnant. Not in high school.

Suddenly, the mass shifted, pressing and rolling Dan from his side to his back like soft dough. The edge of a 2x4 dropped, digging a deep V into his forehead just above his right eye. A stream of blood ran down, but he didn't feel it. His left ear was packed with melting snow and began to ring again. In his right ear, between the throbbing of heartbeats, other sounds were

filtering in faintly. He could hear voices outside the scattered woodpile. One voice was angry and higher pitched than the others, probably yelling at whomever had caused the pile to shift. It was a familiar sort of yell. It could have been Roy.

That night a year ago, almost a year—*that long?*—the smell of beer and cigarettes filled the small log house. Sara wondered if she would get the smell out. Her mother hated that smell. Most of the party had gone home. The New Year was ushered in with gunshots and cursing. None of that Times Square bullshit. Sara was busy dumping ash trays and picking up bottles when Dan stumbled in from the porch to use the bathroom. His flannel shirt was open despite the bitter, Big Sky cold. Sara's white tank was wet with sweat. Dan paused to look at her. Her stringy, dark brown hair, damp around her forehead, her face flushed. She'd tried to pull the hair back, but several strands had fallen down on each side of her pale, narrow face. Dan looked away and pushed on through the kitchen to the bathroom.

On the frozen ground, odd alternations between numbness and stinging pain, the smell of fresh spruce was nostalgic. Dan remembered vividly and fondly working with his dad in the summer, building sheds, barns, out-buildings, car ports. He thought of the way his father talked with vendors—friendly, seriously. His father wouldn't be taken for a fool. No one would get the chance for a wily sales pitch. His father had integrity. There was no wax in him, as the old adage had it—probably apocryphal. There was nothing fragile in him, but also little depth. He saw depth in Sara, though he couldn't call it by name. It tugged at him—it made him feel torn and weak. He hated the feeling but was addicted to it. He had been addicted to it since high school. The load shifted again, this time bringing some relief. He sucked air desperately but shallowly. The scent mixed with snowy, Missoula air: fresh, clean. Dan felt sick.

When he came out of the bathroom, he felt sick but less drunk. He flopped down at the kitchen table carelessly, like a ten-year-old kid. He faced the opposite wall so he wouldn't stare at Sara's ass. He had to stop doing that. The warmth of the kitchen was a welcomed change from the cold porch. He rubbed his face hard with both hands because it seemed to sober him. He felt the table move as Sara sat down. Her head was bowed when he looked up, the top of her high forehead glinting wetly in the soft kitchen light. She raised up just enough for her bright green eyes to settle hard on him. Her expression didn't change. It was tortured.

The world turned black, but just for a second. Light had been streaming through the pile of studs the way the sun sprays beams onto a dark meadow under low rain clouds. The twisted

picture was coming in flashes; he strobed in and out of consciousness. For a while, he tried breathing through his nose; his mouth was filling with blood, and he couldn't turn his head. He would swallow and cough weakly. During these blackouts, his autonomic reflexes reverted to his mouth. He awoke spitting and choking more than once. Timbers continued shifting around him. He guessed they had finally cleared most of it away. He wondered if he was bleeding anywhere else. A little more light broke through.

He got up, nervously, and began looking at some pictures on the hutch by the table. Before he knew it she was standing beside him, her damp forehead against his shoulder. Then she looked up at him, sheepishly, childishly, beautifully, her nose planted into the plaid shoulder of his shirt. Dan always thought Sara was pretty. He didn't think she was beautiful, not in the supermodel, eighteen-year-old porn star sense of beautiful. He thought she was gorgeous because of the little imperfections that were uniquely hers, the odd bent of a nose slightly too large for her face, her oddly dimpled chin. He admired her from a distance, watching her body, avoiding her face, just so he could forget that she was his best friend's wife. But there was no distance now. She was close, not just physically. In some other way, too. Something passed from her to him, he thought, a message he had no language to interpret. Or, at least, not one he had any experience using. Her eyes were—different. She stepped back and turned toward the bedroom, looking away from him, but clinging tightly to his sleeve, pulling him along. He felt the tug as if disembodied.

Someone was hoisting him from the mess. Consciousness was steadier now, but flat, superficial, like a dream. He saw Greg standing to his left—is that my left?—looking down at him, brow furrowed. He felt the hands of at least two others on his shoulders, legs. He felt recognition, but his eyes were empty, so they looked at him as they would a stranger—trying to concentrate on helping him. He tried to ask where Roy was, but only gurgled. Pain ate at his heart. He never told Roy. He didn't think anyone else even knew, but he could never be sure. Everyone at the party had passed out or gone home long before.

She pushed him onto the bed and slipped her shirt off. He didn't even put up a fight. He knew he should have. *What made her act like this?* Was it too many years of being the good wife? Too many years of Roy's course words and drinking? Drunken weakness? Did she even drink tonight? He had watched her open a number of beers, but only to give them away. He

started to ask her, but she closed her eyes and stuck two fingers in his mouth. His anxiety and doubt were clouded by the image of Sara's hair, now free, swaying, holding her face.

In a dream-like moment it was over. Afterward, she embraced a pillow, rolled onto her side of the bed and went to sleep. *She didn't cry?* Dan wanted to cry. *How could she sleep?* Dan lay beside her for a bit, entranced (enthralled? what does that mean, again?). But fear set in quickly. He didn't know where Roy was, and his heart started pounding. He managed to pull his pants back on just before he collapsed on the floor beside the bed.

It was all a mistake. Just a simple goddamn mistake. Some kid was strapping bunks of 2x4s together with the metal-banding tool. He finished half the job, then a customer came along. He had to help him. He took the bill, read what was needed, pointed him in the direction of the 2x6s. He left the banding tool lying on the rugged geometry of two-hundred fifty 2x4s, geometry that was neither Euclidean nor elegant. It was brutally utilitarian. But because of that, Dan thought, it was a beautiful thing.

But it was all a mistake. He tried to rationalize it; tried, but could never make it gel. He could never look at Sara the same again—could never *look* at Sara again. Eleven months, eighteen days. Her green eyes never settled on him again. He wondered if they'd found others. *No. That's absurd.* But why hadn't they found his again? He vomited on more than one occasion, sometimes when he considered the idea that there were others, and sometimes because of guilt. The guilt ate through him like rust: he lost weight; he was physically weaker (though he never let it show). He could not forgive himself. There was right, and there was wrong; and he had done wrong. Could he be forgiven? He halfway hoped she would do it again with someone else and that Roy would find out. At least he could be free of one secret. Roy would leave her, and he would never have to evade her eyes again. But then, before then (maybe now?), in a dark sort of way, he loved her. He should have told Roy. Because he loved her, he should have made it right. He should tell.

Roy rolled him over the next morning. He was on the floor next to Roy's bed, Roy's wife still cradled in the sheets and pillows. Their sweat had dried. His sins, invisible. Real, but locked away. Dan's fingers were still rolled into the waist of his pants from where he pulled them on. His heart was in his ears—a boxer pounding a side of beef, and he was the lifeless meat. But Roy laughed. "Couldn't make it to the can?" He took one of Dan's arms. "As least you didn't piss yourself," he joked, pulling Dan off the floor. Roy couldn't decide what really happened, right?

Yes, he couldn't make it to the can. That's what he would say. Roy surely thought Dan had put his drunken wife to bed—like a good friend. Did she drink last night? Dan wanted to tell Roy yes. But he couldn't say anything at all. His chest tightened. He almost cried. So he said nothing.

Roy's face—standing over him, six foot-five, three hundred pounds, and more of a man than anyone Dan had ever known—Roy was... *crying?* All the sounds around him were muffled, and his vision was still blurry and flat. But he could tell he was being loaded into an ambulance. Roy's bearing never changed. Confusion set in. *Is that Roy?* The faced watched Dan while the ambulance pulled away, *a little too slowly*, Dan thought. The lips before him moved continuously, trying to console, encourage. *For whose sake?* Suddenly, Dan broke inside. He had no strength left, and he broke. His words were translated into the alien language of the EKG—no human would understand. Whatever emotions are, they are real. They play havoc with reality. Unlike God, they play dice, and they are indifferent to winning and losing. Dan's wheezing forced fluid into his lungs. This made his muscles seize and his eyes roll back. For a few seconds, his vision returned, twisted and blurry, and he saw his friend. *Roy?* Scared and hurting. *Is that Roy?* He loved Roy. *Can a man love another man?* Dan imagined that his own pain was worse. Confusion set in. *Is that Roy?* Of all the emotions he could have imagined experiencing on dying, he felt one he expected least. Yet one brief image—a millisecond flash—was different, sharp. It intruded like an unwelcome memory. His vision was clear, but he did not see Roy. For that infinitesimal moment, it was Greg Towart.

Back at the lumber yard, the men dispersed. They talked about Dan, rapped consoling pats on shoulders, resumed various tasks, and greeted customers. They laughed with contractors and circulated rumors like old women. Forklifts chugged to life and lurched around. In the toolshed, a pair of heavy, steel bandcutters dropped loudly into a big steel chest alongside hammers and crowbars and heavy duty staplers. Roy took off his insulated gloves and tossed them on the crude wooden table. His right knuckles were skinned and bruised. He warmed his hands over the kerosene heater and wondered if Sara would be too sore to make dinner tonight.