

## Wood Stacking

It hadn't rained for two weeks, and the heat streaming out from the sun felt like a giant palm grinding the farm and its sprawling fields back into the dusty earth. Ragged birds drifted through a sky wringed of all moisture. The grass had taken on a sallow tinge. A constant, hot breeze rustled the wheat fields like kindling before a blaze. All across the land lay a shroud of dry stagnancy, rippling off the asphalt, reducing the horizon to a shimmering gold haze, forming beads of sweat on David's neck.

He and his Father had been stacking wood in the shade of the house since morning. David's hands were caked with splinters, the cracks of my palms overflowing with dirt. Sweat plastered wood shavings to his skin, and the burning pain of exertion in his arms mixed with the hot flush of the sun on his brow until his whole being was one swirl of fire and fatigue. His Dad's pile was even and straight, but his came up like a jigsaw puzzle crammed together in all the wrong ways, tottering and precarious.

"Come on, David," Dad grunted as he heaved another armful of logs. He let the logs drop in a clatter to the ground, then began to insert each piece of wood individually into the pile with a precise, almost mathematic grace that clashed with the roughness of his face, the angry squint of his eyes. "Get it together. We don't want to be stuck doing this in winter. We've got to be prepared."

"Winter's not for months," David said, but his Dad didn't hear him over the clatter of wood.

David tried to wedge another log into his pile, but a shard of wood near the base shifted, and the whole stack groaned in protest. Wood went scattering everywhere in a sudden avalanche of splinters and shavings and dust.

His Dad let the wood he carried slip from his arms and a couple curse words slip from his mouth. His eyes were very dark, like tunnels leading to a black winter night. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, shook his head. A sigh whistled out from between his clenched teeth.

“That’s alright,” he said. “That’s okay. Let’s take a break for now. Let’s just take a break.”

He trudged away from the piles to the front door of the house. He didn’t look back. His shoulders were thick as a brick wall, coated in shadow as he receded from David. David looked up at the brittle sky, the feeble wisps of cloud smeared across it. He bent down and started to pick up the scattered wood. He had almost rebuilt the foundation of the pile when he lifted a log and beneath it found a mouse trembling like a leaf about to fall.

It was a small grey thing. Its eyes were two pinpricks of darkness in the white glare of the sun. Its back was broken, its legs like snapped twigs, its spine a tangled mess. A pang of sympathy went through his heart. Despite the urgency mounting inside him, he put the log that had crushed the mouse gently back on the pile, then followed his Dad’s trail to the house.

His Dad was in the kitchen pouring a glass of water. He ignored David when he came in. From the darkness of her bedroom with the blinds drawn and the door half shut, his Mom’s voice wafted out on the stagnant air.

“Did you finish with the wood already?” she said.

“No,” his Dad said.

“I should’ve figured,” she said. “You couldn’t finish anything that fast. Could you fetch me some water, Harry? This heat is monstrous for my head.”

His Dad took another glass out of the cupboard. He tipped the pitcher into it.

“And don’t forget to put the ice in like you usually do,” she said.

He pulled the pitcher back, the glass only half-full. He went to the sink, dumped out the glass's contents. The ice tray in the fridge clattered as he yanked it out and fished for a handful of cubes to put in the drink.

"When do you think you'll finish with the wood?" Mom asked.

"I don't know."

"Speak up, Harry, I can't hear a word you're saying. It hurts my head when you mumble."

"I said I don't know."

"Something you don't know? Well, isn't that shocking?"

David cleared his throat nervously. His Dad glanced up.

"There's a mouse outside," David said.

"A what?"

"A mouse, Dad. I think I hurt him when the logs fell. He's all banged up, spine snapped right in half, he can't even run away. What should we do?"

Dad took a long sip from his glass. The skin around his eyes was pinched and wrinkled, like crumpled paper.

"Ask your mother," he said.

After the day's blinding whiteness, the darkness of his Mom's room hurt David's eyes. She was a formless shape on her bed, a silhouette merged against the piled sheets and blankets. The place had the perfume of spring flowers on the verge of rotting.

"What is it, David?" she asked. "Hurry up. You're letting all the hot air in."

"I found a mouse, Mom," I said.

"Well, how shall we commemorate your fantastic discovery? A parade?"

"A log fell on him. He can't walk anymore."

“Well, Christ, David, what’re you doing in here? Let the thing out of its misery. Better you than some animal comes along and mangles it for a couple days straight before killing it. You’re almost fifteen, you have to start thinking for yourself.”

The coolness of the room became ice on David’s skin. “Let it out of its misery?”

“Yes, and close the door before you go out,” she said. “This heat is dreadful. It’s just killing my head.”

He left the cold black void of her room. Brushed past the silent figure of his Dad, still nursing a glass of water. He stepped outside to where the sun slashed his face and the dusty air scratched his lungs and the mouse whimpered and trembled in the grass. His shadow fell over it. He picked up a log, stared down at the tiny, shivering creature. He wished it would just run away. He wished it would get better. But it just stayed where it was, legs crushed, back twisted, far past fixing.

He thought of his Mom’s voice flowing from the flowery darkness of her room. The tired dismissal in her tone. He thought of his dad’s hunched shoulders, face wrinkled like sunbaked leather. He picked up a log lying nearby and held it in the air over the mouse. The creature whimpered and squeaked. Every time its heart pounded its whole body twitched as if rocked by a spasm of violence. He closed my eyes, momentarily fixed his attention on the wood’s sharp splinters digging into his palm. Then he smashed the log down.

The impact was muffled against the dry grass and soil. Dust clouded the air as he lifted the log again, held it high above himself. The mouse was still trembling. Blood leaked from its nose, red and startling against the washed-out hues of the grass. He smashed the log down again. Something crunched, a sound that broke the quiet of the dry air like a thundercrack. He thought of Mom in her room, festering in the darkness. He smashed the log down again. The mouse’s

squeaks were whimpers, barely audible beneath the weighty thump of the wood. He thought of Dad pouring himself water, eyes glazed and fixed on something out of sight, oblivious to his son standing on the edge of the kitchen. He smashed the log down again. He was crying now, the tears hot, the dust stinging his eyes. There were no more whimpers from the mouse. He smashed the log down again. He smashed the log down so hard it split in two.

When he was finished the mouse lay in a cratered ruin of soil, its grey fur dull with dust and dried blood, the dirt around it cracked and fissured. The day was hot all around him, cobalt sky pale, wheat fields a golden haze in the distance. He dragged himself to his feet, patted the dirt from his knees. He picked up the bloody fragments of the log. His tears were already drying. He wiped his splintered hands against his shirt and started stacking the wood once again.