The Roof

Suzannah and I were just out of library school and didn't have much money, but everything fell into place as in a movie from the 1950s. We found jobs, she in Reference, me in Special Collections, at the same big library, and then a grand old Victorian house, a fixer-upper until your dying day, in the northeast part of the city. Some wackadoo church owned it and the wackadoo minister lived there with his wanton kids, and they were frantic to sell. His eyes grew shiny and passionate. Walking out the door, he might have said, “It is finished.”

Suzannah didn't share my enthusiasm for the house and right then I wondered how committed she was to staying together. “It's all rundown, Jimmy. The plumbing hardly works. And I don't know, I hate to say it, but this neighborhood--”

The neighborhood was mixed: young and old, black and Latino and aging white. Lower middle-class. Poor. I was surprised she didn't like it but figured she'd come around. “Suzy, it's dirt cheap, and I'll fix it up. I’m good with that sort of thing.”

“Mr. Fixit? I am not the little woman, barefoot in the kitchen.”

“You were barefoot this morning.” I gave her a kiss. “Bare-assed, too. We'll have equity, Suzy, all that middle-class kind of stuff.”

She rolled her eyes theatrically. She'd taken a minor in theater. “Just like my parents.”

Suzannah was from Des Moines, the geographic center of the middle-class, but rather patrician about how phony it all was. We were the generation who would right what was wrong with America. A

woman's right to choose, renewable energy and the evils of Big Oil, the necessity for wolves to exist in Yellowstone, the death penalty—and even the nuclear family, which placed women in subordinate roles.

I hugged her close.“Don't you want me to be head of the family?”

She wriggled away. “Always joking, Jimmy.”

We'd been together through most of library school but now the university was what we used to do. “As if there were a family,” I said. “Or ever will be.”

“Wow.” She frowned. “Not saying *that.”*

Our first night in the house was spooky. Suzannah stood on the porch a long moment, shivering, looking down the poorly-lit street. Several dogs howled and what I could have sworn was a coyote.

I fumbled for switches. Only one in five turned on a light and I realized that the preacher had taken along his consecrated bulbs. It was late spring. The house felt cold and I didn't know where the thermostat was, so I took Suzannah's hand and we climbed all the way to the attic, the temperature rising by several degrees with each landing.

Up high, moonlight shone through a round window like a porthole on a ship. College kids, still, we spread out our sleeping bags on the plank floor and zipped them together. We stripped and crawled in and melted together in the moonlight, one unit, no one in charge. Afterwards, I looked down into Suzannah's glistening eyes and felt we were eternal. We grew warm and fell asleep in that great ship of a house, as the wind murmured and the old wood creaked--the ghosts, I thought, of people who lived in the attic one hundred years before.

The leak was only in one section, but it gushed down through the shake shingles into our other-

worldly attic. From there it flowed into an upstairs bedroom, through the lath and plaster above the first floor parlor, and dripped, dripped, dripped into the basement. That leak was why we got the house so cheap. Like my dad always said, “There’s a leak in the roof and you don't fix it, pretty soon the only solution’s a bulldozer.”

I'd worked on roofing crews before my hitch in the army and knew what to do. Because the roof was so high, I built a scaffold and brought my ladder up from there. On our first Friday night, the clouds turned dark and I set to work. Far below, Suzannah called up, “I guess we're not going out tonight.”

She'd had her heart set on an old Italian restaurant. She'd made reservations. “Sorry. I got to plug that leak before it rains again.”

“Couldn't we could hire somebody?”

“Old place like this? This crazy roof? It would cost a fortune, Suzy.”

“I worry how much time you're spending, Jimmy. You know you should be writing.”

I’d published two short stories set in the Ozarks, where I came from, and Suzannah thought I was a genius. And yes, the roof took all my free time, but the leak was a true crisis and Suzannah should understand. I nodded and climbed another two feet. The wind was rising and I felt a drop of rain.

Working from the next-to-last rung, I shoveled off the lowest shakes, and the oak sheeting beneath it, some of which had been soaked and resoaked so many times it crumbled in my fingers. But the yellow pine rafters—the old type, actually measuring two inches by four inches—were solid. I crawled off the ladder, braced my feet on the tie beams, and shoveled off eight more feet of shakes. I spread out a blue tarp and tacked it down as a gentle rain fell. I'd stopped the leak.

I secured the ladder, put away my tools, and went inside to announce my triumph, but Suzannah had gone to bed.

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With its gables upon gables, and four dormer windows, the roof had eleven sections, each slanting at a different angle. I wrapped wire around two-by-fours, then nailed down the wire, so I had a place to put my feet as I climbed the slopes. That technique kept me from falling to my doom, but the hardest part was carrying materials. I muscled the new sheeting up to the scaffold, then yoked a rope around each piece and pulled it slowly up the ladder. I wore gloves, because the waferboards were heavy and could tear away skin. Same back-breaking difficulty with the new shingles, which weighed seventy pounds a bundle. I took only half a bundle at a time, but the task quickly grew old, climbing up that quaking ladder.

Larry Mizer, a contractor from down the street somewhere, called up to me from the back yard. “Been watching you,” he said. “I'm impressed, but the way you’re going about it, you're gonna kill yourself.”

He quoted a price to do the roof and it seemed fair, but I shook my head. “I just don’t have the money, sir. I can barely afford materials.”

After some dickering, Larry offered to rent me a small—well, too large for my pickup, and Larry had to haul it in--scissors scaffold. I carried up waferboards and shingles as if on an elevator. Still a tough job, but I finished section two in good time.

The scissors scaffold took the urgency out of the job and gave me more time for Suzannah, but four weeks had passed and she always seemed to be gone. The city excited her and she loved going to new restaurants twice a week, and afterwards to poetry readings. I went along to several and listened dutifully to Suzannah’s poems, but after a while everyone’s poems seemed alike. I began to judge the readings by the quality, or quantity, of wine and cheese. Surely, there was no correlation, but it seemed like the worst poetry inspired the best hors-d'oeuvres.

Some weeks, I saw more of Suzannah at work than at home. I made beef soup that lasted several days, and soldiered on with the roof. In the evenings, I hid away in the attic, sitting in my overstuffed rocker, waiting for the moon to glide by those porthole windows. I had a lamp and read through Kurt Vonnegut, then some books about the Iraq War, *Yellow Birds* and *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk.* I tried to figure what I could write about it. A veteran returning to a dead-end job in the Ozarks. That's as far as I got.

The roof wasn't my white whale. It was a tough job, rather boring, but it had to be done and it seemed I had to do it alone. Maybe, when my repairs moved inside, Suzannah would show more interest. Work, my boy! That's what my parents taught me and I carried that notion through the army and grad school. Whatever else, keep working.

The head of Special Collections, my boss, was a 67-year-old African-American woman, Denise Peabody, whom I liked immediately. She had a unique hair style, combed down flat to her skull but with a curl at the bottom like a screen door spring. She had it done every two weeks and it always looked the same, except now it was gray.

Denise worked her way up through waitressing jobs and as a Circulation clerk to an MLS at age thirty. Back then, the Masters represented a remarkable achievement in the black community. Behind her desk she displayed a framed, faded clipping announcing her triumph in the now-defunct black newspaper. She set about becoming an authority on local, especially black, history, and was often on the phone with reporters when a story needed historical background. I loved seeing the joy on her face when a professor came in with a query about the Exodusters or the A.M.E. Church. She'd bring out photos and files and memoirs many of which were unique, and that she had shrewdly procured.

Meanwhile, I dove into the history of the city, spending the quiet evenings and Sundays reading

newspapers from the Depression and all about Satchell Paige. Preparing for black history month, Denise had me prepare slick bibliographies of authors such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Baldwin, but also checklists for the slave markets in Missouri, the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas, and the infamous Order 11 of 1863, which forced local farmers, loyal to the Union or not, off their land.

Denise also willed to me the privilege of taking around school kids and trying to make history seem exciting. I guess our working theory was that I was closer to them in age. Their teachers forbade the use of cell phones but the kids were lost without them. They stared off vacantly or affected a massive boredom. Even the exploits of Satchell Paige, who at fifty-nine pitched impressively right here in *their* city, moved only a few of them.

"What's to become of us," Denise said.

"Were you interested in history when you were thirteen?"

"Yes," she said. "Weren't you, Jimmy?"

"Yes. But we were bookworms."

My two short stories partly explained why Denise hired me, because she wanted to expand our Ozarks holdings. I had money to buy a few Ozarks titles—accounts of lynchings in Springfield and Joplin, some Harold Bell Wright sequels to *The Shepherd of the Hills,* and an entire run of the *Ozarks Mountaineer,* an old magazine I found on e-bay and bought for a song.

My endless reading turned up the announcement for an academic conference way down in the southeast corner of the state. I could visit my dad at the veterans home in Mt. Vernon and check out some story settings. "I don't have any vacation time," I said. "But is there any travel money for that sort of thing?"

Denise had a fine poker face but I'd worked with her long enough to see she was suppressing a smile. "We'll see," she said.

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Along came Jackie-O, a clerk in Periodicals. Her mother, through a difficult delivery, had cried out to the nurses how much she admired the President's wife. Herself a tough, hard-working farm woman, she identified with Mrs. Kennedy's stoical public suffering. Her admiration went along the lines of "Of course, she's beautiful, she's had everything in life, but look how brave she is."

Unlike the President's wife, Jackie-O didn't have much of a fashion sense. She wore golf shirts in red or lavender, buttoned up to her neck, and striped pants. She had tattoos on her forearms—I could never make out what they portrayed—and large earrings that sometimes went with brass-colored bangles. But in a big city library, me and my button-down shirts, and she with her tattoos and bangles, passed for conventional.

I first saw Jackie-O when I came down from my third-floor citadel, hoping to pick up Suzannah for lunch at a Mexican food truck parked between city hall and the water department. Suzannah and Jackie-O walked toward the stairs, both wearing platform sandals. Jackie-O had mastered the art and stood up straight, giving off a sense of athleticism, while my Suzannah listed forward at a twenty-degree angle, as though she were one step behind but meant to catch up. I thought of a four-year-old trying out her mother's heels.

Like others who knew her well, I soon called Jackie-O Jack. As it turned out, she hailed from a little Ozarks town, Willow Springs, not far from where I grew up, in Red Buck, Missouri. My school used to play Willow Springs in football, not that Jack or I cared. I had too many farm chores for sports and to Jack, though I never asked her, football probably would have seemed boorish and macho. But in those little towns, if you don't like football, not much remains but church, and I couldn't imagine Jack sticking her hand toward heaven, mumbling in tongues. No, Jack and I belonged to that vanishing species who sit by themselves with books.

Jack fixed dinner for us one night and I asked how Suzannah and her had met. “At the library?”

“We met for Amber in Jeff City.”

“Amber,” I said. “The trans woman?”

“The first,” Jack said, almost laughing. “She'll be in Guinness. Reference question.”

“We met with a Catholic group,” Suzannah said. “Good thing, because there were all these hecklers, driving around us with their pickup trucks and Harleys. There had signs like, 'Dykes for Jesus.'”

I remembered now. Back in 2003, Scott McLaughlin raped and killed his girlfriend. He become Amber while in prison.

“How do you stand on the death penalty, Jimmy?” Jack asked. “I mean, no one deserves it, but this Amber person--”

I took another helping of tofu and spaghetti. “I'm opposed because it doesn't work. Appeals dragging on for years? Twenty years on death row? I'd call that cruel and unusual punishment for this Amber person.”

“Jimmy's very practical.” Suzannah shoved away her spaghetti and threw me a sharp look. “Dinner was terrific, Jack.”

Jack understood Suzannah’s little shift in mood and took the hint. She had a cornball sense of humor. “Does Suzy cook for you, Jack? Can she bake a cherry pie?”

“She's a great cook when she wants to be and she's the apple of my eye.”

Suzannah smiled. “It's like typing.”

Jack and I almost made a chorus: “Cooking is like typing?”

“My mother said I should take a typing course in high school but what kind of job does a woman wind up with if she can type? Same with cooking. You'll end up in the kitchen all the time if

you can cook."

"These are just skills, sweetheart," Jack said.

"Right," I said. "Just skills. I don't think those stereotypes hold true anymore."

Jack glanced at one of us and then the other. "Speaking of stereotypes. Did you hear about the blonde whose husband, Bob, wanted fruit salad for dessert?"

"My God," Suzannah put her hands over her ears. "Blonde jokes?"

"The recipe said to make it without dressing."

"So?" Suzannah asked. "I mean, so what?"

"Bob said, 'I'll bring along a friend.'"

I laughed."That's pretty awful, Jack."

Suzannah looked puzzled. "What was the friend for?"

I finished the first three sections of the roof but afterwards rains came, and I moved inside to repair the parlor ceiling. I knocked down the plaster and lath, creating a dusty mess. Suzannah wore a mask everywhere and stayed two nights with Jackie-O. Finally, the ceiling was ready for drywall, but ceiling drywall was one-half inch thick and even an eight-foot length was too heavy for one person to raise, then hold steady. If I'd had any friends in the city, I'd have called on one, though it takes a pretty good friend to help you with drywall.

I pushed the thing up by myself and tried to tack in a few strategic nails, but the far end kept wanting to fall and seemed much heavier than fifty pounds. I switched to screws but they proved just as difficult. I needed the wackadoo preacher to return and offer a prayer, because it would take a miracle to hold the piece still enough to twirl in a screw, and then, me being me, I'd probably miss the two-by-four beneath by an eighth inch. Finally, I set up two ladders, propping one end of drywall on the far ladder,

shoving up the near end with my thick head, urging Suzannah to push up from the second ladder.

“This is hard,” she said.

I pressed in the first screw. “I know it's hard. Just a little bit more,” I told her, reaching out for that second screw, but her arms gave out. The first screw tore loose, while the drywall skidded off my shoulder and knocked down the ladder, taking me with it. I wasn't hurt but watched the drywall break in half. I didn't ask Susannah if she'd been hurt. I shouted at her. “Can't you do *anything?”*

“I'm trying, Jimmy.” She didn't cry. She just stared at me. “I'm not used to this.”

“God knows I don't ask much. Just help me out once in a while, when you can *schedule* it for chrissakes.”

She hung her head low over that dirty old carpet and began to cry.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “Taking out my frustrations on you; I’m sorry.”

“Why are we doing this? In this stupid old house?”

“We're doing it together, Suzy.” I sat on a bucket of drywall mud. “For our future.”

What crossed her face wasn't exactly a grimace; there was sympathy, too, even love. Even, I hate to say it, pity. She stood and brushed the drywall dust from her jeans. “I'll be back,” she said

In ninety minutes, I heard laughter on the porch, and Suzannah called out, “Pizza!” Jack came into the parlor with a an ironic smile. “I can help,” she said, holding up two fat sponges rubber-banded to baseball caps. One said Royals and the other said Chiefs. “This is how we do her down in Willer Springs,” she said.

We pushed up three pieces of sheetrock in two hours. Our heads still hurt beneath the sponges but we could tolerate the pain long enough to tack up a piece. I used nails and Jack ran in screws with the cordless drill.

We stood admiring our work to the sound of Suzannah popping corn. “Thank you, Jackie-O,” I

said.

"Us hillbillies has gots to stick together," she said. "Here in the wicked city."

The three of us sat on the couch watching one of the original Star Trek episodes, eating pizza and popcorn, drinking cheap wine from Aldi. As Captain Kirk wrestled with a tall, purplish female, Jack lit a joint. I'd sworn off the stuff. The world turns slow and stupid and you can't write—or do much of anything. But what the hell, we three had conquered a major problem.

"Jimmy," Jack said.

"Yeah?" Kirk battled some sort of dinosaur now. It looked like a triceratops.

"How many lesbians does it take to change a light bulb?"

"Huh?"

"Ten. One to do it, and nine to talk about how gratifying it was without a man."

She kissed me. Her kiss was startling, hard, and I didn't know what to make of it. She turned and kissed Suzannah, and Suzannah gave me one of her wet kisses.

"It's a game," Suzannah said, sweet and low.

"A party thing," said Jack.

We did a few more rounds of smooching and inhaling. Something in me, the fundamentalist part from my boyhood, wanted to cry out, stop this. The stoned part enjoyed the daring of it, until at last I understood that only Suzannah and Jackie-O were kissing. It was as though I had disappeared. I rattled the ice in my glass and staggered into the kitchen.

I had the urge to scream but remained silent. Why scream? As I filled my glass, the trickle from the faucet seemed profound, the foul water flowing down the pipes into treatment plants and then the river and the imponderable sea. I heard the front door closing as the two women went out, then a subdued, "See you later" from one of them. Shouldn't drive when you're stoned, I thought.

I weaved up to the second floor, then up those high pine steps toward the dark attic. Memories attacked me with every step: the time that I, a sharpshooter in Iraq, missed my target and caused a buddy to die; my mother on her death bed, bringing in a preacher in her final attempt to pull me back from perdition; and a girlfriend I went to only for sex, until at last she showed me the door. Seeming hours later, three-quarters of the way up the stairs, I sang, "Baby, you can drive my car."

I scooted the rocking chair near the big round window with its faint light coming from the street. No moon tonight. I plunged low and far in my mind and thought of my parents, bound up with the little souls of their chickens and Holsteins, growing wearier, sicker, as the drought hung on and they'd had only one cutting of hay.

A light came on from the house—another Victorian monstrosity—next door. That house didn't rise quite as high as mine and so I looked downward perhaps ten feet, where a tall woman appeared, talking to herself. I didn't know her name except by her mail box: R. Berman.

Obsessed as I'd been with the roof, I hadn't paid much attention to my neighbors, but I knew the faces on the block. Two gay guys, Al and Gary, lived on the corner; they said hello when they walked their fussy little terrier. Two old men, maybe friends, maybe one-time rivals, lived side-by-side in broken-down houses. They emerged every day for their mail, and on the Fourth they both raised an American flag. Not long before, there had been an incident in which a demented 84-year-old shot a black high school kid who had confused addresses and come to the wrong door. Neither of the men on my block were the one in the news, but they might have been. Like my dad in that VA home in Mt. Vernon: denied his tobacco, half-crazy, mean as hell.

Otherwise, the block was filled with women. R. Berman on one side, and a house of kids on the other, run by three, perhaps four women. Women to the left of me, women to the right of me.

R. Berman pushed back against a bare white wall. Her face twisted in agony, then grew molten

with betrayal and tears. Slowly, it occurred to me that I was a voyeur, though I hadn't meant to be; R. Berman had simply thrust herself into view. I kept watching. How would I look now, should a stranger see my face, after my girlfriend ran off with a woman? What kind of man was I? I should have thrown some of our Goodwill dishes when I was in the kitchen. I should I have screamed, "Get out! You little slut!"

R. Berman went on talking to herself, yelling sometimes, though of course I couldn't hear her. She clinched her fists and shook them in the air. She rolled her head back and forth and I could read her lips: "No. No. No!"

Gradually, her face calmed, and she hung her head in sadness. I wished I could wave a wand and banish her troubles, but I was a stranger and knew something about her I shouldn't know. I wondered if we all are like R. Berman, even solid citizen Denise, when we think we are alone. Plumb loco.

Suzannah and I didn't announce that we'd broken up and that she'd set up house with Jackie-O, but the news traveled anyhow. I don't unerstand how bad news, or anyhow juicy news, travels, but it does, and my status in the library subtly rose. The women of the library, who were mostly Baptists, sympathized with me without any pointed remarks. They all were married--preacher's wives, several of them.

No doubt that same underground telegraph reached Suzannah, and in a few weeks she moved out to run a branch. This represented a promotion. Not much goes on anymore in Reference.

She sought me out on our in-service day. At lunch, we sat in a corner. She said, "I'm so sad about this. So conflicted."

"Well," I said.

"In junior high, you know—I never told you this—I had a little girlfriend, Rosie. We'd get in

bed together and she'd be the man."

"It's all right. We just . . . didn't belong together. We weren't married. You hated the house."

"But I loved you, Jimmy! Some part of me will always—"

I meant to be polite, but I didn't see much point in talking about it. "It's OK. Really."

"You keep writing. You're really talented. Gifted!"

"Thanks," I said.

Jack and I nodded to each other for a while, but she must have dediced my patterns of movement, because after a while I didn't see her. I learned some weeks later she'd found a job as a mail carrier. I missed her more than Suzannah, though maybe only for her terrible jokes. Go figure.

One cool Saturday evening a long limousine pulled up to her house and R. Berman went out in a slinky evening dress, as the driver held the door and several dark figures, male and female, beckoned. I was curious but not enough to knock on her door. Her first name was Ruth, I'd learned. Ruth Berman, woman of mystery.

Meanwhile, Denise had secured three days off and a small stipend for my conference down in the sticks.

Work was fine, and Suzannah, Jackie-O, and the stingy preacher slowly turned into history. Winter neared and I wanted to finish the roof before heading south to my conference. I took advantage of two sixty-degree days and made a final push, reaching the apex on a Saturday afternoon, scooting along to cap it with one-third shingle pieces. Finally, I was done, and stood up slowly, one foot to the east, one to the west. I could see for a mile in any direction: smoke where a house had burned, tall sycamores and oaks, a few brown leaves hanging on, and the old buildings downtown.

On the front sidewalk and into the street, the house of mothers had gathered with their kids, and

Ruth Berman came out wearing slacks and a short coat with a fur collar. Al and Gary were there with their yappy little dog and had set up a grill. I remembered a flyer stuck in my door about a block party.

The two old men were there, too, leaning on their walkers, then falling back into lawn chairs. I never have liked parties but I'd be happy to join them. At Halloween, I'd walked next door and offered a plate of brownies to the mothers and kids. That was enough to make friends. As though they'd rehearsed it, they applauded and cheered, and I stood up straight. I offered my best salute and lifted my hammer toward heaven.