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A NEW WORK SPACE

Carl had never bought a whole tooling side. He left the office early to be home in time for the delivery. Let some other agent like Larry Sweet go for the Millionaire's Club. Carl was happy to leave the plaques and bonuses to sweet-ass Larry. One sale a month was all he had ever really wanted anyway. He even left his pager in the company car and took a bus home. If anyone called, he was so sorry, but he couldn't show any listings tonight. He would take his tools into the dining room and lay them out on the mahogany side board. With Carl Junior at the videoden, he'd have the house to himself.

He saw the box on the porch before he got off the bus. Partially wedged behind the storm door, it stuck out a couple of feet. It was lighter than he had expected. He didn't open it. The mail had been scooped up from behind the door and stacked on the stool where Wanda used to sit. He wanted to take his time.

The phone rang. He waited. After five rings, his message told them he was so sorry but he wasn't taking any damned client out tonight.

He threw his yellow company jacket on the divan. His picture popped out of the pocket clip. A frail wisp of a man stared up at him from the floor. Wanda had sat beside the

photographer when that picture was taken. She had watched him as if he were finally being pinned onto a card she could display to prove that he worked like everybody else, like the best people she was always telling him about.

He sat on the edge of her grandmother's sofa, the one nobody was supposed to use, a black leather and horsehair monstrosity preserved from five generations of small children for no other purpose than to take up a wall and poke one of its clawed feet into the doorway just enough to trip him every morning. He pulled off his shoes and rolled the white support hose down to his ankles. Wanda was big on support hose. "You got to keep the pressure up, Carl." She said this every morning. She even threw away his other socks.

He wadded his socks between the black leather cushions and walked barefoot into the kitchen. Nothing to drink but Wanda's sherry. He made a half and half concoction with Hawaiian punch in a quart jar and took it with him downstairs to the closet wedged under the basement stairs. Here he kept his leather-working tools.

He unwrapped the five pound maul he'd never needed for small projects and laid it in the tool box beside the bevels, stamps and new rotary cutter he'd bought for the tooling side. He kicked a little stool and marble-top table into the back of the closet and took a swig of punch. No more work on that wobbly table under a forty watt bulb. He set the jar down to pick up the box with both hands and carry it upstairs to the dining room. His heart pounded as he laid the tools directly on the side board. He'd put a piece of plywood on the table, but he had no intention of protecting the surface of Wanda's damned side board, containing her grandmother's silver and her Uncle Reed's knives. It was probably from her uncle that she got her ways. He was always a joker. One time, when a couple was visiting to show off their newborn, he gave the

kid a lit fire-cracker. It turned out to be a toilet roll, but the couple never came back. Behind all of those jokes was something harder. Carl figured that was what Uncle Reed had passed on to Wanda—some pleasure in seeing others squirm.

Carl hadn't understood at first. Shortly after Carl Junior's birth, Carl had come home early to see how Wanda was getting on. He found her rolling the baby back and forth on the side board. She claimed she had just changed him, but Carl noticed that the knife drawer was not closed.

He opened the drawer. The knives were odd-shaped bronze implements that Uncle Reed had bought in Thailand. To Carl, they always seemed like they would be more at home in an armory than on a dinner table. He noticed that one of them was missing. It was the one Wanda had taken out the last time he had called the police. They had pried it from her fingers as she screamed at him. He hadn't seen it since.

It was time to open the package. He slit the taped end with his new rotary tool and let the hide roll onto the table. He reversed the roll to flatten it out and examined the finished side. It was perfectly smooth and unmarked and smelled of tack rooms and saddle soap. He hadn't decided what he would make. He had never done anything bigger than a wallet. And the last wallet had to be tossed after Wanda took the shears to it. She always said she was looking out for him. She said she looked out for him better than he did for himself. He had to apply himself, she said. "You can do your little projects, but don't bring them upstairs and don't work on them until you've made your cold calls." She said this every night before dinner.

He had to make the calls at dinner time to catch people at home. How else was he going to catch up to the sales of Larry Sweet, she asked. Of all the things she required, he most hated

the cold calls. People who might have been prospects if they had wandered into the realty office on their own would instead call in the day after the dinner-time call and demand to have their names crossed off the list. Wanda never understood. She even held up dinner until Carl had made all the calls on her list. Carl Junior even joined Wanda in pestering Carl to make the calls early so that they could eat dinner before eight o'clock.

With the five pound maul, Carl tapped a gouge into Uncle Reed's side board. As he looked at the hole, he realized that he hoped Wanda would not recover. Whatever treatment she was receiving at the Sanitarium, she still screamed that he was a slacker and that no one but she would pay attention to the details.

She was right about that. No one paid attention to the details like Wanda. Nothing Carl did was good enough for her. It was no wonder that Carl Junior had no standards with such a father, she said. He had no drive, no ambition—even when she laid it all out for him. She had so many plans. She talked about them to people who weren't there. She argued with her dead mother about them. She screamed when Carl Junior came in wearing a hoody. That night, she had yanked Carl out of bed. With his feet twisted in the sheets, he had dislocated his shoulder again.

All in all, Carl was relieved, so much so that he even said aloud, "She's gone at last." He looked around cautiously. Even now, he couldn't believe he was alone. He looked for his drink and remembered leaving it in the basement. Wanda would never have had that. "Food stays in the kitchen and dining room," she said. Everything in its place for Wanda, he thought. Even the mail.

Carl had just found the jar of punch when he thought about the mail on the stool by the front door. Just where Wanda always put it. Carl Junior had gone straight to the videoden from school. Carl put down the jar and listened. The basement was dark beyond the dim light over the steps. He backed against the wall and slowly climbed the steps. On the third step from the top, he felt a metal object under his toes. He didn't want to look down. He bent his knees and sat slowly on his heels with his back still against the wall and his head upright to watch and listen. Keeping his eyes on the doorway at the top of the stairs, he reached between his feet and picked up the metal object—Uncle Reed's bronze knife. He had found it only because he was walking up the ends of the steps next to the wall. Maybe it had been there all along. Then he remembered the phone call.

Maybe it wasn't from the office at all. Maybe it was from the Sanitarium. He waited at the top of the stairs and listened. Wanda could be very quiet. She had certainly sneaked up on him before. The more embarrassing she could make it, the better. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that after years of being discovered and made to squirm, he was now doing what he had always done. But she was finally gone, and he was determined to forget his old habits.

He was going to lay the hide on the dining room table, mark out a huge project, and cut it with his new rotary tool. He stood up at the top of the stairs, took a swig of punch, and stepped into the kitchen.

No one was there, of course. "Old habits die hard," he said. He walked into the dining room. The tooling side lay on the table. His tools were spread out on the side board. The china cabinet in the corner was undisturbed. The chairs were pushed away from the table, as he had left

them. He glanced at the hole he had made in the side board, picked up his rotary tool, and turned around to look at the tooling side. As he stared at it, he realized that something had been missing from the side board. The five pound maul.

A voice behind him said, "You got to keep up the pressure, Carl."

THE END