

Dale Scherfling
The Lost Tool

I. The Son

I didn't hear this one from my mother or my father. Their version of the "old days" was a curated gallery of Sunday bests and polite anecdotes. I heard it from Mrs. Gable, our outrageous, bawdy next door neighbor—decades later—when she was already half-laughing before she even got the words out.

"Your mom told me this over gin and tonics in '84," she whispered, leaning over the fence with a look that said I was finally old enough for the truth. "But don't you dare tell her I told you..."

Apparently, my folks were "doing it" one night—her words—and things were getting hot and heavy. Suddenly, my father didn't moan or whisper a sweet nothing. He jumped up, pointed in the air like he'd struck oil, and shouted:

"Goddammit, I remember where I put my saw!"

My mother, God love her, supposedly spit coffee clear across the room the next morning, just trying to look at him over a breakfast plate. I, on the other hand, spent the rest of the afternoon trying to unsee the mental image—stark naked, triumphant, finger raised to heaven—out of my brain. Some things are better left behind the garden fence.

II. The Neighbor

She told me herself, you know. Over the fence, maybe a week after it happened. Both of us with our coffee going cold in our hands, and she couldn't even get through the whole thing without losing it. She was doubled over, gasping, pointing back at her own bedroom window like it was a crime scene.

I held onto it for years—decades, really. Figured it wasn't mine to tell. But the boy came around one afternoon, all grown up and asking about his folks, the way kids do when their parents get old enough to become interesting. And something about his face—her face, really, the same mischief in the eyes—just loosened it right out of me.

I only got half of it out before I started laughing all over again, even after all those years. Lord, I hope she never finds out I was the seal-breaker. But looking at the poor kid's horrified expression, I think I might have given him more "interest" than he bargained for.

III. The Mother

I never told the children. Some things are sacred. I told the neighbor because you have to tell someone, or the absurdity of it will eat you alive.

He was always like that. Always. You could have the man's full and complete attention—or so you thought—and somewhere in the back of that magnificent, maddening head of his, a little drawer was still open. I

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knew about the trick, of course. Every wife eventually does. The batting averages. The deck calculations. The mental inventory of the garage, shelf by shelf, bin by bin—whatever it took to stay the course. I chose to be flattered by the effort, and wise enough not to ask questions about the destination.

The morning after was the hardest part. He sat there at the breakfast table looking so incredibly satisfied—the smug glow of a man who believed he'd reached legendary status the night before, and also, apparently, solved a three-week logistical mystery in the bargain. He had a little whistle going while he buttered his toast.

I looked at him, opened my mouth to say something—anything—about the “revelation,” and the image of him leaping up like a caffeinated jack-in-the-box hit me again. I didn't just laugh; I convulsed. I spit coffee clear across the room, painting the wallpaper and his clean work shirt. I didn't speak to him for a solid minute. Then I laughed until I cried, and I never told him why.

He probably thinks he did something right.

Honestly? He did. He stayed the course, we both ended the night happy. And he found his damned old saw. I'd call that a success on every front. But I'll never look at a tool chest the same way again without blushing.

IV. The Father

The workshop, third shelf, behind the paint thinner. That's where it was. I'd been looking for three weeks.

It's a trick I learned years ago—if things are moving a little too fast, if you're getting a bit too “excited,” you have to pivot. You have to focus the brain on something cold, something mechanical, something entirely unsexy to hold your composure and stay the course. Usually, I'd mentally recite the batting order of the '68 Tigers, or try to calculate the square footage of the deck I wanted to build.

That night, I decided to mentally catalog the garage. I was going shelf by shelf, bin by bin—a methodical sweep of the premises to keep the engine from running too hot. I was doing fine, really holding my own, until I hit the third shelf behind the paint thinner.

There it was. The crosscut saw I'd practically torn the house down looking for. At exactly the right second.

The relief was so sudden, so violent, it bypassed every filter I had. I didn't just remember; I conquered. I bolted up, finger in the air, the victory cry of a man who had finally found his missing steel. Once the announcement was out of my system, I went right back to work. I stayed the course, finished the job, and went to sleep knowing exactly where my tools were. All of them.

She started laughing then, and she didn't stop for twenty years. I must have been really on my game that night.

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V. The Coda

I'm sitting at Sunday dinner now, thirty years later. My father is at the head of the table, expertly slicing a prime rib with the electric carving knife. He's meticulous, his eyes focused on the grain of the meat with the same intensity he brings to every project.

Across the hall, through the open door to the mudroom, I can see the handle of that damn crosscut saw hanging on the pegboard where it's lived since 1984. Clean, oiled, exactly where it belongs.

Dad pauses, wipes the blade, and looks at my mother. He gives her a slow, devastatingly confident wink—the kind of look a man gives when he's still proud of a job well done.

She starts to giggle, a high-pitched, girlish sound that makes my skin crawl. She knows. He knows. He thinks it's because of one thing. She knows it's because of two. Somewhere next door, I'm certain Mrs. Gable is laughing into her gin, too.

I stare intensely at my mashed potatoes, trying to imagine my parents as two-dimensional cardboard cutouts who only ever shook hands and discussed the weather. But as the electric knife whirrs through the roast, the sound transforms in my head. It's not a kitchen appliance; it's the ghost of a shout from thirty years ago, echoing through the floorboards.

"Goddammit, I remember where I put my saw!"

I think I'm going to need a lot more gravy.