

Dale Scherfling
One More Nail

The coffee can held one nail. Elias had counted them out on Tuesday and knew it without looking — nineteen back in the drawer, one left in his palm, the way you count out the pills you're not sure you'll take.

The bottom step had gone soft two winters back. He'd told himself he'd fix it before anyone else set foot on this porch. Before the realtor came through with her clipboard and her voice like a nurse's, saying things like *cozy* and *great bones* about a house that had buried a wife in it. Before his daughter came again with the folder — the one with the glossy photos, the silver-haired people at the card tables, arranged like proof that nothing was really being taken from anyone.

He hadn't told her about the doctor who'd sat across the desk two weeks ago, tapping a pen, using the word *pattern* instead of any of the words that meant what he meant.

Marion used to sit on the top step in her yellow dress and hand him nails one at a time, complaining he was too slow, that she'd grow old waiting on him. She had. He hadn't noticed it happening to her, and now he lay awake most nights not noticing it happening to him — which seemed, some way, worse. She at least got to keep her mind till the end. He was watching his leave a room ahead of him, taking the furniture down before he could say goodbye to it.

He sanded a board that didn't need sanding. Swept steps already swept. Went in for water he didn't want, and stood at the sink a long time, not drinking it, looking at the phone on the wall — the rotary one nobody used, that he refused to take down — and thinking about how many numbers he still knew by heart, and how that number was smaller this year than last.

When he came back out, the nail was still in the can.

He picked it up. It weighed nothing. It required both hands anyway.

Because once it went in, the last item on the list was gone, and there'd be nothing left to keep him out here, tinkering, useful, a man with a hammer and a job. There'd be nothing left but the folder. A numbered door. A version of himself that showed up in his daughter's voice sometimes, careful and terrible: *Dad, we just want you somewhere safe.*

One more nail, he thought, and the rest of the phrase finished itself the way it always did now, unbidden, the way certain doors in his head had stopped staying shut.

He set the nail against the wood. Lifted the hammer.

He thought about the stove he'd left on last month. The drive to the pharmacy that had turned into an hour on roads he'd known for forty years, roads that had, for a while, simply refused to tell him where they went.

He brought the hammer down. Not gentle. Three hard strikes, faster than the wood needed, like he was trying to finish something before he

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could talk himself out of it, or before whatever was coming for the rest of him arrived first and took this too.

Set.

He didn't test the step. Didn't sit down to see if it would hold.

He just stood there a moment with the hammer hanging from his hand, looking at the small silver head of the nail, flush with the wood, indistinguishable now from all the others — and thought that from here on, no one would ever be able to tell this was the last one. It would just look like part of the house. Like it had always been there. Like nothing had ended at all.

Then he went inside to call his daughter, before he could forget why.