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Trying to Figure It All Out

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“QUITTING TIME, CURLEY.” The words hit me like a blast of cool air in July. I unhooked my tool belt and started to roll up the tangle of extension cords and air hoses. I hurried so I could get my check and go home. When everything was picked up, I climbed down from the second story deck. Having spent the day standing on shaky 2x4s handing sheets of plywood up to the roof, I was tired and glad to be done. This was a big house, at least six thousand square feet, and it seemed to be built straight out of the mountain. I hated this house because it was so tall. Owners and architects don’t think about working sixty feet up on walk-boards and ladders.

I trudged through the thick rhododendron back to my truck. The other guys were leaning on their cars and trucks like they did every day; I guess they were getting up the energy to go home. Donnie and Sam were having their usual conversation.

“Thirty thousand an acre, and you’ve got to buy at least five. That’s a hundred and fifty grand just for the damn lot, and then there’s this damn ugly house. I just can’t figure out how someone has that much money.”

Sam took off his shirt, shook it out and put it on again, pondering the question that Donnie asked him every day. He pulled a cigarette out and lit it, making a face to let everyone know that he was thinking.

“I won ten thousand over there in Cherokee once, and it was gone in a week. I don’t know how these people get their money, but I’m glad I don’t live here in all these damn brambles. One of these trees is bound to fall and knock down that house.”

I put my tool belt in the back of my truck and opened the door.

“Hey, Curley,” Donnie called, “you going to the bank?”

I smiled, “It’s Friday.”

Driving out, I looked around at the subdivision. Rock walls lined the roadside, and wood ducks and a few Canada geese swam in two tree-lined ponds. A beautiful stream ran alongside the road spilling over rocks into deep pools. The road was long and wide, and you couldn’t see houses—just fancy brass signs that said the family names. The heavy ornate exit gate opened automatically. I felt better being out

with the rest of the world. That gate made me nervous. I grew up around farm gates, but they don't bother me.

When I got to the bank, it was filled with people cashing their paychecks. The line was long, and I was relieved when Donnie came in behind me. It was gonna be a long wait, and I like talking to Donnie. He is a fat guy with a constant five-o'clock-shadow and big hands. Both of us were foreigners in North Carolina, having moved down from Kentucky, and we were becoming friends.

"Hey, Kentucky, damn glad it's Friday, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I had only been in Sylva for a few weeks, and I was still feeling shy.

We talked about basketball until it was our turn. When my check was cashed, I left the bank and lingered outside, waiting to say good-bye. His eyes shining with kindness, Donnie asked, "Why don't you come and eat dinner with my boy and my woman?" Looking down at my patched jeans and dirty boots, I said that I didn't know, but he reassured me that he really wanted my company. I got in his truck, leaving mine at the bank. Before I could get in, Donnie had to scoot and rearrange a considerable number of wrappers and chip bags so I could sit down.

I sank comfortably into the seat. When I was in college I rode in many of my friends' fancy cars, even a Jaguar once, but I never felt really comfortable in anything but dirty "beater" trucks like mine. Donnie turned the key, but it wouldn't crank.

"Care to give me a little push, buddy?" The bank parking lot was leveled flat, and I got out and pushed the truck so that it could be pop started. The whole time I was amazed at how Donnie wasn't embarrassed. This was his situation, and he wasn't ashamed. My face burned crimson while his was opened up in a big toothy smile.

The truck started, and I jumped back in. Donnie loved it into first, and we sped off. Donnie's truck was the loudest thing I'd ever heard. Growing up where I did, that is something to say. It sounded like a great big, beat up lawn mower and smelled just like one.

I didn't know where we were going, but I didn't care, and I couldn't ask. There's no way that he could have heard me. When we pulled into the McDonald's parking lot, I smiled. So this is where he invited me to dinner. We went inside where Crystal and "Meanness" were already sitting down and eating. I ordered after Donnie and then sat down with his family. I'd never been to their place, but I'd met his family when they picked him up from work every once in a while. Crystal and Donnie weren't married, but they lived together in a trailer not far from

me with their little boy. I didn't know his name; all they called him is "Meanness" after he hit a doctor for giving him a shot. "You should have seen that doctor's face," Donnie would say retelling his favorite story. He loved his only son and the woman who had birthed him.

We ate and talked about the usual stuff: my mysterious girlfriend in Asheville, why I left my family in Kentucky, how "Meanness" was doing in Kindergarten, how Sam did cocaine, and how we hated the boss. The company owner was one of those soft rich people who came driving up in his brand new BMW SUV and bitched about everything we did. Lord knows, along with everyone else, that the man couldn't even swing a hammer. When the foreman cut his finger off with a Sawz-All, he came to work to remind us that we were not covered on workers' comp and that, if we complained, all of us would get fired and that wouldn't bother him a bit. Mark, the foreman, came back the next day with a bandaged stub.

Crystal told us that at the BP where she worked someone told her that our boss couldn't get it up and his wife was always coming on to people and how if he found out about his wife and the Mexican, he'd kill the Mexican.

The Mexican was a guy that worked with Donnie and me. Nobody could understand or remember his name, so he was simply called "the Mexican" just like I was called "Curley" because nobody could remember my name, Sage, or knew if it was Christian to call me that. Seems that the Mexican was hooking up with the boss's wife. I smiled at that.

"I like the Mexican," Donnie announced. "Curley, buddy, he's like you and me, stuck in a culture that isn't his own, without people that will accept him."

I knew that Donnie wasn't talking about our being from Kentucky living in North Carolina but for all southern working people.

"Hell, we can't even speak our own language, and all over the TV there's talk about what kinda house you oughtta own and what you should wear. We help all that along by building these big houses for these rich people, and you know I have never lived in anything but a trailer. I count that I have built at least twelve homes this year, and I can't get ahead." He paused to sip his forty-ounce Coca Cola, stuff salty "freedom fries" in his mouth and look over at his son in the play place. "My son keeps begging me for Gap clothes and new shoes. I will never keep up."

His cheerfulness left for a minute, and he looked out the window, his round face full of gloom, but then he smiled, and it all came back. "Oh well," he said, "let's get the hell outta here."

Crystal smiled at me, and we all left. "Meanness" was pulling on his momma's hand, and I watched in wonder as they got in a Volvo station wagon. Donnie opened the rust red door to his 4x2 Ford Ranger and looked at me. I was standing there dumbfounded in the parking lot. Crystal and "Meanness" got in the Volvo and drove off.

"Whose car is that?" I asked

"It's hers; can you believe that I pay four-hundred-seventy-five dollars a month for that thing?"

"Yeah, but I don't know how you can afford it." I was so surprised that I was beyond politeness.

"I can't really afford it," he said, scratching his rough chin, "but those two people are all that I have, and they can't be riding around in something that ain't safe and needs to be push started. They're the reason I get up and go to work in the morning, and they are the reason I don't hit that damned boss of ours."

I got in the truck; Donnie had parked on a slope, and we rolled and then thundered back to the bank parking lot. I thanked him, and we parted ways and that was it, at least until Monday when we'd all go back to the gated community on the hill to build houses that we could never own. I drove home confused and a little sad. I'm stuck... too poor to change or control much in my life, but I hope that, like Donnie, I can figure out what's important.

