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DEATH OF AN ARTIST

All morning they came, the curious, the bargain-hunters, the ghouls who would later loudly proclaim that they had been "there," that they had witnessed, first-hand, the wood-turner's demise. At first people had shuffled, kept their voices low as if they were in the presence of death, been reluctant to touch the figurines, his beloved toys, the machinery that sat still in the furthest corner of the studio. But then, as the morning sun warmed the air and time nurtured the crowd's boldness, they began to pick things up, to offer opinion, seek a price. By noon most of the pieces had gone, clutched in the fingers of ungrateful children or promised to distant relatives for birthdays. By mid-afternoon only some tools remained, then a tall man in a suit unbolted the lathe and loaded it into his truck, and others came and took single items like they were prizes, to be mounted and admired, if only briefly. And then, when the first soft tendrils of the autumn's evening light crept into the studio, he saw at once that it had been stripped. It is a shell, he thought, a dusty carapace where the living creature who once dwelled within has crawled unwillingly, unhappily away. That was when he left too, clambered up the thin hillside path to his house and sat alone in the kitchen, illuminated by a single bulb as he stared at the curtains and the plates in the sink and a small pot made of jarrah. Ruby-red and glowing, its lines were as gentle as those of a roosting bird.

"I was good," he thought, and a small pleasure surged through him. "Once I was good." Then he went to fill a tea-pot with leaves and water, but his hands had curled and withered in the night-air and he could not even grasp the handle of the pot. He tied once more but nothing worked so he cried out in frustration, smashed the pot with his fist, felt a distant jab of pain but smashed it again and again until finally the pot fell from the table and clattered aimlessly on the floor.

In the morning his neck was stiff because he had slept at the kitchen table. When he opened his eyes, he saw his fingers before anything else. They were bruised, bent, malformed. They appalled him: when he tried to open them further, stretch them out, they refused to obey. Instead they remained oddly angled, different shapes and thicknesses, pasty yellow, hard and blunt and unmanageable. They were useless lumps, he thought, useless lumps clinging to the ends of his arms like defective children grasping their unwilling parents. For a sweet, irrational moment he wanted to take a knife or an axe and cut them from his body, liberate himself. Then he realised how weak he felt, how he

didn't even have the strength to pick up a sharp instrument and carve his own body into pieces. Instead, he asked himself: *What is this life? What is this thing that I have been reduced to?* but he could not, or did not want to, find an answer.

When it was nearly 9am, the door opened and Mrs O'Neill from the Home Nursing Association strode in. She was tall and as thin as a reed. Her briskness unnerved him. She unpacked groceries, clicked her tongue several times, picked up and washed up, banged a mug of steaming camomile tea in front of him.

"Drink this," she ordered. "You look dreadful."

As he tried to obey, she began to make sandwiches, slicing tomato and cheese, pulling fresh lettuce leaves from the heart, grinding pepper. She made two sandwiches then cut each into six small neat pieces.

"Are these all right," she asked. "I mean, will you be able to hold them well enough to eat?"

He nodded wearily, noticing that she had the grace to look relieved. An unusual tenderness flitted across her eyes; she leaned over and held the mug to his lips.

"Sorry," she said. "So many patients ... sometimes I forget. Here, let me help."

He sipped a few times then pulled back.

"Thanks," he rasped. "I ... that's enough for now."

Mrs O'Neill smiled benevolently and put the mug on the sink. *She thinks I'm a fool*, he thought bitterly. *Useless, incapable old fool. Ex-artist, ex-man, ex-everything.*

"Washing?" She gestured towards the laundry, set at right-angles to the kitchen. When he nodded, she strode vigorously to the clothes-basket, turned his socks back the right way, sprayed the collars of his shirts and threw a cupful of powder into the machine.

"Sale go well?" It was a casual question, flung out from the rumble of the washing machine filling with water.

He shrugged. By most standards, the sale had been an unqualified success. People had come. Everything had sold. The money had been, by and large, generous—certainly enough to ease his retirement.

Retirement: the word made him cringe. A life-time of creation, of holding wood fresh from the bush and inhaling its sweet particularity, of feeling the smooth cool dustiness, seeing veins of rich sap coursing through the grain, running his once-alert fingers over bleeding chips of just-chopped pine, polishing each piece with a cloth until he re-discovered that perfect lustre of gold mingled with strawberry ... all for what? To be reduced to an empty, grimy studio, Mrs O'Neill's precise sandwiches and retirement.

She was back in the kitchen, fiddling inside her huge blue bag. Eventually she held up a large plastic tube.

"Doctor said we should rub this cream into your hands," she said firmly. "It won't stop the numbness or the arthritis, but it will help to keep the flesh soft

and a little more pliable. Here, give me your hand."

He pushed one out obediently, hating the sight of it. *I have been betrayed*, he thought. He forced himself to look again at his fingers as she squeezed a dollop of the pink cream onto each bloated tip. *You have betrayed me*.

"Feels better already," she said. Normally he didn't mind her attempting cheeriness; today, however, it rankled. *Rub on the cream*, he kept thinking, over and over. *Rub on as much as you like, because this artist is dead*. They were awful words, uncompromising but true. *This artist is dead*.

Mrs O'Neill left before lunch. The house was clean, the TV was switched onto his favourite channel, there was food prepared in manageable chunks and drinks with straws in them.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow," she had said, waving goodbye. "Doctor wants to see how you're getting on."

Bully for Doctor. What the hell did he know, anyway? Cream keeps the flesh soft—for what? He asked himself: *what can I do with soft fingers that I cannot even feel? What is the point of soft fingers that I cannot control?*

He stood, stretched his legs—they at least worked—and walked to the kitchen window. Outside looked cold and windless; a scarf of thick fog bound the meanders of the river. He could see the desolate studio, almost hear the familiar scratch of leafless tree branches against its rusted guttering. As he watched, a butcher-bird swooped from the sky and landed on the window sill of the studio. It peered inside quizzically, then tapped two or three times on the glass before flying away.

One last look, he found himself thinking. *Would it hurt so much to take one last look?*

There was an old remembered strength in his legs that carried him down the winding path to the door of the studio. It was unlocked—funny how he had never bothered with security when everything inside had meant so much to him—and wheezed when he pushed it open. *You are as old as I*, he thought. *Door to my fecundity, door of my life*.

Inside there were dark contrasting shapes on the floor and walls where machines and tables had once stood. Scraps of wood were scattered about but the shelves were empty, except for a single tin of polishing oil in a bottom corner. *They've missed something*, he thought exultantly. *Left me a relic to dream over*.

His stool was still there too, fallen to the cement floor. He hooked his wrists beneath the frame, righted it then sat on it, breathing the redolent smells before they faded forever. Then he closed his eyes and remembered: the high-pitched whirr of the lathe, his steady hands angling blades, tiny clouds of the finest dust creeping into his clothes and nostrils, piles of timber drying near a gas-heater, shelves laden with cups, vases, toy clowns, wooden fruit, bowls and

then his signature pieces, those curling, twisting shapes that thinned and thickened and were beyond a name, beyond definition. For the art-gallery, he used to smile, but only he knew the origins of such work. Only he was privy to the synthesis of thought and skill that could create these shapes.

When he opened his eyes the sun had appeared, casting a pale and uneven light through the open door. His eyes were drawn to a dull metallic glint in the farthest corner. He heaved himself off the stool and walked across the room to investigate.

The sun had crept inside and touched upon a left-over tool, an old carving blade. He stared for a moment, then bent at the knees to examine it more closely.

My first one. He recognised the worn handle immediately, saw his name carved into the top. The blade still looked sharp—he had always been meticulous about that. There was a longish leather thong cut through the handle which had allowed the tool to be hung.

My first one. He dropped his numb hands to touch it, felt straightaway the pain of redundancy. *If only, he thought, if only ... one last time. One more creation, come from me like a cloud-burst of rain. If only ...*

The idea, when it came, was quick to ferment. He eyed the leather thong, wondering. If he could somehow hook it around his wrist? Fix the blade against his stumpy fingers? Difficult, certainly, but possible.

It took a long time but eventually it was done. The thong attached his hand and the tool, and he had managed to manoeuvre the blade between the third and fourth fingers. Its hard edges leaned dangerously against the inside of his knuckles—one had already made a small scrape that he couldn't feel—but he did not care, because the sight of the tool in his hand had filled him with an enormous longing for his art and a joyful recognition of what he had spent a lifetime achieving.

There was a rough block of fresh pine nearby. He shuffled to it on his knees, then bent at the waist and used his elbows to secure the wood. Carefully he rolled his body backwards until finally he was sitting on the floor, knees drawn up towards his chest, feet flat to the ground. He lowered the pine slowly and jammed it between his knees, holding it as hard as he could. Then he looked at the wood in the same way he had always done, the way a painter eyes a stretch of canvas and a writer views the blank page. *Here is the beginning,* he thought. *Here is that crucial point where the vision must be perfectly transferred.*

He used his wrist and shoulder to power the first stroke. A thin sliver of wood fell to the floor. He was triumphant—it could work! His idea, his vision could happen! He pushed again, and this time he noticed that the sliver was larger, and it was accompanied by a ruby-red smear of blood.

He checked his hand. There was no pain, but the edge of the tool had cut into him. The cut was clean and not yet deep but he knew immediately that if he persisted with carving, his hands would become badly gashed and he might even lose his fingers. *I might lose a lot of blood, he thought ruefully. I might even die.*

He looked at the wood and saw how his carving had freed an artery of sap. Then he looked at his hand again. There was no pain.

What is my hand now, he thought, but a part of the tool. And the vision? The vision of the artist is contained forever in the mind's eye, so he lifted the tool and pushed and scuffed, smiling as each curling tendril of pine floated to the floor. As the day wore on he continued to lift his wrist and shove his shoulder defiantly until the wood began to shape, its natural form changing before him. He laughed as thick gouts of sticky sap mingled with the sweat that dropped from his face and the redness that dripped from his fingers then he cried with the effort until finally, when night's curtain was preparing to fall, he saw that he had finished. Exhausted, he let his hand and body slump to the cold floor then felt such an exhilaration that his body seemed instantly warmed. He lay silently in the gathering starlight and wanted to sleep so he closed his eyes but then he knew that he had to see it again; he wanted, once more, to see the vision realised. When he opened his eyes he saw, to his eternal gratification, that the wooden hand he had carved was still before him. As a commemoration it was, he thought, entirely apt—smooth and beautiful and stained indelibly with the ruby-red of his own glorious blood.

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