Hardware

R. Mark Elling

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The rattail file was warm in my hand. I’d been filing out the holes in the stainless steel washers for about an hour, and I still had a good-sized stack to go. Hundreds of stickery legged bugs swarmed around my head in a dizzying hum, excited by the sudden rain and musical both in their different pitches and the ring of stubborn collisions with the bare bulb above my head. The rain came down in large separate drops, first bringing out the scent of dust, and then making the air smell wet, thick with the humid warmth of summer rain so close. These were the nights I had been staying up late for, the desert smells, the slick gleam of sweat on forearms writhing in some simple task, and even the prick of steel slivers between fingers—something about these things gave me peace.

I should have been calm then, with the murmuring cackle of the warm rain that night, but she was watching me with those eyes of hers, empty, like holes in washers set deep in an unmoving and pale face. It was hard to relax when somebody else was in the garage. I was used to working alone, and I couldn’t shake a desire to work as loud as I could, banging things whenever possible just to annoy her. Even with that drawn expression she didn’t seem sad really, but she didn’t strike me as a happy person either. Then again, the happy ones had filtered out of the family somehow. She didn’t look content to just sit there and stare at me filing washers, but that’s what she did, and hardly said a word. She was very thin then, as she’d always been, with barely noticeable breasts and a slight neck showing her veins. Her skin sank deep into shadowed caves along her collarbones whenever she
moved her arms or took a deep breath. I thought she looked like a praying mantis as she slowly stroked Fred, her wiry cat.

“That looks very interesting,” she said slowly, as if she were conscious of matching sounds to her rhythmic, hypnotic stroking of the cat. I knew she was a crazy bitch, had the genetics for it, but I wondered if that way of talking was some meditation thing she’d learned at a clinic, or if it was just natural crazy talk. She talked that way a lot and it seemed like that self-hypnosis bullshit. But she wasn’t hypnotizing Fred. His eyes flicked back and forth to the rasping jerk of my file, the yellow slits widening with the high-pitched thrusts into the washer’s hole, and he seemed an angrier cat than most. I kept my eye on him, waiting for him to leap on me and try to take a nice chunk out of my neck.

The last time we had spoken was during a Christmas vacation four years ago. That visit had been strange too—those same eyes. She had always seemed odd to me, one of those thin pale kids who got lost in crowds or forgotten at school by parents who were too busy. I guess I’d always thought of her, though I never thought about her much, as a girl who would enjoy wandering through shopping malls, wishing she had enough money to buy things like fancy erasers and scented pencils, shit like that. Her eyes had always seemed to say those things, so flat and ordinary. She was named Athene, but her dad called her “Taco,” and that’s what I called her too—even though her dad was pretty much a prick.

She had called a month earlier to say that she was graduating from college and looking for a job, but had no money to rent a place of her own for the summer months. She wanted to stay with me, and I remember thinking how that was weird, since I knew
Taco couldn’t stand being around me or my family.

“Do you have to work at enjoying that, or does it come naturally to guys like you?” she asked, making sure not to vary the tone she used before. She’d told me when she moved in that she heard I got screwed up in California. She said it like it was a way to start a fight or get me going, but I didn’t give a shit. She probably heard it from her dad. Our fathers were pretty tight, a couple of assholes. She hadn’t changed much over the past four years, just got more irritating.

“I mean, what’s your problem?” she asked, a bit faster now. “Why don’t you just buy some more washers?”

“Pet your cat and shut up, please.” I tried not to be mean to her, but sometimes the words came out, from out of nowhere. At least she could handle it—that was one thing about us, and this time she got quiet, which was real nice. I thought she was one of those people who respond better to abuse, got a taste for it somewhere along the line and started enjoying it, dumb.

But I found myself looking up from my vise and my comfortable task to stare at her face. She was looking out into the rain and playing with her cat’s paws. I wanted to tell her how the flame stays blue and low and wraps a cat’s body when it gets lit on fire. She might have made a snide remark and kept that bland look about her, but I could let her know the truth. I lit one once with some friends, spray painted it first though, trying to make it look like that cartoon skunk. It touched off like a tumbleweed and stayed blue, and that cat moved like a fucking comet across the dead lawn. Left a couple burned spots on it before it holed up to die under the next door neighbor’s wood pile, and half burned that son of a bitch down.
“You know Rob, you’re reminding me more and more of your dad.” She said that like it was a parting shot or something, but that had no effect on me. I didn’t listen to her much. A long time ago she had to check into an outpatient program at the hospital. I never knew why, for sure, but I figured it was for something stupid, like making herself puke all the time or some sort of maladjustment bullshit—leftover shrapnel from her mom and dad’s breakup. My father and her dad were brothers, and I figured she had mine wrapped up with a lot of shit about her dad because it was like our fathers were the same person sometimes.

I filed the way my father taught me a long time before, when I was small. I always had to hold the shank just right and not mess up the angle of the file’s cut or he got pissed. He had thick fingers with those heavy, ridgy fingernails. He clipped them flat, straight across. They were kind of yellow and usually had dirt under them, but he could pull one back behind his thumb and flick it out like a hammer. He flicked me in the mouth with his middle finger for sanding the wrong edge of some nice mahogany once. I had a fat lip for a week, could barely talk. My father wasn’t so gentle, but Taco’s dad was plain mean. Used to throw food at her and shout that she’d be so fat she might as well eat up, but like I said, she was always thin. I suppose he was crazy, and that can’t help but rub off on a person.

She was sitting on the other end of my workbench opposite where I was working, clamping each individual washer into the vise and enlarging the hole with about five strokes of the file. She wore loose shorts and held the cat in her lap, petting him slowly still, despite his nervousness. I wished the rain were louder, loud enough to make it hard to think. The roof over the garage used to be corrugated aluminum, and winter hailstorms could about
make me deaf. I had replaced the aluminum with basic tarred roofing material earlier this summer and so the rain was muffled, even though it was dumping down. But the quiet sound of the downpour made the garage a good place to wander in my thoughts, which I thought was good at times.

I did a lot of thinking out in the garage after I came back to stay at the house. My father told me to. He said I should go home and do some serious thinking about some things and get everything straightened out. I also did quite a bit of repair work. All the faucets got new washers and I reseeded the dead lawn, but the grass didn't take and stayed yellow. I guess I missed working for my father. I did landscaping for him in southern California for a while before I had to come back. He's still there, owns the company. I don't miss him maybe as much as I miss his tools, all top dollar with great handles. I remember my mom hated yardwork, wouldn't do a bit of it. I still saw her once in a while when she heard my father wasn't around. She always told me I should just leave. All I had for tools at the house in Black Canyon were old ones, rusted or beat-up. The only shovel I had for loosening up the dried out soil for the reseeding had been one with a cracked handle. I could still remember how mad he was when I busted that one. He was serious when it came to tools.

Taco pushed Fred off, down to the brick floor, and she sat for a moment, looking at me with her legs kind of spread out on the workbench. I could see the plain white of her panties through the legs of her baggy shorts. I went ahead and looked, even though it felt a little strange, but she sat there like she knew and didn't care. She slid off the workbench then and walked out of the garage and down the brick pathway to the house. I was glad that Fred followed her.
I needed one hundred stainless steel bolts, nuts, and washers to plug holes in the aluminum storage shed. I could have picked up regular steel ones, but they might have rusted in the rain and stained the old white shed, which my father had repainted just a year ago. We kept the old tools and camping gear in it. I figured he would have wanted it done with stainless if he were around. Someone had shot the shit out of the shed with a twenty-two or some small gun, probably kids. The peaked roof caught most of the gunshot, and now with the summer rains the gear was getting wet inside.

I couldn’t figure out how I had made the mistake, but I had grabbed a hundred washers the wrong size. I had measured the holes and everything. It was the kind of mistake my father would never make. But then again, my father didn’t steal, either. He could just bring them back if they were the wrong size. I couldn’t see paying for all those nuts and bolts, so I usually filled my pockets with all but a few and then went to the counter acting like I was just buying those. It always worked, but there wasn’t any way to exchange them for the right size. I figured I could still go back and steal a bunch more, but I started to think about that and decided against it. I didn’t have Catholic values or anything like that, but I figured a thing worse than stealing was stealing badly, and I wanted to make the washers work. I had some pride, even if it was for something my father wouldn’t do.

She returned with a bottle of red wine and a plastic cup for herself, but I ignored her and tried to listen for individual drops of rain coming down onto the edge of the bricks. I did that sometimes, not necessarily with rain, but something like it, just focus on the small stuff. For a while I was leaving my sweaty hand underneath the vise to catch the steel shavings. I just tried to
concentrate on the feel of the filings hitting my skin. After a while it was almost as if I could pick out the feeling of individual grains touching down. Probably not, but thinking hard on small things like that made me believe I could feel it, even though I really couldn’t. That concentration was something I learned a long time ago. It was a way for me to space-out, get a better view on things. 

There had been times I could look really close at the pores between my father’s eyes, pick out the hair follicles and blackheads and count them even. By the time I was that into it I would have already forgotten that he was yelling at me, and he would have thought I was looking him in the face.

I had a hard time looking at Taco, even if I was only looking for pores. Fred was easier, though, and I thought I could see it in Fred’s eyes, some faint intuition that we all knew each other better than we let on. But I was near certain he wanted to bite me, and I watched him for signs of craziness.

Sometimes Fred became transfixed by the bugs. His intense eyes followed their frenzied orbit around the bulb and blinked at each collision. Often the beetles would knock themselves into a stupor and lazily spiral down. Fred’s head would revolve a little, following the descent closely, and when the insect hit the ground to parade around in confused circles Fred would loft out of her lap and seize the bug, crunching it into mash.

There was something about Fred that interested me, frightened me a bit maybe—something about how much Taco and Fred seemed alike. A friend once told me that her cat was a man, a man bewitched and turned into a cat. This friend did a lot of drugs, and I had a hard time believing much of anything she ever told me, but Fred looked a lot like that cat did. Fred really did have the head of a person, with a squarish face and high forehead, and
he had lips. I knew this was the mark of a strange cat. He liked to move his lips like my old aunt before he jumped onto a bug.

It was late and hot, and I thought delirious things, about sex and filing washers, the different strokes—slow, long, short, quick. I thought Taco was looking for much more than just a job, and that she'd been looking for it a long time—in a mall without money.

I finished my last washer and she asked me if I was done. I was, but I paused, I wasn't certain why, and I said no. I said that I still had to test their hole size with a bolt. So I began to slip each washer over the bolt I had clamped in the vise, and I was pleased that I had created another half an hour to enjoy the rain and think. Sizing the washers took less concentration than filing and I watched her face as she scraped at the old bench with a nail. Her face was less animated than her cat's and I knew the cat had something that she didn't anymore. She stroked Fred like she might a man, her fingers twirling his long hair around them, gently tugging through knots without looking, scratching slow circles around his ears.

I could see her dad in Fred. I could see my father in him too, the two of them silent, judging. It was in Fred's eyes as she twirled the hair like it was on a man's chest, her own father's maybe, or on his hairy backs of legs. I could imagine it, her dad walking into her room and quietly lying down to touch her, and she would have cringed but laid a hand on him. She wouldn't have known how to reject him, her face had always told me that, her eyes saying, yes, look up my shorts, I don't mind. Fred would have lain on the floor and stared up unblinkingly, recording those dark and forgiven moments with him, saving it up, taking her anger for his own. That must have been why I never trusted the cat. Nobody
trusts a thief. Fred had a man in him in more ways than just looks, 
I thought, and I had a feeling that it was the women who had been 
stolen from that could sit so open-legged on workbenches.

I refiled the few washers that hadn't fit and I walked out into 
the rain. I stood on a pile of old rusted scrap metal left over from 
other jobs of siding and laying reinforced concrete foundations, 
and I enjoyed the transition from dry and hot to wet. My cloth­
ing tempered the shock of the cool water, making it something 
soothing, and I felt calm.

But the cat needed burning. Maybe he was a witch. A match 
was all it would take, even though the one I did probably blazed 
so well on account of all the spray paint. Glowed like hell, just like 
those Sterno food warmers. I figured Fred should roast for hav­
ing fathers in him. They needed to stay in their right place, as far 
as I was concerned. I didn't need cats or fathers. I remember my 
father had been home that day with the cat, and he heard us all 
laughing out in the yard. He came out and saw the smoking grass 
and heard a last bit of screeching. He walked over to me real slow 
and I braced hard, but he didn't hit me. I remember he just 
looked at me and called me a coward, and then he walked away.

I could have motioned for her to join me out in the rain, but I 
stood still, facing the other direction, out into the shadows of the 
bushes beyond the light of the garage.

"You've always been the weird one." I heard her call out to me. 
I turned to see Fred leap from her lap after a dazed beetle and she 
stood to walk away slowly with the bottle in her hand. I watched 
Fred's jaws working on the bug, but I couldn't hear its shell crack­
ing, as I stood there in the rain with an even stream of warm rain­
water pouring off my nose.