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Place Memory

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The chair tips, crashes to the floor, which masks the snap, and he drops.

But then still he drops. Narrowly evading the jutting edge of an old nightstand, he lands hard on knees before elbows before hands, and forehead connects with concrete before sparks burst, soar across vision before his heart sinks. He realizes the rope must have snapped, split in two. Or maybe his stiff, arthritic fingers had failed, the knot had failed, unraveled, snaking down from the beam overhead, and he has failed.

He slams fists hard against the basement floor, and dust shifts; a cloudburst of grit plumes up around his face. Even in this, his simplest task of opting out, he's too weak to succeed, his will or his body failing him, letting him down, hard onto concrete.

His wife no longer cares for him. His affinities for woodwork and storytelling bore her. She's heard it all before. When their children were young, they kept each other grounded. They reminded each other to laugh when life slid from their control instead of growing frustrated or overcome with the chaos of parenthood. They complimented each other. They encouraged talents and hobbies. They held hands in public and at home. Now, sitting in the same room seems to wear on her patience, so she seeks better company in friends. He just gets in the way.

He no longer knows how to talk with his kids, grown up and away. When they were small, conversation streamed easily, naturally, a well of subjects extending between them, father and sons. The boys eagerly informed their old man about what they were learning in school, who earned detention for mouthing off, which of the abandoned houses along the tracks were supposed to be haunted, and who of their friends made it furthest up the crumbling front steps before a groan from inside sent them all sprawling for the sidewalk. He'd fashioned things for them in his woodshop: small tables and chairs and shelves for their treasures when they were little; a sandbox, a swing set, a sturdy bridge that crossed the trickle of a creek deep behind the house as they grew. And they grew. Over time, somehow, these things lost their appeal; shoved to the corners, piling high on dusty shelves, they got in the way.

For years, interest in efforts from his woodshop dwindled, his sons and his wife nodding, turning away. Even before leaving home, the boys had stopped humoring him, rarely averting

attention from a video game or magazine. His wife, who tolerates him on good days, ignores him most, would mutter incessantly about the clutter, the dust, choosing instead to spend hours away from the house, away from cracks at conversation. He worked alone in his basement shop cutting and sanding until his fingers stiffened and swelled and could no longer grasp his tools.

He gets in the way. He tries to reach out, but he can't relate. He no longer fits, a stubborn tree root that splays itself far and wide, destroying the foundation and tripping up anyone who moves across his breadth. They've all moved on. He lies on the floor, a steadfast stumbling block.

Again, he's failed. He rolls, heavy, to his back, draws breath deep in, and he stares. Though he's failed, he stares at

Boots dangle overhead and sway.

He blinks, feels gritty particles under his fingers and forearms. Above, his boots dangle, sway. The basement air is still, quiet but for the creaking. He lies on his back, concrete cold beneath him, and he stares. Boots swaying, one lace dangling, before jeans before torso, somewhere above, his neck broken, already bruising blue. The taut rope creaks from the joist overhead.

He hit his head, he thinks, when the rope broke or slipped its languid knot. He plunged to the floor and cracked his skull and now he thinks he sees himself, his body hanging, his weight dragging taut twine from the ceiling.

He's hallucinating.

Minutes or hours, possibly days later, his wife finds him, his neck in a noose, dangling from the ceiling, boots hovering inches from the ground. For a moment, she is motionless, perched at the bottom of the stairs, staring. Her fingers clench into fists at her sides.

He pries himself up from the floor, goes to her, reaches for her fists, which he smooths to palms, pulls them to his face, kisses her fingers, kisses

But it's rope in his hands, looped and twisted into a knot. His boots inch to the edge of a chair, and instead of kissing her shaking fingers, mumbling apologies, he's slipping the loop over his head, tugging it tighter, closer.

"Selfish son of a bitch," she nods and turns away, back up the steps.

The chair tips, crashes to the floor.

Weeks or maybe months later, his boys, grown now, childless by choice, off living satisfying lives, descend basement stairs, mutter to each other about the clutter that has overtaken

the space. One nearly stumbles over a wooden rocking horse their old man crafted for them as children before shoving it aside with his shoe while the other eyes a polished and homemade sled leaning forgotten against the wall.

He moves to remind his sons about the hand-carved puzzles piled high on the shelves, the wooden ramp he constructed for their toy trucks, one of the kitchen chairs he made that shifts now under his weight, his toes inching to the edge, the loop slipping down over his face.

They pause for a last look at the many toys and trinkets their father had made, back when they boasted about his skills and surprise gifts, back when his fingers were agile and bent freely, back when he was of use. Then they turn away, hands in pockets, and climb back up the steps.

The chair teeters before tipping, crashing to the floor.

When he wakes on the floor hours or months, maybe years later, the shelves lining the basement walls are empty, the space cleared and cleaned. His workbench is covered with unfamiliar tools, glinting under a new industrial strip light. The concrete beneath him has been sealed, the familiar cracks and buckles filled and smoothed away. Soothing scents of redwood and cedar have evaporated, and a strange antiseptic stench hangs in the air.

He wakes and he wakes and no longer believes he's dreaming or delusional. Strangers drift through what was his home, and he longs to talk to them, especially the children. He knows he'll captivate the children with his stories about ghosts and the enchanted bridge that crosses the trickle of a creek deep behind the house. He knows the children will appreciate the treasures he'll build for them, if only his fingers cooperate. Sometimes they seem to hear him calling to them when one before two of the little ones creep halfway down the basement steps before peeking in all directions, squinting into shadows before scampering back upstairs and away.

Sometimes, before he wakes, he imagines the scurry of footfalls, the giggles that waft down from life above emanate from his own boys, wilted to early translations of themselves, echoes of the past, the gone. Sometimes, before he wakes, he pries himself up from the floor, climbs basement steps, and draws his boys in. They wrap eager arms around his neck, tugging tighter, closer, before the crash, before the drop.