

Collected Short Stories Volume II  
by  
Barry Rachin

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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## Table of Contents

[The Willy-nilly Hedonist](#)

[Sanctuary of the Whirligigs](#)

[Turgenev's Lost Tale](#)

[The Unemployed Minimalist](#)

[A Dutiful Wife](#)

[A Heart Yes, a Waltz No](#)

[Circus Maximus](#)

[What would Junie B. Jones Do?](#)

[Time of Sorrow](#)

[No More Piano Lessons](#)

[Emergence](#)

[Two Pockets](#)

[Still Virgin](#)

[Tulipwood](#)

[A Key to Paradise](#)

## The Willy-nilly Hedonist

A week before the wedding, Benjamin Brannigan visited his grandmother. He found the older woman in the sun room crouched over a tray of black Simpson lettuce seedlings. The plants were arranged in two-inch peat pots. “What’s with the blue powder?” He indicated a plastic container with a granular substance.

“Water-soluble plant food,” she replied, “with equal parts nitrogen, phosphate and potash.”

Benjamin surveyed the greenery. “None of the plants seem to be benefiting from your overindulgence.”

Granny Brannigan scowled. “Early April is still too early to grow plants indoors.” She rubbed her lantern jaw thoughtfully and adjusted the wire-rimmed glasses higher up on a beaky nose. “Not nearly enough sunlight or warmth.” “And how’s my favorite grandson?” Granny Brannigan said, shifting gears.

“Not so hot.” Benjamin sat down heavily in a wicker chair. “Angela’s been cheating on me with a co-worker, since as far back as the engagement. The wedding’s off.”

Granny Brannigan, who had been sprinkling topsoil mixed with worm casings, humus and perlite into an empty container, gawked at the young man. “Ouch!” When there was no immediate response, she added, “Did you tell your parents?”

“Not yet. I only found out last night.” The dark-haired boy with the sallow complexion and hazel eyes looked haggard, emotionally unhinged. He delivered the grotesque news in a numbed monotone. “I’ll call all the guests to cancel the wedding and return gifts, of course.” After an awkward pause, Benjamin noted, “Angela claims that she’s a hedonist at heart and the engagement was a mistake.” His features dissolved in a weak smile. “I looked the word up in the dictionary.”

“And?”

“Hedonism is the ethical theory that pleasure and the satisfaction of desire is the highest good and proper aim of human life.” Granny Brannigan massaged her massive jaw a second time. “Your fiancée is a birdbrain.” She spoke softly in a dispassionate manner. The observation wasn’t so much a reprimand as a statement of unassailable apriori truth.

“Former fiancée,” Benjamin corrected. “Our marriage is a distant memory... caput, finito, defunct, dead on arrival.”

Granny Brannigan held a peat pot up to the light. On the verge of collapsing, the stringy, transparent stalk was much too thin to support even a single green leaf. In addition to the lettuce there were heirloom beefsteak tomatoes, dill, oregano, basil, chive and cilantro in various stages of failing health. All was lost!

“Like a baby born prematurely,” Benjamin noted.

“Yes, a good analogy, but unfortunately there’s nothing I can do to correct the defect.” The woman pinched the stalk with a fingernail and tossed the wilted growth aside.

Pointing at the ruined seedling, Benjamin cracked a sick smile. “That’s pretty much what Angela did to me last night.”

His grandmother reached out and patted his hand sympathetically.

If anyone had asked Benjamin, who among his closest friends and relatives loved him most, the answer would have been a no-brainer. With Granny Brannigan there were never any hugs, kisses or mawkish terms of endearment. Language was a trap. Nothing of the sort. Far too

much got frittered away in emotional excesses. She portioned her affection discretely. A gently pat of the wrist following a failed engagement would suffice.

Benjamin scanned the hickory table which resembled a horticultural battle zone. All was lost. Two dozen tiny pots had been upended, the scraggily, brittle plants thrown in a heap. “Doesn’t seem like your vegetable garden is in any better shape than my wedding plans.”

The older woman’s features dissolved in a cagey grin. Throwing a fistful of tarragon sprouts aside she rose “Come with me.”

In the basement a collection of spruce two-by-fours cut into four-foot lengths were stacked in the far corner. “I need to rip these boards on the table saw.”

“For what purpose?”

“A cold frame... I’m gonna make a miniature greenhouse,” Granny Brannigan replied, “so I can plants these seeds outside without risk of a late-night frost or insufficient sunlight damaging the young plants. But that’s a project for another day.” Flicking the light switch, she led the way back upstairs.

“I could stop by Saturday and help you resize the wood,” Benjamin ventured.

“If you like.”

In the foyer Benjamin noted, “I’ll have to call Father Stan and tell him that the wedding’s off.”

His grandmother grounds her teeth and an unintelligible sound gurgled up in her throat. “You’ve been through enough already. I can handle that insufferable blowhard!”

A devout Catholic who never missed a Sunday Mass or day of holy obligation, Granny Brannigan, despised the parish priest. She ridiculed Father Stan as a hellfire and brimstone fanatic, a brittle-minded cleric who trafficked in original sin and the mortal unworthiness of his sinful flock. Granny Brannigan once confided that she wouldn’t be surprised to find Father Stan lurking in some dingy alley selling indulgences – leg bones of medieval saints, moldy scraps of sacred cloth or other holy relics of questionable origin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Benjamin could tally the woman he dated prior to meeting Angela on the fingers of one hand with several digits to spare. Each was precious in her own way. Each fatally flawed. None marriage material. Rita Winetraub, a Jewish girl whose parents emigrated from Poland, epitomized Benjamin’s romantic folly.

Graduating college *magna cum laude*, top of her class, she was well read, spoke several languages fluidly and had once, in a philosophy class, debated A.J. Ayer’s theory of logical positivism. Rita played second bassoon in the community orchestra. She whipped up gourmet meals replete with fresh herbs and spices, tutored English as a second language at the learning center and loved her nieces and nephews to distraction. Serenely quiet with an adroit sense of humor, the young woman was sexually frigid.

Rita kissed and hugged in a perfunctory manner. Physical intimacy was a tedious chore to be endured rather than savored. In every other respect the girl was normal, kind, considerate, decent. But Benjamin wanted the complete package and couldn’t cope with her blasé indifference to what seldom occurred in the bedroom.

At one point Benjamin confronted Rita with her aversion to intimacy. “It’s just the way I am,” she returned in an off-hand manner.

“Maybe you would feel differently... more passionately with a different man.”

“I’ve been with other men.”

“You never mentioned it.”

“It’s just the way I am,” she repeated for good measure.

*It’s just the way I am.* A cousin on his father’s side of the family was born with cerebral palsy. The poor unfortunate walked with a spastic gait and chewed at a cockeyed, lopsided angle for the longest time before swallowing a mouthful of food. Luck of the draw - no one was to blame for the cousin’s birth defect. With Rita Winetraub physical intimacy was a nuisance, a distasteful ordeal to be shrugged off and forgotten as quickly as possible.

One muggy afternoon in mid-June three years earlier, Benjamin was lounging on a bench in Copley Square. Rita, who worked in downtown Boston, was meeting him for lunch. Trinity Church and the John Hancock Tower were clearly visible. He had only been waiting ten minutes, when a familiar face emerged from the deluge of college students and middle-aged urban professionals. Rita approached with a lilting gait, her hips rocking rhythmically from side to side. A print dress in pastel earth tones showed her fleshy arms to good advantage. Like something out of a Modigliani painting, the porcelain face, supple, elongated neck and chocolaty eyes were perfect in every respect.

Benjamin rose and went to kiss her, but at the last instant she pivoted so that his lips brushed her cheek. “You look beautiful!” he murmured. Reaching down he grabbed her hand. “Where would you like to eat?”

Rita gestured with her eyes. “There’s an outdoor café two blocks down on Clarendon Street.”

At the restaurant she laid both hands on the linen table cloth, palms down with the slender fingers resting inadvertently in a prayerful gesture. Benjamin reached across and cupped her hands in his own. “You are the loveliest creature on planet earth.”

“And now you’re repeating yourself,” she quipped, “having just said something of the sort only five minutes ago.”

At that moment something in Benjamin’s superheated brain went awry. Feasting his eyes on Rita, he saw two completely different women - the twenty-three year-old overflowing with elegant grace and her glacial *doppelganger*, who later that night would unearth any excuse not to sleep with him. “I think I’ll order a Cobb salad,” Rita announced, pushing the menu away, “and maybe a slice of carrot cake for desert.”

Marriage was a partnership, for better or worse. Nowhere in the ceremonial vows did it mention extenuating circumstances. After sixteen months of the drip, drip, drip of physical rejection, Benjamin broke off the relationship.

By comparison, sex with Angela was consummated in a fiery flash, a rapacious burst of lust followed by drugged sleep. The pudgy girl with the squat nose splattered with coffee colored freckles and perpetual sloe-eyed grin was an instinctual, primordial creature. Angela didn’t think things through. Emotion urges surged and ebbed away with kaleidoscopic whimsy. One night when they were getting ready for bed, Benjamin said, “I found this clever book of poems at the library.”

“Poetry... it’s not my cup of tea,” Angela muttered. “Not interested!”

“Just wait a minute.” Reaching for a well-thumbed paperback on the bedside table, he flipped through the pages in search of a particular passage. Locating the verse, he began reading in a singsong cadence:

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you;  
Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you truly want;  
Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth  
Cross the doorsill  
Where the two worlds touch.  
The door is...*

Angela groaned. Reaching out, she splayed her fingers over the page and roughly pushed the book away. "Enough already!"

"Rumi was one of the greatest Persian poets, but perhaps this particular verse is too esoteric for your tastes?"

"Silly... dim-witted." She rejected his rationalization. "That business about the doorsill where the two worlds touch... it's just dopey gobbledygook."

"I'm not going to force you to listen if you don't want to." Returning the book to the night table, he glanced at her uncertainly. Angela was staring at the stucco pattern on the bedroom ceiling. "I want to go to Maine this weekend."

"Boothbay Harbor or Old Orchard Beach are nice this time of year."

"No. I had something else in mind," she parried his suggestion. "The shopping mall at Kittery... they've got designer fashions at wholesale prices."

\* \* \* \* \*

Several of Benjamin's friends from high school had already married and abruptly divorced. They chose poorly, impulsively, or not at all, because, over the four-dimensional continuum of time, love was little more than an emotional crap shoot. One encountered romantic bliss between the covers of a Harlequin paperback; everything else was Russian roulette.

*Don't turn your back on happiness in pursuit of perfection!*

Benjamin fell back on this saccharine adage, when deciding that Angela should be his soul mate, the mother of his unborn children. In the new world order, what worked for his parents, who were celebrating their silver wedding anniversary in October, was no longer relevant. He loved Angela and they would make a life together. He wasn't settling, selling himself short. No, nothing of the sort!

\* \* \* \* \*

Around the middle of the week Granny Brannigan called. "Are you coming by Saturday morning?"

"Yes, of course."

"I need a few things from the hardware store," she said. "A box of inch and a quarter deck screws plus a heavy-duty plastic drop cloth."

"Okay."

"Yesterday morning I spoke to Father Stan... told him the wedding was off." The older woman began chuckling – more like a spastic, dry cough than bona fide expression of mirth.

“The priest became rather indignant... acted as though he had been terribly inconvenienced. Even demanded to know what went wrong.”

“And?”

“I told him that the bride-to-be morphed into the town slut.” “By the way,” Granny Brannigan blurted before Benjamin could collect his thoughts, “I also need a carton of heavy-duty staples and a pair of small brass hinges.” Without waiting for a reply, she hung up the phone.

When he arrived Saturday morning, Benjamin’s grandmother was already in the basement setting the fence three-quarters of an inch from the carbide-tipped blade on the table saw. “Those are your plans?” He indicated a hodge-podge of pages scattered about the workbench. The cold frame would be four feet long with a plastic-covered lid that sloped gently toward the front of the project. Lap joints held the rectangular lid together with plastic sheeting stretched across the inner surface and stapled firmly on all sides. A miniature greenhouse for less than five dollars!

Benjamin pointed at a piece of wood resting nearby. “You’re gonna rip that stud in one pass?”

“Too dangerous.” His grandmother rotated the crank on the front of the saw, lowering the blade until it was almost flush with the table’s surface. “We’ll do it in small increments.”

Flipping the switch the tool came alive with a brutal, metallic whine. Positioning the first board firmly up against the fence, she eased the fir into the saw. The shallow kerf cut like butter. When the rear portion of the board was a foot from the whirring blade, Granny Brannigan released her grip and Benjamin pulled the board the rest of the way. Flipping the board end-over-end, the twosome repeated the process.

Granny Brannigan raised the blade a modest quarter of an inch and repeated the process. A minute later the thick board came apart in two equal sections. “Three more boards and we’re done!” The woman repositioned her wire-rimmed glasses back on the bridge of her nose.

“You’ll want to drill pilot holes,” Benjamin cautioned when the rest of the lumber was cut, “so the wood doesn’t crack, when you fasten the sides together.

“I won’t forget.” Granny Brannigan raised the bladed and wedged a piece of scrap wood firmly against the miter gauge. She made a pass for the lap joint, measured the depth then adjusted the blade accordingly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon the phone rang. Benjamin?” Angela’s voice was composed, friendly enough in a distant sort of way.

“Yes?”

“How’re you doing?”

*How was he doing?* The woman had just upended his universe, turned his guts inside out. “What do you want?”

“I’d like to stop by and collect the rest of my belongings.”

Benjamin’s brain went blank. In a fit of sadistic rage following the breakup, he toyed with the idea of doing something outlandish, sadistic, boorish, intentionally crass - like piling all her personal effects in back yard, dousing them with gasoline and lighting a bonfire. But the

mayor's office had just passed legislation the previous year. Outside burning required a municipal permit from the fire department.

He also considered carting all Angela's clothing and accoutrements - the frilly, push-up bras from Victoria's Secret, French-cut bikini underwear and hundred-dollar, Michael Kors shoes - to the Salvation Army where refugees from an assortment of third world banana republics could indulge themselves in a stylish feeding frenzy. "When did you want to come," Benjamin stammered.

"Now if it's not too inconvenient." Her voice was remote, bordering on impersonal. Scarcely a week had passed and Angela had moved on, given Benjamin the bum's rush. The wedding that never happened and idyllic life they meticulously planned together were little more than a historical artifact.

"When did you realize that you were a hedonist?"

"Excuse me?"

"You can come now to collect your stuff. I'll leave the front door ajar, Just lock it behind you when you leave."

"You won't be there?"

"No. It's less awkward this way."

Benjamin drove to a sports bar a mile from his apartment and watched the Boston Celtics battle the Cleveland Cavaliers with LeBron James in the first game of the NBA playoffs. With Boston up by twenty points at halftime, the game was a complete rout. Returning home, Angela was long gone. He showered and went to bed but not before remembering a curious incident.

As he was leaving after his last visit to Granny Brannigan, the woman suddenly began snapping her arthritic fingers fitfully as though trying to recall some fogbound memory from the distant past. "There was this massive book in three volumes... twelve hundred pages in all." "Anthony Adverse... that's what it was called. Hervey Allen was the author. Anthony Adverse... they even made it into a movie in 1936 with Olivia de Havilland in the lead role..."

"Why are you telling me this?" Benjamin pressed.

"One of the main characters, a middle-aged housekeeper was a hedonist." Granny Brannigan began to giggle uncontrollably, "an insatiable nymphomaniac as I remember." With a rickety, rheumatic gait, she shambled closer and tugged on her grandson's sleeve.

"Angela is selfish and crass. She lacks common decency. Her sexual predilections are more a matter of convenience rather than personal conviction. The housekeeper in Anthony Adverse was a hedonist in the truest sense of the word. Angela's just a spoiled brat."

\* \* \* \* \*

A month later Benjamin stopped by his grandmother's house. He found the woman in the back yard crouched over the newly minted cold frame. The plastic frame had been swung far back. She indicated a thermometer propped up in the corner next to a pot of red pepper seedlings. "Gotta be careful. With the plastic lid down, temperatures can climb to well over a hundred degrees!"

Benjamin was studying a row of butter crunch lettuce. Each plant hugged the earth, the emerald green leaves unfolding in a profusion of succulent new growth. At the rear of the cold frame a half dozen beefsteak tomatoes swayed in a light breeze. The young plants stood a foot high, the sturdy stalks coated with a gossamer, grayish film. All was right in the world.



[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Sanctuary of the Whirligigs

Ignoring the paved, red brick walkway, the dark-haired woman cut across the lawn to where Marcus Rosedale was lounging on the front stoop. Even by the most generous standards, she wasn't particularly pretty. Thick, charcoal eyebrows perched over pallid cheeks, sloping haphazardly toward fleshy lips. It was the sort of unremarkable, aesthetically commonplace face one seldom noticed in a crowd.

Some women possessed a certain penache. Even when wearing torn jeans and a blouse bought off the discount rack at the bargain outlet, they wreaked of *haute couture*. Sadly, this one was not of that ilk. How she appeared in middle age was not much different from how Marcus imagined she would look thirty years later when applying for Medicare and her social security pension.

She waved an arm at a collection of wind-driven lawn ornaments scattered across the weedy grass. "Are these gizmos for sale?"

"Whirligigs," he corrected. "They're called whirligigs and yes, I've got plenty in the basement."

The woman stabbed at a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, pushing the frames up on the bridge of a doughy nose. "Yes, well I really like the feisty chicken." She pointed toward a brightly painted wooden ornament perched on a spruce pole. A gust of wind tickled the blades of a purple propeller, sending the chicken's upper torso bobbing up and down in the direction of a terrified earthworm. A red barn with tufts of hay spilling out of an upper loft served as a makeshift rudder, steering the contraption into the fitful breezes.

"Hennie Penny." Marcus grinned good-naturedly. He disappeared into the house, returning moments later with a replica of the mechanical device.

"They're all so clever," she said, gesturing toward a red-capped lumberjack, who was chopping wood with an axe near a rock garden. Several feet away, a less-ambitious, bearded man snoozed leisurely in a rocking chair that rhythmically bobbed back and forth as the wind pumped a drive shaft hidden just below his feet. Directly to the left, a brown bear clawed the air with an outstretched paw, just out of reach of a salmon leaping from a frothy pond. It was all good fun – a comical, self-contained universe in microcosm where only good things happened and nothing ever went terribly awry.

"Do you teach?" She inched the glasses up on her humped nose.

"Teach what?"

"Woodworking... how to make them... The whirligigs, that is."

He rubbed his grizzled chin and looked away. "In the ten years I been assembling these mechanical contraptions, you're the first person to ask."

“How sad!” The woman ran a taut index finger over the brass welding rod that served as the drive shaft. She stroked the acrylic paint that decorated the wings and fancy plumage. “How much would you charge to teach me?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrea Simpson – that was the dark-haired customer’s name. After purchasing Hennie Penney and registering the unusual request, she was in no great hurry to leave. The woman was a psychologist with a PhD. Dr. Andrea Simpson – she worked at the women’s reformatory in Evanston, where she counseled lifers, hard-core recidivists and assorted social riff raff.

When Andrea finally left, Marcus went back indoors, fired up the band saw and cut a base plate replacement for the sold item, but, before he could measure for the brass drive shaft, the kitchen phone began ringing with shrill insistence. “What are you doing Wednesday night?” His sister, Brenda, was on the other end.

“What I do pretty much every night,” he replied cryptically.

“There’s something we need to discuss. Meet me at the Longhorn Steakhouse.”

*Something we need to discuss...* Marcus saw Brenda only sporadically. They seldom spoke even at holidays and when they did, his sister never mentioned anything more timely than the weather. Since elementary school, they shared no common interests. When there was no immediate reply, she blurted, “Six o’clock. I’ll be waiting in the lobby.” The phone went dead.

Marcus returned to the basement. He cut a slot for the metal cam then routed a quarter-inch groove from the propeller end. The brass rod was considerably thinner, but he always seated the metal in nylon bushings to reduce friction.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrea Simpson arrived early for her first woodworking session. Marcus brought her downstairs into the basement. “Table saw, drill press, router and scroll saw... these are the tools we will be using.” He laid a whirligig on the workbench alongside the metallic gray scroll saw. The elaborate design featured a bearded man in farmer jeans chopping at an upturned log. A pile of neatly stacked wood lay a short distance away. A brown dog resting on his haunches sat close by the propeller watching the woodchopper with a quizzical, upturned face. On the far side a tree in full leaf and stippled with pink blossoms served as a rudder to steer the ornament into the wind. “Thought we’d start with the woodcutter.”

“Isn’t this project a bit involved for a beginner?”

“Each design has a unique theme,” Marcus parried her question. “And, anyway, like I said earlier, we’re in no great hurry. Bit by bit, it all comes together.” Flicking on the scroll saw switch, the reciprocal blade pounded the air with an insistent fury. “We’ll cut the torso from half-inch pine... the legs from thinner stock.”

Marcus reached for a blonde board on which the man’s upper body including the axe had already been outlined in pencil. He inched the board into the thin blade then adjusted the blower to clear away debris. As the blade proceeded up the chest, down the back and over the shoulders, Marcus angled the wood to follow the penciled line. When the blade approached the back of the neck, he shut the machine down and stepped away from the table. “Now you finish the cut.”

Andrea reached for the switch, but Marcus grabbed her wrist. “Always know where your hands are in relation to the blade... that’s the cardinal rule in woodworking. He raised both

hands, splaying the calloused fingers. “The tool has no preferences... it doesn’t discriminate between wood and flesh.”

“Yes, I’ll be careful.” Andrea set the saw in motion and watched as the blade tentatively proceeded up the back of woodcutter’s scalp. As she rounded the tip of the nose, the woman momentarily backed off the cut in order to accomplish the sharp angle, but everything was proceeding nicely.

“Watch what you’re doing,” Marcus counseled as the blade negotiated the underside of the grizzled chin. “You’re forcing the cut, dragging the blade at a cockeyed angle. Let up on the pressure or you’ll snap the blade.” Andrea relaxed her grip and the metal strand eased back perpendicular. Sliding the board a quarter turn to the right, she finished the cut and continued past the belly to the hips.

“Not bad for a novice!” Marcus grinned good-naturedly. “You drifted a bit wide on the brim of the hat, but we’ll clean that up on the vertical belt sander.”

“What about the legs?”

“We’ll tackle them in a moment, but let’s tidy things up a bit.” At the sander he showed the girl how to remove the excess stock then handed her a small strip of 180-grit sandpaper. “Round over the sharp edges and the piece is ready for painting.”

As the sandpaper polished the surface silky smooth, Andrea’s expression settled into a determined grin. “Do you enjoy working at the prison?” he asked.

“I’ve only had the job a few months.”

Marcus’ visits to the lumberyard for rough-cut poplar and pine took him past the Evanston facility at least several times a month. A collection of drab, cinderblock buildings was connected by an equally depressing concrete walkway. A thirty-foot fence was capped with coils of razor wire. “They’re hardened criminals.”

She crooked her head to one side. “Yes, for the most part.”

“How do you rehabilitate incorrigible thugs?” he pressed.

Andrea was sanding the crevices around the eye socket and nose. All the features stood in bold relief. “There is no silver bullet or standard treatment,” she said and brushed a gossamer film of loose sawdust away with her slender fingertips. “Most are severely character disordered. From a psychological perspective, their problems are structural.”

It took Marcus several minutes to digest the queer remark. Pointing at a thick, hardwood beam that ran the length of the ceiling, he observed, “That timber is structural. Tamper with it and the whole building falls down.”

The woman lay the sandpaper aside momentarily and stared at him obtusely. “It’s the same with the human psyche. Given the opportunity, the level three sex offender will continue to molest young children, the pyro burn your house down without the slightest pang of conscience. Short of divine intervention, most of them will never see the light of day.” Satisfied that all the saw marks had been sanded away, Andrea placed the torso on the worktable. “Is there time to shape the legs? I’d love to see how the body parts fit together.”

Marcus handed her another board, half as thick with a pair of identical legs faintly outlined in pencil. Andrea cut and sanded the pieces then drilled matching holes in the upper thigh, assembling the various parts with a slim bolt and matching locknut. Standing the figure upright on the workbench, Marcus rocked the upper portion back and forth sending the long-handled axe in a sweeping arc. Chop! Chop! Chop!

The psychologist, who worked with the worst-of-the-worst female offenders at the state prison, grinned ecstatically. “Truly awesome!”

Marcus glanced at his watch. "Time for one last thing." He grabbed an oddly shaped metal object from the tool rack. "We're going to thread a length of eighth-inch brass, welding rod. The metal will be bolted to the propeller and serve as the drive shaft that powers the whirligig."

He locked the bronze-colored rod in a vice-grip before slipping an end into a narrow hole in the center of the tool. "Feed the rod into the center hole and twist clockwise, until you feel the teeth grab metal," Marcus instructed, handing the tool to the girl,

Andrea seated the tool on the rod and made several revolutions. On the fifth try she blurted, "Yes, that's it! I feel something."

"Good. Now make another half-dozen turns."

She spun the slender handles end over end until a brass filament spiraled out the mouth of the tool. Marcus retrieved the golden thread from the concrete floor and held it in front of her eyes. "Another thirty or forty turns and you'll have your threaded rod."

When the welding rod was finally removed from the thread cutter, Marcus studied the perfectly formed threads – not a single blemish or imperfection over the entire length of the cut. "Too bad," he mused, "that prison administrators couldn't conjure up a similar device to 'retool' deviant behavior, convert character disordered misfits into law-abiding citizens. Mechanical alchemy – that sort of miraculous twaddle only happened in the misguided Middle Ages."

Marcus spun a matching nut onto the freshly-minted thread. "The propeller will seat on that first nut while a second locknut on the far side holds everything firmly in place." Laying the welding rod aside, he dimmed the lights and headed for the stairwell. "I think we'll call it quits for today."

\* \* \* \* \*

*I'm not smart enough  
for the life I've been living,  
a little bit slow  
for the pace of the game.  
It's not I'm ungrateful  
For what I've been given  
But nevertheless, just the same...*

In the foyer of the Longhorn Steakhouse a bitter-sweet James Taylor tune drifted over the Bose speakers. Brenda had already arrived. The hostess showed them to their seats, provided menus and went away. "I'm thinking steak tips." Reaching for a glass of ice water, Brenda perused the menu. "Although the ribeye looks scrumptious."

Whatever seemed so urgent when she phoned earlier in the day, no longer was a priority. "How are you doing with the flea markets?"

"Craft fairs... I sell whirligigs at juried craft fairs," Marcus replied. "An art gallery on the East Side is also selling some of my original creations on consignment."

"That's swell." She was clearly underwhelmed.

According to Brenda's highly-refined sensibilities, Marcus' woodcrafts were tacky, vulgar and tawdry – the sort of frivolous *chachkies* that only knuckle-dragging blue-collar types and the culturally challenged could appreciate "Actually, I sold a whirligig earlier this week." He told her about Andrea Simpson.

“You’re gonna teach a psychologist, who works with female inmates, to cut wood and bend metal rods?”

“She came to the house yesterday for the first lesson.”

“Any possibility,” Brenda sniggered, “of a romantic tryst?”

“She’s not my type.”

Brenda sliced a hot roll in half and slathered it with butter. “Didn’t you have a craft fair last weekend?”

Marcus nodded.

“Weather was awful!” His sister noted. “As I remember, it rained nonstop from mid-morning through late afternoon.”

“That’s about right,” he replied morosely. The fair was held at a local farm. No sooner had the crafters set up their displays, the heavens opened with a flood of Biblical proportions, a deluge to put Noah to shame! Marcus was assigned a spot on a gravel embankment. The tent leaked. The unrelenting rain kicked mud onto the legs of the table, splattering the wood. When he got home, he had to wash all the merchandise that had been out on display. Several whirligigs had to be repainted. No customers showed up. He sold nothing and was out the seventy-five dollar booth fee plus travel expenses.

Marcus’ experience at the East Side art gallery, where he was selling his crafts on consignment, proved even more demoralizing. Among creative artisans an unspoken code of conduct existed: every crafter, if humanly possible, deserved to earn a reasonable profit not just break even. But Carl Swenson, the gallery owner, didn’t see it that way. “It’s a buyer’s market,” the proprietor glibly argued, “and I got a surplus of artisans, who would die to show their merchandise in *my* store.” With niggardly persistence he then proceeded to nickel and dime Marcus down to an absurdly low, wholesale cost.

Marcus wanted the account for prestige as much as name recognition, but when he heard through a word of mouth that the shrewd dealer had tripled the retail price, passing Marcus’ merchandise off as high-end collectibles, he realized the blunder. The cartoonish creations weren’t whirligigs, per se, but the folk art of a gifted artisan. Like any lucrative, financial investment, their worth could only appreciate with age. The dealer was a crook – not nearly as sinister as the hoodlums and nut cases Andrea Simpson counseled, but an entrepreneurial thug nonetheless.

Nothing was negotiable. Carl Swenson owned the store, set the policies as he saw fit. At the Swenson Art Boutique a keepsake jewelry box fashioned from rosewood and bird’s-eye maple sold for three hundred dollars, but the owner couldn’t cough up a piddly ten bucks, allowing Marcus to share the benefits of free market capitalism. He placed five of his best pieces at the store that day, but as he walked out the door and down the street past a Japanese sushi bar and theater that featured foreign films, the whirligig maker knew that he would never return.

The waitress arrived and took their orders.

Brenda reached across the table and tapped her brother forcefully on the wrist. “I’m leaving Jeffrey... moving out of the house over the weekend.”

“What?” Marcus felt blindsided.

“It’s been four years now,” she continued in a cavalier tone, “I’ve outgrown him.”

He stared at his sister bleakly. The body language didn’t jive with the topic at hand. Brenda was grinning mischievously, like an impudent adolescent who had committed a foolish

prank. “You outgrow a pair of shoes, not a spouse.” She glowered at him but held her tongue. “I assume you’ve told him.”

“No, not yet. Jeffrey has been away all week on a business trip. I’m clearing out Friday. When he returns, there will be a note taped to the bedroom mirror.” She cleared her throat of a non-existent obstruction. “Maybe you could...”

Jeffery and Marcus were best friends from high school. He introduced Jeffrey to his future wife. From best friend to brother-in-law and now this! Brenda knew a devastated and bewildered Jeffrey would contact her brother searching for answers. By telling Marcus, she could slip away without the need to defend her decision. “Maybe,” Marcus picked up where his sister left the sentence dangling in midair, “I could act like the guy who trails the circus elephants with a short-handled broom and metal scoop.”

“That’s a bit crass.”

“No, what *you’re* doing is crass. It’s also gutless.” The waitress arrived with the food and they ate in silence. Toward the end of the meal, the James Taylor tune returned in the background, the lyrics hitting him full force.

“Who’s the third party?”

“That’s not important,” Brenda shot back in a snippy tone.

\* \* \* \* \*

At their second meeting Marcus taught Andrea how to shape the drive shaft. He inserted the rod into the groove they routed previously then, with a felt-tipped pen marked the entrance to the cam shaft. Locking the rod in a pair of vise-grip pliers, he explained, “We’re going to bend the threaded rod at a right angle from the black mark.”

Bracing both elbows against his side, Marcus began bending the rod with his free hand. Well before the bend was completed, he handed the rod to Andrea. “Now you finish.”

She fumbled with the metal, adjusting her grip several times until she felt the stiff rod relent. “It’s coming now.”

“Yes, but is it ninety degrees?” Marcus held a Tri-square alongside the bent shaft. “Just a tad more and you’ll be there.” When the angle was respectably close, they repositioned the vise-grip and completed the final two bends. “Character disorder... that psychological term... you said it’s a structural problem.” The odd comment having nothing to do with the task at hand, Andrea stared at Marcus with mild confusion, trying to decipher his intent. “What you see is what you get,” he stumbled over the words.

“In a manner of speaking.” Andrea turned the bent rod over in her hand. She had drifted slightly astray on the third bend, but Marcus finessed the metal, brought it back in line with an adjustable wrench. Now the rectangular section fit perfectly in the wooden base. “There are all sorts of exotic, mental disorders... hysterical, compulsive, sociopathic.” She began to chuckle as though at some private joke. “Even a phallic character disorder.”

“Really!” Marcus eyebrows arched ever so slightly. “And what might that be?”

“Do you want the Freudian definition or the stripped down version?”

“Keep it simple.”

Andrea’s pushed her dark-rimmed glasses up on the bridge of her pudgy nose as her features morphed through a series of comical expressions. “The phallic type... they’re generally selfish and egotistical as hell... notorious for cheating on their spouses.”

“Which is to say, they got a major screw loose.”

“Couldn’t have said it better!” Andrea’s dark bangs bobbed up and down. “Now can we get back to woodworking?”

“One last thing.” Marcus stabbed at a blond pile of sawdust with the toe of his shoe. “Is it just criminal types who suffer these fatal flaws or -”

“Oh, no,” Andrea cut him short, waving both hands in the air emphatically. “There are more character disordered people walking the streets on any given day than locked up behind bars.” Andrea pursed her lips, a mischievously wry smile. “Perhaps you know somebody who fits the bill.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“Phallic character disorder... anyone from your immediate family, friends or business associates who deserves that unsavory moniker?”

Marcus chuckled and shook his head. “No, not really.”

Andrea held the drive shaft chest high. “Now can we mount the propeller and glue the wooden cover in place?”

\* \* \* \* \*

The middle of the week, Marcus’ brother-in-law wandered into the back yard where he was tearing rotten plywood paneling from the side of the shed. Jeffrey had the look of a beaten dog. The man hadn’t shaved in days, and his graying hair was matted in the front. He stood with his disheveled head tilted to one side, watching as the wall came down. “The shed tilts to one side.”

“Yes, I know. It’s been that way for eighteen years.” Unfortunately, when Marcus built the structure, he was a rank amateur. The foundation tended to follow the downward pitch of the land. He hadn’t a clue how to fix the problem. The finished structure, which resembled the Leaning Tower of Pisa, was sturdy enough if somewhat irregular. “I suspect it will limp along in that precarious state for another couple decades.”

Jeffrey took a couple steps closer. “What spacing did you use on the two-by-fours?”

“Sixteen on center.” Marcus pried a mangled nail from the damaged wood.

“How you gonna hammer nails in new wood, when you can’t see where the studs are located?”

“I had a funny feeling you were going to ask about that little dilemma.” Marcus tapped the wall a foot above his head. “I’ll set a nail in the wall above each vertical piece and then snap a chalk line to a corresponding mark on the foundation where the stud rests.”

“Clever as hell!” Jeffrey nodded appreciatively.

“Even if the chalk line careens at an utterly cockeyed angle, it will faithfully follow the lumber hidden on the far side.”

“So the nail grabs solid wood.”

“Yeah,” Marcus confirmed, “that’s the general idea.”

“Brenda left me... moved all her stuff out of the house while I was away on a business trip.” Jeffrey retrieved a bent nail that had fallen in the grass. “Did you know she was seeing someone on the sly?”

“She stopped by the other day,” Marcus spoke haltingly, measuring his words. “That was the first I heard of it.”

“The cheating... it wasn’t the first time.” Jeffrey’s voice cracked and he had to turn away to compose himself. “Over the years, there’s been a series of romantic intrigues.”

*His sister in the role of home wrecker - Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary.* Unaware of his sister's salacious propensities, Marcus felt nauseous, lightheaded.

The other party – she never even mentioned his name, never intimated anything about falling in love or meeting a spiritual, twin soul. Rather, there was a detached, business-like quality to the impending breakup, as though his sister was using the present arrangement as a slimy stepping stone from a tiresome marriage to a more manageable situation. “Did you ever confront Brenda with her shenanigans?”

“In the past,” Jeffrey replied bitterly, “she got all maudlin, teary-eyed... claimed that the debauchery meant nothing. Each affair only made her realize how much she treasured our marriage.”

“Until this last time.” Marcus shook his head. “My sister... she’s all mixed up.”

“On the contrary,” Jeffrey shot back, “I’m the emotion wreck. Brenda knows perfectly well what she’s doing.”

Marcus seated the claw of his hammer on a bent nail and pried it free. When he looked up again, Jeffrey was gone. Marcus replaced the front and both sides but ran out of steam before reaching the back of the shed. By the afternoon, the late June heat had topped out in the low nineties with a tropical-grade humidity that sucked all the oxygen out of his lungs and left him weak in the knees.

Putting his tools away, he went indoors and showered. In the kitchen, he removed a tub of red pepper hummus from the refrigerator and popped an onion bagel in the toaster. Several years previously, his sister decided to go strictly vegetarian, allowing no meat, cheese or poultry across the threshold. No matter that her husband was an all-American, meat-and-potatoes kind of guy.

At a pool party Brenda hosted, she served up a platter of bagels slathered with hummus, spinach and tomato slices. She drizzled the exotic appetizer with olive oil, freshly minced basil and parsley. The unusual hors d'oeuvres was just about the only thing of worth that Marcus associated with his sister anymore.

And now the marriage was defunct, blown to smithereens.

Marcus bit into the onion bagel and luxuriated as the disparate flavors enveloped his taste buds. The tomato dissolved into the salty chickpea paste as the succulent herbal garnish worked its flavorful magic.

With woodworking, whether it was repairing a rotted shed or building whirligigs, Marcus always found solutions for seemingly impossible problems. The cockeyed shed was a classic case in point. With the wind-powered ornaments, hardly a week passed that Marcus didn't discover a way to improve on a craft design. Frequently it was a matter of trial and error, a stumbling, bumbling process of elimination. Not this, not this, not this, THAT!

But you couldn't finesse human nature.

The damage Brenda perpetrated on a guileless world at large was exponential. Common decency never factored into the cosmic equation. Thirty-eight years on planet earth and, except for hummus bagels, she hadn't learned a practical thing of value.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I can't paint for crap... got no eye for color or proportion,” Andrea confided.



They were situated upstairs in the kitchen, where Marcus spread a collection of acrylic paints, brushes, a plastic palette and the unassembled pieces of her whirligig across the length of the table.

“This isn’t the Sistine Chapel,” he returned dismissively. “Not the Mona Lisa either.”

“Yes, but I’m really quite awful.”

“When you were a little girl, did you have coloring books?”

“Sure, every kid did.”

“Well then, just think of what we’re doing as coloring with paints instead of crayons.”

Marcus handed her a brush and the woodchopper’s left leg. A light pencil line at the bottom of the limb indicated where the ankle left off and the shoe began.

Squirting a generous dollop of blue paint into the palette, he handed her a sable brush. “Paint the pants down to the pencil mark near the ankle.”

Andrea’s hand trembled as she raised the bristles to the upper thigh. “If you’re having trouble controlling the brush, brace your right wrist with your left hand. She did as he said and the tremors subsided. “Start your initial stroke a half inch away from the edge and brush up. Any globs you can work back down into the piece.”

When Andrea reached the bottom, she looked up. The blue had smudged well across the pencil mark onto the top of the shoe. “See, I told you I couldn’t paint!”

“There’s a trick... a technique for fixing irregularities.” She eyes him doubtfully. “We can fix it,” Marcus continued, “once the paint dries on both sides.”

Andrea painted the legs front and back. With a tiny brush, Marcus added shoe laces. Reaching across the table he tapped her lightly on the forearm. “Watch closely.” Grabbing a felt-tipped Sharpie he deftly ran a thick black line across the area where the paint had smudged and the defect disappeared, swallowed up by the crisp, dark line that now separated the pant cuff from the top of the shoe.

Andrea shook her head in disbelief.

“Your first coat of paint sealed the wood grain so the black ink couldn’t bleed into the porous wood. You get a razor-sharp line every time. It’s a simple fix with the added benefit that the silky-smooth line makes the surrounding colors pop.”

“Everything looks so much better... more professional!”

“What color should we use for the face and hands?” Marcus shifted gears.

“I don’t know. Nothing you’ve got here looks quite right.”

“Then we’ll improvise... concoct our own.” He squeezed a generous splotch of white onto the palette, mixed several drops of chocolaty brown plus an even smaller quantity of orange. Stirring the mixture forcefully with a paint brush, a lightly tinted flesh color emerged. “Keep the wood directly in front of you, even if you have to rotate the work several times as you paint,” Marcus instructed as she spread a film of the blended paint over the forehead toward the broad-brimmed hat.

“How many craft fairs are you doing this summer?” she asked when the face was finished.

“I’m not doing any.” He told her about the soggy debacle at the farm and his more recent fiasco with Swenson’s Boutique.

“Why not set up your own website and sell your crafts through the internet?”

“I can just barely retrieve my emails,” Marcus replied sheepishly. “Setting up an online store isn’t a realistic consideration.”

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