

AUGUST C. BOURRÉ

TOBACCO HAND

EARL LEAVES HOME HARDWARE with a brand new Black & Decker belt sander—the one Janine told him not to buy but that he had made up his mind to have anyway. It's heavy in his arms, heavier than he had expected, but he's sure it'll do the job. When he gets home he's going to lay out a few old rough sheets of plywood, or some scraps anyway, on his workbench in the garage. He'll get them from behind the house and under the deck, where the rain and the wind and the little bit of sun that gets at them has slowly turned them grey. He just wants to practise on something so he can do it right when the time comes to actually get things done. He's thought this through, but first he's got to have a cigarette, some beer, or maybe a little bit of dip to steady himself.

Earl has a hard time remembering when things have been this bad. Maybe they haven't ever been. Janine left home once or twice before, okay probably more like three or four times, to stay with her mother or sister in Sioux Lookout for a week or two, but it's never been like this. There's a case of Blue in the fridge and another one in the garage, but he starts with the cold ones and has already tipped back two long-necks before he sees how fast he's going through them and decides to take it easy. The day she left he'd been trying to tell her something, but he couldn't remember what it was. Everything had happened so slowly, and when she talked it was like he was underwater and couldn't hear anything. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, so he just stood there with the empty look on his face, fingering the can of Copenhagen in his pocket. He wanted things to go back to normal, so he tried to think for a minute and say something to make her understand, but she thought he was trying to make out like he didn't care. Then she was out the door, and all he could do was sit down and spit a shit-brown stream into the big blue mug on the kitchen table.

Earl's been working with his hands all his life, first framing houses and then later on the machines in the mill across the river. He grew from a bean-

pole kid to a big, meaty man with a temper that scaled up with him. He never hit anybody, no matter how angry he got (and you bet he got angry during some of his arguments with Janine), but violence was what most people saw when they looked at him. They couldn't get past his bad skin and thick, scarred fingers, some of them cut up and broken more than once. People said things when Janine went to her mother's or her sister's, though they didn't say those things directly to his face.

There's a half-empty pack of Export A on top of the fridge, and he grabs the little green box when he goes up to get another beer. There's a lighter stuffed in the empty side so pretty soon Earl is inhaling the smoke and finishing that third beer, which is starting to make him feel a little light-headed. He can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing with those pieces of plywood and that belt sander waiting for him in the garage.

The fingers on Earl's right hand are stained brown and mustard yellow from the dip and the smokes. There are two little matching stains on his moustache, dark against the blond, one under each nostril. He knows that the stains are there and that they're spreading like big old bruises, and he tries not to look at them ever. When he does he remembers the time Janine had that infection, when she came home from seeing the doctor and told Earl she got it because he couldn't keep his hands clean and probably didn't even bother trying. He'd soaped up for a good twenty minutes that night, but none of it came off and he'd felt ashamed. After the soap didn't work he took out one of the little cardboard sticks with sandpaper on it that Janine used for her nails. First he tried it on the heavy calluses that he got from working, just to see how it would feel. It didn't really hurt so he tried it on the stains and got no result except he had to wear a Band-Aid for a day or two. He tried to hide it from Janine, but he was sure that she had seen it. He still feels ashamed and tries not to look at his hand.

He quit smoking once, and the dip too, but it didn't take. Janine's sister Katie had been a smoker, before she got cancer a few years back. They'd gone up the hour and a half together every day to see her in the hospital until they kicked Earl out because Katie couldn't stand the smell of him anymore, and then Janine went on her own. Katie came out the other side of it okay, but Earl could tell that Janine was scared—truth be told, he was too—so he quit tobacco altogether. The stains had started by then, but you could look at them and almost think that they were shadows or that maybe he'd gotten too much sun. He lasted three months, his temper growing to the

size of a bear and eating up all the space in the house. The anger was like a thing inside of Earl that he could see but couldn't understand. It filled him up and then just kept getting bigger and bigger until it was everywhere. He hated it and wished he could cut it out like they did with Katie's tumour, but things don't work like that and he didn't know how to ask for help. The empty cases of beer piled up in the garage when they were living with the bear because he never learned to talk to Janine the way people talk to each other on TV, which is what he thought she wanted. He tried a few times to talk like the people on her shows, but the words either got stuck in his throat or they came out like he was blaming her for the bear, which wasn't what he meant at all and only made things worse. He wanted to say, "I'm sorry I'm so weak," but he could never say that to her, even if he knew how. He eventually went back to using tobacco worse than ever, and the stains spread like a paint spill on a concrete floor.

Another beer and two more cigarettes are gone when Earl thinks that it might be a good idea for him to call Janine and try to talk things out. The glowing green clock on the microwave says 10pm, which is probably too late to call, but he gets up from the chair anyway and walks over to the phone. He takes the receiver down from the cradle and stares at the buttons. She told him not to bother calling, but he's already called her twice now—once the night she left and then a few days later when he figured she'd had a chance to cool down. It had been a disaster both times. Nothing he'd said had come out the way he'd planned it in his head, and Janine ended up crying and then screaming at him and hanging up.

He dials the first couple numbers but doesn't know if he wants to finish. All he can think about is how he's not crying so he puts the phone down, gets another beer from the fridge, and tries to think about the belt sander. He wants to say he's sorry because he knows there's something wrong and wants to fix it, but he doesn't know how it would help even if she would listen. He sees now that the fight wasn't really about him getting the belt sander or the money they didn't have now that she was laid off from the NAPA store, and probably none of the fights were ever about the things they were about. Earl and Janine are two people who just don't know each other and can't see each other properly. They speak different languages and know different things. He doesn't understand why she gets angry, and she doesn't understand him or the goddamn bear any better. He supposes that's his fault, but by now he doesn't know what fixing things would even look like.

They had their first real fight back when they were going together, before they got married, and when they made up she told him that she wanted this to be forever and showed him what that meant. Now he knows that forever doesn't last as long as people think.

Earl finishes his beer and then he gets up and goes into the garage and turns on the light. There's a notebook on the workbench that he uses to rough out his projects, and he tears out a clean page. He writes out the phone number for his buddy Dan, who has the spare keys to the house, and the number for his boss at the mill. Then he puts the paper in his pocket, arranges the plywood on the workbench, and plugs in the sander. He works it over the boards and sees that even though it has a lot of power the action stays easy and he can control it with no problems at all. After shoving the plywood out of the way, he lays his tobacco hand down on the bench and picks up the sander in his left. He looks at the stains on his fingers and fires up the sander, hoping he never has to look at them again.