

When Timbers Start

Lancelot Schaubert

“I like the other one,” she said.

“But it’s so heavy,” Remmy said.

“I know. I like a sturdy table,” she said.

“There’s kitchen tables and then there’s butcher’s blocks. I don’t plan on slaughtering a hog in my dining room.”

“I might,” she said. “I’m the cook.”

Remmy sighed. “Do you think it’s pretty?”

“I think it’s pretty.”

“Do you think anyone else will?”

“What do I care for what anyone else thinks?”

“I’m not going to answer that question, you’ll get me into trouble if I answer that question.”

“Wilson Remus Broganer, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Wilson Remus Broganer said nothing to his pregnant wife.

“Well in any case,” she said, “I like it and I think it matches everything else so this is what we’re getting.”

“Alright now, I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

“I’m not mad. I’m decisive.”

“And you won yourself a decisive victory. Okay now, let’s get it to the bag checker.”

“They don’t make bags big enough for this, honey.”

“You know what I mean.” He hefted the massive slab of wood.

“You know what I mean,” he muttered as he grunted and hefted it over to one of the counters with one of them Sears and Roebuck signs and they bought it and, with much struggle on Remmy’s part, took it home.

“Five dollars a month,” he kept mumbling as he drove. “Five dollars a month. I could buy a share of Texaco at the end of the year.”

“Well then let’s take it back.”

“You were listening to me?” he asked.

“You weren’t whispering, really, now were you?”

“I meant to be.”

“You didn’t mean very well.”

He harrumphed. “Well I’m glad you have your table.”

“Are you?”

“It’s just so big.”

“I think it’s pretty.”

And so they went until they got home. He set up the table and it filled that room as does the king’s table in a great hall. Except this was no castle. Not even castle law existed at this time. He was pleased enough with it.

“You’re smiling,” she said.

“It’s a pretty table set up like that.”

“I told you so.”

“You did.” He smiled bigger.

“What?”

“I just did a good job setting it up.”

She did not return the affirmation he’d afforded her.

He grimaced.

Two weeks later, the biggest and baddest tornado any of them could remember hit. It snapped hundred-year-old trees in two. It leveled some houses and frayed some power lines.

When it hit, Remmy was at home with Beth.

“It’s a semi-hurricane!” Beth screamed.

“Tornado.”

“We’re going to die!”

“We might,” Remmy said.

“Why would you say such a thing?”

“I mean I’m sure we’ll be fine honey. Let’s go to the storm shelter.”

Well they went outside and that wind blew everything. Tore at the trees. Tore at the roof he’d just fixed up. There were boards and water thrown every which way and they walked out. Beth waddled a

bit with her swollen body and the baby inside. They got to the storm shelter door that Remy had just dug and they opened it up and I'll be damned if there wasn't two feet of water down there.

"That's not a storm shelter," Beth said.

"Sure it is, get inside!"

"That's a pool! That's an underground lake like in the movies where the monsters hide, I'm not going down in there!"

They were shouting over the wind, mind you. Stuff still blowing all around them.

"You get in there or I'll get you in there," he said. "We're not going inside."

"You do whatever you want," she said, "but me and the baby are going inside."

He watched her go, holding that sheet metal door like he was. Then he groaned and let it slam and he barely heard it over the cry of the trainrumbling in the sky. He started following her inside and then he shouted to no one in particular, "Where the hell did my brand new lawn chairs go?" They'd been metal chairs, heavy chairs, sturdy chairs, and not a one of them was in the backyard.

Back in the house they looked around, Beth was pacing, slowly, off-kilter. "What do we do?"

"You vetoed my plan!"

"What do we do? What do we do?"

The house had been built just on concrete blocks. Well the wind got under there like two stock boys will get under a box and it lifted the whole house up about six inches and slammed it back down again.

Beth screamed.

Remmy, for once, had nothing to say.

"What do we do?" Beth begged him.

The house was lifted higher and slammed down on those concrete blocks again. Some plaster fell off the ceiling in the other room. The table.

Remmy went into action. “You get under there. It’s new but it’s the strongest thing we’ve got.”

She got under there, moving like a station wagon with two mis-sized wheels, like a wheel with a ten pound weight on one wall. Then she sat still and some plaster fell off the ceiling and onto that five-dollar a month Sears and Roebuck kitchen table.

Remmy didn’t bother to duck under anything but one of the open doorframes, leaning against it like some cowboy watching his horse from the porch of a saloon. “Five dollars a month,” he muttered. “Decent insurance policy, I guess, I don’t know.”

More plaster fell.

The house bounced once or twice more.

The wind died down.

And then a sound like what you’d expect if Chicken Little’d been right and the sky really did fall. Something like the crashing of the Tower of Babel. Something the fall of Troy or the breaching of Atlantis’s levy.

All was calm.

“The hell was that?” Remmy said.

“Oh, Remmy, do you have to cuss?”

“I only cuss at cursed things and whatever just happened wasn’t no blessing.”

“Is that why you’ve been cursing at me?”

He didn’t answer that. He walked outside instead.

There in his yard, discarded as if some god of greed had found no more fun in a playtoy, sat stretched a massive tower, a fallen piece of alien architecture, as if the angels had gotten bored with their scaffolding for building the pearly gates and had kicked it over the edge of heaven. He was shouting, “Bethy come look! Come look, it’s awful! It’s an awesome thing to look at.”

The neighbors were outside too on their front porches, looking at the mangled black thing spread across the yards, the rain still coming down and none of them caring, not even the prettier ones in their nightgowns a bit too early—maybe his neighbor Joe’d been

passing the time with a little bit of marital duty. How people do cling to one another in hard times.

They looked at one another.

Beth came out and looked with Remmy.

They all stared at the massive steel oil derrick, as long as a water tower is tall. His father'd told him about these things, about how they drilled with big old bits. And about the salt water tank at the top. He looked at the top. It had exploded and the great salt water tower bled out over all of their yards that, along with the rain, was turning the ditches and divots to estuaries. Some of the neighbor kids ran out and played in it.

But all Remmy could think about was that salt. All of that salt. He stared at it, his eyes staring at the eye in the tower where the ... well it might as well have been where the poison came out.

Beth cried out behind him and went into an early labor, the contractions scared into her from the crashing and banging about.

He swore.

"Don't swear! This is a blessing!"

"Not in the rain and the wet!" he said.

She screamed. Oh, how she cried out from the pain.

The neighbor ladies came. Beth went inside with them. Remmy fretted and occupied himself with the boys. They went over to the tower to try to stop the bleeding but the water kept on coming. Some of the younger men actually tried to put their hands on the thing, which was about like trying to stop Niagara with your shoulder or some such stupidity.

While they were working over in Joe's yard, they found those table and chairs in a hedgerow.

"New chairs!" said Joe.

"Like hell!"

"Oh come on, Remmy, finders keepers, those are nice lawn chairs."

"Well in that case," Remmy said, "I just found this house sitting out here after the storm." He pointed to Joe's house.

“Oh, I was only joking.”

“Well joke these over into my yard with me, will ya?”

They hauled them. “You know,” Joe said as they walked back into Remmy’s yard, “I heard they got the name *derrick* from a hangman in England.”

“Come on, now.”

“That’s what I heard. Cause they call cranes derricks too. Big towers to hang things from, you know, like a hangman and his noose. Sticking out over to stick something down into a hole like that.”

“I’ll be damned. A derrick. It makes sense, I guess.”

They never did get the hole plugged. Not with wood. Not with clay or plaster or the pig carcass one of the boys tried. Where he got it, nobody asked because some things just were. After several hours of this the women came back out and told him he had a son. He ran in to find Beth there, tired and smiling. And the blood there reminded him of a full bottle of ketchup he’d once accidentally shattered while flirting at a diner as a teenager, tomato blood scattering everywhere. But he smiled all the same because he had a son. He named him Tobias—Toby.

Three weeks later, Toby died of pneumonia. It must have been the rain and the wet.

That was the year the Army Corp of Engineers started damming the Kaskaskia River to make Carlyle Lake. Through eminent domain, the government bought out house after house of the townships in the river valley. They capped sixty-nine oil wells.

They exhumed some six hundred graves, some of them undoubtedly holding the remains of ancestors of Native Americans as well as the remains of babies.

