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Jon Remmerde

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Getting Down to Laughter

Herb said, “Lon got everything shingled but that back roof, and now his widow’s got the materials stacked there. Some of us are going to finish the job. Enough of us, it won’t take long.”

That was as close to an invitation as I was going to hear. I didn’t say yes or no. I just ate breakfast the next morning and walked down the ridge to where the crew had started to gather, four men, all retired, who lived on the ridge.

I was between jobs. I didn’t know anything about roofing, and I owned no roofing tools. Everyone else had tools to spare, so I used whatever I needed.

Joel started me out snapping chalk lines to define where to place shingles and showed me how to cut and nail shingles. We took turns carrying shingles up the ladder.

The sun shone from the southern sky, above the tops of old growth pine trees standing above the steep canyon, and warmed our work party on the roof. With five of us, the work moved rapidly toward completion, but everyone took time to joke, laugh, tell stories, pass the hot chocolate, pass the soda pop, and sometimes to sit idly in the sunshine and smell spring, full of growing plants and new shingles, on the ridge for a few minutes.

I’d met Michael, the oldest man on the crew, autumn of the year before, when I responded to a small sign he and his wife put out by the road, “Apples for Sale.”

They had a small orchard behind their house. I bought two boxes of winesaps, and Michael volunteered to keep the second box for me until I finished the first. “We can put the box down in the well, just above the water, and the apples’ll keep until you’re ready for them.” They did, too, as fresh as newly picked when I went over to get them, midwinter.

Sitting on the roof in sunshine, drinking pop, Michael said, “Now what you don’t want to do is fall off this roof. Pitch on my roof’s steeper’n this one. Two years ago, I was up there nailing shingles, and I slipped. I know enough to tie off on a steep roof, but you know how men get about safety. Ready to let it slide to save a couple of minutes. My rope was coiled in the valley off to my side. I looked at it and felt really stupid

when I started to slide.”

Everybody quit cutting shingles, snapping chalk lines, and nailing and turned toward Michael, ready to take a break and hear a story in sunshine.

“Once I started sliding, no way I could stop. Nothing to grab onto. Just as I slid over the edge, a big nail bent into the end of a rafter caught in my belt and stopped me, half over the edge, just hanging there. I couldn’t get up. I couldn’t get down. I was facing sideways, just dangling. I started hollering. Felt pretty dumb, but there wasn’t anything else I could do.

“My wife was in the kitchen and she come running out, took one look at me, and that old woman started laughing fit to bust. Couldn’t do anything. I kept saying ‘get the ladder over here. Get me a ladder.’ Well, eventually, she did. She scooted that ladder around from the end of the house and got it about half under me, til I turned and got a grip, hung onto the ladder and slipped my belt out of the loops and climbed down the ladder, but first she had to laugh about ten minutes.

“Might be a good thing she didn’t get the ladder right away, once she busted out laughing. It took so long to get the ladder and for me to get on it and get down, by the time I got down, I had to admit, well, manly dignity aside, it was funny. Every time she looked at me til dinner she’d bust out laughing again. To this day, she’ll think about me hanging there by my belt on the edge of the roof, and she’ll get to laughing again. Can’t do anything but laugh with her. My age, it’s too late to marry again.”

Everyone laughed when he finished the story. His story started the crew swapping stories about roofs, wives, and manly dignity completely lost. Before anyone had a chance to think up new subjects, we finished the roof, packed all the tools, and everyone went home. A storm brought wind-blown rain the next day, but it blew harmlessly over a roof secured by nails, skill, a strong sense of community, and a fair measure of laughter.