

Handyman

Dewayne mowed the lawn in hot, mountain sunshine. He shut off the mower, soaked up quietness and mountain odors mingling with smells of cut grass and gasoline and oil smells, then pushed the mower into the garage. He turned the hose on beside the garage and washed his hands, dried them on his shirt, shut the water off, walked to the front door, and rang the bell.

Virginia opened the door and said, "Come on in." He followed her through the hallway into the kitchen, and they sat down at the table.

Dewayne said, "How's everything with you this afternoon?"

"Not too good. I got this arthritis in my elbows and my wrists and my fingers, you know?" She said, "It feels like hot sand in my joints. Jeese, I can't sleep most of the night. I go to sleep, and then I move, and it hurts. I wake up, and I can't go back to sleep, you know?"

Dewayne didn't know, but he nodded.

Virginia Miller was small and thin, with short blond hair, still pretty, though troubles crowding her existence tried to wash away her beauty. She said, "Jeese" a lot and waved a dismissive gesture when she said it. The world was too much, she seemed to say, and Dewayne agreed that it was a lot, for her.

Richard Miller sat in the big, padded chair in the living room, the other side of the kitchen counter from them, and watched television. The house felt close. smelled close to Dewayne after working outside.

Dewayne thought there was probably nothing wrong with Richard's mind. It looked like he could think okay. He had lost his ability to speak most words. He could say "Yes" and "No," or usually, he said, "God, yes," or "God, no." If you couldn't say very many words, probably you should use the ones you could say, even if they didn't seem appropriate for the situation.

Weeks ago, Dewayne thought he would be friends with Richard. You could be companionable without saying a lot. Dewayne sat down in the chair next to Richard's chair, and they had a three-way visit, Richard, Dewayne, and Virginia. Dewayne said, "Pretty nice sunshine. We should

open the curtains and let the sun shine in here.”

Virginia said, “He wants to keep the curtains closed. The sunshine makes it harder to watch television.”

Dewayne said, “I’m gonna move that big gas tank up behind the barn down by the driveway. Virginia says she’ll try to sell it. She doesn’t use it anymore.”

Richard pointed his remote control and tapped the volume on the television up a little, then louder yet, until Dewayne couldn’t hear what Virginia said.

After that, when Dewayne came into the house, he just waved at Richard, and Richard waved back and kept watching television.

This afternoon, Virginia and Dewayne sat at the kitchen table and talked about work Dewayne had done, about what needed to be done, about how much money he had coming, and how things were going for Virginia. Dewayne said, “I can’t hear much over the television going full-blast. Can we go out in the entrance hall or outside?”

Virginia said, “Sure. Jeese. He keeps that up full-blast all the time. You can’t hear yourself think in here.” She got up and led him through the entrance hall to the small room by the front door, with a rolltop desk, a closet, hooks to hang coats, and a gun rack, with two .22 rifles and two bigger bore rifles, with scopes, and two shotguns.

Dewayne always wondered what people were about, what their lives were like, what they thought about and treasured. He wanted to ask questions. He wanted to ask, what happened to Richard? A stroke, that’s obvious, but he looks like a fairly young man, so what brought it on? What did he do for a living before he had a stroke? This huge house with all the land around it, how can you afford all this? How do you make enough money to live, with him like that, and what does it do to your life? other than arthritis that wakes you up all night long? Even, is Richard still capable as a man? Is that part of what makes your nights restless and painful? and plenty of other questions, but he knew he couldn’t ask the questions.

Virginia asked him how many hours he’d worked this week, and he said, “Twenty one hours.” He padded it an hour and a half because obviously they could afford it, and Richard was rude to him, and they talked longer than that, and maybe talking with Virginia, listening to her talk, was part of

the job. Virginia made out the check.

Dewayne looked at the check and said, "It's D-e-w-a-y-n-e, not D-u-a-n-e, the way you wrote it."

She said, "Oh, I know that. I've written it right plenty of times, but I wasn't thinking. Jeese." She waved her hand, as if to dismiss the world and all its vagaries and wrote on the next check.

Dewayne wondered what would have happened if he had added two and a half hours. No use pushing it too hard. Over the winter, he'd have free rein to take care of the place and keep track of his hours however he kept track.

On the wall behind the television hung an 11 by 14 color picture of a rubber raft riding rapid currents down the Arkansas River. Rough water sprayed into the air. The tallest man, with the squashed down hat, and the orange life vest, with his paddle raised to strike the water, the man turned toward the photographer, was Richard before the stroke, when life was active, when life was whatever he wanted to do, because he'd made his money and retired and to hell with all the dumb ones who had to spend the rest of their lives working.

Richard looked at that picture sometimes, when he seemed to be watching television.

Richard could have told Dewayne about the weapons in the gun rack. He could have told Dewayne about the elk, deer, bears, ducks, geese, and different kinds of pests he'd killed with the weapons in the gun rack. It would have taken several hours to tell the story, if he could tell it.

Not that he would have told the story to Dewayne. Dewayne was someone who came around and did the work that needed doing. If he had any brains, he'd be doing something that paid a lot more money. He'd make enough to buy a place like this.

Richard and Virginia left for California. Dewayne came over in the morning, opened the drapes, and let winter sun shine in the big south windows. He turned the chairs away from the television set, so they faced the windows. He sat down in the sheepskin-draped recliner and looked across snow-covered open meadow to scrub brush and forest rising up the mountain southwest of the windows to a huge granite ridge rising southeast, with trees growing between jumbled boulders on the ridge. He let more air into the house, the smell of snow, of the forest and all its

animals.

Dewayne thought about the trees, about the snow drifted deep the lee side of the boulders, the wild meadow. Winter sun reflected bright from winter snow. He soaked up hot sunshine pouring in through the big windows. He lost almost all thought. His thoughts became what he looked at, winter brilliant white on the land, without words.

Time without consciousness of time slipped away from him and busy thoughts crowded in again. Dewayne stood up, walked through the house, and got ready to take the wall between the two downstairs bedrooms out.

He looked at the picture of the raft in white water, but he didn't know he looked at a photograph of Richard. There wasn't that much difference between Richard's face then and Richard's face now. Richard's face in the photograph showed clearly, between sprays of water trying to be sky, but Dewayne didn't realize he saw part of Richard's life before, that could answer part of his question, "What did you do before?"

He thought he'd like to raft down a white water river, but he doubted he ever would. Too expensive. He used up too much of his time trying to make a living. Most of his adventures, he'd already adventured. He didn't think about it much, because if he thought about it, the future looked flat.

His life was liveable. He lived in a beautiful place in the mountains. He worked enough to pay what he had to pay. If dull work came along, he just said no thanks.

Virginia hadn't moved the furniture she said she'd move. She had too much to do, taking care of Richard and herself, getting ready to drive to California. It didn't matter. It would take longer to do the job, so he'd charge more.

Something stunk. He opened the pantry doors and searched until he found a package of cheese, rotten and stinking. Should have been in the refrigerator. Bottles of liquor of a dozen different kinds. Must be several-hundred dollars worth of booze lined up in bottles. If he was a drinking man, he'd have a winter's worth of drinking there, but he rarely drank. He took the cheese outside, threw it off in the brush by the driveway, and dropped the wrapper in a garbage can in the garage.

Dewayne put cloth under the furniture, to avoid scratching the floor, and slid it out of the room. He removed the wall.

He had asked Tricia, "Why don't you go with me? You could help me

with the work. It would be a chance to get out of here for a while, do something different.”

She put her finger on her place in her magazine and looked up at him, blank-faced, as if she didn't know what he said, but then she answered, “Maybe toward the last, when you're cleaning up. I have plenty to do here right now.”

He could have said, “You won't go over with me toward the last either, so why mention it as a possibility?” but he just said, “Okay,” and left.

He didn't try to talk with Tricia much anymore. Early in January, he had said, “You've put on at least 50 pounds since the kids left home. It isn't good for you, and it's slowing down what you can do.”

Tricia said, “Is that all you see? Is that all you care about, my body? how much I weigh? Why does that mean so much to you?”

He should have known better than to say that. Tricia took off into wild emotion. She didn't hear him when he said, “I'm sorry I said that. I'm sorry. Can you hear me apologizing for what I said? I'm sorry. Can you just quiet down enough to hear what I'm saying? You say I never apologize, but I'm apologizing over and over again.”

Dewayne tried to walk away, but Tricia followed him everywhere. She yelled at him and cried hysterically. He wanted to walk out, get into the pickup, and drive away, but he didn't know what she would do. He thought he'd better stay until she calmed down.

It took a long time to get her calmed down. He said, “Of course I love you the way you are,” and “No, I didn't just marry you for your beautiful, slim body,” and “Certainly your identity is not just what you look like.”

He wouldn't go through that again, especially since it took discipline to keep from adding, “but partly for your slim body, and your identity is partly your physique, and you should have listened to what I said; it's slowing down what you can do, for yourself and for me.”

At Virginia's place, he removed part of the flooring. He nailed down new boards, then sanded and varnished the floor. He patched walls and painted the walls and ceiling of the large bedroom the two small bedrooms had become. It took him two weeks. When he finished, you couldn't tell a wall had ever stood there. He cleaned everything up and moved the furniture back in. He left the windows open all day to clear out most of the smell of paint.

When he remodeled, he usually left the cleanup work for the people who owned the house. Who wanted to pay a construction worker's wages for a maid's work?

Virginia did. She told Dewayne she didn't want someone she didn't know in there when they were gone.

She said, "Clean it all up, wax it, paint it, the works, whatever it needs. I don't want to come back to a mess. I have enough to do, taking care of Richard and this place. Taking that wall out would make it easier to get him in and out. I'm glad you suggested it. He could get out of bed himself and use his walker or his wheelchair. This house sure wasn't built for anybody disabled."

She didn't ask him how much it would cost. Maybe she didn't care how much it cost. He didn't know. She never complained about what he charged, even though he heard plenty of complaints about how much things cost these days, "Jeese, 82 cents a gallon for propane."

"So I thought I'd better buy another car, but jeese, the prices, even for used cars. So I had the old one fixed, and prices for fixing cars would just about knock you flat, you know what I mean?"

She wanted to talk. Dewayne listened. People have to help each other, don't they? Jeese, what are people for? He wanted to help. He always added the listening time onto the work he'd done, and she didn't know the difference.

Compared to what a psychiatrist would get, he was cheap. He listened as well as anyone could. He gave Virginia the comments she needed to hear. He saved her a bunch of money. It put groceries on his table and helped pay for his place. Virginia was always more relaxed after she talked a while, complained about the way the world worked, got a few things off her chest.

She said, "You know, it's really a nice day when you take time to notice it. We bought this place because it's so beautiful up here, but I get so wound up in troubles, I forget. Sometimes elk come down that ridge and graze right here in our yard. I used to see them all the time.

"One time we saw a mountain lion walk across the meadow, just this side of the trees. Now, we keep the drapes closed all day so Richard can watch t.v., and I forget to look. Jeese, I never take a walk anymore. I leave him for a while sometimes if he's sleeping or set up with the t.v. I go to the

store or the post office and leave him here alone, and he's all right, but I never get out and take a walk."

Dewayne said, "You should. You should take time for yourself every day to walk outside. You should get out every day and sit in sunshine. Does Richard ever get outside?"

"No. I've tried to get him to. He could walk on level ground with his walker, but I've given up on talking him into it. I can't make him do what he won't do."

"You still need to get outside yourself. Take a walk. Sit in the sun."

"That's for sure. I need to do that. I'm gonna do that. It's better for Richard too, if I do that. I have to have some strength to take care of him, physical strength and strength of self, know what I mean? I have to take care of myself to be able to take care of him."

After he cleaned up and moved the furniture back into the bedroom, Dewayne sat in sun shining in the south windows part of the morning. He would suggest more walls out to Virginia. Whoever built the place built it big, but with small rooms, too many walls.

Virginia and Richard came home May 20. Green grass grew toward the blue mountain sky. The sun shone warmly. Dewayne drove down the curving dirt road, past the huge granite boulder in the curve in the drive, past the big, dead ponderosa pine tree Virginia had asked him to cut down, two years before.

He said, "I'll do it if you want it done, but woodpeckers live in that tree. We'd destroy their home if we cut it down."

She said, "I didn't notice that. Well, it isn't hurting anything. I just thought it was ugly." She laughed. "If we cut it down, the woodpeckers'll come and bang on the house. Sometimes we have to put plastic owls up to keep them from pecking holes in the house, know what I mean?"

The Millers' house sits under old Douglas fir trees. Behind the house, the mountain rises into dense forest of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir, interrupted by granite formations thrusting above the forest.

Dewayne saw the car in the garage, so he turned around and drove back out. Virginia and Richard sleep late. She'll call when they get rested up from the trip.

Two days later, she phoned. Dewayne drove over in the early afternoon. She said, "I should have called earlier, but I tell you, we were plenty tired

out from the trip. Every year, that trip seems longer.”

She said, “Richard’s asleep. Poor guy. That trip’s really rough on him. He’s still exhausted.”

The television was off, so they sat at the kitchen table. Virginia got out her check book, and they settled up for the winter’s work, beyond what she’d mailed him now and then through the winter. The check startled him. She added \$150.00 to the amount they agreed on.

She said, “You did a good job. Jeese, you can’t even tell there was a wall there. Makes it a lot easier to get him in and out of there. You do a good job taking care of the place all winter. I don’t have to think about it when we’re away, know what I mean?”

Dewayne said, “Thank you.”

Virginia said, “Don’t mention it. I’m the one to thank you.”

She had a small bottle of whiskey on the table. She said, “I’m having a drink. You want one?”

He almost never drank, but he felt good, with the check in his wallet, and he said, sure he’d have a drink. She poured two. They drank them, and she poured two more.

The second drink hit bottom. Dewayne felt the alcohol spread through him and reach fuzzy fingers into his brain. Good thing he didn’t have to drive far on the highway when he headed home.

A small black spider walked across the floor. Virginia said, “I hate spiders.” She stood up and started to step on it.

Dewayne said, “Wait, wait, wait. Don’t step on it. I’ll take it outside. If you’ll get me a glass and a piece of paper, I’ll show you how to move spiders.”

She brought him a glass and a piece of paper. He put the glass upside down over the spider and slid the paper under the glass, let the spider walk onto the paper, and he held the spider captive in the glass. He carried glass, paper, and spider out the front door and released the spider in the flower bed at the edge of the drive. He said, “That’s where you’re supposed to live.”

Virginia said, “You’re okay, you know? You care about woodpeckers in the tree out there. You care about spiders. I don’t like spiders in the house, but you’re right. If it’s outdoors where it’s supposed to live, then I don’t mind. That’s a good trick with the glass and the paper.”

She sat down on the rock wall dividing the high ground from low ground.

He said, "Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey. Along came a spider and sat down beside her," and he sat on the rock wall beside her, "and frightened Miss Muffet away."

She laughed. "Remind me to give you a couple drinks more often. I never saw your funny side before. It does a person good to laugh. I don't laugh much anymore. You know, when I was a kid, I thought that said, 'eating her courage away.'"

They both laughed. Then they sat quietly. East of them, a pileated woodpecker called, speaking of the future of his species, and hammered a message that sounded across the quiet mountain. A steller's jay set up a raucous complaint from down near the well house. A rough-legged hawk soared through sunshine above them and watched growing spring grasses of the meadow for small creatures of the ground.

Virginia said, "The rock wall around back is falling down. A lot of water washed down the hill when the snow melted. I'd like you to fix that wall and fix something to let the run-off through the wall if we have that much snow again. You got time to do that?"

"Sure."

"Well, let's go around and look at it and decide what to do. Then you can do the work whenever you want."

She stood, and her foot caught in the vines along the bottom of the wall. She started to fall.

Dewayne caught her arm with one hand and her waist with his other hand. She reached up and caught his shoulder with her right hand. She freed her foot from the vine and stood steady. He let go of her, and they walked side by side.

Perhaps she wouldn't have fallen, he thought, but should he have waited to see? If she had fallen, his slightest hesitation would have made it impossible for him to catch her.

He thinks these thoughts because touching her was like an electric shock, followed by flame that burned through him. He thinks she might have had a similar reaction. He sees her face from the side, and she has blushed deep red. They walk toward the wall at the base of the hill behind the house. Neither of them says anything.

Neither of them is aware that inside the house, Richard woke and got out of bed. He put his robe on over his pajamas. With the room bigger now and the bed farther from the wall, he didn't need help to get out of bed. He stood into his walker and used it to get out into the living room.

Spring sun shines intensely in through the tall south windows. It takes Richard's eyes a moment to adjust to the bright light.

Then he sees them. Virginia sits on the rock wall. Dewayne stands close to her. Richard hears part of what Dewayne says as he sits down beside Virginia. "...and frightened Miss Muffet away." He hears their laughter and watches as Dewayne takes Virginia's arm and puts his arm around her, and she puts her arm partly around him. They release each other and walk out of sight around the side of the house, walking close together.

Richard's thoughts jam up together inside his head like ice breaking up on the river. He feels awakened. He has been sleeping, but he is more awake than he has been for five years.

A tiny black spider walks across the floor. Richard tries to say, "Along came a spider." The words will not come out, but for the first time, he thinks he could work at speech. He could practice and try to say more.

He moves his walker forward and steps on the spider. "Alo..."; that much, he is able to say. The rest rings loud in his mind, "Along came a spider."

He turns his walker toward the entrance hall. For five years, he has not been out there. Always, he leaves by the garage door. Virginia pushes him in his wheel chair and loads him into the car. But he is sure nobody has changed anything in the entrance hall and the small office space by the front door.

Everything will be the same. He will find everything he needs. He knows he can do more than he has attempted to do. A little at a time, he moves his walker toward the small room near the front door, steps forward into it, and then moves it again.