

THE QUARRY

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Five Loose Screws

Note: do not try any of this at home.

As she was leaving my mother handed me an envelope.

‘It has the screws for the bed head in the second bedroom. I’m sure you can do it by yourself. It won’t take you more than five minutes.’

‘I’ll try my best.’

She handed me a screwdriver. ‘I even remembered to bring you the screwdriver,’ she said. ‘I knew you’d insist. Not that you really need one.’

The family holiday house I was staying in and which she was leaving was forty-five minutes by rough road to the nearest town.



This was a remote corner of the world. Police recently caught a murderer whose location they knew, but could never find. He had been on the run for seven years. The terrain was so rugged they could never quite catch up with him. There was a single cable power line that came up the valley. That was it. No phone, no TV, no post, no shops, nothing. Sometimes on a cloudy night you could pick up a radio station broadcasting from Sydney, but there was so much static that you couldn't really make out what was being said or sung.

My mother drove down the road, her dust cloud slowly settling on the road and verge behind her. I stood on the veranda clutching the envelope of screws, and the small green family screwdriver. I looked at the screwdriver. The shaft was bent.

My mother was the tradesman about the house. 'My tools are words,' my father said. 'If you want something done with a hammer, then you employ a carpenter. I do not expect a carpenter to be able to prepare a brief, and nor should a carpenter expect that I be able to use a hammer.'

But my mother had a different view. Household maintenance could only be a matter of common sense.

Years before, my Woodworking class made plywood puppets. We cut out the shapes using scroll saws. The body and legs were separate. The idea was that the legs would be pinned to the body and by pulling a string, you could make the puppet's legs dance. Our teacher told us we had to drill the holes and secure the legs for homework.

'Your dads will help.'

I knew, however, that this was my mother's territory. 'It's just a matter of common sense,' she said. We took my puppet bits to outside the laundry and lay them down on a saw-horse. The saw-horse had seen better days, and wobbled quite a bit. It was very old. I think it had belonged to my mother's grandfather. I often wondered who had taught her so many practical things. Maybe it had been him. She once told me he had been an accountant. My mother went to the garage and came back with a large electric drill. It was very heavy, like the power tools from the 1940s on display in the Museum of Technology. The casing was made of metal, and the power cord was made from frayed woven fabric.

'I'll show you how to use a drill,' she said. 'First, we have to use the chuck key and put a drill bit in.' She looked along the cord. There was a rubber thong which had

perhaps once held a chuck key, but the rubber had perished so much that it couldn't hold anything. There was no chuck key. 'We can use the screwdriver,' she said. Using the screwdriver — there was only the one, and it was the same one I was holding in my hand now — as a chuck key was difficult, but she eventually managed to get a drill bit in and the chuck reasonably tight around it. The drill bit looked worn. The tip was polished and rounded. I felt it with the tip of my finger. It felt cold and smooth.

'You place the drill exactly where you want the hole to go, and then lean into the drill as much as you can, then turn it on. I'll show you.' She positioned the drill carefully over the 'X' I had marked on the plywood and leant on it with all her weight. The drill made a groaning sound, and the bit started spinning. It didn't seem to be drilling. The wood started spinning. She stopped and I held the wood in place. We started again.

'I need to lean in more,' she said above the din of the drill. Smoke started to rise from the plywood. The drill was screaming. A small flame erupted. My mother stopped and examined her handiwork. There was a slight ebonized indentation where she had been drilling. The drill bit glowed a dull red.

'Must be hardwood,' she said. 'Maybe we should just punch a hole through with a nail. Have you ever used a hammer before?'

I shook my head. I had used a hammer in Woodworking class, but the school hammers, I knew, were not like the household one. The only time I had ever used a hammer like my mother's was once in Metalwork class.

'I have the hammer in the kitchen. I'll go and get it.' My mother returned with a large rusty hammer and a four-inch nail. The head of the hammer was ball-shaped. The wooden handle had a large split going down the middle. She had got the hammer and nail from the second kitchen drawer, the one she kept the broken carving knives in. The first kitchen drawer was for cutlery. The second was my mother's toolbox. It was exactly the same arrangement at the holiday house. First drawer for cutlery, second for house maintenance and broken carving knives.

'The trick with nails is that you give them a few light taps to heat them up, then you bang like fury.' She showed me how. She tapped lightly on the nail, and then delivered an almighty blow. The nail clanged as it hit the clothesline and there was a clack as bits of hammer handle hit the concrete ground.

‘No problem. I know what to do.’ She hurried off to the kitchen and returned with a lump hammer. The lump hammer also had no handle. I had never seen the lump hammer before, but then the second kitchen drawer was three times as deep as the other drawers.

‘We just grip it like so and hit the nail with it this way.’ She banged the nail a few more times, gripping the lump hammer head in such a way that she could strike the nail with its side. The nail went through the wood. My puppet made a splitting, wood crunching sort of sound. My mother took the nail out and examined the split wood and nail hole.

‘Nothing that can’t be fixed.’

My mother kept a large roll of gaffer tape in the drawer as well. The gaffer tape was an extraordinarily useful tool. She had repaired refrigerator shelves, garden pots and even the garden hose with that gaffer tape. Once she had even done some temporary repairs on a pair of school shoes. She tore a piece of it off with her teeth — the family scissors hadn’t worked properly since the time they had been used as an awl — and smoothed it over the hole.

‘Now it’s your turn.’

I aimed my nail carefully over the mark on the remaining leg and tapped, a bit more tentatively than my mother, as I wasn’t used to using a lump hammer without a handle. My nail went through without incident, but the wood was slightly burred on the other side. After prising the nail out, my mother carefully peeled the wood splinters away from the hole. One splinter kept peeling until it reached the other side of the plywood.

‘Perfect,’ she said. ‘You see, you can do anything if you set your mind to it.’

‘Mr Robinson had said we should use brass split pins to join the legs to the body.’

‘I’ve never heard of those. We don’t need to buy expensive complicated doooverlackies. We’ll just use some two-inch nails. It’s so easy. I’ll show you.’

I couldn’t remember Mr Robinson ever saying that split pins were expensive or complicated. My mother lined up a leg hole with a body hole, and tapped a nail through, into the saw horse, so that it was about half-way into the saw-horse wood. She then bashed the top so it was bent over, extricated the nail from the saw-horse,

and then did the same on the other side. It worked like a pin, but because of the thickness of the nail, the leg jutted out at a strange angle.

‘What is this?’ Mr Robinson asked holding up my puppet with his thumb and forefinger. He said it with the same tone of voice Mr Rodgers used when handing me my marked Maths papers.

‘It’s my puppet, Sir.’ Someone at the back of the class sniggered. I didn’t come last in the form, though. That position was reserved for Alan Bertwhistle, who had moved interstate half-way through the year, and as a consequence had not done any assessable projects for at least six months. Mr Robinson wrote on my report at the end of the year that ‘James tried his best.’

I watched my mother leave, then folded the envelope, put it in my pocket, and went into the bedroom. I lined up the bed head against the bed. Bed head and bed had been separated some weeks before by my mother so they could be carried up in the trailer. Maybe my mother was right. Maybe it would only be a five minute job. After all, she had managed to get the screws out. How hard could it be to get them back in?

The bed head was attached to the bed with two metal brackets. The idea was that you screwed the metal brackets to the bed head, then screwed the brackets to the bed. Only it hadn’t been done that way. Whoever had assembled the bed head and bed in the first place had screwed the brackets onto the bed first, so that the only way of screwing the bed head on was to guess where the metal holes of the bracket were from the other side of the bed head. There should have been six holes, but there were in fact thirteen, as many of the holes hadn’t quite lined up with the bracket holes. Seven of the holes were near misses.

The obvious solution was to unscrew the brackets from the bed, but they were firmly screwed in with three large slotted flat-head screws on each bracket. There were no screwdrivers except the one my mother had given me, which was small and bent. However, my mother had years before showed me a practical solution to this very problem: carving knives.

I was taught how to use carving knives as screwdrivers when she showed me how to do my own electrical repairs.

‘The trick with electrical repairs,’ my mother said, while carefully using the tip of the carving knife to unscrew a little brass screw that held two wires together, ‘is to

make sure the colours are the same. If you have a red wire, you should always make sure it connects to another red wire. Same for green, same for black. It's that easy. And to think some people pay electricians for this.'

We had to wait until my father was out of the house before we started the project. That very morning he had pleaded — begged — with her to hire an electrician. She had agreed, but now that he was out of the house, she had changed her mind. My mother had never hired an electrician, ever.

We were wiring in a new light fitting, one that terminated in two halogen lamps. She had bought it on special at Ikea for just a few dollars — there was a discount on the discount when she had complained there was a dent in the packaging. She unwrapped it and looked at the wires. There was a blue one, a brown one and a red one. She looked at those, and looked at the black, red and green wires from the old fitting.

'Hmm. Looks like they got the colours wrong,' she said.

'Maybe they just changed them,' I said.

It was all a bit complicated, because in the old fitting there were *two* blacks and *two* reds. She hadn't been expecting that. The two black wires were together, but the two red ones were in different sockets.

'I suppose brown means red. Maybe they ran out of the proper coloured wires,' she said. 'That means blue means black and green is of course green.'

'This may look complicated to you, but it isn't really,' she continued. 'All we need to do is wire up the new fitting the same as the old fitting. We'll draw a diagram so we won't forget. You should always draw a diagram or make notes if you have any doubts.'

She drew a diagram and on it with her unique handwriting labelled each wire so we could tell what colour it was and what slot it belonged to, guessing at its colour equivalent. Red and brown seemed reasonable. I wasn't too sure about black and blue. The blue was a vivid blue. Almost an *electric* blue. She put Gr for Green, Bl for Blue, Br for brown and Bk for black.

She then got the carving knife, and using the very tip, loosened the little brass screws that held the wires in place on the old and new fittings, prising the wires out. We then looked at the diagram for guidance.

All her life my mother had writing and reading issues. If she was growing up now she would have been diagnosed as dyslexic, but she was just told she was stupid. In order to cover up the fact she had trouble writing words, she invented a spidery curly script where one letter was almost indecipherable from another. She perhaps worked on the theory that people would spend so much time working out what the writing said that they'd forget about the spelling. In my adult life I have received perhaps six or seven letters from my mother. I've never been entirely sure what any of them said.

I looked at the diagram with its Bk, Bl and Br annotations. I could make out the B, but wasn't sure if the next letter squiggle represented any letter in particular.

'Is that a Br or a Bl?' I said, pointing to the diagram.

'Bk. Definitely a Bk. This digital age. My own child can't read his mother's handwriting.'

Using the carving knife, my mother started tightening the screws. The tip snapped.

'Get me another knife will you?' she asked, handing me the broken carving knife. I went to the kitchen and put the carving knife with the others in the second drawer next to the gaffing tape. I took a new one out of the top drawer. My mother bought carving knives six at a time from St Vincent De Paul for 50 cents each. She preferred the long thin ones with the bone handles, because they were good for getting bits out of toasters.

After she finished the wiring, my mother asked me to screw the fixture to the ceiling.

'Shouldn't we test it first?' I asked. She agreed that it was probably a good idea. I went outside and turned the power back on. I came inside, and on her nod, turned on the light switch. There was a loud pop as one of the bulbs exploded. The rest of the lights in the hallway remained dark. Now none of the lights worked.

'Maybe it was Bl after all,' my mother said, frowning.

'It's the fuse,' I said. I knew how to mend fuses. My mother had taught me. Our fuse box was the old fashioned type, the ones with the ceramic insulators and a little bit of fuse wire. The power company had once offered to update the fuse box to something more modern and safer for a nominal fee, but my mother had declined,

saying their bills were too expensive, and they weren't going to get yet more money out of her. I went outside with a fresh carving knife, and turned the power off. I took the fuse out and examined it. The wire had melted clean through, which was surprising because my mother never used a single strand of fuse wire.

'It's cheap nasty stuff. You need to twist at least four or five strands together for the wire to last,' she had once said.

I fixed the fuse, using just a single strand, and leaving the power off I returned inside. I was deep in thought. I was trying to do a mental calculation. There were five sockets in the new light fitting, and five wires that had to meet three wires, two of completely different colours to the old wiring. How many permutations, would that be, mathematically speaking, before we had gone through every possibility? I couldn't work it out. I wasn't any good at maths. I suspected the answer was 'lots'.

Which brings me back to the lots of screw holes in the bed head. Armed with a carving knife, I inserted the back of the blade into a screw slot and twisted. It wouldn't budge. I looked at the screw. It had a fine brown layer of rust on it, almost indistinguishable from the shellac veneer on the wood. This was an old bed. On a lacquered paper plate next to the bracket were the words 'HS Joyner and Sons, 132 Lambton Road Broadmeadow,' and then the letters 'TEL' and then a four digit number. I never knew that phone numbers once only had four digits.

I wasn't going to shift the screws in a hurry. The next best thing was to line up the bed head and guess which of the thirteen holes my five screws were supposed to go in. I lined up the bed head as best I could, and opened the envelope. Inside were five loose screws. I looked at them carefully for at least a minute or two, turning them over in my palm one by one.

The screws were amazing. In a way, they were a testament to the ingenuity of man. Each and every one of them was as different to the other four as a screw can be from another screw, and still be called a screw.

The first one had a brassy look and a wide flat slot head. It was about an inch long. Screw number two had a small rounded silver star head, and a thread that looked like it had been originally used to screw two bits of metal together. Number three was rusty, and the same sort as the screws on the bracket that I couldn't shift with my carving knife. It perhaps had been an original part of the bed. Number four was much the same, except it had a round head and a bent shaft. Someone had tried to straighten

out the shaft at some stage by hitting it with something heavy. The threads were all mashed on one side. Whoever had tried to straighten this screw hadn't succeeded, but had, from the state of the screw, delivered some forceful blows in the attempt. The last screw was black, and had a wide thread, the sort you get for particle board screws, and had an Ikea key head. It was one of the many screws my mother had kept as left over bits and pieces from Ikea projects. My mother loved Ikea furniture, because you could assemble it yourself. She never followed directions which were always printed on a large sheet of paper using graphics and as few words as possible, probably in deference to the fact the Ikea furniture is international furniture. She always preferred to work things out for herself. Had she been asked why, she probably would have said following instructions was somehow cheating. She always managed to assemble the pieces of furniture, but often had bits and pieces left over, which she attributed to careless packing. What hardware we possessed in our house, we possessed because of St Vincent De Paul and Ikea's careless packing.

I started with the Ikea screw first. The holiday house was practically bereft of tools, but did have a huge assortment of Ikea hexagonal keys. My mother kept them in an old coffee tin in the shed. There were maybe fifty or sixty Ikea keys in that tin. It took me a while to find the right one, and a bit of jiggling around to find the right hole, but eventually I got the screw in. From the four remaining screws I took out what looked like the sturdiest, and using my crooked screwdriver, screwed it in. This was hard work. Screwing in a rusty screw with a short bent screwdriver into what may or may not be the correct hole requires patience, considerable strength and callused hands. I had none of these qualities. I blistered the palm of my hand on the screwdriver handle getting that screw in. But now I had one screw either side, and a bed head that was precariously attached to the bed. I had three screws left.

Wondering vaguely whatever had happened to the sixth screw (it definitely hadn't been in the envelope), I tackled screw number three. It was too tough for the screwdriver, so I resorted to the carving knife. I had it almost all the way in before the carving knife snapped. Carving knives weren't going to work on this screw. I needed a proper screwdriver, but how?

I remembered I had a little toolkit in my car, under the back seat. It had a tyre jack, and a tool for levering off the hub caps and undoing the tyre bolts. The lever bit looked like it doubled as a giant screwdriver, maybe the sort you need for tinkering with the engine. I found the tool kit, a black leather satchel and took out the tool. It

was about 15 inches long, and did indeed have a screwdriver end. A *massive* screwdriver end. The sort you would use for maybe taking screws out of an engine block. I took it inside and tried to turn a screw with it. The screwdriver wouldn't fit into the screw slot. It was too big. Maybe, I thought, I could use a hammer, forcing the head into the slot. I didn't have a hammer, of course, but there was a fist-sized lump of quartz by the back door. I took that and hammered the tyre tool onto the screw head. After about three minutes of repeated blows the screw head fell off. It took with it the piece of screw sticking out of the wood. That would do for that one.

The next two were relatively easy. The fourth one went in so easily that I could push it in and out with my fingers. I thought this might be a problem, and decided to pack out the hole with sawdust and wood glue, a handyman trick my mother had taught me. For some reason there were several small piles of very fine sawdust underneath the bed head. I have no idea where they had come from, as I certainly hadn't done any sawing. I went to the kitchen drawer where I knew lay a small bottle of wood glue. It had been in that drawer since we first bought the holiday house, about twenty-five years ago. My mother had used it to repair some plastic wall power plugs, and it had lain there since. It took me a while to get the cap off the plastic bottle. The top half was watery, like thin milk. But the glue underneath seemed good. I mixed up a sturdy putty, and using my fingers, crammed it into the hole, and pushed the screw back in. I imagined that in a few hours it would set like concrete.

Concrete, by the way, is a great way of repairing outdoor furniture. My parents once had western red cedar chairs and a small outdoor table that they didn't look after very well. After some years, the chairs had such deep weathered grooves in them that sitting was uncomfortable. My mother smoothed over the wood with a ferro-cement mix, and they were as good as new. Or they would have been as good as new if my father hadn't chucked them out sometime over the next few days. My father, without permission or a by-your-leave from anyone, went out and bought a whole new set, taking the old one to the dump by himself. We only found out several days later. My mother was very cross about it, and would still get cross just remembering the incident.

'For God's sake Elaine,' my father would say, his voice straining with exasperation and carefully enunciating each syllable so it was a rifle shot, 'Why can't you just go and spend some money instead of trying to fix everything yourself?'

‘At the very least, he could have waited until I got the screws out of the chairs. We might have been able to use them. Completely wasteful,’ she had said.

By the time I got the last screw in, it was dark. It had taken me about four hours to do the job, but I had done it despite a dearth of tools, and a complete unconformity with the screws. I lay down on the bed, my back leaning on a cushion against the bed head. It felt good, sturdy. The kind of bed head you could rely on.

My father’s favourite tune was a song that has many names. He called it ‘Waly Waly’. He’d sing it when he was happy, but it was a sad song. It had a stanza that went something like:

I leaned my back against an oak

Thinking it was a mighty tree

But first it bent, and then it broke

So did my love prove false to me.

I often sing that song inside my head when I’m feeling good about something, when I feel I have accomplished something. Today I had accomplished something. I had, despite the various difficulties, put the bed head back on the bed, without even losing my temper, much.

I knew my mother’s handyman hints were wrong, and that things would have been a lot easier had I bought myself a tool set. But I hadn’t. I should have expected my mother would have some project planned for me. And now, in an isolated cottage I had had to resort to my own ingenuity, meaning the things my mother had taught me. It’s funny how we fall back on doing things because we are used to doing them, not because it makes any sense.

Of course the bed head snapped. Deep down I sort of guessed it would. I didn’t know it would snap exactly, but I knew something would go wrong. I thought maybe my mother would change her mind, and buy a new bed head, or a complete bed ensemble. That was unlikely. Maybe it would catch fire, like the transistor radio she fixed when I was thirteen. But I knew a bed head could not have an electrical fault, and my father had long ago put a complete ban on electric blankets. It was stupid to imagine the bed head could catch fire. Maybe someone would steal the bed head. I

tried to imagine someone stealing the bed head. Why would they do that? But then, why did my mother keep all those broken carving knives?

‘Snapped’ is perhaps too strong a word for what the bed head did. ‘Disintegrated’ might be a better way of putting it. I was leaning against it, thinking my thoughts, when it fell into several bits. I got off the bed and examined one of the bits. Where it had broken, the bare blonde timber showed. It was riddled with little holes, and covered with a fine dry powder. In one of the holes I could just make out something moving, like a beetle.

The pieces of wood came away easily from the screws. There was only four of them sticking out, as the one I had wood-glued had fallen out completely. I decided to let them be. I gathered up the bits of wood and took them to the stove to start a fire. Now that the sun had set, it was getting cold. All I had to do was put a match to the bits, as between the dry wood, the little holes, and the ancient shellac, it roared into flame. It was a bed head that was meant for burning. At least I was doing something useful with the wood. My mother would approve.