

Second Thoughts

by Foster Trecost

I caught sight of him standing near the nails. My first thought had been the bakeshop, he always had a leaning toward anything iced, but something told me I might find him in the hardware store, so I went there instead. His gray hair curling from beneath a faded baseball cap confirmed I'd made the right choice. From two aisles away, I watched while he contemplated the nails, picked up a few, put them back. A clerk approached and offered assistance. "I reckon I can figure this out." I recognized the tone, a raspy indifference that accompanied most everything he said, be it compliment or criticism. The clerk backed away.

When I switched to his aisle, it was a subtle maneuver made with caution in mind. I settled a few feet away, but to him there was nothing but the nails. The store was empty - I wasn't there, nor was anyone else. So I spoke: "You building something?"

"No," he said, "Nothing like that. My wife wants me to hang a picture and I need a nail."

His wife. My grandmother. Ten years gone.

"I see," I said. "Then you'll need something small." I reached in the bin for what looked like the perfect picture hanging nail.

"This won't do. It's much heavier."

I asked how much heavier. He studied the nail, then focused on something I couldn't see. Then he looked at me and said, "Lots."

I pinched up a larger nail and held it out for inspection. "A ten-penny nail," he said. "That's just what I need." I'd never heard of a ten-penny nail and asked what it meant, but my question passed unanswered. My guess is he knew, but it didn't matter. To him, things were what they were, named or not.

We walked toward the register, him holding the nail like a trophy, me with a hand on his shoulder. He said something about how pleased she'd be and, in that moment, I envied him. Outside, I circled back to the ten-penny nail, asked again about the name, and this time his eyes came alive with seemingly fresh recollection. His

answer detailed theories so plausible, I wondered which was true, but before I could ask, he skidded into a dark patch. "Speaking of nails," he said, "I need one. My wife wants me to hang a picture."

My first thought was to make mention of the one we'd just bought. Instead, I lead him back in the hardware store. And we bought another ten-penny nail.

