

New Year's Eve

by Mark Reep

It was New Year's Eve. Quail was waxing his workboots.

Uncelebratory but needful and put off too long and now late and leaking. The room reeked of beeswax. Or so the label claimed. Quail wiped his hands on a clean page of the Shopper and rose and unlatched the little window. Cold wind rushed in. A leaf trapped in the window well fluttered at the screen and subsided. Quail went quietly upstairs, found the old man asleep before his TV. Some black and white movie with an overwrought soundtrack, a woman in big seventies sunglasses hurling a sportscar along a mountain road. Dark hair like Rain's whipped about her face. The old man's head had rolled to the side, his mouth fallen open. He was drooling a little. At the door Quail turned. The old man seemed unmoved but the slackness had gone from his mouth and Quail thought he watched through slitted lids. Rain called him a cagey old fuck. He probably liked it. Quail went back downstairs.

His room was colder but no clearer. What toxic shit had they used to soft the beeswax. If beeswax it was. Quail left door and window open, plugged in his heater. The old man wouldn't hear.

He was relacing his boots when Rain come clomping down the steps. No, she said. I just got home. I ain't going out tonight. She posed in the doorway. Losin' you, she said. You still there? She winked at Quail, snapped her phone shut. You burning kerosene in here?

Quail smiled, showed her: Says it's beeswax.

Huh, she said. Stinks.

He nodded unoffended. Guess I'll leave 'em in the hall tonight.

That, or outside. You gonna do mine?

Quail looked in the jar. Ain't got much left. Might do one. I can get more Friday.

Wasn't talking 'bout that shit.

Quail looked up at her. Unsmiling, challenging.

Lemme just go wash my hands, he said.

She closed the door, bolted it. You won't need your hands, she said. Shut that fucking window, though. I get cold quick.

