

Down Cellar

by Neil Serven

Down cellar, my father showed me where he kept his beer stash. It was in a cubbyhole under the bulkhead, where Mom never thought to look. The cans stayed cold there in the winter.

Last year, after his surgery, he promised Mom he would quit. Liver transplants don't grow on trees, was how she had put it. He was taking medication now that made his hands tremble, his notes illegible.

"What do you drink at school?" he asked, and I told him. His eyebrows arched, impressed. Two months into my freshman year at college I had honed a taste for expensive microbrews. They were easier to find in the city.

"You'll have to smuggle me some," he said.

He extracted two silver cans from a paper sack and handed me one. It was his old reliable brand, with the chess knight on the label, the kind I could remember rolling off the top of the kitchen trash, clattering on the floor, when I was young.

A half-finished project lay strewn across his work bench. Before his surgery Dad had been making these wooden desk clocks to sell at the church fair. The cellar was where he had built our dining room table, and before that, my cradle. Now his hands were too shaky to work the table saw. The space still held the dusty odors of cedar and varnish.

We popped open our beers simultaneously. Mom was upstairs, preparing Thanksgiving dinner, and wasn't going to hear us with the exhaust fan running above the stove. The floor creaked above us where she walked.

He picked up a block of wood and wiped off the dust to examine his pencil marks. "Did the girl tell her family yet?"

"No," I said. "She was going to tell them this week, when she came home."

"And you said they were Irish Catholic."

I nodded.

"I noticed that when we visited. The stickers on the backs of all the cars." He ran his finger along the rim of the can, wiping off the condensation. "Well, in that case you know what's coming. You can tell your mother now and ruin her Thanksgiving, or wait a month and ruin her Christmas. She may find out before then anyhow."

He had a mechanic's talent for distilling the plain and obvious. I took a gulp of beer. A few months ago it would have made me screw up my mouth in distaste but now it seemed watery, like a joke that skipped a line.

I was waiting for the explosion. The rare times Dad got truly angry with me, it would rise up after a deadly silence; he would ask me what the hell I was thinking, being careless like that. But then we heard the door squeak open at the top of the stairs. I mouthed the words, "oh, shit," but without missing a beat he pulled open the drawer of his workbench. With a wobbly hand he placed his beer in the drawer and I followed with mine. Casually he pushed the drawer shut with his hip. Mom typically took her time coming down the stairs.

"Am I missing a convention down here?" she asked when she emerged.

"Dad's showing me his clocks," I said. "I'm going to help finish them when I come back for Christmas."

He flashed me a sidelong look of incredulity. The man knew I couldn't hammer a nail straight. But Mom must have bought it, because she nodded approvingly.

"Gary and the others should be here in half an hour or so. There's a football game on TV upstairs that nobody's watching."

Still looking at me, Dad said, "We'll be up in a minute."

Mom's footsteps trailed up the stairs. Once the door closed, I saw a smile creep across my father's face, widening into a crescent that showed his pearl teeth. He still had great teeth. Slowly he pulled open the drawer and took out our beers. "Guess we better finish up," he said. He took a long gulp, then set down the can. That's when he started to laugh. It started under his breath, with his

eyes closed, and before I knew it, his chest was heaving and he had to balance himself against the bench. I had never seen him laugh like this before. "My boy," he said. "He's gonna help me finish the clocks."

