

Hammer

by

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DESCRIPTION

Delia, a construction worker, smacked the eleven-year-old son of her boyfriend when he told her that he didn't want to learn anything about carpentry from a "girl." Does such violence nip violence in the bud?

CHARACTERS

- DELIA [pronounced Duh-LEE-ah], construction foreman; uses a mild Southern accent or slight drawl
- SUSAN, author doing an interview; using a pad of paper to take notes; same accent or drawl; dressed appropriately

SETTING

- A worksite

MISCELLANEOUS

- Tool belt, hardhat
- Sawhorse
- Anything else to establish setting, but should be minimal
- Bag/briefcase for SUSAN

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DELIA comes on stage and hangs her tool belt and hard hat on the sawhorse, slowly and deliberately. Then she sits on the sawhorse. SUSAN follows her, holding a pad of paper and her bag/briefcase.

DELIA

It wasn't anything of which I am proud.

SUSAN

What was the "it"? Delia, you called me.

DELIA

I couldn't think of anyone else who might be able to understand.

SUSAN

So, I'm here, all ears and notepad.

DELIA

I'm not sure now I want this in the book.

SUSAN

The dissertation—the book comes later, remember? along with the website, movie, and a percent of the gross?

DELIA

You are crazy.

SUSAN

(mock incredulous)

What?

DELIA

Trailing clouds of glory.

SUSAN

Smell the sizzle here! Building The Form: Women In The Construction Trades.

(pointing to the briefcase/bag)

Got the acceptance speech right in there.

DELIA

So maybe you wouldn't want this in there.

SUSAN

This dissertation grinds all sorts of grist. And, Delia—you did call me.

DELIA

Well, then, hung by my—

DELIA & SUSAN

—own petard—

SUSAN

See, I even know your pet phrases.

DELIA

And we're not even blood-related.

SUSAN

Imagine that! Of which you are not proud?

DELIA

Okay—well, I don't have much time—those chuckleheads'll lose everything if I leave 'em alone too long. Okay. What you said last week about being on your last chapter—

SUSAN

The lessons.

DELIA

The lessons. I think I had one, past weekend.

SUSAN

Of which you are not proud.

DELIA

To be sure. If only he'd listened! Jaron.

SUSAN

The eleven-year-old.

DELIA

Jaron, son of Jared.

SUSAN

Listened to what.

DELIA

The voice of reason. He wouldn't ease the nail in, you see. Just ease it in. He insisted on banging the board and bending the nail. I tried to show him how it should be done.

DELIA gets a nail and a hammer from her belt and demonstrates.

DELIA

How to set the nail and, with a bit of focus, take your swing short and sharp.

(drives the nail into the sawhorse)

An art to it, make the wood want to accept the nail.

DELIA holds on to the hammer and plays with it.

SUSAN

What were you building?

DELIA

Nothing. Jared wanted me to teach him a lesson in using tools, show him something. I didn't really want to—I don't really like the kid, don't like kids much at all, but I said yes. Well, for love, or at least some facsimile of it. He's chopping wood with this hammer—board looked bitten by a dragon—so I make one more attempt, trying to put everything maternal I don't have into my words, and he turns his eleven-year-old face to me—smooth, unhurried—and says, "I ain't gonna do it like a girl." Maybe, maybe it was the combination of a humid day and the little snots I could see just inside his nose and the bruised wood and somewhere in the universe a fool moon causing lunacy, but the way he spit out the word—girl, like it was something he couldn't wait to flush out of his mouth—I lost it. Wait, no, that is not accurate, Delia, so do not lie to Susan. I did not lose it. Quite the opposite.

SUSAN

You hit him.

DELIA

I had the hammer in my right hand, and I transferred it to my left—a conscious choice, I want you to note, deliberate as laying a chalk line. And I did that because I knew I was going to cock this boy across the face—which I did, as you said, as clean and cold as a chisel. With this salt in the wound: "This is how a girl hits a punk." Yes, I hit him.

SUSAN

Of which you are not proud.

DELIA

He took off, like a hare with a hotfoot, leaving me standing there.

SUSAN

With an impatient hammer.

DELIA

Things raced through me.

SUSAN

To be sure.

DELIA

I've had my share of artillery, you know—"cunt" this and "dyke" that, bam, bam, bam all around me. Half the women I started the apprenticeship with are in the "Loss" column. You can count us in this industry like dandelions on the lawn.

SUSAN

And just as tenacious.

DELIA

I'd like to be more than a weed. It's not like I haven't suffered every variation and had stuff done to me that should have tenderized me. I know! And yet this boy—tiny, just like that word, "boy"— It's there, with those, what he did, that it starts, and that's what struck me.

SUSAN

To strike him.

DELIA

Oh, a blow for the sisterhood, right on! I saw it that way—a little. But I was not going to let it—

SUSAN

That weed—

DELIA

—take root. That was one lesson.

SUSAN

Driven home—

DELIA

—so to speak. Eased in with a short, sharp blow.

SUSAN

You said—one lesson.

DELIA

The lesson didn't only go one way, his way.

SUSAN

So—

DELIA

What—struck—hah!—struck me later—when I thought about it—
was shifting that hammer from my right hand to my left.

SUSAN

That chilled me, Delia.

DELIA

It was—it was voluntary. Planned. Planned. If it had been
passion—

SUSAN

Defense of the sisterhood.

DELIA

Maybe, maybe, excusable—“provoked by the stupidity” as my line
of defense. But to plan—premeditate—how to harm—a child—
now, that is—troublesome—

SUSAN

You meant every ounce of it, you know.

DELIA

I know.

SUSAN

And you took—pleasure in it.

DELIA

I had no pleasure in it.

SUSAN

Don't lie to me, Delia. You can't lie to me. That shift from the right hand to the left—you knew precisely what that meant, and you enjoyed—at some level you enjoyed knowing that he didn't know, couldn't anticipate—having the power of that surprise—

DELIA

Having that power made me feel empty.

SUSAN

Only after, I'll bet—and only empty, not apologetic. Like a great orgasm. The adrenaline spike, the kick of the surprise—you wanted to inflict. Make your mark, deep but scarless. Admit it. Little Jaron corrected felt very good. What felt better—much better—oh, infinitely satisfying—was the shock running up the muscles of your arm—power requires its own blood sacrifice.

DELIA

Susan, you talk to me with a full dark voice.

SUSAN

You called me because you believed I would understand.

DELIA

Dark and full.

SUSAN

Because you know I know Jaron.

DELIA

Your father.

SUSAN

He was a carrier. A victim, too, in some ways, but definitely an agent of infection.

DELIA

Carrying.

SUSAN

Oh, it's a long old story—you know it.
(dodging)
Incoming: Cunt! Bam! Dyke! Bam!

(takes a baseball stance)

Battered up!

(swings, shades her eyes)

Bam! She's outta here!

(grabs her crotch)

Let me just cut you up a little to make you perfect. Let me fill you with fear to keep you pure. It's a long old sad story—my father just brought a chapter home with him. But I'll tell you—I'll tell you—it does feel good—it cannot be denied, it does feel good— when the lizard brain clicks in and you take your chance to reply in kind.

DELIA

So you know.

SUSAN

Of which I am not proud. And which set back the progress of everything. And gave the evil a second life. And so on and so on. But—there it is.

DELIA

You're speaking a nasty truth.

SUSAN

Of which I am not proud. Which I would not take back. What happened after? After the bunt.

DELIA

He ran to his father. Snot, a little blood. What happened, what happened, what happened, all that flying around.

(makes a dismissive gesture)

I hated having to play it out.

SUSAN

Hard to feel superior when you've been caught.

DELIA

I told Jared what had happened, what I did. "Now, I know you're a good man, and you've treated me clear and fair," I said, "but I'm not going to have all of what I've fought for—" You can guess the rest of the riot act.

SUSAN

And Jaron?

DELIA

Snug against his father's hip—and that tore it for me. Just a kid. Yes, I know, like you said, the infection, and it should be irradiated early, but—still a child, this child, scared, hurt.

SUSAN

And Jared?

DELIA

Well, we're not.

SUSAN

He's got to protect.

DELIA

He was good that way.

SUSAN

I'm sorry he's lost.

DELIA

And your father?

SUSAN

He died without ever admitting, ever, I think, ever being aware he had the plague.

DELIA

Mother?

SUSAN

Still alive, collaterally damaged—though, you know, like the land around a volcano, occasional greenery pries open the hardpan. She's not completely lost.

DELIA

But numbed.

SUSAN

All major arteries.

DELIA

So—how?

SUSAN

That's what I'm "dissertating" about.

DELIA

Your book a vaccine?

SUSAN

I wish. No, small voice in a big wilderness.

DELIA

We could hope for the apocalypse.

SUSAN

Purge all?

DELIA

Yeah.

SUSAN

The reign of God's triumphant terror wouldn't be any better.

DELIA

So—how?

SUSAN

One step, like this: I've got the darkness, you've got the darkness, too—how could we not? You eat from a sewer, you are what you eat. Fine. But we do know better. And if we don't do better, knowing better—everyone else pays. Inoculation is a daily act. Just one step, mind you—about as frail a reed as you can lean on, a human intention, a human vow.

DELIA

I have to go.

They pick up their materials.

DELIA

It did feel good, for that moment, you know. I have to admit that.

SUSAN

So now you know the temptation full-out.

DELIA

I should apologize to them all.

SUSAN

Miss Manners would consider that minimal.

DELIA

What a knot.

SUSAN

Just keep the signal tuned to the right station with this motto: we do not want to be like them. We do not have to be like them.

DELIA

And you're going to get your dissertation published?

SUSAN

Yes.

DELIA

Even if it's pissing in the wilderness?

SUSAN

It's the way I pound nails. Someone will read it—some people won't use it for a doorstop. That's some progress.

DELIA

Making the flesh into word—

SUSAN

To protect the flesh.

DELIA

You can put this story in there, then.

SUSAN

I had no doubt.

DELIA

That will make me ready for the next time.

SUSAN
The next time.

DELIA
There will be a next time.

SUSAN
Just make the next time an advance.

DELIA
An advance—like a loan.

SUSAN
Yes.

DELIA
But there will be a next time.

SUSAN
Come hell and high water.

DELIA
Fire and ice.

SUSAN
But make it an advance.

DELIA
The pay off.

SUSAN
See, you got the flow, you got the words.

DELIA
And I got a crew that's brain-challenged. So I'd better git.

They face each other for a moment, then DELIA holds out her hand. SUSAN shakes it firmly. They exit.