

Dovetail Joint

Vanessa eyes the knot at the end of the plank laid out on her workbench. She moves a hand plane along the grain, careful not to bruise the wood with her bracelet. A curl shaves back toward her face, throwing up a pinch of scent. It makes her want to put her tongue on the streak of exposed pine, lodge a molecule of bitter pitch in the back of her throat.

The instructor at the front of the class makes the almost imperceptible dip of his head that signals he's about to talk. He's a compact man named Luke whose hair is the same colour as the sawdust that comes up from around the knot Vanessa is planing—brown with hints of gold. Her body straightens to listen as she watches a red glow emerge from beneath his shirt, move up his throat and into his cheeks.

"Everybody come and have a look at what Heather has done with her corners," he says.

Vanessa sets the plane down, ready to move, but she waits. She does not want to be first up beside Luke again. While she's paused, she wipes at the beard of shavings that hang from the front of her mohair sweater. A dumb choice for woodworking class, even if cerise does make her look younger. She knows from years in fashion merchandising this is one of the best colours for a cool-toned brunette like herself. *Try to look at the pulse*, she used to tell her clerks, *if the veins are blue the customer is cool*.

As she starts to make her move, she gets hung up waiting behind Ernesto, who works at the bench next to hers and has taken this moment to sip espresso from his thermos. He's got his foot up on his stool and his body turned in the aisle so there's no easy way to get past him as he slowly drinks. By the time she is finally able to glide forward, she's so far back from the action she can't see anything. She can only hear that Luke is talking.

"These brass guards Heather has put on her box are practical for a really functional piece. She's done a fine job. Everybody take a look and think about how you're going to finish your own corners. And don't forget about the dovetail joint for those of you who can handle it."

She can see Luke hold something up in the air, but she isn't sure what it is and doesn't dare venture forward to have a closer look. As she walks back to her station, she silently mocks the *Heather-this-Heather-that* of it all. It's only the second week and already she's sick of so much about Heather. Why are the blondes always the centre of attention? Especially when Ernesto is clearly the most accomplished—though she can't blame Luke for not wanting to move in too close on that one—wine and salami breath with overtones of coffee. This much she can tell just by looking at him and his swarthy near-neck beard.

Vanessa's head is down close to the plank when she feels the heat of a body behind her. She thinks it might be Ernesto, so she doesn't look up and is startled when she hears Luke's voice over her shoulder.

"Move the plane with more assurance."

He puts his hand on top of hers and together they glide along the plank in one smooth motion.

"That's better," he says.

Luke smells of pine. When she sneaks a sidelong glance she sees that what she'd thought was

a streak of grey is only specks of sawdust sprinkled in his hair. His hand looks surprisingly youthful on top of hers, their fingers lightly interlaced, his tanned and hers almost translucent white. At the proximity of his youth, her hand makes an almost imperceptible movement of discontent underneath his. They both feel it.

“Easy,” he says.

She smiles shyly and, unsure she can continue, takes her hand off the plane. When their eyes lock for just a second, the strain is intense, as if the muscles behind her eyeballs might spasm. She looks down from his face and sees a faded insignia on his t-shirt: Hart House, University of Toronto. She keeps her eyes averted, gazes at his shoes while she digests this new information—he’s university educated, his eyes look wise.

She starts to convince herself again that despite his boyish skin, he could be close to forty.

WHEN VANESSA’S HUSBAND turned sixty, he’d taken the package the board offered for his twenty-five years in the trenches as a high school principal. Vanessa said then she didn’t want him to feel alone in this step, so she’d leave her work too. But the truth is the colour and light in her job had dimmed the day she was told her *demographic* (read *age*) made her perfect for the newly created position of executive buyer. What this really meant is that she was no longer going to be lead buyer for an exclusive retail chain, rather she was to take direction from a woman who was nearly twenty years her junior and whose sensibility tended toward grunge.

Vanessa knows now that she made the decision to retire too hastily. Dick has adjusted slightly better, although he still spends too much of his time walking Lucy, their aged and adored King Charles spaniel. But now she has definitely gone house-crazy. She misses travelling the world searching for fashions, haggling with exotic dealers and brokers, and she overfills her days with largely irrelevant community meetings and uninspiring courses.

For some reason, the description of the woodworking course had been different. It had leapt from the calendar of options advertised in the newspaper—*build your own toolbox in just 8 weeks*. When she’d read the ad, she’d thought she could use the box to store the Japanese carving tools Dick had given her the year before for her fiftieth birthday. The tools were something she’d said in passing that she wanted, and he’d taken her seriously. At her birthday dinner, he’d said to her, “Nothing’s too fine for you.” What he hadn’t said was that he’d been observing her unhappy spiral, and he’d grasped at the only thing that seemed to hold her amusement for more than a few seconds.

Most importantly, Vanessa knew she needed to build a box as proof she was actually doing something with her time. But she’d made a mistake when she registered for the workshop. She shouldn’t have taken the discount offered for early seniors. In joining the 50+ group, she’d been making an honest effort to embrace the next stage, to stop shrinking back whenever Dick enveloped her in a bear hug of enthusiasm for their new life. Still, she’d been dismayed when she’d arrived at the first class to see the big red star beside her and Ernesto’s names. Evidently, they were the only two who had taken the seniors’ discount.

Afterward, she’d nearly dropped out. It had taken two hours each way to do the bus-subway-bus shuffle from their house in Leaside to the workshop in Swansea. She’d come home at the end of it with a nose full of pine dust, an attitude as wet and tired as the mid-October day it was, and a hate-

on for Toronto Transit. Although when she stopped to think about it, she realized she'd just had too much time sitting on a bus mulling over the misstep she'd made in giving away her age by virtue of her registration. But then there'd been that difficult conversation with Dick.

"Why don't you find a closer workshop?" he'd asked.

"There isn't another one like it," she'd said.

"What's this class again?"

"It's not the class, it's the instructor."

"Well, what's so special about the instructor?"

When she'd signed up, she'd imagined someone more like Ernesto would be teaching. Somebody stout, old-world, a man perhaps who'd spent too many years in the backyard tending grapes and staking tomato plants to have any sex appeal left. Instead it's the surprisingly arousing Luke, and she hadn't known how to answer Dick's question. So she'd been grateful when he'd left it hanging to bend over and give Lucy an affectionate pat.

"Okay, Lucy and I will drive you. We'll walk High Park while we wait for you. Won't we old girl?"

Lucy had given her head a shake and her collar had rattled. She, at least, liked the attention.

WHEN LUKE PAUSES at Vanessa's workbench, she stiffens. She hates that she can't feel relaxed around him.

"That's enough planing," he says. "Take a piece of medium sandpaper and see if you can straighten out that dimple. Look for the spirit in the wood."

"I'm trying," she mumbles.

It's week four already and she's barely ready to glue. Her hands still feel like two clubs when she works. The week before, Ernesto, already on to his second box, had stopped by to tell her, "Pretty lady, you try too hard. The wood has direction. All you have to do is help it." She wonders if perhaps too much advice is clouding her mind.

Luke moves on and stops at Ernesto's bench, where the two of them huddle over a sketch.

"What's this box going to be for?" Luke asks.

"Going to give it to my granddaughter," Ernesto answers.

"Is she a woodworker?"

"Oh no, my friend. She is seven years old. It can be for her trousseau."