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Birdhouse

John awakes in August, Indiana, and feels at ease. His day will be a perfect continuation of a carefully constructed routine, his slow paradise. Today, as always, at 6 a.m., the Sentinel-Post slowly arcs from Jerry's '79 Buick idling down Cedar street, and comes to rest at the bottom of John's brown porch stairs. The Buick's ailing muffler is John's call to rise, the parting rumble just enough to end his slumber without need of an alarm. John stares up at the ceiling, following the big crack to the corner. He folds back his sheet, cotton blanket and well-worn brown comforter, turns, and sits up, toes touching the hardwood floor. It is cold beneath his feet, a cold that signals the coming of a new season. He stands, curls his toes, and walks slowly to the window.

John gazes over his backyard garden, taking account of its progress. He is pleased, but never to perfection. The ajuga, purple-leaved ground cover which serves as a border between the grass and garden, is spreading too quickly, and will require thinning later in the day. John looks forward to tending his garden, anticipating the feel of cool moist soil in his hands and under his fingernails. He puts these thoughts aside, and dons his thick maroon bathrobe, which hangs on a tarnished brass hook by his bedroom door. His steps down the hardwood stairs are slow and calculated, each plank of aged wood bending with a familiar creak beneath his bare feet. John ambles through the dining room and into the kitchen, where he turns on the percolator, the one he bought in 1967 when Hammond's Hardware was still owned by Edgar Hammond. He pours his coffee into the worn mug that waits on the counter. Mug in hand, John retraces his steps through the dining room. He unlocks the front door and pulls it towards him. A wall of crisp morning air greets him, sending a single shiver rolling through his body. John unlatches the wooden screen door, pushes it open, and steps onto the porch, easing the door closed behind him. He steps carefully down the three stairs and onto the cracked sidewalk. He reaches down to pick up the newspaper from the yard, and the grass brushes a droplet of cool dew onto the back of his hand. The chill of the water causes him to shiver once again, and the cold seems to invade his body, tightening joints and tensing muscles that have been relaxed for the perfect summer that is now coming to a close.

He surveys the street before him. Old two-story houses lie at close but comfortable intervals, stretching three blocks in either direction. Their small front yards are canopied by a row of faithful trees, some of which alter the path of the cracked sidewalk. There are no fences, no gates, no hedges. The yards seem community property, with only their varied gardens as signatures of ownership. Each house has its own form of front porch, from the simple group of lawn chairs scattered outside the door to the brick extensions of the house, complete with a glider swing and a thousand pieces of colonial craft. Lights are beginning to come on in these houses as the rest of the town awakens. Across the street, Larry Walton is emerging from his house to find the morning paper, still decked out in his blue and green plaid pajamas. Larry, an English teacher at August Community High School, spends his summer as a lifeguard at the local pool, and has been John's early morning comrade in newspaper retrieval for quite some time now. Larry steps lightly to his newspaper, grabs it, and strolls across the street to John's sidewalk.

"Morning, John."

"Morning Larry."

"How's retirement treating you?"

"Well, can't say as I mind it too much, but this cold, I just don't know."

"Going to be your first winter without employment, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Bet you've got a whole stack of books sitting by that fireplace in there. Now that would be a dream come true - a foot of snow on the ground, and me just curled up under three blankets by a nice fire, no papers to grade, no renegade kids to chase down, just a winter of sitting on my duff, pouring through all those books I never had time to read."

"I don't know. Reading never really caught my interest. Used to love it as a kid, but, after I got into hardware, I lost the feel for it. Liked to keep moving, building, you know."

"I hear you. I'm sure you'll find something to keep you busy. Well, I've got to get moving – kids appreciate it too much when I'm late to class. Have a good one, John."

"Sure. You too." Larry and his plaid pajamas stroll back to his porch and inside the house.

John squints his eyes, looks up and down the street, and smiles. He pushes from his mind the sprawling subdivisions and tacky strip malls that have been planted around the town, and thinks only of Cedar street and of good neighbors like Larry Walton. He is envious of the man, still young and able to spend his days moving around the classroom, solving problems and chatting with kids. The cold air breaks his train of thought, and he turns around, climbs back to his porch, and sits at the lone chair. It has been his routine to read the paper cover to cover every morning and sit in silence, watching the coming of the day, but when he takes a sip of his coffee, he finds it cold. The mug itself is even chilly to the touch, and the outside air is becoming more than he can tolerate. Frozen to the bone after only five minutes in the cool September air, John grabs his paper and coffee and retreats inside to the kitchen table, stopping on his way to edge the thermostat up a few degrees.

It has been four months since John Barton's retirement from Hammond's Hardware. He had begun his career there at age twenty, and for forty-five years had worked six days a week, eight hours a day, quietly strolling the floors of the store, giving customers directions to the Allen wrenches in Aisle Three or consulting on the best mix of concrete to use for setting a basketball goal. John was never the fastest worker, never the most personable or immediately friendly, but he knew hardware like no one else. If another floor clerk couldn't answer a customer's question, they'd ask John. He would cock his head and look to the ground, then give his answer: "Well now, I tell you what. You're going to want to use wood screws instead of just nails in your tree house. Now you see, those nails will hold all right, wood screws will give you some lasting strength."

Hammond's had been bought out by SuperSaver hardware, a national chain, back in May. Bob Hammond was getting on in years, and was looking to move south and live on a golf course somewhere, so he took the cash and left the midwest behind. The chain left Bob's name on the store, banking on tradition to be a significant factor in steady business, but they changed just about everything else. A new manager was brought in from out of town, a skinny, nervous man named Herb Drinbeck, who spent his first five years

of managing at the SuperSaver by the mall on the east side of Indy. Herb threw out the old displays that Bob had put up twenty years ago and replaced them with standard SuperSaver fare. Where a poster of paint shades had once been, Herb installed some computer driven machine that would mix the right paints automatically. Touch-screen monitors were placed all over the store to aid in product location, and John was transferred to the checkout line. One week later, he stepped out of the newly chaotic world of hardware, retiring to his calm and simple home.

This morning, John finishes his coffee with a bit more haste than usual, upset at himself for retreating from such a mild cold snap. He reads quickly through the paper, stopping to carefully examine the weather section. It looks like the chilly weather is here to stay for at least a few days, and there is even a chance of rain this afternoon. He feels a tightening in his gut, a small but notable urgency pulling at his routine. He has spent every morning of his retirement on his front porch, and the promise of approaching fall with its dying light and frosty mornings is obviously going to interfere with that tradition. The thought of the coming season propels him a bit more quickly than usual through the house and into his gardening clothes. He shuffles back up the stairs, removes his bathrobe, and dons his overalls, t-shirt and old flannel. He heads downstairs to the back porch, where his work boots and tools await him. The boots are cold from their night on the porch, and John flexes his toes to warm the hard insoles. He pushes open the screen door and steps out onto the soft back lawn.

Bordered by a row of crab-apple trees, John's backyard consists of more garden than grass, a path of broken slate pieces trailing between the carefully divided sections of the garden. A few morning birds chirp about in the trees, and a squirrel skitters across the garden and behind a bush. In the background can be heard the hollow rattle of a jack-hammer, intermixed with the annoying beeps of heavy machinery backing up. It is likely the street crew, whose latest assignment is to split the sewer main so that a line can be run to the three new subdivisions on the south side of town. Shutting out the noise, John moves directly to the near left side of the yard towards the plot of ajuga that has traversed his dividing rut and begun to invade the soft grass. The pesky ground cover, although beautiful when in full bloom, requires a great deal of attention, and John has been concentrating his efforts on the ferns on the opposite side of the garden in the past week, as the coming fall threatens their early demise. His pace slows as he lowers himself to the ground, one knee gingerly bending to sink into the receiving earth. John assures his balance with a steady hand, adjusts his legs to compensate, and begins to pull the ajuga from the ground. He piles them carefully at arm's length, keeping the growing pile out of his way. Once the offending plants have been removed and the borders restored, he surveys the damage. The grass has not suffered too greatly, and shows merely a few spots of dirt where the ajuga used to be. John smooths the thick blades with his hands, covering most evidence of holes. He gathers the discarded ajuga in his hand, and gently stands up. The physical exertion of the simple work combined with the cool September morning have slowed him again to a careful, reserved pace. The pull in his stomach is still there, but his tired body's ability to respond to that pull has begun to fail. Torn ground cover in hand, John paces across the yard towards the compost bin on the far side of the house.

In the center of John's backyard is a scale model of his house, painted and detailed with careful precision. The structure is mounted on a three foot pole, and a small

round hole in the front door allows access for any interested birds. The birdhouse was his first project after his retirement from Hammond's, a meticulously crafted piece of small-scale carpentry that was two months in the creation. The robins who made their home there this summer have just recently gone south for the coming winter, and so John has not given much attention to the birdhouse lately. John pauses to admire his work. The smooth brown roof with its intricately carved shingles catches his eye this morning, and he smiles with pride at the exacting standards of his craft. John finishes his walk to the compost heap, tossing the ajuga onto the mound of dead leaves, rotting food and other garden waste that have accumulated over the summer. The pesky plants disposed of, John turns and ambles back to his gardening tools. When he passes the birdhouse again, it seems something is missing, something that he had not noticed on his first pass. John squints at the miniature house in disbelief, checking his vision. The four small round uprights which support the front porch roof have been carefully and deliberately removed. Yes, without doubt the half-inch dowel rods which he cut to length and painted brown have been wrenched from their wood-glued positions and are missing. He looks around the yard for the lost pieces, then realizes the futility of his search. He had expected some minor vandalism to strike eventually, perhaps a pellet gun shooting through the wood or even a pocket knife scratching down the roof, but nothing like this. He removes a glove and runs his wrinkled hand over the roof and down the etched siding of the house, staring at the now-sagging porch roof. The feel of the worn wood snaps him from his disbelief, turning it to the first feeling of disgust that he can remember since May. This gesture of specific and calculated destruction is more than he can tolerate. The damage must be repaired immediately.

John walks slowly through the door of Hammond's Hardware, the conflict between his hurried brain and his tired body still eating at him. He has driven the nine blocks to Hammond's, a distance he would walk on any other occasion. Upon entering the store, John realizes immediately that Herb has changed the layout once again, the third renovation since May. The aisles run the same direction, but the first aisle now consists of garden hoses, gutter pieces and PVC pipe. His disgust heightens another level, but like all of his trips to Hammond's in the past months, John must suffer the insults of a poorly managed and incompetently staffed hardware store in order to obtain his building supplies. Unwilling to roam the twelve aisles in search of a single half-inch dowel rod, John grudgingly approaches one of the touch-screen locator computers that sit at the front of the store. He slowly types out "dowel rods" using the video keyboard, pressing the "enter" key when he is finished. The screen goes blank for a second, and then the words "no listing found" appear. John sighs impatiently and re-enters his request, this time simplifying it to "rods." Again the screen goes blank, but this time a list appears: "Rods, Curtain: Aisle Three; Rods, Lawnmower Steering: Aisle Eight; Rods, Stirring: Aisle two." John grits his teeth in frustration and walks over to the first checkout line. The boy working the register, a chunky, scraggly-haired youth, turns and greets John with a bored monotone.

"Will that be all for you today sir?"

"I'm looking for dowel rods. Can you tell me where I might find dowel rods?" John asks. The boy squints in confusion.

"What rods?"

"Dowel rods."

"Uhhhh. Hold on." He picks up a booklet and flips through it, to no avail. The boy then reaches for the phone and pages a manager to come to the front. "Hold on." John sighs again. The store is blinding, polished white floors reflecting too many fluorescent lights, and he feels as though he is standing under an air conditioning vent. It seems an eternity before he sees the skinny shape of Herb Drinbock moving towards him. Herb recognizes John immediately, and shoves his hands in his jeans pockets, jingling his change ferociously.

"Hi John. What do you need now?"

"A dowel rod. Just one half-inch dowel rod." John says quietly.

"We've certainly got those, got 'em by the hundred we do. Right back there in the far corner. End of aisle twelve." John turns and begins to walk towards the back of the store. He realizes that Herb is following him and that the questions will soon begin. "Well, John, what do you think of the store these days?"

"Cold. Too bright." John picks up his pace as much as his waning energy will allow.

"SuperSaver recommends a low temperature to encourage customer alertness, and the lighting is pretty standard fare, you know." Herb's small voice seems to cut into John's ears. He grunts in response. Herb continues his barrage. "How about the new features on those interactive terminals? Bet you never thought you'd see anything like that, huh?" Herb's questions begin to batter John.

Doesn't this man realize what Hammond's used to be? Doesn't he see what it's become? None of them do. John's irritation melts into pure sadness. His motivation gone, John's legs coast to a halt, leaving him stopped in the middle of an aisle, stranded between duct tape and snow shovels, adrift in his mind. He closes his eyes and breathes a calculated sigh.

"John, you okay?" Herb's inquiry is cut short as the checkout boy's monotone voice comes over the intercom, calling for a manager at the front. As Herb's distance increases, John regains his senses. He begins to move down the aisle again, step over step, yard by yard, until he reaches the end. The dowel rods are separated by width, and John quickly finds the quarter-inch bin. He grabs a rod, checks for significant imperfections, and turns towards the front of the store. It is then that he sees the old wooden door in the back corner, obscured slightly from view by a hanging shingle-display. Almost automatically, John steps to the door, grasps the dented brass handle, and pulls it towards him.

There is a creak of rusty hinges and a blast of stale air. John steps through the frame and into the lumber garage. When Hammond's was still locally owned, it served also as a lumber store. Customers would pay in front, then drive through the long, tall barn at the back of the store. The on-duty worker would then load whatever amount of wood they had ordered onto their car or truck, tie it all down, and send them on their way. When SuperSaver bought the store, they decided that lumber sales weren't profitable enough to continue. The wood was too costly to ship out and too much hassle to sell off, so Herb simply closed the doors of the garage and never opened them again. John stands in the long, narrow barn. Stacks of boards hug the walls, waiting for new customers that will never come. The barn is chilly, but the wood seems to give off a life that makes the cold tolerable. He takes a deep breath, remembering the sweet smell of the wood, the warm, natural scent of creation. He slowly walks down one side of the barn, his hand brushing

across each stack of wood, from coarse six-by-sixes to the smoother plywood sheets. Mesmerized, awash in the smell and feel of the piles of forgotten lumber, John finds himself sitting on a stack of two-by-fours. He looks down to find a pile of sawdust at his feet. John carefully reaches down and scoops up a hand full of the fibers. He squeezes them, feeling the compression between his fingers and palm, then sprinkles the hand full back to the ground, eyes carefully focused on the drifting particles. The air clears, and with it John's thoughts. Snapped from his daze, he realizes the waste that lies before him, the dismal existence of these stranded boards, their potential forever lost. He moves slowly towards the door.

It is raining when John leaves Hammond's Hardware. The late September weather has turned even colder, and the pelting rain pops against John's old leather work jacket. He climbs into his car, puts the dowel rod on the seat beside him, and looks up at the brightly lit "Hammond's Hardware" sign glaring through the rain. He feels the tightness come back into his stomach, and the feeling of disgust returns. John grits his teeth, starts the car, and puts Hammond's in his rear view mirror. There are projects to be accomplished, other things to worry about.

Dusk has fallen when John glues the final bit of dowel rod into place on his birdhouse. The newly painted pillars are a mismatch with the rest of the house's well-worn color, but a few weeks of weathering will smooth things out. He steps back to examine the birdhouse. The beautifully crafted model appears tiny and insignificant, sitting on his wide workbench. The person who broke the pillars could easily repeat the act, or even move on to other areas of the house, the gabled roof, or even the chimney. Perhaps with some small wood nails, he can fortify the birdhouse, make it strong enough to withstand the vandals. He opens a drawer beneath his work bench and sorts through the various sacks of nails until he finds the tiniest in the drawer. He grabs the smallest hammer from the peg board behind the work bench, and lines up a nail that will secure the uprights to the porch roof. John stops, hammer raised carefully in midair. An uncentered nail will likely cause the upright to split, and an imperfect swing of the hammer, even at the most delicate speed, will probably crack the porch roof. John steps back again and realizes the impossible frailty of the birdhouse. No amount of reinforcement, no quantity of nails or extra wood can protect it from destruction. John's heart sinks yet again, and the tightness goes out of his stomach. Cradling his creation in his arms, he trudges out to the backyard and mounts the house back on its post. While the newly replaced porch uprights bring the house back to its previous level of careful completion, the house appears tiny beneath the early evening sky, and the spattering rain seems to pound on the structure, as if to weaken it before his eyes. Standing in the cold rain, John feels the exhaustion of his day weighing heavy on his shoulders. He paces slowly back inside.

After hanging up his damp coat and work clothes, John trudges up the stairs and to his bedroom. He pauses a moment to stare at himself in the mirror. Never has he felt so tired, so hopeless, and his face reflects his mood. For the first time in his life, he notices the slightest hint of dark circles under his eyes. His hands, still cold from the outside work, are stiff and aching. With a deep sigh, John breaks his gaze from the mirror and eases himself into bed. The spattering rain becomes a blur in his ears, and he drops quickly to sleep.

John awakes at five in the morning, chilled to the bone. His bedroom is terribly cold. He realizes that the pilot light on his aging gas furnace must have gone out. John

pulls off the covers and moves quickly across the room. Bathrobe on, he hurries down the stairs. He turns the corner at the bottom of the stairs and strides to the basement door. His fingers touch the brass doorknob and its frigid metal brings waking memories of his night's dreams. In the dream, his birdhouse sits on the checkout counter of Hammond's, encased in a block of solid ice. The four porch-supports have been removed yet again, and John tries to chip away at the ice with his fingers. Herb explains that he'll need more than that, and chuckles at John's efforts. The frost from the ice gathers under John's scratching fingernails, numbing his fingertips. The memory of the dream fades, leaving John standing at the basement door, panic and desperation pouring over his body.

As quickly as his newly awakened body will allow, John scurries around the house, climbing into his work clothes. They have dried from the previous day, and although they are cold to the initial touch, they soon warm with his body heat. He hurries out the back door into the yard and strides quickly to his birdhouse. The familiar gray light of an overcast morning fills the air and although the rain has stopped, the chill of yesterday is far from gone. He removes the birdhouse from its post and sets it gingerly in the grass. John dons his work gloves, grips the narrow post, and begins to work it back and forth, loosening it from the cold ground. After a few minutes of work the post is free. John's back throbs from the effort, but he presses on. Gathering the birdhouse and post, he strides into his garage. John opens his car, carefully puts the birdhouse and post in the front seat, grabs a wooden mallet off of the workbench, and slides into the car. The vinyl seats crackle under his weight, and the steering wheel feels cold even through his thick work gloves. He fumbles in his pocket for his keys, finds them, and starts the engine.

On a country road north of town, the creeping gray of a September dawn begins to light John's way. The rain has stopped, but its traces remain in the darkened road and the occasional puddle. A corn field stretches out to his left, its withered brown stalks beginning to be cut, taken away from their leaning tiredness. On his right, a narrow field of weeds runs next to the road, bordered at the back by a wall of trees, just beginning to hint the coming turn to fall. Evidence of civilization is sparse, with the occasional farmhouse dotting the countryside serving as the only testament to the existence of other people. A few snowflakes brush over his windshield. Within a minute, the air is filled with the soft white fragments, each parachuting its way gently to earth. John pulls the car off of the road and gets out. He blinks hard, three times. Indeed, it is snowing. The flakes have transformed the countryside into some sort of white heaven, and have given dimension to the flat ground around him. John turns about with disbelief. A flake comes to rest on his left eyelash, then another on his wrinkled cheek. Their sensation seems strangely warm to him. He relishes each individual snowflake as it lands on his nose, in his mouth, and down his shirt.

John opens up the passenger door and carefully removes his birdhouse and its post. He cradles them in his arms, closes the car door, and carefully makes his way down the road embankment to the field of weeds. The mass of tangled plants gives way easily to his stride, their summer strength having been transformed into the dying brown of fall. John traverses the field and reaches the patch of forest on the other side. He turns and looks out from under the canopy of trees. Already a half inch of snow has collected on the ground, on the weeds, on his now far-off car. John turns back into the forest, the layers of dead leaves from seasons past now cushioning his steps. After about fifty yards he arrives

at a small clearing. He sits the birdhouse gently on the forest floor. Removing the mallet from his pocket, John carefully lines up the post and pounds it two feet into the rich forest soil. He then bends slowly to his birdhouse, picks it up, and mounts his creation again on its post. The birdhouse looks at home in those woods, its deep brown exterior blending perfectly with the vertical trunks in the background. John removes a glove and runs his hand down the roof of the house and over the newly replaced porch supports. He smiles, turns his back on the birdhouse, and walks through the woods and back to his car.

By the time John returns to his home, three inches have collected on the ground, covering Cedar street in an unexpected blanket of silence. John parks his car in the garage, returns the mallet to the workbench, and steps inside the back door. The house is still cold, and John heads immediately for the basement. The smell of the musty cement-floored basement greets him, and he realizes that the pilot light is out simply because it has not been turned on for the winter. Grabbing a box of blue tip matches from a shelf, John pries the old grate off of the furnace, lights a match, and turns the pilot valve. With the sharp rumble of igniting gas, the pilot lights, warming John with its small flame. He replaces the vent and slowly climbs the basement stairs. At the top of the stairs, John decides to light a fire in the fireplace to help with the warming of the house. The blue-tips still in hand, he ambles into the living room and pulls aside the wire screens that shield the fireplace. He reaches up the chimney and finds the metal lever which opens the flue. The lever gives after some effort, and John hears the flue doors clang open. In the fireplace sits a prepared stack of wood, complete with stacked kindling and wadded newspaper. John remembers piling this wood last winter, a fire that he never got around to lighting. A single match is all it takes to ignite the paper, and John sits back to watch the fire grow. It is then that he realizes that the morning paper has probably arrived. After navigating through the hallway to the front door, he pries open the door. A few flakes of snow are sucked into the house. The newspaper lies in roughly the same spot as it was yesterday, but it is covered with an inch of snow. John steps onto the porch. At his feet is a thick paperback book with a small yellow post-it note stuck to the front cover. He frowns, bends down, and picks up the book. The note reads: "John – Thought you might like this one. It's about an architect. – Larry" John tucks the book under one arm, pulls the front door open again, and strolls inside to his growing fire.

-Tyler Smith '97