

A Perfect Fifty-Fifty Split

By David Meuel

The sun was barely visible from behind Mount Hamilton as John and his brother Mack pulled away from John's Santa Clara apartment in Mack's weathered blue Ford pick-up. Both were about forty and dressed in worn jeans, sweatshirts, and ball caps. John was sipping a Starbuck's house blend Mack had picked up for him and scratching three days' worth of stubble on his face. Mack was trying to find a radio station that suited him.

"Forget it," John said. "Turn it off."

"It's a long way to La Honda," said Mack.

"We'll get there quick enough. I'm not in the mood for happy talk anyway."

"You're the boss." Mack turned the radio off, brought his right hand back to the wheel, and took a long, heavy breath. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" he said.

"It's a great idea," John said.

"We can still call Ben and Sam and call it off."

"No. I'm good."

"And there won't be any legal trouble?"

"Trust me. I'm the boss, remember?"

"Okay."

They rode in silence for a couple of minutes.

"Is the apartment getting any better?" Mack said.

"It's pretty much the same. The plumbing isn't worth shit. And there's all these noisy Mexicans running around." He grinned, "They must be living fifteen or sixteen to a place over there."

"Sorry. It must be a big change after living in the redwoods all those years. You heard anything from Ruthie?"

"Just more papers from her lawyer."

"And you're sure she's not going to be there?"

"No. She's in Hawaii—all week—with lover boy."

"Which island?"

"Shit, I don't know which island."

"Sorry. I guess that's a dumb question."

“Maui, I think. I don’t know.”

“Sorry.”

John took another sip of his Starbuck’s.

“In Afghanistan, they stone people to death for doing what Ruthie and that guy were doing. The whole village comes out and pitches in.”

“Real community spirit,” Mack said with a grin.

“And here, we let them go to Hawaii, sit on the beach, go snorkeling, and drink those fancy umbrella drinks.”

“I’m sorry. Shirley’s sorry too. It must be rough.”

“Worst part of it is that they kept doing it in our house. And think of all the work we put into it—you and me. After the cement guys laid the foundation, the two of us pretty much built that thing.”

“Yea, we were proud of it, too. Nice place.”

“It’s the thought of them together in our house—our home. I keep playing it over and over again in my head.”

“You need to get past this, big brother.”

“First things first,” John said, sipping his Starbuck’s.

An hour later, they pulled into the long gravel driveway that led to John’s house in the redwoods near La Honda. Ben and Sam, two men in their twenties also dressed in blue jeans and sweatshirts, were waiting in the big open-bed truck with the words Crandall Construction, a phone number, and a contractor’s license number written on both the front doors.

“Ready to go to work?” John said.

“You’re the boss,” Ben said.

“Well, let’s get going. There’s a lot to do.”

Ben and Sam went to the back of their truck and pulled out two chainsaws.

A moment later, John and Mack pulled two more chainsaws from the back of Mack’s Ford.

Then John went back into the cab to get the old blueprints of the house.

“I want to be sure this is a perfect fifty-fifty split,” said John. “I don’t want to cheat Ruthie or me out of nothing.”

He rolled the plans out on the front porch.

“I checked this out again last night. We’ll start by going right up the center of these steps—right here.” John gestured with his hand. “And we’ll keep it in a straight line all the way to the back. We’ll take

away everything on the left side, and we'll leave everything on the right side. So don't mess up anything there. I want this to be clean."

Mack, Ben, and Sam nodded, and the four went to work.

After nine hours and four truckloads full of wood, sheetrock, roof shingles, and household furnishings and appliances hauled to the dump, the four men looked at what was left of the house. The split had been clean all the way down to the cement foundation.

Afterwards, John and Mack drove back to Santa Clara, silent most of the way.

"Are you sure you don't want to come over for dinner?" Mack said when he dropped John off. "I don't know what Shirley's cooking, but I know it'll be good."

"No, but say 'hi' to Shirley and the kids for me. And thanks for all your work today."

"I just hope you get past this," Mack said.

"Thanks for everything."

John went into his apartment, pulled a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator, opened it, and took a long, hard gulp. He had been thinking about this day—this moment—for weeks now: how good the beer would taste, how freaked Ruthie would be when she saw the house, everything. But the beer didn't taste good at all.

A few minutes later, he tried some whiskey. That didn't taste good either. But he kept drinking anyway.

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