Rope and Lumber

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The old man sat on the porch of the house, his house, the one he had been living in for so many years. His hands held a book, his book, the one he had written over those years—from the day he married her until the day she left him. His eyes stared at the pages his weathered hand turned so methodically, one by one, page by page. The hand turned the pages while he sat and watched them pass in front of him without the pain the real years had brought him. The hand paused, his eyes saw the page—saw the words. His lips moved as he read the words aloud to no one.

"She bore me two sons. The first was named Amos, after her father. The second was given the name Benjamin, after my father. I wished the first to be called Benjamin, but she would have none of it."

Bitterness filled the old man's heart, his eyes looked up from the page. He saw Benjamin coming up from the barn, Amos loading the truck. His eyes moved to the truck, the sign painted on the door.

ICHABOD BURROUGHS
and
SONS
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LUMBER
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The old man looked back at Amos. "Ichabod Burroughs and Sons," might just as well be "Ichabod Burroughs and Son."
"Ain't that right boy?"
Amos looked up at the man on the porch, then turned back to his work. He looped the rope through itself and pulled it tight. The end hung limply at the side of the truck.
"Damn, Amos! How many times do I have to tell you to pull it up tight and then tie it off! Damn. Now the rope won't hold those boards together. Benjamin! Come over here and tie this load up. It don't look like Amos can."
Benjamin walked up behind Amos, looked at the rope Amos held in his hands. "Screwed it up again! You don't know your face from your ass, you know that? You ain't never going to learn to use a piece of rope. Damn. Let me do it. Give me the rope!"
Amos stood there with the rope in his hands. The rope that accused him and condemned him of the crime, both in the same instant. He couldn't help it if the rope slipped, he didn't have control over it. He couldn't say, "Now rope, you stay tight." He couldn't say that. He couldn't say, "Do what I tell you rope, or I'll thrash you!" People would think he was crazy if he started talking to a piece of rope, and he didn't want them to think that. He'd die before he let them think that.
The old man stepped down from the porch and walked toward the truck. "You got that load tied up, Benjamin? I want to get to town before it gets dark. While I'm gone, stack that new load of lumber we got that's laying by the barn inside. Put it in the back corner, near that old feeding trough." Amos looked at the man. Of all the corners in the barn, why that one? Why that corner?

"Be sure that wood gets stacked!" The old man put the truck into gear and drove off, a cloud of dust trailing him down the road.

Amos looked at Benjamin out of the corner of his eye. It was funny the way a person could see things without really seeing them. He knew Benjamin was there, but he couldn't tell if it were really Benjamin or just someone who looked like him. Maybe it wasn't Benjamin, maybe it was someone else. But Benjamin was standing there before Amos looked at him. It must be Benjamin.

"Quit looking at me that way Amos! Ain't you got nothin better to do with your eyes than screw them up like that? Use them the way they was supposed to be used—straight ahead."

Amos kicked him. He kicked Benjamin hard in the groin. Benjamin rolled on the ground like a snake, wriggling this way and that, groaning all the time. "Why're you on the ground, Benjamin? You better get up. We're supposed to stack that wood in the...."

Amos turned and looked at the barn. In the corner. The old barn had been standing there for years, it was so old hardly anyone remembered exactly when it was built. The only person Amos could think of was the Reverend; he was the one who told Amos about the barn. There had been a picnic after the barn was finished, the biggest feast the Reverend had ever seen. People came from miles around to see that barn. It was a grand show.

"Come on Amos. That wood has to be in before the sun goes down. Amos!" Bam! Right in the mouth. Bam...Bam...Bam....

Amos made his way up the side of the stack carrying the last of the wood to the top. It was a good, square stack—tight and even. Amos set the last board in place; it was a perfect fit. The whole stack was good and sturdy. Like a...like a sturdy stack of wood! Amos smiled at that. Like a sturdy stack of wood.

"Amos! Grab this rope and pull it up tight. Make sure it goes around all the boards." Amos caught the rope Benjamin threw to him and pulled it up over the stack. Amos wrapped the end around a brace alongside one wall of the corner and pulled it up tight. "Hold it Amos! The stack's starting to lean some. Get down here and help me with it!"

Amos eased his hold on the rope and let it slip from his hand.

"Amos!"

Amos laughed.

"Amos!"

Amos laughed, tears filled his eyes. The old man, out of breath, stumbled into the barn. He saw the broken body buried under the pile of wood—the body that used to be Benjamin.

"Amos! What have you done? My god; Amos what have you done?"

Amos dangled from the brace, laughing so hard his ribs ached. The ache ran to his shoulders, then his arms, then to his hands and into his fingers. It hurt when Amos hit the ground.

Amos sat in the cell. A man, the lawyer, walked back and forth in front of him.

"Amos, I might be able to save you." Amos stared at the floor, his eyes
did not move--did not blink. "Did you hear me, boy?"

Amos stared at the floor, his hand reached up to scratch an itch on his head. It was an accident. The rope slipped out of his hands. It wasn't his fault, how could he help it? He couldn't say, "Now rope, you stay tight." He couldn't say that.

The man bent over Amos. "You're going to die if you don't come around." Amos looked up at the lawyer. It had all been an accident. No one understood that except Amos and, of course, Benjamin. And Benjamin was always right. "Amos, you're going to take some tests, sanity tests. If things go right we can claim insanity and maybe save your neck. All you have to do is answer the questions wrong--like you're crazy." The man looked at his watch. "I have to go. Remember, act crazy."

Amos smiled inside the cell. He did it--he fooled them. It was so easy. They asked him a lot of questions--questions about his life, how he felt about this thing or that...about Benjamin. Amos' mouth fell into a straight line. Amos answered the questions right--not the way the lawyer told him to--but right. The lawyer wanted to prove Amos was crazy; Amos proved he wasn't. He heard the doctors talking to each other; they said Amos was as sane as anyone else.

Amos smiled again.

The court room filled quickly. It seemed like everyone within a hundred miles had come to see the trial. Amos saw men dressed up in suits and ladies in Sunday dresses; all pleasant and smiling. The women carried baskets on their arms; Amos could smell the food inside, could almost taste it. It was a grand show.

Days went by and the lawyers still hollered at each other, back and forth, back and forth. It was getting hard to tell which lawyer was which. They were both fighting with the same words, only one would say them this way and the other would turn those same words around and say them right back. Amos became confused. Six days after the trial started the jury arrived at a verdict.

Amos watched the judge take the piece of paper and open it. It was the first thing Amos really saw during the trial. He watched as the judge let go of it--watched as the paper floated down toward the floor. It fell in a slow spiral, twisting and turning. Amos watched it drop--watched it hit the floor. All he saw was the piece of paper.

It was blank.

Amos looked out the cell window into the courtyard. A small crowd stood watching the four men who were working so hard. A small child pointed and gave a questioning look to one of the adults. It was funny. It was funny how hard those men worked when it was only going to be used once.

Just once.

A cloud of dust blew down the road. People scattered to get out of its path as it came to a stop and settled where the four men worked. Amos looked at the truck sitting there with a load of lumber on its bed. He watched as the old man got out of the truck and walked through the crowd to the four men.

Amos's eyes went back to the truck. He looked at the sign painted on the door.
ICHABOD BURROUGHS

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