

The Big One

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He knew there was a big one in there.

Sometimes after dinner, he'd come out here in the warm spring evening, and stand and stare until he could see it, hiding there among the roots and gnarls. He'd stare until his eyes went just that perfect bit of glazed, and he'd see it, rising from the depths, dim and shimmery, hovering there as much in his mind as in the real world.

Might be a three-footer, he figured. At least two and a half, maybe three. He'd tried three times to get it out. He'd bought the stump at the wood-lot almost three years ago, a big burl and a gnarly set of roots, with a foot or so of trunk, and he'd had it on the lathe three times, trying to get that bowl out of there. He wasn't really sure what kind of wood it was. One of the hardwoods, that much he knew. He was pretty sure it was a fruit wood, but the guy at the wood-lot thought it was one of the oaks, and his fork-lift driver swore it was rock maple.

As near as they could tell, it had been cut a long time ago, and when he got it, it already bore the scars of other bouts with turners. They thought there'd been at least two, because there were two sets of scars showing vastly different skill levels. Maybe the turner who'd chattered those first ugly marks all over the side of the trunk had put it away and learned for a few years. The second set were a lot smoother, but then there was a big ugly gouge where the wood grabbed the blade. The score stood at stump 2, turner 0.

The first time he mounted it on his own lathe, he'd spent twenty minutes trimming it with a handsaw, taking off roots little bits at a time until he could turn it any way he wanted, and it would stay there. He had it on his biggest faceplate, the flat end of the trunk against the plate, and when he started it up, the twisted roots and gnarls of it spun like ghosts, flickering in the sun. That first time, the stump won through sheer intimidation. He stood there with his biggest gouge in his hand and watched the groping spinning of it until he could already feel the gouge slipping and turning in his grasp, then he shut down the lathe and went for a walk. When he got back, he took it off the spindle and put it away, faceplate and all.

The bowl he could see in there among those roots, rising in flighty glimpses like the shadows in his coffee cup, was almost urn-shaped, only wider, a big full-bellied bowl with a flaring edge, gone all lacy from the spread of the roots. He wanted to take off all the parts that weren't bowl, but because of that lacy edge, he had to cut away the spinning, grabbing roots on the lathe. The safe way was to cut them off with a saw, start with a shape that the tools could lay against smoothly all the way around. But the safe way led to a different bowl, much smaller, with a solid edge, and that wasn't the bowl he wanted.

The second time was months later. He watched it spin until he was almost hypnotized by it, thinking of the scene in *Sand Pebbles* where the machinist's mate or whatever he was lays down under the spinning crankshaft, looking for the vibration that haunted him. He fiddled with the tool rest, moving it in and out and up and down until he had to admit he was just stalling. He laid the gouge on the rest, clamped it down good and firm under his left hand, pivoted it slowly into the spinning stump. It chattered a bit, but that was to be expected, given the number of times on every revolution that it had to start cutting again. Five seconds, ten, fifteen, and he began to relax. The wood was dryer than he liked, and the turning was pretty ragged from all the roots, and the chips were chips, not the long easy curls he liked so much, but the stump was laying down its arms. Perhaps he let his guard down too much, perhaps the stump was simply waiting, biding its time, but just as he thought things were ok, there was a terrifying jerk, and a pounding wobble, and the gouge was flipping through the air like a thrown knife, and the lathe was jumping like a demon. He got it shut down, and in the echoing silence of his shop, he began to breathe again, slowly at first, but then with slowly returning normality.

His biggest faceplate hadn't been big enough, apparently. The screws that were supposed to hold the stump on had been the biggest he could get through the slots, but they weren't big enough, and one or more of them had given way, the rest following in close order. He pulled out the remaining screws and put the stump away again.

More months went by, and he felt like a little less of a man every time he thought of that stump, chuckling in the back of his shop, licking its finger and chalking up another point for itself.

The third time he tried, it was on a brand-new faceplate, a huge cast-iron woolly mammoth of a faceplate, weighing almost as much as the stump did. There were huge screws in through the plate, and there were dogs around the end of the stump, and he was ready. He and his friend Cal hoisted the stubborn bowl and all of its baggage up to the spindle of the lathe, and his wife turned the lathe head by hand, threading it onto the waiting spindle.

As he fiddled with the tool rest some more, and turned the speed up a little and then down a little, and thumb-nailed the edge of his gouge, testing that possible weakness, and all the other fiddly little rituals he could think of, Cal and Emily retreated to the far side of the shop. Finally, he took his nerves in hand and laid the gouge to the tool rest. Clamped it down under his hand. Pivoted it toward the spinning stump. Backed it away. Took a deep breath. Pivoted it in, in, in, against the wood, finally beginning to cut, beginning to breathe. Again, the chips were small and dry, falling like rain around his feet, and again there was the chattering, but if he took it easy WHAT WAS THAT?!?!?

In the aftermath, they deciphered clues and traced down the missing bits and pieces. The blade of his gouge had caught in the roots a tiny bit too deep, deeper than it could cut, and it had virtually exploded. He was lucky he was still alive, lucky he hadn't taken one of those shards in his chest. He'd never seen that happen. It looked like someone had frozen the steel blade, and then shattered it with a hammer. The stump went back to its place by the end of the wood-rack, gloating sullenly and un-manning him further every time he came in.

He stopped coming in. Months went by, and he didn't turn a thing. Fall came and went, winter gave way to spring, and the stump sat victorious in the shop it had claimed from him. As spring got warmer and brighter, though, he started coming out here after dinner, coffee cup in his hand, standing and staring into the deep gloom of those roots. He had to get that bowl out of there.

He scrimped on car maintenance, not telling Emily, putting the money on the end of the bottom shelf of his wood-rack. "You see that?" he'd ask. "You see that, you evil demon? Right there next to you, and not a thing you can do about it! Ha!"

He watched the Packard catalog, pricing and sizing new gouges, exploring his options. The handle he thought he wanted was seventy bucks. The blade was another seventy. A few back-yard oil changes, instead of Jiffy-Lube, and he'd be set. No way he's telling Emily about this new gouge. The way she carried on last time, you'd think he could have died. Well, uh, yeah. Anyway.

He and Cal mount the evil demon again, choosing a time when Emily's not around, fighting the weight of the thing and turning the lathe head with just the two of them. All of the fiddly little rituals slide by again, and when he can no longer delay, he pivots the new gouge in slowly and smoothly.

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