



JOEL JENSEN

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*a short story by* JOSEPH BATHANTI

**M**y first day on the job, Uncle Pat teamed me with a wiry little bricklayer named Shotty Montileone, who had learned the brick trade at Thorn Hill Reform School. Shotty talked like a gangster, syllable by syllable, in that halting, mannered clip, so you never really knew when he was finished. Every day, like a uniform, he wore tight jeans and a gleaming white v-neck t-shirt. He lacquered back his silver hair and sported a sharp, manicured goatee. On his bony chest hung a tiny gold crucifix and the horn to ward off the evil eye.

Shotty wouldn't climb scaffold. Not even to the first level. He wouldn't get near it. Thirty years before, while he was laying the last few courses on a gable three stories up, the scaffold he was on had collapsed. He'd fractured his skull and broken both legs, one of them shattered. Six months in the hospital. Screws and pins in his leg, and a serious, dragging limp.

He blamed it on Pat, who was notorious for ignoring safety to spare his wallet. All his equipment was secondhand and wired together. His laborers crossed from scaffold to scaffold

in midair with nothing but a rickety gray plank between them and the ground.

"Skinflint mother-huncher," Shotty said. "Hasn't bought new scaffold since World War II. And he bought that used. He still has his baptismal money. No way I'm getting up on that wobbly shit."

Sometimes he'd apologize for what he said, because Pat was my uncle, but I didn't care. It wasn't like Pat and I were close. He never said two words to me, or anybody for that matter. I didn't really know him. I only went to work for him because I needed a job. I had just graduated from high school and had no plans. Pat's sons all went to Notre Dame. I figured maybe I'd try night school in the fall, see what happened. What I really wanted was to stay home, read Marvel comic books, and wait for the aliens that Jeanne Dixon kept predicting would swoop down on the kids one day and take us all back to outer space with them. I aimed to be first in line. But I wasn't allowed to stay home. My mother informed me that I was a grown man (my father didn't seem so sure of this) and that I had to work.



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My older cousins had each spent a summer laboring for Pat, carrying a hod. They talked about it like it was climbing Mount Everest, and you didn't know nothing about anything until you had served your apprenticeship. It was the manhood ritual of the family: work a summer carrying a hod for Pat, and then we'll see what you're made of. I didn't even know what a hod was.

The dictionary gives two definitions. The first is: "An open box attached to a long pole in which bricks or mortar are carried on the shoulder." Which told me next to nothing until I saw one racked in the hod stand that first morning on the job. You shovel the v-shaped box full of mortar, then step up to the stand, half squat under the hod, assume its weight on your shoulder, straighten your legs, grip the pole to your chest, and step away. You then walk quickly to the bricklayers and very gently *pour* — do not dump — the mud onto the mortarboard between them. To splash them is the ultimate faux pas, the cardinal sin. It's an insult to the bricklayers, who are the artists. The laborers are expendable. This

hierarchy was immediately established.

I had no trouble mixing up my first batch of mortar: a sack of aggregate, six shovelfuls of sand, and a five-gallon bucket of water, all tossed into a gasoline-powered mixer, like a giant eggbeater with a throttle cord. No problem spading the hod full, either. But when I stepped away from the stand, the metal v of that hod digging into my trapezius, I teetered like a drunk wearing a two-hundred-pound hat. Before the whole thing went over — and me with it — I lunged back to the hod stand and slammed it home, sending a wash of mud over my head and shoulders.

Same with the bricks. The hod took eighteen of them. I could get it on my shoulder, but I simply could not balance it.

I ended up hauling the mud on that first day in five-gallon buckets, one in each hand. I had to stop every few yards, they were so heavy. I toted the bricks in brick tongs. Ten bricks apiece, but they turned my forearms to jelly.

"Jesus Christ," Shotty said. "It's a good thing you're getting paid by the hour." Shotty was patient. I'd catch him smiling,

shaking his head. He was Pat's fastest and best bricklayer, so he needed bricks and mud in a steady stream.

I worked through lunch to get ahead, stocking the foundation with brick. Shotty sat in the shade and watched me. He ate two baloney sandwiches and a whole pack of Archway cookies, and drank Rolling Rock beer — the little seven-ounce cans.

"Don't you ever tell your Uncle Pat about this," he said, holding out one of the beers to me. "Sit down and eat your lunch before you pass out."

"Fungool Pat," I said.

Shotty laughed and blew the beer out of his mouth. I drank two double-rs with him. The rest of the afternoon was excruciating. I was exhausted, in terrible pain, sunburned, and dizzy from the beer. I hadn't worn a hat. My hands (no gloves) and feet (tennis shoes instead of work boots) were blistered.

Late in the day, Pat cruised by in his truck to inspect the site. He didn't say a word to anybody. His arm out the window, his sneering, handsome face lit by the sun, he watched me staggering around with my buckets of mud. Then he drove off.

Shotty gave me a lift home in his beat-up gold Bonneville. The back seat was piled with clothes and bricklaying tools. Crushed beer cans littered the floor. Each time we hit a pothole, mortar dust rose like smoke around us. Shotty lived by himself in East Liberty, not far from my house. When he dropped me off, he asked me what size shoes I wore.

"I don't know. Nine and a half, ten."

"Look under that shit back there. I'm gonna lend you a pair of boots."

I rooted around and found a pair of size tens coated in cracked, dried mortar.

"Take them. Good work boots are the secret to a long life. And grab a pair of gloves too."

"You sure?"

"I insist."

"Thanks a lot, Shotty."

"Don't mention it."

"I'll give them back as soon as I quit."

"At the rate you're going, I'll have them back by this time tomorrow. I'll pick you up in the morning."

"You serious?"

"Six-thirty."

He rumbled away in a halo of dust.

My dad didn't just read the paper; he digested it. Every inch, including the crossword puzzle. It was he, not my mother, who cut out coupons and taped articles, cartoons, and recipes to the refrigerator. He also did all the grocery shopping and cooking. My mother never cooked. Never. It was their arrangement, and, mysterious as it was, it seemed to work. My dad was a terrific cook. He worked as a waiter at the Park Schenley, a high-dollar restaurant near Pitt in the university district.

When I got home that first day, he was already in his tux shirt and black pants. His red waistcoat dangled from the back of the chair. He carefully folded the paper and laid it on the kitchen table. Then he started tying his tie. He was the only

guy I knew who could tie a bow tie — and without even looking in a mirror. The other waiters all wore clip-ons.

My mother, dressed in a girdle and bra, stood in front of the screen door in the living room smoking a cigarette and ironing her work dress. Her long straw-colored hair was teased high on top. A furrow of black roots plowed through it. The hair in her Roman nose was long and black, like a man's. She had beautiful, thick black eyebrows and an unusually long septum that drooped almost to her upper lip. She looked like a hawk, even when she smiled. She hosted at a club called the Suicide King that had strippers who danced in go-go cages dangling from the ceiling. My parents both left the house around 5:30 in the afternoon and didn't get home sometimes until 3 A.M. After her shift, my mother picked up my dad — he didn't drive — and they'd meet their restaurant cronies for drinks at Delaney's or the Luna, then later head over to Ritter's for breakfast before coming home and emptying pocketfuls of rolled bills onto the kitchen table. Their schedule suited me perfectly. When they were gone, I was home; when they were home, I was gone.

I believed that I loved my parents — I had no other word for how I felt — but I did not like being around them when they were together. By themselves, they were fine, especially my dad, but together they were brusque and unaffectionate, always hammering away at each other. They slept in the same bed, and I knew they still made love. Often when they got home early in the morning, I'd hear them. But there was something else about them. They had a history of which I was unaware, and I was afraid that at any moment they would reveal their true identities, like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

My mother said she knew Shotty. She claimed he was a slicker, that his real name was Basil, and that he knew blindfolded the back entrance to every beer garden in Pittsburgh. I doubted she even knew who I was talking about. My dad had labored for Pat a long time ago, before he scored the Park Schenley job. He didn't commit one way or another about Shotty, just nodded and went back to his newspaper.

"You know Shotty," my mother barked at my dad from the living room.

"I know," he said without looking up. "I said I knew him."

"You and that goddamn paper," my mother said.

"Why don't you put some clothes on?"

"Don't look if it bothers you."

"What about your impressionable young son here?"

"He doesn't have to look either."

My dad didn't care for Pat. Something about when he had worked for him. Sometimes my mom would give him a hard time about quitting Pat. She said they'd have more than a pot to piss in if he had stuck it out. Pat was a millionaire, she reminded my father.

"I wasn't man enough, Rita," my dad would crack.

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