

THE SILO

“A little to the left now. To the left. That’s not left!”

The construction workers looked down at Mr. Van Trout. They nodded and gave him reassuring salutes.

“Don’t patronize me! Just do your damned job!” He stormed into the garage, picked up a hammer and pounded nails into random objects—into the wall, into the construction table, into a basketball (it exploded), into a ski, into a freezer door, into the hood of his Mercedes...into his hand.

A tsunamic curse resounded across the landscape of McMansions.

His wife opened a door and poked out her head. “What was that noise?”

Mr. Van Trout glared at her. “I pounded a damned nail into my hand. See?” He showed her. She covered her mouth. He marched out of the garage, slamming the door on his wife’s face as he passed. He thrust the maimed hand into the blue sky. Blood coursed down a blond-haired forearm.

“You did this!” he shouted at the construction workers. But he forgave them immediately. They had managed to place the domed roofing of the silo in precisely the right spot, and now a swarm of mop men polished its aluminum exterior with big chamois, gently in some areas, furiously in others. Soon the roof shined like an aged celebrity’s grin. The shine blinded one construction worker. He slipped, fell, and parachuted to the grass. Mr. Van Trout put on sunglasses and admired the man’s descent.

The crane operator rolled down the window and leaned his elbow out. “Got a tetanus shot lately? My little girl died of a tetanus shot. Rusty syringe.”

Mr. Van Trout clicked his tongue. He studied his hand and went inside the house.

His wife's nose was bleeding. She held her head over the kitchen sink and allowed the blood to leak into the drain, clutching her long, silver-streaked hair in a pony tail behind her. "I don't think you broke it," she said calmly. "But I'm going to let it coagulate on its own."

Mr. Van Trout yanked the nail out of his hand and put it into the silverware basket of the dishwasher. "I'm sorry," he said, wrapping the hand in paper towels. He went downstairs to the basement.

Moans of pleasure. A laugh. Some grunting, squealing...Layke was watching porn. Soft porn, her father detected—no genital interaction or close-ups. She sat cross-legged on the floor in front of a wall-screen.

"At least go to the bathroom," grumbled Mr. Van Trout.

Layke winked at her father. "Cable's out in the bathroom." She cocked her head. "What's your deal?"

"No deal." Clutching the wad of blood-soaked paper towels, he proceeded into the laundry room. He turned on the cold faucet of an industrial sink, unwrapped the towels, and held his hand under the water. It felt good. He squirted liquid soap into the hole. It stung. He tried to stick his finger in the hole and clean it out, but even his pinky was too thick. He found some Q-tips and used one of those. Then he held his hand under the water until it went numb.

He turned off the sink. The hole continued to bleed, although not as badly. He could see through his hand. He could see through it into the sink's drain. There was a piece of cauliflower down there. Or a big tooth. He couldn't tell.

Now what? Did people get stitches when they nailed holes into their hands? Or did their hands take care of the holes themselves? When was the last time he had a tetanus shot? Five years ago? Fifteen years ago? How often were people supposed to get tetanus shots nowadays? As often as you were supposed to get them five years ago? As often as you were supposed to get them fifteen years ago? Is the number of years for five years and fifteen years the same? If so, what is that number of years? If not, how many numbers of years fall between the former and the latter? And which number is correct, despite contemporary medical opinions? Despite old-fashioned medical opinions? To what degree

does the effect of a tetanus shot vary depending upon one's physiology and genetic disposition? Was Mr. Van Trout going to die? Was he ready to die? Then what? Heaven? Did he believe in Heaven? Did he believe in God? What about Jesus? Was he Jesus? Would the hole in his hand be mistaken for stigmata? Do stigmata exist? Should he nail a hole into his other hand and tell people he had stigmata? Why would he do that? Why would he do anything? What would people think if he walked around with only one hole in his hand? That he was only a partial incarnation of Christ? That he was posing as a partial incarnation of Christ? That he had a birth defect? That he accidentally nailed a hole into his hand in a fit of irrational anger?

Mr. Van Trout blinked.

He soaked up the blood with a warm washcloth, squeezed a dollop of Neosporin into the hole, put band-aids on the openings, and bandaged his hand in gauze. Then he went back upstairs to check on the status of the silo.

A Short History of the Silo

The first documented appearance of the silo occurred in ancient Greece circa 20,000 B.C. in the middle of what is known as the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age. While it had no apparent use-value other than being a tall, hollow edifice into which one might enter and walk around in circles, the silo's popularity quickly gained momentum. Soon every functional, financially capable socialite had built a silo alongside his home, and although a silo intermittently served as a locale for the odd novelty party or card game, the structures remained outside the boundaries of practicality and utilitarianism. This lasted for millennia. Circa 7,500 B.C., the silos, which by now spanned the length and breadth of the country like so many shotgun shells on a checkerboard, began to entertain a religious significance. They did not serve as churches or sanctuaries, but as idols to be worshipped. The specific reason for this turn of events is unknown, albeit many critics believe it had to do with a cataclysmic event (among the most popular suspects are an alien invasion, the awakening

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of a race of hibernating dinosaurs, a turbo-charged ice age involving various “NASCAR glaciers,” and a two week downpour of acid rain). The idolization of the silo on a communal level was an ephemeral phenomenon. Not half a century later, most of them were being employed as outhouses, garbage bins and, in select townships, private barber shops. They continued in this vein for approximately 89 centuries, past the birth of Christ, into the dark ages and beyond, until, in the fifteenth century, documented evidence of a silo being used as a farming storage unit appeared in “The Tail’s Tale,” a fabliaux ostracized from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* by Edward III because of its allegedly overclever subject matter and prose. In the story, an armadillo mistakenly eats an undead shrew that invokes sentience in the armadillo’s tail. The tail turns against its owner. Capable of ventriloquism, it throws its voice into various inanimate objects, daring the armadillo to stand on its hind legs, calling its manhood into question, and ultimately aspiring to drive it insane. The plan works. The armadillo comes to believe that it is a masochistic vampire and sucks itself dry, underscoring the moral of the story:

Know what you are before you eat of it.

The silo played no significant role in “The Tail’s Tale.” It was mentioned only peripherally.

*Pure in heart, the farmer passed a silo,
filled with corn as yellow as the devil’s eyes...¹*

But finally the silo had a true purpose, one that realized the structure’s full potential and endured to the present day.

There were exceptions to the contemporary rule. Sometimes people filled their silos with flower petals, for instance. Sometimes they filled them with coffee beans, or eucalyptus leaves, or Super Balls. Typically aromatic items.

¹ Translated from Middle English by Stanley Ashenbach.

Mr. Van Trout thought: The world is bleeding from every orifice. And the world has too many orifices...Or is it orifi? He had difficulty remembering which words deserved an *i* or an *es* in their plural forms. He was sure about porpoise: the plural was porpoises. He was sure about fungus: the plural was fungi. But what about orifice? Was the plural orifices or orifi? Both forms seemed incorrect.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Van Trout continued to lean over the sink. Her nose had stopped bleeding. A thin, fragile stalactite of blood hung from the bridge of her nostrils, and she kept her head steady, stiff, trying not to break it.

Mr. Van Trout reached out to put a hand on her shoulder. She stopped him with a back kick aimed at the groin. The kick didn't connect, but her husband got the picture.

"I said I was sorry."

A pause. Then, in the faintest whisper: "I know you did. It's not about apologies. You'll break it. You'll break it if you touch me."

"It's gotta break at some point."

"Not on my watch."

Mr. Van Trout chewed the insides of his cheeks. "Your daughter's downstairs masturbating again." He exited the kitchen.

Outside the construction workers had finished the job. They stood at attention in front of the silo in an organized line. They were clean, well-groomed, tanned, and looked like Ken dolls except for their potbellies: spit-shined yellow hardhats, bright white grins, designer plaid shirts and jeans, and construction boots. A few of the more fashionable workers had on cowboy boots.

The foreman stepped out of rank and approached Mr. Van Trout. Cast in the shadow of the silo, the two figures looked like generals walking across a battlefield to meet and discuss terms. Mr. Van Trout seemed confused by the formality, especially when the foreman began to clash two orchestra cymbals

together and high step as if in a marching band. Apparently this was some kind of promotional technique; in any case, the construction company was reputed throughout the neighborhood for its musical appetite. Mr. Van Trout ignored the foreman. The silo was up. The silo looked good. That's all that mattered.

The foreman continued to play the cymbals after the two men reached handshaking distance and came to a halt. Mr. Van Trout waited patiently for him to stop, wincing each time the cymbals collided. His patience threaded into anger. He could be polite when he wanted to, but it was much easier to be a bastard. He stomped on the foreman's toe. The foreman wore steel-toed boots and it didn't hurt. He took the cue, however, and threw the cymbals over his shoulders. They hit the grass and quietly rolled into the street.

Gongs rang in Mr. Van Trout's ears. "The silo looks good!" he screamed.

"You're screaming," the foreman told him.

"I wonder why!"

"You did it again."

"Did what?"

"Screamed."

"Screamed!"

"You did it again."

"Did what?"

"Screamed."

"Screamed!"

"You did it again."

Mr. Van Trout tightened his lips. He cleared his throat a few times. He waited... "The silo looks good," he said in a normal voice.

The foreman glanced over his shoulder. He made a surprised face, as if he had never seen the silo before. "I think you'll find it to your liking, sir. Care to test the unit out?"

Mr. Van Trout shook the foreman's hand and walked towards the silo. The rank of construction workers opened and he passed through them and stepped onto an ironclad ladder that zigzagged up the silo like a fire escape. Some of his neighbors had gathered in the street. Shielding their eyes, they craned

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back their necks and examined the great height of the silo as their children busied themselves in driveways with magnifying glasses, burning anthills and vagabond beetles. A few children used miniature blowtorches.

At nearly 200 feet, the silo was by far the tallest structure in the neighborhood, seconded only by an egregious turret affixed to the left flank of the Onderdonk's McMansion at the top of the street. A little walkway with a hand railing circled its top. Mr. Van Trout climbed the ladder and passed through a trap door in the walkway. Panting, he closed and locked the door, then leaned against the railing. The heat of the sun kissed his bald spot. The air smelled like a man-made lake, clean and pure with just the slightest hint of toxicity. It was cooler up here by at least a few degrees. No breeze, though.

Mr. Van Trout took deep, calculated breaths. The climb up the ladder was the most exercise he had done in awhile. He wasn't necessarily out of shape. He took walks. Sometimes he did curls. But he wasn't in shape either. Not like he used to be. Not even close.

A bead of sweat dripped from his ear lobe. Mr. Van Trout removed his shirt. A modest roll of fat fell over his belt. He threw the shirt off of the walkway. He laid his chest and arms and cheek onto the smooth, warm surface of the silo's crown.

More neighbors gathered below, all of them wives or Mr. Moms and their kids. Children outnumbered adults now. There were hundreds of them. From the sky it looked like the street was on fire, flames humming and crackling over the din of insect screams.