

John Allen

Piece Parts

Dwayne had a place in his garage where he kept broken things. Things that did not quite work right, but were too valuable or irreplaceable to be discarded. Things he hoped to repair one day, when he had time. Things, or parts of things, that might have another use someday.

Eventually these items began to accumulate to the point he had more broken stuff in his garage than he had working things, or time to repair them. They outgrew the space he had allocated for them and were now scattered about haphazardly. His cars sat in the driveway. A shovel blade leaned against a shelf awaiting a handle. Its broken handle stood in a bucket with other scraps of wood, awaiting a need for a stake or a small fence post or you never knew what. His wife, Clarice, lay on a shelf up in a corner above his work bench where he could easily reach her when he got around to it. She had accumulated dust, lying there too depressed to function, cobwebs draped over the effects of the hard knocks of her life still present on her surface, and deep within as well. Her eyes were reversed in their sockets, only able to look back to her miserable past.

Behind a bicycle pump with a missing hose his alcoholic Uncle Pete sat hunched, his back against a wheel-less wheelbarrow, a half-empty bottle in his grasp, still where Dwayne's little sister dropped him off weeks ago. Uncle Pete made the rounds from sister to brother to brother back to sister again and again. No one had fixed him yet. All the attempted repairs had come undone. Dwayne was surprised to see him. He thought he had hauled his uncle over to his older brother's the week before.

"You still here, Uncle Pete?" Dwayne asked.

"Yup," Uncle Pete answered, holding up his bottle. "Drink?"

"No thanks," Dwayne answered. He made a mental note to call his older brother.

Before he could get started on his uncle, or his wife, or his wheelbarrow, or any of the other broken things lying about his garage, Dwayne knew, he had to prioritize his repairs. He needed to get organized. There was no point in restoring his wife before he could fix the other things in his life that might prevent her from failing again.

When his uncle hoisted his bottle again, Dwayne tossed a tarp over him so he could properly think about his broken things, about a plan

to renovate them. Uncle Pete and his bottle were a distraction. Dwayne needed peace and quiet.

If he could restore his tarnished, ramshackle career, Dwayne thought, then it might be much easier to get the other pieces of his life back in working order. He began searching drawers and shelves for the left-over pieces of his profession. Dwayne had a job with the United States Postal Service, a good job, a job with benefits like sick leave and vacation and retirement. He spent his days fixing the broken parts of the mail sorters, the robotic machines that sorted the collected mail into the appropriate routes, the circuit cards that controlled the conveyor belts, the motors that turned the pulleys that moved the sorted mail around the nation's Post Offices, distributing it to the right places so it could be loaded on the right trucks so the postmen could deliver it to the right addresses. He worked on the devices that counted the mail, and weighed the mail, and collected the data into files and databases on hard drives in servers so the Managers of the Post Offices, and the Executives that managed the Managers, could study them, and determine how much mail there was, and how much it weighed, and how fast it got delivered, and on and on.

At first, his job at the Postal Service had seemed so promising, so full of potential, as if all he had to do was show up and he would rise upwards into more lucrative and prestigious positions. He knew he was capable of it. He knew he would deserve it when it happened, as he had applied himself so diligently, had so earnestly repaired the broken parts that came across his workbench. And as Dwayne spent his time fixing things, and then finding new broken things to repair, Dwayne came to realize that absolutely everything breaks. Now when he looked at something, anything, like a toaster, or a cell phone, or two people holding hands, his first thought was to wonder how that thing would eventually break. This, for Dwayne, became the Eternal Fact. Repairing something meant it would only break again someday, eventually, sometimes the same way, sometimes a completely new way. Mail sorters. Servo controllers. Financial Systems. Marriages. Civilizations. Eventually a decision must be made when the moment comes, as it inevitably will, when the thing crosses over from the Functioning into the Broken. This knowledge that everything subsides back into the Broken began to weigh on Dwayne's mind as he applied himself to diagnosis. At some point during each repair, day after day, Dwayne faced the question: Why bother?

He found an angry e-mail to his supervisor beneath a box of sheet metal screws. Dwayne had labored diligently, made broken parts whole again, but when it appeared a mistake was made, when Dwayne was passed

over for a promotion, he began to feel trapped in an unending cycle of brokenness, and in his frustration and fury he had broken off a piece of his career.

In his attempt to repair it, to put the broken piece of his career back in such a way that no one would notice it had ever broken, other pieces came off. As it had started coming apart, Dwayne was careful to save the pieces so he could make it right again, someday, but in his outrage and distraction he had inadvertently left the parts around his garage without any rhyme or reason. As time passed, and other things broke, the pieces moved around. Under some old half-filled paint cans he found a brief, ill-advised fling with a co-worker. He glanced up at his wife, and slid the affair back under a can for the time being.

So, as often happened when Dwayne started to rearrange, to reorder, to prioritize the little messes in his life, it seemed that as he found a solution to one dilemma, he would create two more. Thus, he could not clean up his career, or his garage, including the illicit, intense affair with a co-worker, which by now was just one of the many cracked and broken pieces of his career, until he could find space to lay out the broken parts, in order to see how they might fit back together, or to find out which pieces might not ever fit back together, and to devise ways to refasten the broken pieces, and find new places to adhere those that would never fit back together where they had been, so that his career, while it would never be the same, might be said to be in one piece.

Dwayne could hear his uncle's bottle sloshing under the tarp. He went into the kitchen so he could think in peace, and perhaps have a small glass of milk.

As Dwayne removed the bottle of milk from the loud, buzzing refrigerator, he realized that before he began repairing his career he had to be sure it was the proper place to begin. It seemed to him, at times, that if he could get his career mended, it would free up room in his garage to work, at least. Perhaps with the promise of potential promotions and an eventual pension, he could more easily repair his wife. Maybe, Dwayne thought, the two major broken parts of his life were related; maybe her other parts, her shattered self-image, her tattered self-esteem, not to mention her negative point of view, might just begin healing and functioning together more readily if she saw a change, an improvement in his career opportunities. Perhaps her parts would stick together better if she had more financial security to hold onto. Perhaps she would finally have something to look forward to, and her eyes would roll forward in their sockets. And it was while considering these things that Dwayne felt most creative. He began

to wonder if he could use the leftover, no longer useful pieces that remained from his career to repair his wife. Or even his uncle. Or maybe a smaller thing, like his golf game, which wasn't of prime consideration to him, but if a useless part of his career could help, why not? And that other woman, the part of his career he didn't want to put back or restore, but still somehow treasured in a regretful way, he wondered if his wife could use some of those parts. Maybe he could, with the right adhesive, if he was steady and careful, attach a little of the leftover lust that still existed in little piles here and there around his garage to all that love he still felt for Clarice. Not that he needed to. But if it worked, it might add more dimension to their relationship, might strengthen it, might close the gap they both seemed to perceive coming between them.

When Dwayne returned to the garage, to look around and reevaluate his unfinished plan, there was a commotion going on under his uncle's tarp. When Dwayne removed it, there was Uncle Pete wrestling with Dwayne's cousin, Jenny.

"What are you doing here?" Dwayne asked.

"I'm looking for my father," Jenny said. "What have you done to him?"

"I haven't done anything to him."

"Look at him," she said. "He's shitfaced."

"I certainly didn't do that," said Dwayne.

"Get this little slut away from me," Pete said.

"Don't call me that, Daddy."

"Don't call me Daddy. I seen that boy you were with."

"Bobby?"

"S'at his name?" Pete slurred. "What happened to Jeff?"

"Jeff didn't love me, Daddy. Jeff left."

"So who's this Bobby?"

"Bobby loves me. We're going to get married."

"Sure you are," said Pete, tipping the bottle again.

"Daddy, don't," Jenny said, grabbing the bottle by its neck, trying to pull it away from Pete.

"Leggo, dammit."

"Don't, Daddy. Let me have it. You've had too much. You've got to quit this."

"So this Bobby. He got a job?"

"He paints houses with his Dad. He told me he loves me."

"Oh he did, did he. When was this?"

"It was day before yesterday. He came by with Jeff to get the rest of Jeff's stuff."

“Oh, Jeez-us Christ,” Pete said.

“Look, I really don’t need this,” Dwayne said.

“No, of course you don’t,” Jenny said, turning on Dwayne. “Just turn your back on my Daddy and me. We don’t need your damn help anyway.”

Pete held his bottle up to the light, struggling against Jenny’s grip. “You got anything in a cabinet somewhere, Dwayne?”

“Uncle Pete, the last thing you need—”

“Don’t tell me what I need,” Pete said, pressing his elbow into his daughter’s ear, trying to pry her grip off the bottle.

“Daddy, please put that down. I came over here to ask you something.”

“I got no money,” Pete said.

“No, it’s not about money,” Jenny said. “I told you. Bobby has a good job. He works for his Dad’s company.”

“I thought you said he painted houses,” Pete said, looking at her sideways, repositioning his grip.

“He does. He works for his Daddy’s company...”

“Oh, I see.” Pete said. “*His* Daddy doesn’t just paint houses. He owns a *company*.”

Music began playing somewhere in Jenny’s clothing. She released the bottle and Pete rocked back hard against the side of the wheelbarrow.

“That’s Bobby now,” she said, pulling out her cell phone. “Yeah, baby,” she said. “I love you too. No, that’s not Jeff’s CD. It’s mine. No. Uh-uh. It never was his. Dammit, if he takes that...”

“Can you get her out of here?” Pete asked, looking up at Dwayne.

“No, it’s mine,” Jenny continued. “It never was *ours*.” She dropped her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I’m kinda in the middle of something here. Uh-huh. I’m trying to get my drunk dad back home so he can let us have the spare bedroom.” She paused, looking up at Dwayne. “But you said... just until we find our own place... until we’re...” Uncle Pete was leaned back against the wheelbarrow, feebly pushing against her with the bottom of his feet.

“You said you loved me,” Jenny gasped, pushing back into her father. “You said we’d have beautiful children...”

“Dwayne?” Clarice sighed from beneath the cobwebs. “Dwayne, who is that? What’s going on?”

“I gotta take care of something,” Dwayne said, and hurried back into the house.



Dwayne sat in front of the television, half-listening to his favorite

home-repair/remodel show, *Quick Fix*, peeling an orange. He piled the orange peels on the coffee table, half-consciously rescheduling his incomplete tasks in the back of his mind, rearranging and correlating the chips and dents of his imperfect life, searching for a strategy broad and thorough enough to deal with all his unfinished business, once and for all. He sought the victory that would bring unconditional surrender to all the little battles he was fighting. He was growing impatient with himself, unable to find the right starting point, unable to accomplish the groundwork that would allow the process to roll out neatly before him like new crushed-pile carpet. Watching Mort the Carpenter carefully frame out the header for the French doors of a new porch addition, his mind puzzled over his own problems' interdependencies, how each problem related to another, which related to another, and on and on, and it seemed he would have to fix everything at once or nothing at all. He didn't know how to patch up his marred career without addressing the matter of his short, intense, ill-advised extra-marital affair, which he wished had never happened but still made his heart flutter. Since the former focus of his desire worked in Human Resources, and now had a large grudge to hold against him, and knew people who could substantiate the alleged insults he had expressed towards both his current and old supervisor, he was somewhat at a loss as to how he could repair his career without simultaneously patching things up with her, who, thus far, had done everything she could to undermine him. And without renewing his career, he was limited as to what he could do for Clarice. He was, it seemed, screwed. Mort the Carpenter assembled the center beam for the new porch as Dwayne began to consider the idea that perhaps the broken bits of his career and certain other damaged and corroded parts of his life would have to be simply cut away and discarded, like the rotten end of a board, or the rear bumper of his pickup, which still ran pretty good and could function without it just fine, as long as no one rear-ended him. *Quick Fix* was interrupted by a series of warning beeps on the television, an Emergency Weather Alert, and a young, concerned meteorologist standing in front of a map covered over with the color-coded blotches that represented severe downpours, damaging hail, and raging winds, all following a howling gust front rolling over the prairie, bearing down on them all.

He prayed, he wished, he hoped. He conjured. He willed. He longed. When the gust front took the basketball backboard off the pole and put it into the bed of his pickup he became optimistic. The old, leaning shed by the back fence, full of broken things that would no longer fit in his garage, shook in the howling wind. Low, ominous clouds advanced from the

southwest. The sky darkened to a dark, fetid green. He smiled, anticipating destruction from above.

All the weathermen had given warning. The conditions were ripe. He was prepared. The treasured photos already packed into boxes, the important financial records that wouldn't fit in the safety deposit box placed into grocery sacks, and all of it transferred into the storm shelter along with the dog and cat, and some water, crackers, and peanut butter. His cell phone was charged, a crank radio and lantern sat ready. He stood outside the back door of the garage, imagining a funnel dropping out of the turbulent sky, hurling his broken house and belongings across the countryside, never to be seen again. He smiled still.

He heard his wife calling from her shelf in the garage. He walked in through the back door, stepping over the half sorted pieces of his life.

"Dwayne?" she called. "Dwayne, what's going on?"

"A storm is blowing in," he said. "Looks like a big one."

He lifted her easily, curled in the fetal position, her eyes still rolled back, her thin fingers kneading the worn hem of the sweatshirt she always wore. He brushed the cobwebs off of her, blew some dust out of her ear.

"What are you doing?" she asked, a little panicked.

"We're going to get in the shelter," Dwayne said. "The weatherman says there are mesocyclones popping up all over the place. Headed straight for us. Some serious hail, for sure."

"Oh, Dwayne," Clarice piped. Dwayne thought he saw her eyelids fluttering. He thought he saw the bottoms of her irises trembling downward from under her raised lids, like the picture on their old RCA when he slapped it on the side to get the vertical sync to come back.

Dwayne rolled her into an old tarp, so he could tie up the ends around her curled form, the better to hoist her over his shoulder and get down the short ladder into the tornado shelter. He held on to the bannister with one hand, panting as he stepped carefully, the load threatening to pull him backward off the ladder. He unwrapped her and rolled her carefully into a corner.

"Don't leave me alone down here, Dwayne. It's so dank and musty."

"I won't, Clarice. I just have to get a few more things. Some tools and the pet food. And I need to clear out some space in the garage so I can pull the pickup in, just in case. We dropped the comprehensive on it, remember?"

"Oh sure, Dwayne. Just don't be long."

"And I'll get another flashlight. And some batteries."

"What about my *dieffenbachia*?" Her eyes darted side to side as she

took a mental inventory.

“I don’t know, Clarice. It’s heavy, and there’s only so much room.” Dwayne didn’t want to tell her he had thrown it out, yellowed and dying, the week before.

“Well, how about the grandfather clock in the hallway? It belonged to my Aunt Agnes, you know, and she was always so kind to me. After mother died—”

“We’ll see, Clarice, but geez, I can’t get everything, and—”

“Oh, Dwayne, I know, I’m sorry. But what about the divan in the back room? My mother gave that to us when we were married, and—and what about the piano? I learned to play on that piano, and--”

“I can’t carry the piano, Clarice. I’ll try to drag the divan out, but Clarice, we can’t save everything. We’ll see. I gotta check on Uncle Pete.”

“Pete? Is he still here? How did—? Oh, Dwayne, all those memories!!”

But Dwayne was already up the ladder, closing the lid on the shelter.



“I ain’t going nowhere,” Uncle Pete slurred when Dwayne pulled the tarp off of him. “I’m comfortable right here.”

“They’re talking tornadoes, Pete. Pleasantville’s already been hit. They’re headed this way. More than one, looks like. Big, long-track ones, they’re saying.”

“Tornado, shmornado,” Pete said, still gripping his bottle.

“Where’d Jenny go?”

Uncle Pete looked around him, then shrugged. “How would I know?”

“She was just here.”

Uncle Pete shrugged again, took a long drag off his bottle. He swirled the whiskey around, looking at it wistfully. “I can’t keep up with that child.”

“C’mon. I can’t leave you here.”

Dwayne looked around the kitchen, opening cabinets. Pete stumbled along behind him, double-checking. Pete grabbed a half-empty bottle of cooking sherry, and three beers from the refrigerator, still in their plastic rings.

“Dammit, Uncle Pete.”

“S’ok,” Pete said. “I got it.” He put half a bottle of cough syrup in his pocket as Dwayne moved into the back room and pushed the piano into the southwest corner of the room, covering it with cushions from the couch and a throw rug off the floor.

“That’ll have to do,” he said. “Maybe it’ll survive.”

“Survive,” Uncle Pete mumbled, blinking slowly. “Yup, survive.”

“If not, we’ve got full coverage.”

Dwayne took a slow walk through the house on the worn and stained carpet. He looked at this object and that, pausing to determine whether they merited saving or not. He took an old vodka bottle full of change off the dresser in his bedroom. He glanced at the walls, thinking back on all the spackle jobs, the repainting he had done over the years. He looked out the window at the trees, jerking and swaying.

He turned back to the bedroom, saw Uncle Pete exiting his closet, wrapped in layers of jackets and raincoats, bottles and beer cans stuck in their pockets, his arms holding two umbrellas.

“Don’t wanna get wet,” Uncle Pete mumbled.

“They’re yours,” Dwayne said, stuffing two rolls of toilet paper into the raincoat pockets over the necks of the bottles. “Hang onto these.”

There were any number of things Dwayne could take. Most of what he regarded important was already in the shelter, but now that the moment was near, he stopped to consider these last things, the bathroom mat, the toothbrushes, the roll of paper towels hanging askew under a kitchen cabinet with its doors ajar, these last everyday things that seemed to call out to him, seemed to accuse him of an insensitivity that let him leave them all behind.

Dwayne thought he heard something, and as he paused, head cocked, listening for some missing sound, he realized the wind had stopped. All had grown calm. Out the kitchen window the trees stood motionless, the sky like pea green soup. A siren began to wail.

“C’mon, Uncle Pete, we gotta hurry,” he said, pushing Pete ahead of him out of the kitchen into the garage. The door swung open and they ran, straight into Jenny, stooped over and weeping, her incomplete and fractured love spilled over the floor, under the cabinets, scattered amongst all the other broken things.

“Aw, fuck,” Uncle Pete said.

“C’mon,” Dwayne said, his voice rising, the hairs on the back of his neck lifting, a low rumbling coming from across the horizon. He lifted Jenny up from her knees where she was trying to gather her shattered love into a pile, and pushed them both staggering out the back door towards the tornado shelter. Dwayne started to follow but then stopped, and dropping to a knee he swept up with his hands a small, mixed pile of broken bits and put it in his pocket before he chased after Pete and Jenny. He lifted the shelter door and they lurched in and down the steps as he took one last look around, the tree branches slowly starting to tremble upwards, the backboard levitating up out of the back of the pickup he had forgotten

to put in the garage, somebody's wading pool dropping softly onto the yard before lifting off again, the wind picking up and the noise surrounding him and growing louder like the leaky washing machine going into a spin cycle, the worn bearings screaming for replacement, or like a fighter jet coming down on them out of the eerie sky, afterburners aflame, hitting full throttle just as Dwayne threw himself in, the door clanging down, the spring loaded catch popping into place as he hit the floor, the air exploding above them as they huddled on the floor, hands on their popping ears.

Dwayne found the radio, turned it on, tuned it to one of the stations that had abandoned their programming to report the extensive damage across the tornado-ravaged city. Hook echoes here, hook echoes there. It seemed a gang of tornadoes were assaulting the town. By the time Dwayne found a station, reporting a tornado on the ground, reporting a track running diagonally, southwest to northeast across town, across his very property, the noise, the shearing and cracking of tree trunks, the scratching and thumping of heavy objects against the top of the shelter had abated. All was still. In the time it had taken him to dive into the shelter and find the radio, it was over.

Uncle Pete clambered up the ladder to open the door.

"Wait a minute," Dwayne said, but when Uncle Pete looked back at him he could only shrug. "Go ahead."

When Pete pulled the latch free and pushed up on the door, it wouldn't budge. Dwayne crowded up onto the steps beside him, and together they shoved the door open, tree branches snapping and swinging free and pushing into the opening of the doorway. Together, they pushed up until the door stood up and open, broken branches and torn leaves whipping down onto them.

"Dwayne, what is it? What just happened?" Clarice asked.

"A tornado, Clarice. A tornado just happened." Dwayne pushed the branches aside and clambered up the ladder into the yard. Pete followed, bottle in hand.

"Wow," Uncle Pete said, lifting the bottle before realizing it was empty.

Dwayne stepped over the branches into the yard. He paused to look around. The trees were stripped and bare of leaves, as if it were December. Some lay on their sides, roots exposed. Large limbs were scattered about. Raw trunks stood up out of the ground, their bark gone. Nearly all the leaves had been swept away. The neighborhood seemed strangely exposed, naked and violated. Missing buildings allowed angles of view previously unseen. Some of the bushes and shrubs were sheared off at the ground, some yanked out by the roots, leaving only holes or depressions where they

had been. Others were reduced to collections of sticks. The shed was gone, and everything in it. The house was gone, water pipes spewing water, the smell of gas in the air. A swing set hung in what was left of his walnut tree.

“Holy shit,” Pete said.

Dwayne wandered over to where his garage had been. Only a bare square of concrete was left to show where all the salvaged pieces of his life had been collected. Now, nothing was in one piece. The pad was stripped of everything save for a few pieces of electrical conduit left hanging in the remains of an interior wall and some sheared-off pieces of plumbing sticking up out of the concrete. Wads of insulation were stuck in the crumpled chain link fence. Everything he had ever owned, broken or not, was gone. All that he had collected, saved, hoarded, was sucked away as if by a giant vacuum cleaner, leaving only the bare, stripped concrete and foundation.

“Dwayne,” he heard, from down in the hole, down in the shelter. “Is everything all right, Dwayne?”

Dwayne turned from the garage, walked back to Clarice and the shelter. She stood there, peeking out of the top of the shelter, rubbing her eyes.

“Dwayne?”

“Everything’s fine, Clarice,” Dwayne said. “Everything’s gone.” He reached down to her. “All gone.”

She reached up, squinting, her eyes sensitive even under the overcast skies, but she was peering up at him through her eyelashes, she was stepping up the ladder as he helped her out of the shelter and across the tree limbs in front of it. She stumbled over to where the house had once stood, still blinking, trying to focus her disused eyes, saying nothing. Dwayne climbed back into the shelter for a pair of channel locks to shut the gas off with. Jenny sat in a corner sobbing.

“C’mon out,” Dwayne said. “It’ll do your heart good to see the place.”

Dwayne climbed back out and walked to the back of the yard to the gas meter. It had survived somehow, untouched. He closed the valve and turned back to his home, not just flattened but removed. Mangled siding and trim from some other house stuck up out of the yard. Save for some scattered bricks and pieces of shredded plywood, and a few wall studs of the empty front hall closet, the demolished portions of the house were gone. Dwayne could now see across the street from his back fence, could see his neighbor’s garage door, leaning against the piled rubble of the garage walls crumpled in their driveway, could see all the way to the interstate beyond.

They walked around on the pad. Dwayne was giddy. Clarice pretended to open cabinets in the kitchen. She giggled, imagining a new dishwasher

in the kitchen. Dwayne faked a shower where the bathroom used to be. He plugged an imaginary television into the lone socket in what was left of the hallway and pretended to watch football. Clarice stood in the Master Bath, arranging the jacuzzi and the shower and the walk-in closets, choosing the tile, laughing. Uncle Pete and Jenny walked over to where the water was spewing up out of the bathroom floor, talking quietly to each other. Dwayne watched them, removing the last bits he had collected off the garage floor from his pocket. He fingered them in his palm, recognizing a few of them, sorting them and stirring them about. He looked up, saw Jenny looking off to the southwest at the path of destruction, drying her eyes and sniffing. Uncle Pete popped open the tab on one of the beers in his pocket. Clarice walked around remembering where the rooms of the house once were, looking up where there no longer was any roof. Dwayne tossed them up into the air, those last little bits, so small and insubstantial, into the now-gentle breeze.

From across the fields the sirens began to sound again.

Dwayne glanced over once more at the empty pad, looking forward to something brand new to shelter them, something with a warranty, put in right and nothing overlooked, the roof tight, the flashing bright, with room for both cars in the garage, next to a little workbench and all his tools, each in its place. He gazed up at the evening sky, no home to go to, no car to get him there, all the damaged pieces now gone and nothing more to worry about but the future, the ordered life he knew they could live without the nagging interruptions of a thousand broken things.