

Rambo on the Moon

The morning that young Joe MacDonald stepped from the van the sun and the moon were sharing the sky. He stood out amongst the dirt stained workers preparing to begin their day. He was too clean. Each item of his clothing had yet to endure a single day's work. He stood out, and he stood staring at the moon. I watched him as I buckled on my tool belt. I caught a glimpse of Slate Knife McCallum striding across the building site, homing in on the new start. Old Slate Knife wouldn't be long in pulling Joe's head out of the sky and getting it down to the job. He grabbed Joe's hand, turned it palm up and dumped a heap of nails onto the fresh pink skin.

'The moon's never far away, son, and there's always work to be done. If you want to stare at the moon, that's fair enough, do it in your father's back garden. If you want to work, put your tool belt on and fill it with these. It'll not be long before I'm needing them.'

The youngster had moved from the moon to a handful of nails in the space of a single breath.

When all three of us were set, we left the frost on the ground and ascended the scaffold, lifting and laying our limbs to the sound of hammers. Joe's feet didn't falter as we got higher. It seemed he had a head for heights, which was just as well. The exertion of climbing the scaffold had brought forth my first sweat of the day. When we got to roof level I looked out across the Forth Valley.

'It's a good day to work,' I said, 'crisp and clear.'

'There's a rain coming,' replied Slate Knife, 'mid-afternoon.'

'The weather forecast said it was to be clear.'

'We'll see.' As usual, he was sure of himself.

'Seems like the older you get the further you can see. 'I looked down at all the slate that had to be moved from one side of the scaffold to the other.

'It's all in the nose.' He tapped his grizzly old hooter. In fact, right there I noticed how much his nostril resembled one side of a pick axe.

'Well you better breathe through your mouth. Otherwise you'll drag the rain towards us.'

I expected some sort of reply, even a cuff across the ear, which wasn't beyond him, but he just tapped me on the shoulder and pointed behind me. Joe was there, kneeling down in front of a pile of slate. He was looking down intently at something. We crept up beside him. The youngster was staring at a fly that had landed on the top slate. Slate Knife lifted his hand.

'No,' said Joe quietly, 'Don't, can't you see it's rubbing its hands?'

'Young Rambo,' Slate Knife had the habit of calling anyone under the age of eighteen that. 'Young Rambo,' he said, 'I wouldn't dare hurt something so small and so precious,' then slapped Joe across the back of the head.

The fly took off, and for an instant was framed by the moon which was now sitting low in the sky. Joe laid his hand on the back of his head and watched the fly zip away.

‘Sorry,’ he said.

Slate Knife rolled his eyes at me. ‘Sorry doesn’t move these slates from one place to another. It’s your back that’ll do that, now start lifting. You can see where they’ve to go.’ Joe bent to pick up a lift and struggled to get it waist high. He lumbered over the wooden planking of the scaffold like he was struggling to cross the deck of a ship in a high storm.

‘Easy there sailor,’ I called after him. I took him back to the slate, showed him how to use his knees to get the lift to his shoulder in one smooth movement.

‘Less strain on your back if you use your shoulder, and don’t carry more than your body wants to. You’ll need your back to earn your money. If that goes, you’re fucked. Make lots of journeys with what you can handle, your strength will build from there. And don’t let anyone tell you any different. Break your back for no man. Your hear me?’ He nodded once with a stern set to his lips.

‘Good,’ I said, ‘now go.’ He struggled but he got the lift to his shoulder. It would come with practice. ‘And enjoy yourself,’ I shouted at his back, ‘at least up here you can see the world. You could be cooped up inside like the joiners.’ He looked over his free shoulder at me then, but it was hard to decipher his expression.

I found old Slate Knife cutting down broken bits of slate to tappers.

‘Go easy on the lad, for Christ’s sake. He’s a bit of a dreamer but he’s sixteen, it’s his first day. You don’t want him going to bed tonight dreading tomorrow.’

‘A dreamer? If he wanted to be an astrologist or a zoologist he should’ve stuck in at school, but he didn’t, and he’s here with us. We can teach him how to make a living but if he doesn’t keep his mind on the job he’s a danger to himself and a danger to us. The sooner we find out what he’s made of, the better.’

‘Old Slate Knife McCallum, have you forgotten what it was to be young? Have you forgotten what it was like to run in the woods?’

He looked up at me then. I could see his face, and his eyes, and the lines stretching from his eyes, and the frost covered fields stretching into the distance behind him.

‘I remember what it was like to run in the woods,’ he said, then set to his task again. I knelt down beside him and picked up a brick to use as a sage. We fell into rhythm, lifting and chopping and laying. Even our breath that spread out before us came and went in tandem.

By the time we had stopped for lunch the slate had been shifted. We had struck the chalk lines across the felt and made a good start to slating the roof. Joe had begun to blend in. The half shift had soiled his clean clothes. He walked across the rubble strewn ground with a dip and roll to his shoulders that came partly from exertion, and partly from the sweat that had already begun to freeze on his back. All three of us welcomed the cramped interior of the van with a deep and satisfied sigh. Slate Knife let the engine turn over and switched some power to the heating element. Not too much, though. If the temperature didn’t rise gently the skin on our hands and feet would begin to itch and burn

Joe was jammed between us. He was as thin as a piece of string but as we tried to shift out bodies to collect our flasks I noted how wide his shoulders were. Given

proper exercise he would fill out well. It was our policy to always have three clean mugs hidden safely inside the dash. Slate Knife had strong black coffee in his flask and steam drifted upwards from the dark liquid as he poured a moderate measure into each of the mugs. I had let a pot of soup simmer for hours the night before. Plenty of vegetables for goodness and two healthy chunks of smoked rib from the local butcher gave heart to the flavour. We used the plastic cups from the top of our flasks as bowls. Joe watched us from the corner of his eye and imitated our movements as we raised the soup to our lips and paused to let the heat flow over our faces before slurping down the meat and vegetables.

I was speaking into my soup but addressing young Joe when I asked the question.

‘Have you got yourself a wee girlfriend son?’

‘Yes,’ he answered, then blew his breath into his soup to encourage it to cool.

‘What’s her name?’ asked Slate Knife.

‘Maria.’

‘Maria, good, I meant her second name.’

‘McKenna.’

Slate Knife set down his coffee and looked out of the window at his right shoulder.

‘I knew her mother. She was a good woman. That’s a strong family you’re moving into there son, keep a hold of that one.’

Half Brick McMurphy appeared from the side of the farmhouse and came stomping across the building site towards the van.

‘What’s this idiot looking for?’ Slate Knife didn’t much care for the Mcmurphys. He just sat there until Half Brick was standing outside his window. Then he still just sat there, facing him through the pane of glass. Half Brick huffed and chapped lightly on the door. Only then did Slate Knife roll down the window and when he did the cold came tumbling into the van.

‘What’s happening old man?’

‘I’m getting cold, that’s what’s happening.’

‘We need some extra hands.’

‘We’re having our lunch.’

‘We need some roof irons and batons on so we can fasten down the ridge poles and get the zinc ridges on. Site manager wants the farmhouse building watertight by the end of the shift.’

‘Once we’re finished our lunch.’ Slate Knife rolled up the window before Half Brick had moved from the spot.

In the end we rushed our food and slammed the van doors behind us. The thought of another team sitting with their thumbs up their arse was too much for the old man. On the way around the farmhouse Slate Knife stopped Joe.

‘Young Rambo, go back to the van and get the oilskins, we’ll be needing them before long.’

I looked behind me and sure enough there was a dark mass of rain moving over the valley.

We fastened ourselves into the oilskins before we started hammering home the roof irons. The moving mass of falling water came as we were lifting the last and highest baton into place. I could hear every single droplet strike the hood of my waterproof. I was on the ground, passing the batons to Half Brick who was on a set of ladders. Joe was balanced on the baton that was halfway up the roof. Slate Knife was up top. Roof irons are hammered into place and stick out from the roof at right angles. The wooden batons are placed on top of these right angles to form a series of thin platforms for the workers to move up and down the roof. Once the top baton was in place Slate Knife hauled himself onto it. He was shouting something down but the rain was mercilessly pounding the hood of my oilskin. I couldn't hear a word.

I pulled back the hood but he had already passed the message down to Joe so he could relay the words to Half Brick, then to me. Joe's hood was too large for his head. Whenever his head turned inside it the hood would stay static so that every time he turned he found himself looking at the inside of his hood. I had to screw my eyes shut from the force of the falling rain but I could see him struggle with this predicament. It was comical and Half Brick was laughing into the rungs of the ladder. Slate Knife was irate and motioning for him to throw his hood back. When he could handle it no longer Slate Knife leant forward on the baton and reached downwards to pull back Joe's hood himself.

Joe felt the tug at his head. He had no idea where it was coming from and his natural reaction was to jerk away from the pull. He pulled Slate Knife off balance. Half Brick stopped laughing. The old man let go of the hood at once but a wooden baton is a thin area to try and regain your footing. He toppled sideways, landed with his back to the slates and began to slide.

Sliding down a slate roof on your back is no place to be. He twisted onto his stomach so his hands and feet could scabble at the roof. He made a desperate reach for another baton but it only flipped and followed him. When Half Brick saw that man and wood were rushing toward him he started to scamper down the ladder. Joe stretched out, belly to the roof, and grabbed Slate Knife's hand. His fingers, as they clasped the old man's gnarled knuckles, seemed unnaturally thin and pale.

Slate Knife's momentum took Joe with him. Joe kept his grip as he tumbled from his own baton. He landed on the next one down and stuck there. Slate Knife, anchored now, swung across the roof in an arc. The baton that had been following his descent missed him and clattered into Half Brick's ladder. Half Brick landed with a thump on the wet ground but I took no notice of him. I hoisted the ladder in a panic and placed it beneath Slate Knife.

The old man was cursing and swearing and spitting foul words at Joe. I climbed the ladder as fast as I could and helped push him onto the safety of the baton. When he was firmly planted beside the youngster he grabbed him. Seized hold of the head of his oilskin, yanked it away, and screamed:

'Pull back your fucking hood!'

The rain cleared. Half Brick was fine, but sloped home for the day holding a hand to his lower back. Slate Knife insisted we finish our shift even though young

Joe's shoulder was giving him pain. Once we were back onto our own scaffold Slate Knife sat the youngster down.

'Young Rambo, if a man is sliding down the roof you never, never, show him your hand. The only thing worse than one man falling, is two men falling. It was virgin's luck that stopped us hitting the ground together.'

'But...'

'But fuck all. If you show a falling man your hand again you won't have the pleasure of living to regret all the mistakes you've yet to make.'

The youngster nodded, with that stern set to his lips again.

We worked in near silence for the remainder of the shift until I looked at my watch and shouted time. The old man wanted to finish his last task while we brushed down the roof and collected the equipment. As we were finishing up, Slate Knife was cutting down some slate on a baton. Joe was crouched beside him and had to stretch sideways for a tool. Maybe a little too much. I was watching as the old man, without moving his head, reached out and curled two fingers around the inside of the youngster's tool belt. The setting sun was falling behind them.