

## News About Yourself

by Scott Wolven

*For EJS*

The fall brought some cold nights and the pond had the thinnest sheet of ice I'd ever seen. I pointed it out to Richard as we walked around the old farm, eighty acres, talking about how he wanted me to tear the buildings down and how fast I could get the job done. We looked inside the first two barns, then just walked around. We spooked some deer that were bedded down in a field near some old apple trees. The barns all looked the same inside, I was pretty sure of that. We passed by the pond again.

"Ice melts from the bottom," he said. "I never knew that till a couple years ago."

We stood on the point, where you could see across the Hudson River. Richard worked a farm on the other side, up in Greene County. This farm, outside of Red Hook, had been a project his younger brother was going to start, before he passed away in late summer. No illness, no warning. Richard was going to have the barns and outbuildings torn down, to make it a neater parcel for developers. He didn't have a choice. He couldn't very well run two farms. The fall had been very slow for my logging business and I was more than happy to help Richard complete the demo and keep my machines working. I hadn't talked to Richard or his brother since high school. His brother and I had been in the same class, with Richard a couple years ahead of us. The three of us had been great friends when we were kids. I knew his brother had gone on to college, been a fraternity man, and come home to work. He was an officer in the fire department. The past ten years or so, I just waved to them while they were working out in the fields if I happened to be in Greene County visiting my folks. I'd been out of prison about five years at that point.

"I can do it," I said. "It will take me a week. I'll leave the stub-ups in place for the utilities, so if you decide to bulldoze below grade you won't hit anything." Only four of the seven barns were electrified and only two of those had water.

"The electric is dead back to the pole," Richard said. "How much?"

"Twenty-five hundred," I said.

"That's not enough," Richard said. "You have to make money too."

"I'll make money at twenty-five hundred," I said. "My trucks are sitting right now, I've got to get them on a job. Might as well be this one."

Richard nodded. "My family will appreciate that."

"How's everybody doing?" I said.

"It was a real shock," Richard said. "We're watching out for each other." He looked around at the old farm. "I almost never came over here, unless he asked me to. I don't know what he planned on doing with it." He swallowed his sadness. "But I know he had plans for it."

I nodded. "Please give my best to your mom and dad."

"I will," he said. We started to walk back across the property, toward our trucks. "Remember we used to play so much basketball?" he said.

"Sure," I said. "You guys had the only court that was dry in the rain, inside your barn."

“Once he got into the fire department, that was a big part of his life,” he said. “He was a good judge of men and fires.”

“I bet he was,” I said.

“Time goes so fast,” Richard said. “Time is not watches and clocks and calendars.” He opened the door to his pickup truck. There was a shot in the distance. “Muzzle-loading season opens today,” he said. “I’ll see you Ray.”

“See you Richard,” I said. I stood there as he pulled away. He had work to do on his own farm.

I started right away the next day. Brought my two big trucks up, along with a skid steer. Two of my regular guys were working with me. We ran the work in an orderly fashion. One of the guys would climb into the rafters of the barn with a logging chain and hook onto the main beam. We’d hook the other end to the skid steer and pull, which usually made the barn collapse. Then we’d load the wood and debris into the trucks with the skid steer and haul it back to my woodlot, about ten miles away. We drove with the flashers on and I followed in my pickup truck, to grab anything that fell onto the road. Three barns fell that first day and we were able to haul most of the stuff off.

The next morning at the farm site, there was a man in an SUV parked by the big house. He got out of his truck as I pulled up. He started talking before I opened my door.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“I’m handling a job here for the Broderson’s,” I said. My two guys were there already, and I waved at them to go ahead.

“This isn’t going to developers,” the man said. “You can’t do that. The town won’t allow it.”

“I think you’re trespassing on private property,” I said. “Hit the road.”

He shook his head. “I’ve got people coming from the town with a Dutchess County Sheriff,” he said. “We’re going to put a stop work order on you.”

I looked down the dirt road toward the barns. My guys were hustling, already had the big chain hooked up and were ready to tear down another barn. I gave them the thumbs up and the skid steer lurched forward. I turned back to the man as the barn collapsed.

“Wait on the road for your people,” I said. “Get off this property.” The man looked at me like I was kidding. “I can hook a chain on your truck and drag it to the edge of the property,” I said. “Or you can drive it there.”

“Do you know who I am?” he said. “I’m Cal Sheely.”

“Like I give a fuck,” I said.

“Who are you? Some tough guy?” he said.

“Find out,” I said. “If you want to get in a fight, I’ll help all I can.”

Cal sized me up and must have decided I was tipping the scales too much to mess with. He got back in his SUV and pulled to the edge of the road, off the farm. I kept my eye on him. He sat there for almost an hour, before he pulled away. We had loaded up the truck at that point and were ready to make a haul back to my woodlot. I called the guys over.

“Let’s make a change today,” I said. “Let’s put all the structures on the ground right now, as quick as we can. Then we’ll load and haul them. It will make for a messy work-site, but that’s how I want it done.”

They agreed and we ripped down all but the last barn when I saw some trucks pulling into the farm entrance. I stopped working and slowly walked up to see who it was. Two men from the town, a sheriff, and the man, Cal Sheely, I had seen earlier. I recognized one of the men from the town. It was Ernie Pickens.

“Hey, Ray,” Ernie said to me. He pulled me to one side. “This guys got everybody in an uproar, says the farm is covered in asbestos shingles. Says you’ve been hauling it near town. It that true?”

I pointed at the remaining building. “It’s tar paper, Ernie, with regular shingles. There’s no asbestos here.”

“Okay, okay,” Ernie said. “Will you let us inspect it?”

“It’s not my property,” I said. “Call Richard. If you get the okay from him, it’s okay with me.”

Ernie walked up to the other men and got on his cell phone. He walked back to me next to the last barn after a minute.

“Richard says okay,” he said.

“Do what you want, then,” I said.

He motioned at the last structure. It was the largest barn, the only one still standing. We opened the big swinging doors. It smelled like wet hay.

Inside was an old fire truck.

“Maybe he was restoring it,” Ernie said.

The truck must have been brought in on a flatbed. All the tires were flat. It was a dull red and most of the gold lettering had been scraped away. The axes on the sides showed rust. I climbed up into the cab. There was a yellow legal pad sitting on the front seat. There was a list of things that needed to be fixed on the truck. Along with a list of names. Richard’s name was on it, his dad’s name. It was a list of guys that he would have wanted to be on the truck with him. Some of the guys were already long dead, like his grandfather. My name was there. It said Ray Cooper, my good friend.

I stepped outside, into the sunlight. The sheriff was there, smoking a cigarette. I walked over and stood next to the big farmhouse. My two workers were there and we waited until the town was done. Ernie walked over to me.

“There’s no asbestos here,” he said. He said it loud enough so Cal Sheely could hear him. Sheely walked away and sat in his truck while we worked. Finally, he took off.

After they all left, we chained up the fire truck and dragged it out of the barn. We chained up the main timbers and the beams snapped like matchsticks as the structure collapsed. The guys got busy putting the debris into the big dump truck and hauling it. They cleaned up the site pretty well and we were done a day early, as it turned out.

I called Richard to tell him I was done and about the truck. The next day there was a check in the mailbox from him with a note that just said: *Thanks*. A couple cutting jobs turned up over the next couple weeks and I ended up being busy into October and beyond.

It must have been a year later, in the late fall. I was having a bad time of it, for several months. I had a dream and woke up suddenly in my own bed, my heart pounding. The dream had been that the old fire truck was running, with lights and sirens going. I got into my truck and drove over to the farm property. The truck sat in the field where I'd left it. It was too old a model even to have lights on it. Rifle shots came across the morning air and I thought about how much the hunters would hate it if I somehow got the siren to work. I got back into my truck. Something kept me from walking into the woods and fields in my tan jacket and taking my chances. Among the trees and the evergreens and the deer.

It was a couple summers after that when something came my way. It was late August. I was sitting at the garage to escape the heat, downing beers with Jimmy Work and he started to talk about this guy that owed him money.

"Who is it?" I said. Jimmy had tattoo sleeves. He'd done about eighteen years overall and I met him inside after knowing him outside, which is pretty rare. He was a big guy, walked like a biker and had a lot of biker friends. Sometimes he hooked people up with drugs, if the buy was big enough and he was sure it was safe. He made sure the rent was paid. Cash.

"This guy, used to be on the Town Board around here, till he moved," Jimmy said. "Now he owns a store and used car lot over by Saugerties. Cal Sheely and his oldest son."

I drank a beer like it was water. "You don't say," I said. "How much is he into you for?"

"He's owed me eight grand for over six months," Jimmy said. "I just thought about it today and started to get angry."

"Do you know where he lives?" I said.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I know where he lives."

I emptied another beer and so did Jimmy. "Let's go talk to him," I said.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "Let's go talk to him."

We got in Jimmy's work truck and Jimmy drove over the bridge, into Kingston and headed north. He cut off the main road, until we were riding north right along the Hudson River, with big houses and huge lawns on either side of us. It was almost dusk on the river. Isolated by at least two miles from the other houses was a white, Italianate fake mansion with an attached garage.

As soon as we pulled into the driveway, a black German Shepherd mix came out and started barking at us. Jimmy pulled a silver whistle from his pocket and I knew it was a dog whistle, but I couldn't hear it. The dog put its tail between its legs and lay on the driveway. Jimmy and I got out of the truck and walked through the open garage. I was carrying a claw hammer that I'd picked up off the floor of the truck.

We walked through the garage, through the house and ended up out back by the pool. There was a young girl and boy there, probably neither of them more than fifteen. The girl was in the water and the boy was sitting under a big umbrella, talking on a phone. He stopped talking when we came out of the house, through the back screen door.

"Hi," the boy said. "My dad isn't here."

"Is he at the car lot?" Jimmy said. "He's selling us a car."

“Oh,” the boy said. He looked at the hammer I was carrying. “He should be home any minute.” The girl kept swimming in the pool, glancing at us.

“Where’s your brother?” Jimmy said. He pointed at the phone next to the boy and the boy tossed it to him. Jimmy tossed the phone in the pool.

“Cape Cod,” the boy answered. He picked his head up and listened. “I think that’s my dad,” he said. A car door slammed from the front of the house and we heard the dog give some friendly barks. The boy was smarter than he looked. “Don’t hurt my dad,” he said, very softly. The girl stopped swimming.

After I smashed his arm and shoulder with the hammer, Cal opened the floor safe in his bedroom and paid Jimmy what he owed him, plus the rest of the contents of the safe. We brought him back downstairs, out to the pool. The boy still sat under the umbrella and the girl was wrapped in a towel next to him. The dog lay on a chain run in the back of the yard.

Cal got up off the grass and started to run for the trees at the edge of the property. He was trying to carry his right arm, the one I’d smashed, with his left. He was limping. He was overweight.

Jimmy pulled a pistol with a silencer out of his coveralls and drilled Cal once in the back and then again in the side of the head. The blood flew, like a red shadow coming out of Cal’s head in the last of the fast fading sunlight. Then Jimmy shot both of the kids, the girl and boy, twice each, through her towel and through the baseball shirt the boy was wearing. We got back into Jimmy’s truck and left. We didn’t speak, all the way down the road and across the bridge. When we stopped at the garage, I got out and got into my truck. I might have waved as I left. I forget.

The outrage in the community, not for Cal Sheely, but for his children, was tremendous. The BCI questioned Jimmy twice, at his garage. Nothing ever came of it.

I didn’t see Jimmy for a while after that, but I was out in the woods working in the spring and I turned around and there was his blue beat-up work truck.

“Hey, Jimmy,” I said.

He waved. “You were never there,” he said. “So sleep easy.”

I nodded. He got back into his truck and pulled out, down the logging road I had cut.

I thought about the list of men in the old fire engine. I didn’t belong on that list. Maybe I had never belonged on that list.

*Scott Wolven is the author of Controlled Burn. Six years in a row, Wolven's stories have been selected for the Best American Mystery Stories series. Wolven's new novel, False Hope, will be available in 2008.*