



# The Old Steeplejack

by James Meirose

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Here's your coffee, said Claire, setting the hot liquid before him.

Thanks.

Mason gripped up the coffee. Claire shook back her blonde hair and sat down with him in the luncheonette booth.

Are you still working on that steeple? she asked.

He took a sip, then scratched at his chin as he answered.

Yep. Got the last fifty feet to do. What time is it?

Ten after six.

I got to be up at the church by six thirty.

Mason took another sip as she spoke.

Why did you volunteer to do this job?

The coffee cup went back down with a tap.

I'm the only one with the experience—

She stretched out a hand palm up.

Yeah—but you're retired. I worry about you.

He squeezed the cup.

Well—nobody's going to do it if I don't, he said.

Father Tierney could hire some younger men.

Money's tight at the church, Claire. Steeplejacks charge big money. Didn't I used to charge big money when I was in the business?

Narrow eyed, he raised the cup to his lips.

You were younger then, she said.

He sighed. They looked at each other. Each clutched their coffee cups as if desperately trying to warm their hands, though it was warm in the room. He looked down into the tabletop; it was like the way he would look down on the churchyard from a hundred feet up later that day.

—all of the graves in neat rows that way; all the ones under the ground with me so far above—look at all the graves lined up so nice and neat look look down—

Hey mister, said a young voice. Mason looked up. A young man stood there, of

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about fifteen or sixteen.

Hi Johnny, said Claire to the young man.

Hi Mom—hey mister are you the one who's been working up on the church steeple?

Mason laid a hand palm down on the tabletop.

Why—yes I am, he said. The boy's cheeks blushed red.

I'd like to be able to work up high some day, said Johnny. It looks like fun.

Well—it kind of is, said Mason, smiling.

What are you doing up there?

Mason sat up straight and wrapped his hands around his cup.

I'm nailing new shingles up on the steeple.

Is it scary?

Claire touched Johnny on the sleeve.

Johnny, said Claire—

No it's all right Claire, said Mason. It's not scary, son. It's very safe. You just need to know your business and be careful.

—they're resting underground like that—why do I have to be clinging like this—

How do you get up there so high? I know you hang from a rope—but how do you get up there?

Mason sipped at his coffee, then answered.

First I go up in a bucket lift, to the bottom of the steeple. From there I pull myself up the steeple on a bosun's chair with a block and tackle. There's a safety line I attach to my belt. The block and tackle and safety line are attached to the top of the steeple.

The boy stood transfixed.

Who attaches them to the top of the steeple? he droned.

Mason scratched at his cheek.

—this boy is full of questions intelligent questions it's quite unusual—

I go up in the bucket lift, said Mason, and attach them before I start.

The boy stared wide-eyed into Mason's face.

Why don't you just use the bucket lift to stand on to put on the new shingles instead of hanging from the steeple? asked the boy.

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Mason took a sip. Claire sat bored.

—my God—

Because you can't maneuver the bucket lift all around the steeple, said Mason. When I hang from it on the bosun's chair, I can swing myself around all sides of the steeple—

It sounds like fun, smiled the boy.

But it's very dangerous, Johnny, said Claire. I think—

No, said Mason, pushing out a hand. It's not dangerous. There's a safety line.

Are you tied to the chair? asked Johnny.

No.

Mason sipped at his coffee with his eye set on the far yellow wall.

—what's the next question going to be come on, let's have the next question—

What if you slip off the chair?

Mason tapped the tabletop.

There's a safety line—but you don't slip off the chair. Say. Listen.

Mason leaned forward with his hands clasped on the table.

Have you ever just fallen out of a chair Johnny? he asked—I mean, just like that? Just sitting there one moment and on the floor the next?

No.

Mason raised a hand.

Well just because the chair is a hundred feet in the air you're not any more likely to fall off of it than if it were on the ground.

The boy's hands turned to fists.

It still seems like you ought to be tied to the chair, said the boy. I'd be scared that far up not tied to the chair.

Mason shook his head vigorously and picked up his cup.

Oh, no—you don't want to be tied to the chair. If the block and tackle lets go from the top of the steeple, say, you want to let the chair fall free. You jump off the chair and grab the safety line and you're safe. If you were tied to the chair, Johnny, you'd fall and be brought up short by the safety line and the heavy block and tackle would fall and come up short and jerk you so hard, it'd just about rip you in half—

Mason, said Claire, rolling her eyes.

Rip you in half, said Johnny—that'd be bad. That'd be awful. You'd die.

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The boy turned visibly pale.

Mason touched Johnny on the sleeve.

But that never happens, said Mason. Those ropes are attached to the top of the steeple good and tight. It's safe.

He took a drink of the coffee. The cup was almost empty.

—yes it's a long way down but it's as safe as I'm sitting here right now—

Claire, said Mason.

What said Claire, pressing her hands around her coffee cup.

Do you feel safe sitting here? In this booth?

Yes. Why—

Well I'm just as safe as this when I'm—up there—

—yes and they look up from their graves at me so far above them and they wonder, why is he up there so free and in the open and we're down here in these graves all closed in and unmoving and rotting and dead—

Do you ever drop anything? asked Johnny.

Mason shook his head.

No. It's just like sitting in the chair. I don't just drop things all the time when I'm down on the ground, so it's no different when you're way up there. Being up there is really no different than being down here. Only, higher—

—come down and be with us, say the dead. Come down and be with us, say the voices drifting up from the churchyard below—

Claire drained her coffee and rose from the booth. She put her hand on Johnny's shoulder.

I think you better go get ready for school Johnny—the bus leaves at eight—

Johnny pointed at Mason's feet.

Why are you wearing those funny shoes? he asked Mason.

Mason lifted a foot and scratched at his ankle.

Oh—these? These are soft slippers. I got to wear them when I'm up on the steeple. The shingles are white. If I wore regular shoes or work boots I'd scuff the shingles all up when I push myself around the steeple with my feet. See, Johnny? There's a lot to think about and know to be a steeplejack.

Steeplejack? said Johnny—what's a steeplejack?

Steeplejack. That's what they call men who work up high.

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Have you done this kind of work all your life?

Yep, smiled Mason. Sure have.

God, that's a long time, you're so old—

Johnny! said Claire—that isn't very nice—

Oh it's all right Claire, said Mason—it's true.

Mason drained his coffee and once more looked down into the tabletop.

—yes you're so old you'll be with us soon, said the voices come up from the churchyard. You're so old you'll be with us down here—

Well Johnny run along, said Claire. Go get ready for school.

Good bye, said Johnny to Mason, and then he kissed his Mother on the cheek, and was gone. Mason rose also, and put a tip on the counter. Claire stood there. Mason lightly touched Claire's hand. She raised her chin and looked into his eyes.

I guess you'll be going on up there now Mason—

—come down be with us—

Mason held Claire's hand.

—let go, let go—

You know what Claire?

What.

You make me feel—

Mason hesitated.

—come down and rest with us—

What? said Claire, slightly smiling.

You make me feel—like I'm safe. Really safe.

—come down here be with us, said the voices far below—

Well, said Claire—be careful up there today.

I will.

Don't look down.

I won't.

Mason paid and left the luncheonette for the last time.

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**Jim Meirose's** work has appeared in many leading journals, such as *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Witness*. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Shirley Jackson Award, and the Best of the Web 2011. This is the second time his work has appeared in *SNReview*. He holds a BA in Economics from Bloomfield College.

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