

WOODWORK

Once more he prepared to sharpen the blade of the plane. The edge needed to be perfect. Less would not suffice.

It had been nine months. Ribbons of ebony filled a basket in the corner. The black oval was an inch thinner.

He lifted a finish stone from a bucket of water. With a small hammer he tapped the oak body of the plane. The blade and the keeper came loose.

The cottage that held his shop was silent. Music would have been good company, but it covered the scrape of steel on stone that told him when the blade was straight, the pressure even, the angle true.

Outside a gust of wind scraped a tree branch across the roof. He waited for it to pass, taking the moment to hold the blade before the window, sighting along the edge, seeing where the light stuttered. Two more passes he thought, dripped some water onto the stone. He drew the blade across it, once, twice, the keeper, three times, held both to the window.

He slipped the blade into the plane, the keeper on top, tapping with the hammer, first the one, then the other, squinting along them, tapping the corner of the keeper once more with his knuckle alone. Then he set the plane down on its side as though it was a robin's egg. Crossing to the corner of the shop, he lifted the ebony oval from its shroud of silk and brought it to the plane.

Patience, he thought. His breath slowed. His hands steadied. He drew the plane across the ebony. A gossamer wisp rose from the oval, closer to smoke than wood. When he pursed his lips and blew, it floated away. In its place was a reflection of the plane.

Patience. When the sun dipped behind the trees he stopped. When it topped them the next day, he continued. At noon he blew the last shaving away.

Clasping the oval, he raised it before his face. There he was. There she would be. It was clear enough for her to see herself, dark enough to mask the past seven years. Now she could put away her fears. Ebony would not break.