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## **The Woodworker**

By Sidney Stevens

My father once told me he was afraid of me. He said it only once, but I never forgot. I was young and would gather up things from outside—stones, feathers, sticks, dragonfly wings, insect carcasses, wild animal bones—and construct them into intricate towers scattered throughout our eighty-five forested acres. I’ve come to think of them as shrines to him, which he finally commanded me to clear away one morning when I was five.

“Stop this foolishness,” he growled. “You’re scaring me.”

In hindsight I doubt it was only irritation that drove him, though that was the message I received. I've come to believe he saw himself in me—some fiery hunger to grab the world's materials and remake them into something new—and he didn't like what was reflected back: a capacity to chase inspiration and inner yearnings and forget everyone and everything else already here. I haven't thought of this in years, and don't want to remember now. But I do. Now that he's dying.

I used to bring snacks to his studio each afternoon—shortbread cookies or tea cakes, that sort of thing, his favorites. His studio was little more than a weather-beaten cabin sitting above the steep ravine that cut through our land. That was before he built his new studio in the same spot, along with a bigger house, an exhibition gallery and his school for apprentices—all now in various states of disrepair.

I'd run my fingers over his chisels, planes and files, tracing the edges of wood he'd just carved, inhaling the scent of fresh walnut or pine. I adored the fine grains and gnarly protrusions. He never talked to me on those afternoons, but I felt we shared this experience as a single soul. I sensed he felt it too in some subconscious way. At least that's what I chose to believe.

The rest of our life outside the studio—the majority of it—was not the same. He talked to me some in that world—ordering me to pass the bread or shush me and my brother if we got too loud. Of course, he was this way with everyone, including my mother.

"I'm an artist," he'd sigh from his seat at the head of the oak table he built himself and carved with fanciful leaf and flower designs that reminded me of hieroglyphics. "I have clients, responsibilities. I need time to create. How else do you expect to eat?"

All of which was true. He was—is—Orrin Merrick. World famous. I simply chose to focus on the deeper communion I thought we shared in his studio, not this “outside” life. But signs of my folly were always there, if I’d bothered to notice.

When my brother drove himself into a tree in 1972 at age nineteen my father hung his head—in retrospect I swear it wasn’t despair I saw as he glanced up scowling through sandy waves of hair. It was relief. One less burden. One less child lacking his peerless preeminence. I followed his lead and buried memories of my brother as deep as I could.

My mother left after that, unable to find consolation here. My father didn’t seem quite so relieved to see her walk away. He followed her to the car like a shadow and asked in a small boy’s voice when she’d be back. I was fourteen and remember clearly her ignoring him and begging me, “Please come!” I certainly shared a more immediate and visceral connection with her than my father, and relied on her for all my emotional needs. But my father begged too, in a different way—begged me to stay.

“Guess I’ll find another girl to bring me treats,” he said in that same small-boy voice.

I didn’t realize the heartache my staying would cause my mother. But it’s all so vivid now—her climbing into the car, face etched with ghastly dread of losing all she had left, of grieving alone.

My father moped around for days afterwards refusing to go to his studio. Even so, it took little time to find my mother’s replacement in Marguerite Simmons.

Looking back, I’m certain he didn’t really want me. Didn’t want the responsibility of nurturing another human being. I even realized then I wouldn’t get the same attentive love from him that I would from my mother. But I simply couldn’t risk him finding

another daughter—some usurper—to share his afternoons. I understood his passion for rescuing wood from the forest floor and masterfully transforming it into lasting art. At least I could continue standing near that love, if not directly receive it myself. That’s why I chose him.

###

“You weren’t an artistic genius,” he tells me this chilly April morning as I sit with him in his spartan upstairs bedroom where he’s slept since my mother left. His voice is weak, and he looks emaciated lying in his narrow bed. “I wished for it ... You have no idea.”

He seems sincerely regretful that I wasn’t a chip off the old block. I want to protest his insincerity, slap him. But this is what he’s told himself and buffed into polished belief. There’s no way to untangle all my feelings—shame for falling short and disappointing him, the father I love. Rage that he would say this out loud without regard for how it might hurt me. A wisp of hope and stab of defiance that maybe he’s wrong. All I know is I’m here. After all he did and didn’t do, I’ve come back one last time to nurse him through death. That’s what you do for love.

“Rest now,” I say and pull up the thin white blanket he’s used for years. He’s nothing but bones now. I swear I can see them through his skin. And he smells like old cheese. His face is all gaunt angles and sunken features, misshapen like something a child might mold from Play-Doh. Incredibly, he still has that mop of waves, completely white now but every bit as full. I can’t wait to escape his room.

“I helped you all I could.” His voice is hardly a whisper, holding me near a while longer. “You never made a success of things... I couldn’t keep funding you.”

He means my failed acting dreams and divorces (two of them).

“There was that small part on Broadway,” he says, “Then nothing else.”

“I had big roles with Tannery Run.”

He sighs and looks away. “Community theater.” His blue eyes, faded and cloudy, stare at the trees outside.

He’s right, of course. I never achieved anything like him—the great Orrin Merrick. Pulled himself up from nothing and coiled his name around the planet. Don’t I know? He became the greatest woodworker of his generation. Took woodworking into the realm of the sublime. After acting I became a real estate agent (moderately successful), and before that I was a department store clerk. Everyone wanted his sculptures, a table, a desk, a door, a mantelpiece. They still do. His works are in museums and mansions around the world. I’m merely his dutiful but unremarkable daughter. Don’t I know?

“At least I tried,” I say. I should pat him or offer some comfort. He is, after all, dying. But I can’t. In that way I’m a chip off the old block.

He nods and closes his eyes. “You tried ...”

He believes I don’t know where the wrong turns were. It’s true I don’t dwell on how my life didn’t play out right, how I drove it down an abandoned road. But I know exactly where the unfortunate junctures lie, where forward momentum went awry. I just thought I’d eventually point myself in the right direction.

“Do you need anything before I go downstairs?”

He doesn’t answer.

There’s so much I could say but don’t. He failed in marriage, too. There were lean years in my childhood when my brother and I sat in hand-me-downs in the school

cafeteria without enough money for lunch. He struggled to make ends meet like I did, often resorting to pruning trees for other people and doing odd jobs. Success came slowly. There were failures.

I remember all this, but he doesn't. Or won't. He never could see the fault lines in himself, the earthquakes he caused for others. Instead he cast his flaws onto everyone else, never feeling them as his own. He could flourish unscathed as long as someone else played "loser."

If only I could pummel him now and shove him toward reality. But he's shriveled and helpless, and I'm tired. I was on the receiving end of his projections too many times, a crash-test dummy enduring trauma and mutilation in accident after accident so he didn't have to. I came back to him anyway. That's what you do for love.

###

Here's another unbidden memory—I was fourteen, not long after losing my brother and mother, hovering beside my father in his new studio.

He handed me a piece of wood from his storage cellar, walnut. It was about a foot long with a bulbous burl on top that twisted down to a slim middle and widened again at the other end.

"Use whatever tools you like," he told me from the doorway. "I'll come back in an hour to see what you've made."

Of course it was a test, but I felt new worlds open in me. That wood in my hand was alive. It vibrated so I could barely hold it, as though it was talking to me without words, guiding me to sculpt and burnish it until its soul shone through. He trusted me with it.

It was quiet in the studio except for a gentle rain outside plunking on the metal roof, everything gray and dripping. But I was so beautifully lost it all seemed faraway.

I followed the lines and curves of the wood with my father's gouge chisel, scooping out depressions, rounding off edges and shaving off bumps, floating in a heavenly place I'd watched him reach but had never been to myself. I was hooked.

It seemed only minutes before my father returned. "What's this?" he asked, moving closer.

"A goblet," I said, handing it to him. It had sprung from the inherent shape and grain of the wood. The cup on top tilted slightly like a flower toward the sun but not so much it couldn't hold liquid. The stem spiraled down and around like a vine, swirling to a broad bottom base. It wasn't finished. It still needed sanding and staining and polishing, but I could already see its completed beauty. I was proud of my work.

He turned it around and around in his large hands, my lovely goblet bending and curving like the body of a dancer. He held it at arm's length with a frown as though it was something from alien space, and finally set it down. His eyes widened briefly as he studied me, and in that moment I swear I saw something like fear. The same fear he spoke out loud when I was five.

"The work of a child," he muttered and looked away. "This wood was clearly to be fashioned into the arm of a chair or door handle. My mistake in thinking you'd see it as I do."

Fear drained from his eyes, dismissing me. He pointed toward the door. "You tried, and that's to be commended...Now run along."

I remember slinking back to the house, shoving past Marguerite baking in the tight kitchen, and retreating upstairs to my room with hot shame burning my skin.

Banished from the only place my father and I could connect. Little did I know I was dismissed forever. Never invited back to his studio merely because my goblet wasn't what he would make. For once proclaimed inferior, he and I and the rest of the world believed I was talentless. The great man had spoken.

###

I linger in his doorway this morning. The spring days are getting longer and warmer as the weeks drag on, but I can't seem to shake the chill hanging around me. Odd how shame once remembered is still as fresh as it was fifty years ago when he exiled me. He can barely move his head now. His breathing is shallow and his eyes are closed most of the time. He eats so little. It won't be long. He wants me by his side more and more.

I've longed my whole life for him to need me like this. And yet I can't stand to breathe the same air now or touch even a bit of him, especially his old decrepit hands that have had the luxury of creation all these years.

I've never let myself hold another piece of wood since that day in his studio. The thought actually pounds like a migraine in my brain. I want to forget what I never got to have.

###

Marguerite called a few months ago to say my father was "failing." Her word. It shouldn't have surprised me. He is, after all, ninety-three. Even so, I didn't expect it so soon. The bigger surprise, though, was that Marguerite, twenty-two years his junior, was



also failing. She didn't mention it then. Colon cancer. The same kind that took my mother ten years after she left.

"He wants you here," Marguerite said softly. "Can you come for a while?"

I almost said no. I hadn't spoken to them in five years. They'd just quietly slipped from my life. Yet I quit my real estate job and took on nursing them both. I can't explain it—some combination of being needed—loved—again, wanting to escape the humdrum-ness of my life, and the urgency and regret I believe I heard in her voice. These are my reasons for being here.

"He's sorry," Marguerite told me a few days before she passed. She was beautiful to the end, lying on the brocade sofa in the sitting room, long hair spread out on cushions, nearly white but still full like when my father first brought her into our lives. Her mahogany eyes were just as brilliant too, like glass beads. I sat in a nearby chair, unable to look away.

"Sorry for what?"

"For everything, I think."

"Everything?"

"For not being a better father." She paused and held out her hand, which I didn't take. "You needed compassion and love, not just money. And encouragement. I failed you too."

It was true, but I didn't say so.

She reached for a canvas bag on the floor. "I found this in his studio. He told me about it then."

I peered inside, stunned for an instant, as if my brain couldn't recognize what my eyes saw. There was my goblet. Exactly the same.

“I kept it for you.”

“Why? ... I thought he threw it out.”

“Because it’s beautiful.”

My eyes stung with old shame. “He doesn’t agree.”

“He’s wrong more than he knows.”

If only she’d said that back then. If only he would now.

“I had a dream after that.” It slipped out before I could stop myself. Useless dream. I’d never told anyone.

“About what?”

“It’s silly.”

“Tell me.”

I looked around, desperate to divert her attention. But she lay waiting.

“There was a beast with horns and iridescent scales, bluish-green.” It sounded ridiculous. “A dragon mixed with something like an elk.”

Marguerite smiled and closed her eyes. “Go on.”

“A woman in a matching iridescent gown with a cape rode on its back. She wasn’t young or old, sort of ageless. She was intimidating and never said a word—but I sensed they were there for me.”

“Remember that dream,” Marguerite said softly. “Watch it come back someday.”

My father opens his eyes now, staring at me as if my childish dream has suddenly appeared to him. Ridiculous dream.

“All this will be yours,” he whispers. I lean close, barely able to hear him. “Protect my legacy—I know you will.”

I will. That's my role. It always was. I sacrificed my mother for this privilege. Failed to grieve my brother with her, failed to love her. I assumed our love was solid, robust. Not like the frangible love I had with my father, so much of it hidden. I couldn't risk losing even a twig of that. I believed she'd forgive me, but she died before she could.

Only saps remember dreams, right? Yet he expects me to carry on his dream—the one he made come true. I sacrificed everything to protect it and keep him close. Dumped the courage to hear my own dreams. And yet here I still am.

###

There's fear in my father's eyes on his last evening alive. Immediately I'm struck with an odd thought: What if it isn't fear of death staring at me, as you'd assume, but the same fear he declared when I was five as he ordered me to tear down my creations. Or the fear in his eyes when I was fourteen and dared to create what I saw in the wood without him. What if he's still afraid now—no, terrified—that I might have talent, too. Talent he squashed to keep himself elevated, or to keep me in service to him, or any number of other reasons he'll now take to his grave. Did he know what he was doing then? Is he afraid now for his place in eternity?

If so, he doesn't snatch his last chance to say so. And later after they've carted away his body in a zippered black bag and I've put clean sheets on his empty bed I creep through the dark house. My house. Empty now too except, of course, for me and his wooden art that fills every damn cranny. Wooden walls lined with carvings. Chairs and tables sculpted from tree trunks, whimsical banisters fashioned from winding boughs, and desks with secret, odd-shaped drawers—all of them wrung from his mind and

hands. I was also wrung from him. We're cut from the same trunk. But he wanted to be king. Utterly unique. I got in the way.

I run my hands over his things. My things now. I'm not gentle. I dig my nails along walls, furniture, whatever I can find, scratching lines into finely carved angles and undulations. Priceless objects by a master artist.

It's criminal, but after a lifetime—my lifetime—of silent screaming at his disregard for who I am it feels beautiful to etch my fury into all that's left of him.

I wander up to my bedroom closet and pull out the goblet Marguerite gave me months ago. I haven't looked at it since. He was right. It's immature, the work of a fourteen-year-old. I can see what he saw then, but there's also beauty. Its swirling shape in my hands still pleases me. My body almost curls in unison. I can imagine it finished, the lines sanded smooth and the grain rubbed to glowing life with oil and a soft cloth. Years of loving use would have darkened and ripened its finish to satin.

These two perceptions—his and mine—hang side by side like they're on an old-fashioned balance scale. But his tray hangs lower. It still holds more weight.

###

"He doesn't deserve you," my father told me once after I left Cameron, my first husband, a fellow community-theater actor who was sleeping with anyone he could grab. I was so laser-focused on the prince I imagined him to be I stupidly overlooked his indifference until it was too obvious to ignore, right there in front of me on the futon in our cramped apartment. Just one of my innumerable wrong turns.

"You were right to leave," my father said. I still remember him seated in his favorite leather chair in the study. It's the only time he ever admitted I was right about

anything, and I could tell from the grim line of his lips he was sincere. You'd have thought he'd taken me in his arms, brushed back my hair and told me I was his princess and everything would work out fine. That he'd love me forever, and I'd find another man who would love me just as much. That's how completely his words sated me.

Well, I didn't find someone to love. I found Rick Weltman instead, a banker, who said he loved me (I believe he did) but left after two years because I couldn't stay faithful. Just another wrong turn. Pining for something else. Something more. Another fairy-tale love that looked better because it sat at a distance, out of reach, within my comfort zone shaped by my father.

I assumed I'd never feel as low as I did after those abandonments. But as I clutch my goblet now—my father newly gone—I feel lower. This is a new order of abandonment.

I walk out the front door, past my father's studio to the edge of the ravine, goblet still in hand. I don't feel him around. Strange that some sliver of him wouldn't stay at least for a while. He loved this place. Fiercely. I've always believed he loved me too; just found it hard to show. I've run on that fuel, loving him back with everything in me. You can't explain how a heart in love can forgive anything, accept any behavior, overlook every truth. It loves what it loves without asking why.

But I've come to the end of fantasy, finally forced to admit what a fool I am. His love never manifested into anything tangible, even one small stick that I could carry with me. The ghastly truth is this: He didn't love anyone. Not in the right ways. Not fully or deeply enough to matter. It simply wasn't in him. I spent my life holding out an offering, but he lived and left without it, never offering me one thing in return.

How do I mend this knothole inside stuffed with love that never found a place to land? Love he couldn't receive, but also love I never gave my mother or anyone else, including myself. I was so focused on winning him I ended up withholding it all. Just like him. This is grief.

I fling my goblet into the cool, black ravine. A loud cracking breaks the night as it hits trees and rocks, perhaps splintering into a hundred pieces that scatter in the mud below.

###

"It really is lovely here," Joan says as we wander toward the studio on a cloudless autumn morning months later. "A work of art in itself."

I've asked her here as my realtor, but also as a friend. "Whatever helps it sell," I say.

"Oh, it'll sell, even in this shape."

A sense of lightness moves through me. Relief. I laugh. I need the money. But also there's a sense of loss that surprises me. My father would be heartbroken. I shouldn't care.

We make our way down to the ravine on the woodland path he walked most days.

"Are you sure about this?" Joan asks.

"I am."

I'm not really. After months of thinking, I still don't know what I want, but I'm tired of mulling it through my mind. I need action.

Joan stumbles on something protruding from the fallen leaves, but catches herself. She bends to retrieve it. "My god," she says. "Is this his?"

I look away. I might cry. My goblet is intact.

There's no explaining how it survived and why it's appeared now. Surely a crazy coincidence. Yet some part of me believes it was meant to happen. It sounds ridiculous. I'd never say it out loud. But that's how it feels in this moment, deep inside me. "It's mine," I mutter.

"Wait, you made this?"

I nod. "I was a kid...I wish he'd taught me more."

"I don't think he needed to." Joan traces a finger along the sinuous stem. "You have to finish this and make more."

It's the nicest thing anyone has ever said. I want to cover my ears, hold in the words forever. I blink back tears.

"Open the studio again," she urges.

"No one wants my stuff."

"They will...turn this place into a museum. They'll come."

"Oh my god." It's overwhelming. The risks. All that needs fixing. Buildings to be repaired, fingernail marks to sand away, treasures to be restored. Courage—I simply don't have enough.

"Imagine the headlines," Joan says, looking around. "Naomi Merrick carries on her father's work."

###

In my dark bed I clutch the goblet like a teddy bear. I try to sleep, but I'm wholly awake. I want to believe Joan, but also I don't. At the heart of things, bottom line, my father's voice is still strongest of all. I simply can't fail again.

I examine my goblet in the moonlight. For an instant I flash to the beast from so many years ago. I'm not dreaming exactly. I'm awake. But it's like my mind is playing a game of make-believe. One I have no power to stop. I'm invited to ride the beast. I hate make-believe. I don't want to play. Only saps remember dreams, right?

"Why her?" people whisper as I stand trembling before the creature. "She's not queenly like the one before."

I glance from side to side, seeking a place to flee, but assistants arrive to dress me in the woman's dazzling gown and cape. "I can't wear these!" I try to squirm away. "I'm not like her!"

They hoist me onto the beast, massive and muscular beneath me. I long to disappear, but can only slouch low. I'm not worthy.

*Why not you?* This thought comes to me as I move through the crowd atop the beast. *You can grow into her and ride as she does.* That's the next thought. No, wait. *She's something you are already.* I am her. I didn't know.

Love fills my goblet as I raise it to the moon. There's a place, after all, for my love. I don't have to hold it in. Alone. This land, the tools, the wood—they can all hold my love. There's so much here yet to create. There's joy to sculpt and forgiveness, too. Still time to love—even if he couldn't. Time to accept what life has brought me—all of it—and embrace the whole of me, the knots and chop marks but also my special grain and luster. In this way I can't fail.