

## **Splinters**

by El Jayne

The worst part of carving is the splinters. After all this time, I still present every finished piece with bloodied hands, watering eyes to match my proud smile. I hiss and press my thumb to my lips as a bead of red springs up from beneath my skin.

“Do you need to take a break?” Ro asks without looking up from his book.

“No. Just a splinter.”

Ro raises an eyebrow but doesn't say anything more on the matter. He knows better than to try to stop me when I'm like this. I focus my attention back on the wood in my hand, reminding myself that it never looks right this early on. Like Grandpa David always told me, it's about being patient; eventually, the wood will tell you what it wants to be.

The thing I've always noticed most about my grandfather is his hands. They're like leather; covered in lines like a road map of his life, like if you listen closely enough you can hear them telling you the story of his life. I remember when I was a kid, I'd always watch his hands when he was whittling. I can't think of a time when he didn't have his knife out, carving up a plain old piece of wood into any shape you could think of. As far as I was concerned, he was a wizard, only he used a pocketknife instead of a wand.

When my mother gave me his name, I don't think she expected I'd take on his spirit, too. Grandpa David is the type of person people remember. Whenever we'd go into the city, he'd treat everyone we encountered like an old friend, chatting about anything and everything, not minding the time ticking by. My grandfather is big on leisure time. He always said he hated to see young people working so hard when they should be enjoying themselves. And he practiced what he preached; I never saw him without a smile on his face and his whittling in hand.

I can feel his worn, calloused hands on mine even now, guiding my blade in gentle, even strokes, letting the wood whisper to me what it wants to become. My hands can see it long before my eyes can. Although I still can't carve totally without looking like Grandpa David always did, I can glance up every

so often and see Ro across the room with his eyes glued to his book, pretending he's not worried about me. Through the window behind him, the gray sky looks back at me, weeping gently as it has been for days now. I'm starting to wonder if the sun is ever going to come back.

These were the kind of days Grandpa David always spent in his shed, sawing and hammering and making. He built big things too, like the bed my mother slept in, the dining room table that stood strong for decades, but those things never caught my attention. I had no interest in straight lines, right angles perfectly matched up and sturdy and utilitarian. I liked the whittling. I could look at one of his carved statues for hours, the details in it, the grain of the wood creating texture and beauty. The carvings were more than just wood to me; my grandfather had a way of bringing them to life.

The first thing I ever made on my own was a worm – at least that's what I called it. It was just a column, uneven and splintered, but I was damn proud of it. And my grandpa was, too. I remember when I showed it to him I was crying, embarrassed that I'd failed at the instructions he gave me so lovingly. But he just smiled as he turned it over in his hands. "You should be really proud of this, David," he said. He always used people's names when he spoke to them; he said it makes people feel important. I don't know about important, but it made me feel like he saw me. He pointed to a few spots where the worm looked almost right. "See, look how smooth the cut is here."

"It doesn't look like yours."

"Well, when you've spent fifty years of your life practicing, it will."

I've never forgotten that. I repeat it to myself all the time – every miscalculated cut, every splinter I get. *Fifty years. Just give it fifty years.*

I'm still nowhere near. In fact, I haven't picked up the knife in a couple years, now. Not since my hands started going. I was only twenty-three when it started. It was just a little stiffness at first, nothing to worry about. It was Ro who convinced me to go to the doctor, Ro who drove me there when I was trying to back out, Ro who held me close to him when I heard "early onset arthritis" and the rest of the words went silent. Ro takes good care of me, better than I deserve sometimes. When I was a kid, I never even knew to dream of someone like him.

The first time he met my grandfather, he was so nervous I thought he was going to drive the car off the road. I'd never seen him so worked up before. But Grandpa David wrapped him up in this big hug as soon as the two of us got out of the car. "I've never seen David so happy before in his life," he said. "You keep taking good care of that boy, and you and I will get along just fine." Ro looked relieved, but I was never worried. I knew my grandpa had spent most of the week practicing his Spanish *r*'s so he could say *Rogelio* properly. When we left, he gave Ro a hand-carved wooden bear on a silver chain.

That little bear still hangs off Ro's rearview mirror today. To him, it reminds him of a family that's accepted him unconditionally when his own refused, but to me, it just reminds me of what I've lost. I haven't been able to carve since the arthritis set in. I oscillate between being angry and just feeling defeated, having lost the one thing I shared with the person I love most in the world. I used to make sense of the world through my knife, same as Grandpa David, but now with my fingers protesting every move, I can barely hold a block of wood more than ten minutes, much less make the same precise cuts I used to.

Grandpa David's mind started to go around the same time my hands did. He was forgetting dates, asking the same questions over and over, and we'd all laugh at him, until it turned into getting lost in his own home. His sentences were fragmented and splintered as he'd lose track of his words, the frustration visible on his face. His hands were shaking too bad to make anything, anymore. I think that was the worst part; I don't think I'd ever seen his hands empty before.

Ro gets up from his chair and carries his coffee mug into the kitchen. He comes back a moment later with two and sets one beside me. The aroma fills me, surrounds me with warmth. "How's it coming, *mi vida*?" he asks. His voice is soft, almost singsong, a gentle lilt that can draw most anything out of me that he pleases.

"It's coming. My hands hurt."

"Maybe you need to take a break."

"No." My fingers tighten around my work. I have to finish this. There's no alternative.

Ro knows it, too, so he doesn't push the point. He sits back in his chair across the room and opens up his book. It's nice, the way he doesn't prod, just stays present and nearby.

I run my fingers over the wood. It's rough, ready to be sanded and smoothed before I work on the detail. This is my favorite part of all. To take something rough and angry and turn it into something soft is, to me, the true art. I love the way the sharpness of the wood falls away beneath the sandpaper until I can run my hands over it without fear of splinters.

After sanding comes the details. I work the very tip of the blade into the grain, creating the grooves and the dips and curves to bring it to life. I can feel the ghost of weathered hands over my own, guiding them through the motions that are both familiar and forgotten. It's almost a trance by now. I barely notice the stiffness because I barely notice my hands at all. It's like they're moving of their own accord, while I, the captive audience, watch in awe as the piece comes alive in front of me.

"Hey," Ro says, breaking the reverie with a hand on my shoulder. I didn't even notice him get up. "It's getting late. We should get going soon."

I stare down at the work in my hand. It's not good enough. It's never good enough. But Ro is right; the sky has gone orange outside and if we want to make it in time, we have to go now. I hand it to him and let him help me up from my chair. He holds me in his arms for just a moment, eyes searching my face, pulling a smile from me before I've even realized it. "*Te amo*," he whispers with a thumb gently stroking my cheek.

"Love you, too."

The drive is spent in almost complete silence. I can't find the words to say what I mean, and Ro knows not to push. He keeps his eyes on the road and doesn't complain when I blast the heat in a desperate attempt to wake up my stiff and aching fingers.

When we get to the house, Grandpa David is in bed like usual, but he's not asleep. Ro stays in the living room with my mother and grandmother. He knows I need to do this alone. Grandpa David smiles when I walk in. It's been some time since he lost my name, but I can tell he recognizes me at least a little. The warmth in his smile is impossible to mistake.

"Hey, Grandpa," I say as I sit on the foot of his bed. "How are you feeling?"

He hacks a phlegm-y cough. "I'm tired." It's the same answer he always gives, lately, and I understand why. He has moments of lucidity amongst the confusion; the effort it takes to have those moments must exhaust him.

"Hey, I brought you something." I reach into my pocket and find the little carved worm, smooth and firm in my grip, and hand it to Grandpa David. "I made it today. Just like you taught me, remember?" I try to hide the breaking of my voice. It just makes him feel guilty to know how desperate I am for him to remember me.

Something, though, seems to register on his face as he takes it. He runs his fingers over the ridges of the worm's body, the S-shaped curve, the pointed end, like every detail is a piece of braille and he's just learned how to read. "This is really well done, David," he says slowly.

The name hits me like a truck. I haven't heard my name out of my grandfather's lips in months. I didn't realize how much I'd missed it. "You could have done better," I manage to respond as my eyes start to flood.

"Not even if I tried."

I keep thinking about it the whole way home, how Grandpa David gave me this gift without even realizing just how big it was. I've spent years practicing and fighting against my failing body, always dreaming of catching up and creating art the way he does, and he'd finally given me the gift of graduation. I'm in the big leagues now. And it didn't even take fifty years.