

J . F . N E W M A N

What a Hammer Can Do

Our grandfather was a carpenter. A short man, shaped like a barrel. When I visited him and my grandmother in the summer, I often found him at the workbench in his shop, a long, low outbuilding between his backyard and his garden. The shop always seemed like something of a bunker. Inside it smelled of dirt and oil-based lubricants, like a fox hole might, minus the blood and shit.

During the Second World War, this man at his workbench served in the United States Army Transportation Corps. We listened to his stories, about Joey Navarro, a bricklayer from Medford, or Danny Saltamacchia, a plumber from Brooklyn, who looked like a cross between a window-shade and a traveling salesman. Nobody in my family knew what that meant, but it sounded good, so we repeated it a lot. I'm not sure that Navarro or Saltamacchia are the real names he spoke, I just remember they were Italian-sounding and full of vowels.

By the time I turned twelve, I was convinced that World War II was mostly a bunch of wise guys sitting on Willys tearing off hunks of warm bread, surrounded by the grateful daughters of French farmers. This was untrue, of course, but our grandfather rarely spoke of the other, more horrible stuff.

He did tell me one story, about the Allied push into Germany. He was assigned to a rail yard instrumental in keeping supplies flowing from the beachhead in Normandy to the front. Trains would chug in and need to be unloaded rapidly, both to preserve them from attack and return them for another run. They were long, and it was wasteful to unload one at a time, when there were up to three waiting on parallel tracks.

“Corporal,” our grandfather told us he said to the man in charge, “line up the damn box cars, and we’ll build platforms between them. Do them all at once.’ That got them going all right.”

Our grandfather spent most of his later years in his garden, where he grew tomatoes and cucumbers and corn in peace. Outside, he hardly used any tools, at least none that I remember, instead preferring to push the soil aside with his hands, plant with his hands, to weed with his hands, to the point his hands would be so covered in dirt it seemed as if he himself had grown straight out of the sandy ground. I watched from the end of the row, sweating in the summer sun, not wanting to help because the feeling of dried dirt on my palms gave me goosepimples. He never chastised me for my laziness. “You okay there, zippy?” he’d call over his shoulder and I would nod. Sometimes I worried it was so hot he’d fall over dead.

In these later years, he wore green or tan. Tan work pants, green button-up shirts with his name in yellow thread. They were leftovers from his job at the highway department, but I knew at twelve that green and tan were the colors of the Army and so I imagined them as relics of his military uniform, as if he couldn’t bring himself to take it off.

The last time I spoke with him, about twelve years later, I was visiting him in hospice. They’d removed a tumor the size of a grapefruit, but the cancer had spread, just a bit, and everyone was wondering what to do next. He was ninety-three, and the new owner of a pacemaker, which they’d put in so his heart could take the surgery.

I helped him in the bathroom the way no one wants to be helped, not ever. “This is some damn thing, isn’t it?” the Army carpenter said to the twelve year-old boy who didn’t want to get his hands dirty. I told him not to even think about it, but maybe lay off the spinach next time. He laughed at that and caught himself on the steel handicap bar. I was struck by how wide he still was, how broad his back. The cooper who made him knew what he was doing.

Afterwards, we sat on his bed. His room was bright and floral, nothing like his bedroom at home, which was dark, with our grandmother’s jewelry still laid out on the mirrored vanity, and where you could hear the echo of the Glenn Miller band. The only thing here was a picture of our grandmother sitting on his knee, him dressed in a baseball uniform, both smiling.

Suddenly, tears began to run down his cheeks and he hid his face in hands, his shoulders heaving up and down. We knew our grandfather to be a crier—he moistened up every graduation and most birthdays—but a brief, high-pitched wail of sorrow told me this was different. I placed my hand on his back and asked

him what was wrong, which was a stupid question, because he'd just had a melon yanked from his head and his chest cut open, but there we were.

"I don't want to leave all you kids," he said. "I'll miss you too much."

I pulled him tighter. It was an awkward last hug, side-by-side on his bed, him too wide for my arm and me swallowing my own tears and terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing that would make this moment more difficult for him. It occurred to me, just for an instant, that this was the curse of those who came back. You can't beat back death like you can the German war machine, with something as simple as a few well-placed two-by-fours and some planking.

Years later, I watched a History Channel documentary on the Allied invasion. During one of the voiceovers, they played some b-roll of a rail yard. Sweet Sue from Kalamazoo, there they were—three trains in parallel, platforms built between them, GIs off-loading cartons of ammunition and cigarettes.

"Well-timed provisions kept American forces moving," the narrator said.

But that's not what any grandson hears.

Your grandpa took one swing with his hammer and bashed Hitler's teeth right down his own throat, the television told me. Then he went home, bounced your grandma on his knee, and planted a garden.

I shut the television off and went to bed. I stared at the ceiling a long time, thinking of all the things I hadn't done, all the things I hadn't been called to. Then it occurred to me. Maybe it's enough to remember, to tend the garden, keep it ready in case there's a next time.

J. F. NEWMAN lives and writes in Milford, Connecticut. He dedicates this essay to his maternal grandfather, Joseph S. Kentoffio, who didn't want nothin' from nobody, and who made us promise we'd stay at home and mind our own damn business.