

Carpentry as a Hallucinogen

By Will Balice

Time: 11:30 pm-

“For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say to myself: I’m falling asleep.” Proust’s words echo in my mind, recalling them from the memories of reading the first page of *Swann’s Way* about twenty-seven times, each in a more vigorous attempt, to complete the book in its totality. Each in vain. I guess Marcel and I will have to wait till another time. I wonder, as I flip my blinker, signaling to turn left into the alley behind Crazy Wisdom, if Mr. Proust had not such an affliction in his later years, would he have been as prolific in his writings. Would the world know Marcel Proust differently, (as a children’s novelist, perhaps, i.e. *Big Birds Budding Grove*) if he could run from the street corners to his favorite shops, and had not been bed ridden for so long?

The tools clanged in the back of my work van as I pulled over a bump in the alley and parked, such noise was lending a hint to anyone listening that I was not as careful at putting them away last time as I should have been. “Our tools are our livelihood” a weathered old man once told me. He had been a carpenter for a long time and had some wisdom like that. Looking out past the mist in the air, maybe for wisdom of my own, or maybe for the secret to having a quiet van, I see two men and a woman walking across the street towards the Fleetwood Diner. They had a long night ahead of them. I could feel their jovial existence, their duty to fulfill the moonlight and feel the sweet air of midnight in Ann Arbor. Sleep would be only a memory for them, not something to work towards, no pillow would offer the excitement that could be found on the arms of their friends or the laughter of strangers they might meet on their way. My father used to say “a page of Proust is good for you. It’ll relax you and get you ready for bed.” A page of Proust, or a bite from the Fleetwood before bed... a thousand tastes make up this world, I suppose. The van door shuts behind me, as I walk up to the back door of the glowing book store, realizing that I never believed my dad while he was living, about things like Proust, but now that he has passed from this life, I find his voice more clear and present in my life. I guess when there are no new things to be said, all of the old words come back more often to fill in the spaces.

I find myself now looking closely at men who are the same age he was when he died a year ago, and am happy to feel similarities to my father in them. It comforts me somehow. Bill Zirinsky, of Crazy Wisdom, was one man who recently etched a place in my mind, with his calm-

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ness and often understated collective demeanor towards seemingly everything he did. The first time I spoke with him about the Shelf project for the store was months before now, and I quickly noticed his slow intentional way of speaking. Nothing was rushed, unless it was a quick one or two word phrase, in which case, he became very pointed and direct. He seemed to be a very calm man, but also a very clear man, no nonsense. This was my father’s style in some ways. He was a very easy-going person, but when he had his mind set, it was set and that was all there was to it.

Bill walked with me through the store and looked upon the different areas where the new Oak “Slat Wall” shelving would be installed. Details of the trim and dimensions

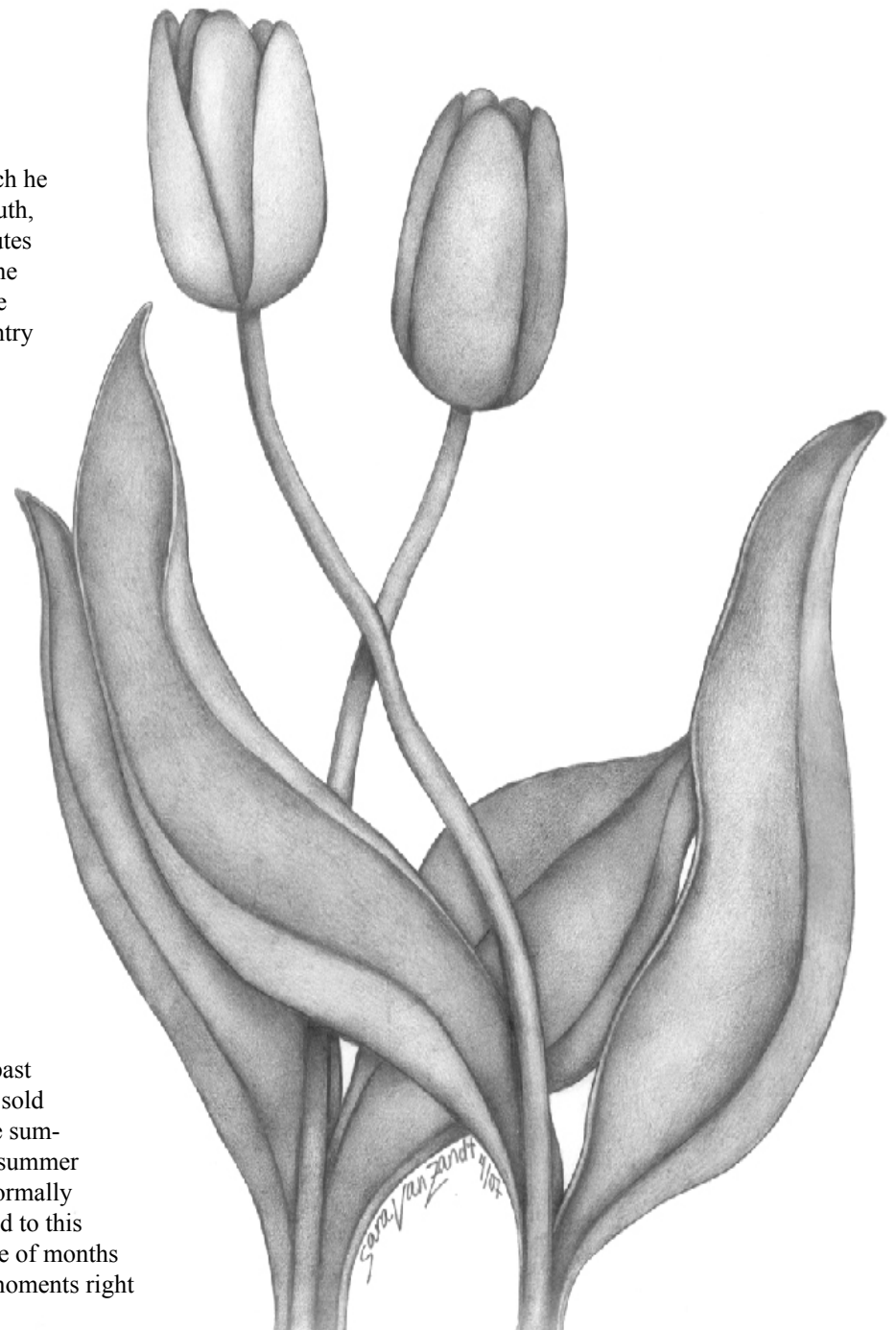
were clarified in a quick fashion, with some exceptions about which he would converse with his wife, Ruth, and within only a few short minutes we had completed the scope of the project. I was a bit amazed at the speed of this, since, in my carpentry career, I have been accustomed to taking a good deal of time at the initial scope of most work. I could see he had a simple pleasure in knowing that he was done with this task of meeting and talking, and could now move on. I liked this style and was again reminded of my father who was a huge family man, and from there reminded of my own family... Ani, a vibrant and strong seven year old girl; Liam, a happy seven month old boy; and Sarah the most beautiful woman in this world, who has welcomed the very light of the sun into my heart. My thankfulness to be in the space of Crazy Wisdom was now genuine, remembering my past meetings with Bill, when he had sold me a beautiful leather journal the summer before, and, when later that summer Sarah had introduced me more formally to him. All of those moments led to this project, which has lasted a couple of months now. Moments building more moments right out of thin air.

As the project continued it became apparent that arrangements might be made for me to perform my work after hours, meaning between eleven at night and eight in the morning (since I would need to be at my regular job by then). The first night was fine, it felt long, but not having any prejudged assessments of what to expect from an all night session of carpentry, it was easy. My co-worker Ronnie and I worked quickly and accurately. The hours passed, and before we knew it, the late hours of the night had slowly drizzled into us like syrup into a pancake. Ronnie was a couple of years younger than me, and was a bit rougher in character. I think Proust would have done him well in his life, but since up until now, no one has given him any attention like that, he would probably just shrug it off as intellectual jargon, as he did with most things.

The second night was longer and I was starting to experience the relationship between sleep and non-sleep. One’s eyes really do need to be closed and rested for at least a little while. Hallucinations, I have found, begin with the eyes. Soon my attention was wandering more from my work to other ideas, which was a dangerous thing to let happen. The blade of a saw, or the nail of an air-powered trim gun, would not offer any forgiveness if they felt my gaze lacked intent; the next rung of a ladder does not make itself available if your foot does not remain consistent with the last.

“You’re young, don’t hurt yourself,” my dad would say whenever I was exerting myself in a frenzy. Growing up on a farm, there were constantly chores which a tall, young, skinny lad like myself could find to hurt myself with. I made it my goal though, to prove my dad wrong and actually push myself harder, I don’t know why I did that, maybe just simple rebellion, maybe something more. I now know he loved me and cared for me, and had physically restricting pain of his own, and simply did not want the same for me. Being a father myself, I feel an intense closeness to him about that.

In Buddhist areas of Asia, it is normal protocol for monks to undergo sleep deprivation meditation, where



they will stay awake for weeks at a time...this seemed unreal to me now. As the days and nights progressed, night time and day time became a blur of colors and sounds. The saw and the hammer felt more like extensions of my body and less like external objects. I could see closely into each of the pieces of wood I was working with. In some ways it was nice, a new kind of vision came from all of the extra work and non-sleep.

Hours were spent during the day, sometimes into the evening, working at my regular carpentry job in town, and then working through the nights on weekends on my own projects made for a busy life. I could feel energy inside of me being depleted. I thought back to a book called *Every Day Zen* by Charlotte Joko Beck: “We try in vain to protect ourselves with our worried thinking...(but) our body has its own wisdom.” Maybe I was unclear about what was actually happening inside of me. Was I aging at a stressed accelerated pace, or was I tapping into a universal energy that might bring me closer to enlightenment? I hoped for enlightenment as I sipped another cup of espresso.

Sarah was extremely supportive of my state of mental fatigue, and though mothering two children and working part time is an unbelievable task in itself, she somehow found the space to give to me all of the care and attention I could have ever asked for. She remained beautiful and helped create beauty for me to rest in. In many ways, she was my inspiration to complete this project, and I was aware that as hard as I thought I had worked, I would probably never see a glimpse of the work that is “being a mother.” To hold life, and the living breath within her, to give herself completely to someone else, to have not even a moments rest, this felt truly amazing.

I smile now as I walk through the back of the store (feeling good about working tonight), seeing Chris, a very friendly man who works at the front counter of the store. I wave and say “hi.” The time is just before midnight. Chris offers me some tea while I start carrying in my tools. Some are heavy and bulky, with motors, and some have not changed in hundreds of years like my bag of chisels. Chris

seems like a good worker, and I am enthused again to be here doing this work. The walls are defined by tall book shelves, filled with pages of metaphysical and ethereal wisdom. The air has a residual taste of incense in it. I like that. If you have ever spent much time in the store, you know, eventually you will find a book that speaks to you. And if you spend a little more time, the air will speak to you. It speaks with one voice, a collected voice of all the authors, held upon the book shelves, at once. I wander for a moment now. My eyes search the many titles, and author groups. I glance at the elegant Buddha statuary and the sparkling jewelry cases, and am taken away to a dreamy place of utopia, where peace may be found. I am warm and this place is good. I am happy to feel that I may contribute to this space of rest and beauty.

I look up at the slat wall areas that have already been completed. New wall art hangs proudly from them. Ronnie walks in and we exchange hellos. Plugging in the hoses and chords, laying drop cloths and dust protection, and bringing in the wood, we are finally ready to do some carpentry. "Why do you work so much?" he asks me. Laughing I start to recite something from somewhere in my head, "...love is work..." as Charlotte Beck wrote. And what she means is that the expression of love is not lazy, it is not disobedience, or selfishness, or slothfulness.

And I go on: "It is work, it is folding the laundry, it is weeding the garden, cooking dinner, driving, caulking a tub, love is action. Love is work. To work is to love." Ronnie smiles at me, as if to say "do you really believe what you just said?" He and I don't speak of it again. I disagree with much of the way Ronnie thinks, and he assumes I am crazy probably all of the time, but we work well together. Carpentry is an equalizer. It is a breath in the wind. Carpentry is not biased, or judgemental, it only asks for honor and respect. It is a craft which holds the very fibers of this earth within it, the history of civilizations stem from it. Each small measurement must be done with care. Each cut, each nail, each connection, a thousand strands, a thousand tales surviving in one tree. We must honor such a tree. Tom Brown Jr. in his book *Grandfather* wrote: "...our role as caretakers (of this earth) does not begin and end with taking the right things in the right way. We must become protectors of the earth."

In my short career thus far, I have already seen the depletion of South American Mahogany as a resource, and have heard stories from old grey-haired carpenters about the famed, once plentiful redwood, which also is no longer available. I am sad to think of our misuse of these energies and resources. Since they are not separate from us, we should take care to treat them as we would ourselves. In *The Soul of a Tree* by George Nakashima he writes beautifully: "A tree provides perhaps our most intimate contact with nature...we woodworkers had the audacity to shape timber from these noble trees...each tree, each part of the tree has its own particular destiny and its own special relationship to be fulfilled." And I feel this to be true, as I look around, preparing to make my next cut, seeing that maybe each bit of tree will have a different destiny, some will be trim in a mansion, some will be processed into a beautiful book that sits upon a shelf here before me, and some will be made into this very piece of paper that you read right now! Bless the trees. Bless this amazing life that we can enjoy such abundance, and let's never forget their sacrifice.

The night passes. Rain starts. What happened to the people who were going to the Fleetwood diner? Have they finished their dinner? Did they have humorous political talks, or a series of serious conversations dealing with the imbalances of dating? Have they gone to bed yet? The dust from my last cut fills the air next to me. I breathe it in and the hallucination begins. I feel the life of the wood in my lungs, and feel of a lifetime when I was once a tree. I can see the bugs that lived in my leaves, and the birds that homed in my branches. The moon comes out tall and bright. Ronnie moves slowly to a piece of oak trim, he feels the same fatigue that I do. We decide its time for a break.

Resting for a moment we watch the people walking along Main Street from the Tea Room window. The moon is bright above, letting down a glow upon the city streets that makes me feel like I am somewhere else. Maybe Europe somewhere. What time is it? Where are all these people going? What are they doing? I am amazed at the crowds still roam-

ing at 4 in the morning. I guess Europe is a busy place at this time of night. I start to zone out a little. Once when I was younger I asked my dad: "Dad, why does it seem like you have dark circles under your eyes?" He looked serious for a moment, then answered: "Well, I stayed up for days at a time when I was in college, and I don't know if it was very good for me." I flash back to the present and feel the sting in my heart as I miss the warmth of my home and my family. Sarah, Liam, and Ani, soon to be with them.

Ronnie gets up and I follow, to finish the night. A

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couple more hours and we will be done with our tasks. Another hour passes just like the last. I glance past the Rudolf Steiner section as I step up onto a ladder. Walking back to the saw I see the Osho section out of the corner of my eye. Soon my mind is filled with voices. I start to feel a warmth in my center. I feel like I might fall over. The caffeine might finally be getting the better of me. Or maybe I am about to reach nirvana. Just a couple more cuts to make. Measuring for the last cut I look down. I see my hand in front of my body. I see its small shape, its skeletal form, the hairs on the back of my wrist, and I see it as no longer my own, it is my father's. Ronnie is nowhere to be found, the store disappears from my vision, and soon all I can see is my hand. I watch it for a moment, as it moves to manipulate the chalk line. "I could see the big veins on the back of grandpa's hand. There were beads of sweat standing out too, shining against the copper skin. There wasn't a tremble nor a shake in the hand. The rattler struck, fast and hard. He hit grandpa's hand like a bullet; but the hand never moved at all." Something broke free in me by reading that passage from *The Education of Little Tree* a couple of months before.

Now I saw my right hand and remembered my father's right hand, the smell of his sweat, and the smell of farming, his touch of kindness. And remembered the strength that you feel in your father's hands when you're just a boy and your own hands are so much smaller than his. I feel his hands brushing my hair along my forehead the way he would just before I would go to school in the morning. His strength seemed immeasurable to me. My hand, my hand was now that size. My hand had grown. Now in this late hour my hands were like my father's. I miss him. I miss watching him play his guitar, or the way he would write something down. I looked at my hand once more. The pressure to cry was pushing at me hard, somehow I could not shake this feeling of my hand being his.

I made the cut and finished the work. Ronnie and I cleaned up and began our last couple of trips to the van with tools. We didn't roll any of the chords or hoses, we were too tired. We dragged their ends along the wet ground till they were thrown into the back of my van. Looking out across the parking lot like I had when I arrived about 6 hours before, I could see in the distance a couple of people laughing and staggering to the Fleetwood. I laughed a little remembering the group who had preceded these. The sun was just beginning to peak through the distance of night. I felt a newness in my heart, the carpentry was good. Beneath my breath I thanked Bill and all of the Crazy Wisdom Staff for offering themselves to the store, and slowly pulled myself into the driver's seat. I hadn't even turned the key when suddenly a tool fell from its spot on a shelf behind my seat and made a big crashing noise. I sighed, smiled, and started the vehicle. Time to go home and see my family, and sleep.