

Snapshot

By Benjamin Daniel

There's an older guy who lives a few houses away from me on a tree-lined, asphalt-cracked suburban street. The street is one of those where M&M rocks dot it and concrete slabs fight in vain against tree roots whose strength is in the entire planet and man can shape but not defeat these roots, only compromise as the slabs erupt. The houses were built when conformity was the rule rather than the exception and people didn't deign to create from whole cloth an existence absent the advertiser's pen.

The older guy's hands, arms and knees have seen a great deal more than mine: scabbed, calloused, indifferent, knowing. The hands, mitts, really, are gnarled with age and handiwork. I spoke to him one slate gray day when he told me he built things, a master craftsman who designed cabinets, bureaus, mirrors, shelves, sinks and tables the old way, not using new tools, sighting along edges to see straight, and broke things in Vietnam and Korea before he was broken and left to get fixed. Veins in his forearms trace watercourses down toward his creased wrists. He wears a faded Timex, now a smudged green where it once glowed gold, and it runs late. "You're on time or you're late," he says, a standby phrase pulled from a white paint-stained carpenter pant pocket like a soiled handkerchief and proffered for my use or not. He's ambling toward a Lincoln Town Car. The car sits low and there are whitewall tires with yellow guidelines, 195/75/R14. The Town Car sports a hydrant dent scored with red and yellow paint on the rear bumper and I don't know if that means there's bad driver in the house down the street because I only ever see him drive it or if the car has an affinity for red and yellow hydrant dents or backing into objects in general.

The older guy's eyes look like washed crayon colors and glint in yellow streaming sunlight. He wears a dimple on his right cheek when he smiles and shows all of his teeth, or the ones that aren't dentures, and a deeper dimple on his left cheek when he pulls a frown, like his face uses a pulley system to control each side.

His wife is a lot younger than him and has sought and received the company of other men while they have been married. For a time, he seemed resigned to the comings and goings, her packing the silver van with two, then three, children, and toys and clothing-stuffed parcels she would drive away. The brake lights glowed and shrank in the distance and the marriage-screaming stopped. She is both petite and pudgy and smokes her size in cigarettes and wears her hair short. She used to cut the grass but the older guy appeared outside one gleaming August day astride a green and yellow riding mower. He perched there and smiled and cut his half-acre's worth of grass and smiled his smile and waved contentedly while the

mower chopped and tossed, chopped and tossed. The green carpet of his lawn shone with the mower's labors, cut to specs and edged with a razor. I think his wife worked at the post office or I heard that secondhand. The wife's children are her children and his physically and temperamentally, but they only share two, a son and a daughter.

My oldest son plays with his son and when they fight it makes a screeching noise that sounds like Sister Mary Walter scratching writing lines across a smoky green chalkboard in an eighth grade Catholic school classroom, now defunct. They are great, lifelong, minute-to-minute friends in the way of eight year-olds, sharing toys, games, dirt, food and other creature comforts during the day and sleepovers. The older guy's son seems cut from the father whole cloth, quiet, seeming to brood but thoughtful, keenly observant. I measure myself and come up short. Some.

We share the street today. He walks his arthritic hip walk, taking care, not rushing, a person with all the time in the world and very little as he approaches, always at an angle, leaning into it. He usually wears khaki, pressed to shiny, and a polo shirt, usually some variation of red or white, so it could be maroon, whatever. "You know," he begins. It's always "You know," with a pronouncement declaiming what I should know following on. "You know, I was thinkin', you should pull that bush out front there."

Why?

It don't match and it's unruly.

What do I put in its place?

Whatever, get it outa there and start 'er over.

And so it goes. When I make my way down to his porch as the sun continues its ascent he sits, settling himself into a padded chair how a do might circle its bed and getting comfortable. The chair has seen some kid and weather wars, out there with the elements and scratched and worn from use. The detritus of parenthood encroaches on the conversation space, plastic tools, bicycles, a couple of stuffed toys of indeterminate origin, sun-faded, wet, spider webbed. He always goes first, knowingly or from my deference, some awe creeping in the way I am with folks I know have seen and experienced so much.

The day's gray had begun to give way to a clearer cloud-dotted blue, and we silently welcomed the approaching warm. Cars passed on the street infrequently, either far faster than the posted 25 MPH or Sunday drive slow. The park, freshly cut and smelling of spring lawns, opened its wooden doors wide to the neighborhood children, park sitters, skaters, basketball and baseball players, a theme emerging as the sky invites people outdoors. "I think we've got a good one coming," I hoped, inviting him in, seeking pearls or conversation, whichever he'd dispense, and sometimes I'd get both whether I wanted them or not. "See, I

don't think," he began, wisdom seeping like maple sap from this initial opening. "I'm 'wake, kids up, sun out, it ain't easy and still I'm 'live. I KNOW it's a good one. And it ain't comin', 's here." I could sit and listen to just the rhythm of his speech, the blank verse of it, and try to make sense of it later. It reached back and forward, and was always in the moment. And completely independent of it.

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