

## Traditions

Among the things I had packed away on the top shelf of my bedroom closet was a small wooden box my dad had given me when I was a boy. Intricately tooled and hand-painted, the box held a yellowed picture of him in his navy uniform, taken the spring of 1942, just before he shipped off to do battle with Japanese ships roaming the Pacific.

Also in the box was the Purple Heart he had been awarded for his wounds, received during an encounter with a submarine off the island of Okinawa; a medal he had refused for numerous reasons to wear. The young chief petty officer came home from the war with all his limbs intact, but was scarred and walking with a limp. He maintained from that day forward that the war had not only destroyed his leg, but had irretrievably damaged any remaining sense of patriotic obligation.

“They don't just own your mind and body,” he said, one bright Saturday morning as he planed the edge of a door for a set of cabinets he was building for my mother's kitchen. He bent to take the measure of his work, brushing the sharp-smelling pine shavings off onto the shop floor and eying the lines he had cut. Folding a square of fine-grit sandpaper with hands made rough and calloused by years of carpentry work, he rubbed the edges of the doors, rounding them in preparation for the finish coats of varnish.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You'll find out for yourself,” he said. “Once they stick you on a ship in that war zone.”

I was not just a third generation woodworker: with my entry into the Navy, I had inherited my father's and my grandfather's love of the sea. When she saw me in my bell-bottoms for the first time, my mother confided how much I looked like my father, when he signed up to fight in WW II. It was my devilish grin, my reddish hair and my clean-cut Irish features, she said. The very attributes my father had used to win her heart and hand.

A keeper of traditions, my father carefully turned the handle of the hand drill, boring screw

holes for the hinge plates with the eyes of a master. Removing a ratchet screwdriver from its place on the wall over his bench, my father examined each screw, then installed it in a precise manner.

“Did your mother ever tell you I almost didn't go?” he said, positioning a hinge plate and ratcheting in the first screw.

“No, she didn't,” I said, handing him another screw.

He looked at it intently, screwed it in, then said, “Yep, almost didn't sign up. Here, you do the other two.”

While I mounted the remaining screws and hinges, he planed the other cabinet doors, stopping only to check the accuracy of his shaves. My father was a meticulous man; a trait born of tradition.

When he helped my mother in the kitchen, he could not spill a single drop of water without immediately sopping it up. My mother, always the light spirited one, would pretend anger and chase him out of her kitchen, accusing him of being an obsessive old fool.

“What made you change your mind about joining up?” I asked.

“Your grandfather,” he replied. “He took me aside just before I married your mother. Showed me a photo of thousands of spit and polish German soldiers lined up in perfect rows in Berlin. Never said a word, but he had me.”

After the hinge-plates were mounted, my father leaned the doors against the legs of the saw horses that supported the unfinished base cabinet. Using a carpenter's folding rule, he measured and marked the door and hinge positions on the support frame.

“When do you ship out?” he asked.

I used a pencil to trace out the individual hinge-plate screw holes. “In five days,” I said.

“Where they sending you?”

“My orders are for Hawaii,” I said. “But, I heard a lot of guys my age are being assigned to riverboat patrols in 'Nam, straight out of Pearl Harbor.”

A brief look of consternation crossed his face.

“Strip the hardware back off these doors,” he said, handing me a screwdriver. He sighed, shaking his head almost imperceptibly. “I’ll put the primer on them later this afternoon.”

My father wasn't much for showing his emotions. Much like his father, I imagined, when his sons went off to war. My younger brother, David, had joined the Marines three months after my enlistment. The prospect of one of my father's sons losing his life in service to his country had become a very real and disturbing cause for him—for both our parents.

Expecting not to see him for another three days, my mother seemed out of sorts when David arrived home from boot camp unannounced that evening at dinner time, producing orders for guard duty in the Caribbean arena aboard a naval supply vessel. Her joy, while unspoken solely for the benefit of my father's pride, overflowed at the idea that her baby boy was safe—for the moment—from the ravages of war.

“Had to be the luck of the draw,” David said, spearing a second serving of my mother's roast beef.

Leaning back in his chair, my father gave him an appraising look over the top of his coffee cup. “Do you really think luck had anything to do with it?” he said, at once distant and surfeit.

Of all the conversations my father had shared with David and me—about life, about death, about women and love—the one about luck had never taken place. Luck had no place in my father's scheme of things; everything had its perfect place, its perfect order and perfect time. No toss of the dice could change that generations-old pattern. Traditions.

“I thought you'd be glad for me, Pops,” David said. “I could have been given orders to shoot gooks in some god-forsaken jungle.”

“Don't...say that, David,” Mom said.

Her face wane and drawn, my mother sat quietly with a hand over her mouth, staring, first at David, then at my father. With no way to slow the onslaught, the very ones she loved were decimating a lifetime of loyalty.