

SAWDUST

MR. BULFAMANTE SMELLED like oil of wintergreen. I swear he greased back his gray curls with the stuff. He had a chunky head and cauliflower ears and carried a ball-peen hammer everywhere, as if it were the key to unlock his days. That hammer: a dainty object of brass, so small it disappeared inside his fist. He'd been a boxer in the French navy, he said, and carried his shoulders scrunched high, as if warding off imaginary blows to his ears.

On weekends starting the summer before my junior year of high school and continuing through winter break, I worked for Mr. Bulfamante sanding floors: worst job in the world. Most of the floors we sanded were in new houses, their Sheetrocked walls unpainted, no electricity, no water. We drank and washed our hands from a two-gallon water keg Mr. Bulfamante kept in the back of the van, next to the drums of varnish and sealer.

Mr. Bulfamante liked me to call him Sugar, as in Sugar Ray Leonard or Sugar Ray Robinson, one of those sweetly named boxers. At dawn he would pick me up in his white Ford Econoline

van. The van was covered with varnish: dripping down door panels and across windows, staining upholstery, stamping blurry brown thumbprints on the hood, streaking like comets across the windshield. The radio dials were all yellow and sticky. Seeing me standing at the end of the driveway holding my lunch bag, Sugar would flash a gap-toothed smile, nod his big, square head, and mouth the words, *Ya bum!* through the windshield, which had a big crack in it. Sugar called everyone a bum.

Before he'd let me into his van, Sugar would make sure I'd brought my thermos full of bouillon. Sugar insisted on hot bouillon as the only suitable beverage for floor sanders and boxers, summer and winter. Not lemonade or iced tea or coffee or hot chocolate. Bouillon. And not chicken bouillon, either. Beef. Chicken was for fruitcakes. Also the bouillon couldn't be made from those little cubes, none of that Herb-Ox or Knorr Swiss crap. It had to be real. Homemade. From oxtail or beef brisket bone. Sugar taught me how to make it. He was a widower.

"You make bouillon?" Sugar would ask. He had a thick accent. I couldn't tell if it was French or Italian. Maybe both.

I'd nod and tap the red thermos sticking out from under my arm.

"Good. Bouillon good for you."

I'd sit on the passenger seat, which, like everything else, was sticky with varnish. Over the defroster's useless whir the radio sputtered classical music: *Bolero*. Schubert's Eighth. The *Firebird Suite*. The same music Mr. Quick, my freshman English teacher, had taught me to appreciate on his portable Sony tape recorder.

Sugar would hand me a Kleenex to wipe the fog off the windshield. Then we'd rumble through the morning gloom, the sky still as dark as the roofs of the houses, headlights peering down murky

streets, the defroster exhaling lukewarm air, strains of Schubert seeping through static, barrels of varnish and sealer bumping and splashing in the gloom behind us.

I never knew where we were going. It might be an old farmhouse with wide-planked floors thick with paint that would take dozens of sandings to remove, the burnt paint smell horrible in my nostrils. Or it might be a brand-new house with fresh-laid floors still smelling of oak, caked blobs of plaster forming little bird-guano-like archipelagos all over it. We'd rumble for twenty minutes or so down increasingly narrow roads, Mr. Bulfamante's calloused hands loose on the steering wheel, the sun just burning pink through silhouettes of houses and trees, the van bouncing like a donkey cart. I'd keep my eyes fixed on the windshield crack, watching to see if it grew when we bounced, afraid to speak lest I say the wrong thing and increase Mr. Bulfamante's suspicion that I was a fruitcake.

Sugar suspected I was a fruitcake because of my friendship with Mr. Quick, which began during my freshman year. Sugar had learned about it from my mother. My father was dead. Mr. Quick was skinny and short, with a black mustache, the ends of which he would twist upward, and a rapid, mincing walk to match his name. A lot of kids called him "Mr. Queer," but then they called everyone queer who didn't play sports. I thought he was interesting, like no one else I'd met. I liked it when he read us poems about Grecian urns and assigned stories about the knights of the Round Table.

Jack Quick lived alone in what used to be the caretaker's cottage at Bennington Pond. He wore Frye boots with side buckles and bell-bottoms. He'd been a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and had an English accent, but not really. He didn't drive a car or eat meat

or wear ties. His cottage had no electricity. He liked to read and write and play chess by oil-lamp light. He didn't have a family as far as I or anyone knew. His cottage was filled with books on every wall. He didn't drink but liked to sip a certain kind of Chinese tea with a melodic name and a smoky taste and smell. He'd been teaching for less than a year when I started high school.

I began to visit him at his house in early October of freshman year. When the water was warm enough, he and I would swim together in the lake, sometimes with no clothes on, since there were no houses nearby and no one could see us. It shocked me how muscular he was, standing there on a large rock, the sun bouncing off his skin. I never thought you could fit so many muscles in a body so skinny.

At the center of the small lake was an island with a miniature stone lighthouse. I'd swim out there with Jack — I called him Jack — though he always swam faster than I did, his short, skinny legs kicking up sun-speckled plumes of water. Then we'd lie flat on a rock below the lighthouse, looking up through a net of tree branches that seemed to sway and leap out over the water. Sometimes we'd talk. Jack never talked about people or things, only ideas, with every other sentence ending with a question mark. He liked to think, think, think. I said to him once, "Jack, can't you ever stop thinking?"

"Frankly," he said, "no."

Or we'd just lie there silently, eyes closed, the sun warm on our faces, the wind crawling coolly over us, feeling nothing but good.

When it got too cold to swim, we'd play chess in his cottage with the stove roaring and mugs of that strong tea that smelled like Wesley Conklin's house after it burned down. Jack would

checkmate me, and I'd say, "You bastard!" or, "You slimeball!" or even, "You fucker!" and he'd smile that sneaky, know-it-all smile of his under his black mustache.

Sometimes he'd get me so worked up I'd lunge at him, and we'd wrestle. And though he was no bigger than me, he'd pin me in two seconds flat to the cottage floor, which was wide planked and painted a greenish blue color like the sea. While pinning me he'd grin, and I'd pretend to be mad and call him all kinds of names, though I wouldn't be able to stop smiling.

The van turned up a freshly paved road, bordered by aborted-looking mounds of snow-covered dirt, to a new housing development, some of the houses still without clapboards, sided in tar paper, their yards snowy moonscapes of raw earth littered with shingles and scrap lumber. Sugar stopped the van and checked a house number against the one written on a varnish-stained scrap of paper. He nodded his greasily groomed head, pulled into the driveway, turned the engine off, and yanked the hand brake, hard.

"Ready, ya bum?" he said, punching me in the shoulder.

We went inside and scouted the premises. Using his ball-peen hammer, Sugar tapped the floorboards, *tap, tap, tap*, like a doctor thudding a patient's chest. With the hammer's flat end he chipped away at stubborn plaster deposits, then ran his thick palm across the floor feeling for nail heads and gaps between boards, all the time nodding his wintergreened head, making grunting sounds — the same sounds for approval and disapproval. Then, like someone who'd just sampled a glass of wine, he drew a deep breath, stuck out his lower lip, nodded, and said, "Okay. We work."

First, we dragged in the heavy-duty, industrial belt-sander that you pushed like a lawn mower. As I helped Sugar carry it up the steps into the house, its metal edges clawed my palms. Sugar always went up first, walking backward like a scuttling crab. He was powerful — especially for a man in his sixties — and puffed like a steer through his nostrils. He told stories of his days in the French navy, how they persecuted him for being born in Italy, called him “Mussolini” and “Il Duce,” gave him all the worst jobs, made him box. Sugar’s arms were as thick as my legs. I saw them flex beside the bright red sawdust bag that hung limp, like a deflated punching bag, under the belt sander. An unlit cigarette dangled from his lips. The way he carried that sander you’d have thought he was carrying nothing heavier than that cigarette, while I struggled, afraid I’d lose my grip and tumble back with the sander on top of me, body crushed, blood and bouillon seeping out of me into the snow.

The day Mr. Quick told me we’d have to stop spending so much time together we were hiking the railroad tracks, collecting blue glass insulators that had fallen from telephone and telegraph wires, keeping the best ones and throwing the rest into the weeds like fishermen throwing small fry back into the sea. We were walking by the ruins of an old hat factory when he told me. His voice was quiet, matter-of-fact. I kept saying, “Why?” But I knew; at least, I had some idea. I’d wondered if he might really be queer, and if I might be queer myself, though I didn’t think so, not really, since I liked girls. Still, these things had occurred to me. And it had occurred to me too that people were saying and thinking things, even my own mother. But I didn’t care. Honestly, I didn’t.

Jack said it was for my own good, that someday, when I was old

enough, I'd understand. By then we'd both be men, and we could be friends again.

It wasn't fair, I said. What did it matter how old I was? I cursed up at the hat factory smokestack. Jack said, "You're acting like a child." He was right.

I went back to the van for the rotary sander, a smaller machine for sanding corners and against walls. But before using it I had to scrape. I had to go around on my knees with a little scraper scraping inside closets and in corners where even the rotary sander wouldn't reach, scraping gobs of plaster and leveling the uneven spots: you'd be amazed how sloppy new floors can be. I scraped until my fingers turned into claws around the wooden handle and my blisters burst, bleeding pink, until my knees wailed under the flimsy kneepads Sugar gave me to wear.

By then Sugar had the belt sander going, pushing it back and forth, back and forth, his curly hair white with sawdust already, the bright red bag burgeoning, his unlit cigarette dangling (he never actually smoked them), sweat leaking out of his forehead, his breath painting clouds in the sawdusty air. When I'd finished scraping I moved on to running the rotary sander. I wore earplugs and a paper mask to keep the sawdust out of my nostrils, but it got in there anyway.

When you sand floors all your senses turn against you. Noise, dust, heat, smell, pain, hunger, thirst, exhaustion. The sawdust turned to putty in my nose; my ears ached from the noise; my skinny arms turned to rubbery celery stalks as the rotary sander twisted and turned. That rotary sander hated me; we hated each other. Now and then, through the sawdusty corner of my eye, I'd look up at Sugar, hoping to see him switch off his machine and

announce lunch, and at the same time hoping he wouldn't catch me looking or see me losing my battle with the rotary sander, being a fruitcake.

I wasn't in school the day they announced that Mr. Quick would no longer be teaching us. I was home sick in bed with a fever. It was late May. A few days earlier I'd gone swimming by myself in Bennington Pond and got hypothermia. The water must have been around sixty-five degrees. When I came out I couldn't stop shivering. The coldness had sunk into my bones. I could hardly walk. I knocked on Mr. Quick's door. He sat me under a blanket in front on his stove and gave me a mug of hot Chinese tea. "I've been meaning to speak with you," he said. "Have you been hearing things, about us? Has anyone said anything to you, asked you anything?" I shook my head no, no, though people had. My teeth were chattering. The next day I woke up with a fever.

I learned about Mr. Quick resigning or getting fired (I never found out which) the day I went back to school, from Clyde Rawlings, on the bus. He told me how Miss Rathbone came into the classroom with Mr. Dillard, the vice principal, and told everyone to hand in the journals they'd been keeping for Mr. Quick, that they wouldn't be needing them anymore, to get out their grammar books.

As soon as the bus pulled up to the school, I jumped off and started running. I ran all the way to Bennington Pond, to Mr. Quick's cottage. The door was open. Aside from a few books everything was gone. The Japanese-style table. The chess set. The blue glass insulators arranged on the kitchen shelf. He'd left behind one oil lamp, its glass chimney darkened with soot, wick burned to a nub. The smell of tea-soaked wood lingered. I rifled

through the books scattered across the blue-painted floor, old paperbacks, their brown pages crumbling as I flipped through them in search of a letter, a note, something.

For a long while I stood holding the last book, the light through the windowpanes licking a warm streak down the side of my face, making little rainbows on the floor. I felt the cottage growing smaller and me growing smaller in it, until I thought I would disappear. After a while I sat down. I sat there until the sun rose higher in the sky and the rainbows dissolved and the blue green floor planks grew dusky, like waves in a storm.

I sat in the cottage all morning and deep into the afternoon, until the windowpanes gleamed with ruddy, low-angle sunlight, and my stomach growled. Then I got up and walked out the door.

I was halfway down the flagstone path when a primitive urge took hold of me. I bent down, picked up a stone, and hurled it, smashing a window. It felt good so I did it again. I broke another window, and another. I kept breaking windows until there were no more windows left to break.

A month later I got a letter from Mr. Quick, postmarked Kyoto, Japan. It was a short letter, and there was no return address. He said he hoped I was doing well and that he was very sorry for having left so “abruptly” but that he’d felt it was “for the best.” After that I checked the mail every day, hoping there’d be another letter, a postcard, anything. Nothing came.

I never heard from Mr. Quick again.

I stopped giving a damn about things and spent lots of time in my room. That summer my mom got me the job with Mr.

Bulfamante. She did it, she said, to get me out of the house, but I knew she was worried. When school started again, my grades went to hell. I didn't care. My mother spoke to Mr. Bulfamante. I overheard her in our kitchen one afternoon, talking under her breath about Mr. Quick. Sugar said, "Leave him to me. I take care of him."

Sugar didn't stop. He never stopped. He kept pushing the belt sander back and forth, back and forth. I couldn't stop, either. I had to keep going, the sawdust turning to gold nuggets in my nostrils. I was sixteen, thinking this was what my life had come down to. I'd blown my grade-point average. I'd never go to college; I'd never do anything. While fighting the rotary sander, I thought about what a disappointment I was to everyone, especially to myself. I wondered what Jack would think if he saw me here, now, and wondered if he'd really been queer, if that was the only reason why we'd been friends, and why he'd left so suddenly. That's when the tears came, mixing with the sawdust. I worried that Sugar would see me. The rotary sander kept whipping and twisting, dragging me along the floor like a parachute in a stiff wind. I'd done only one bedroom. I had five rooms to go and all those closets.

Hours later, after every floor was sanded and we'd applied the first coat of sealer, Sugar said, "Bouillon time!" meaning time for lunch. We stood in the cold air by the back doors of the van sipping the soup from our thermos cups.

During lunch breaks Sugar would give me boxing lessons. It was all part of his plan to defruitcake me. He had two pairs of old boxing gloves, the leather dried and torn. We boxed in our

T-shirts. The scratchy gloves pasted my forearms and shoulders with welts. By the end of a sparring session the skin on my arms would be red and raw like a canned tomato.

We'd use the empty new garages as boxing rings, bobbing, jabbing, and feinting on the cold, smelly cement. Sugar never hit me as hard as he could have; he always pulled his punches. Still, even a pulled punch from Sugar could hit pretty hard. After sparring, Sugar would rub down my arms and shoulders with wintergreen oil — he always kept a bottle handy — his thick, calloused fingers kneading away at my ravaged flesh, his breaths breaking like snorts through his nose. The minty liniment stung like fire when Sugar rubbed it into my welts.

I'd gotten good enough to avoid most of Sugar's swift jabs and even get in a few of my own once in a while. Instead of flinching or growing teary eyed like me, Sugar would smile through the bobbing cigarette.

After lunch that day we were dodging and feinting when suddenly Sugar asked me about Mr. Quick. "You ever hear from your fruitcake friend?" he asked.

Something about the way he said it, the glint of a smile in his eyes, the hungry look, made me lose my concentration. I lowered my guard. Sugar's right hook hit my chin, sending me tumbling backward into the garage door, which we'd raised halfway to let out the sealer fumes that leaked in from the house. I banged my head hard into the metal bar running across it and sat myself down on the icy cement, holding my head, colored lights dancing around me like candied fruit in an exploded fruitcake.

Sugar stood in front of me. "Okay?" he said.

I nodded. But I was crying; I couldn't help it. Tears dripped

down my face. I didn't care. It wasn't just the pain; it was everything.

Sugar put a thick, sawdusty arm around me. "Ya bum," he said. He said it with affection, which only made me cry even harder.

Then I was gone; I wasn't there anymore, in that cement-smelling garage, on that hard clammy floor. I was swimming, kicking up white plumes of water, halfway to the island with the miniature stone lighthouse. The water was cold and clean and beautiful. I lay on the flat rock, the breeze caressing me. Then I was sitting with my legs folded in front of your Japanese-style table, smelling that odd fermented wood smell, lamps burning, stove roaring, sipping smoky Chinese tea, gazing across the chessboard into your eyes and waiting to hear you say, "Checkmate!" We were on the floor then, wrestling, me locked under your arms, looking up at you looking down at me, smiling under your thick black mustache, my shoulders pinned to the wide-planked, blue green floorboards, adrift on that dusky wooden sea. Helpless, happy. Happier than I'd ever been, or would be again.