



Working Wood

by

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Samuel Theodore Allison (1906-1982) was my grandfather. His grandchildren lovingly called him Papa. He was part of the Afro-American migration, which took place between 1915 and 1940. He migrated northward from Jacksonville, Florida with his high school sweetheart and wife to Harlem, New York. His father was of Italian decent, a master craftsman who built homes in and around Jacksonville. However, there are no notes pasted behind the sepia photos in my shoebox to tell me more of his history.

Papa was Papa and I was a little girl not keeping track of the order of years in my head. I believe he helped build the rocking chairs that my sister and I watched TV from. They were upholstered in blue with our initials on them. Papa wore Apple Jack hats that eased over one side of his brow. Sometimes he kissed my face, his was so scratchy; but when it was soft it smelled of the fragrance, Canoe. It would be a special treat to cross the big street, hand in hand with Papa's to the ice cream parlor. You could hear the nickels and dance in his deep, pleated trousers pockets as we dashed across the street. The scoop of ice cream was huge and the peaches or strawberries stuffed into each cone made it an act you had to balance on the way home. I never missed a lick!

The Harlem years seemed to jell in my mind in the '60s. My grandfather was the Superintendent at 203 W. 145th St. You had to walk a dim, cement hallway; more than a few steps to move away from the scream of yellow cabs and foot traffic. Only then would the noise dial down as you entered the courtyard outside their apartment. You could see that the courtyard floor tried for burgundy, but the daily soot tore at any embrace of it. Its back to the street looked straight up into what sky passed by. As kids, we spent many summers playing ball and chase on that floor and next to the buildings that blotted out the day.

Papa and Daddy would watch endless innings of baseball in the courtyard. His workshop was just off it, where they could hear the games and work on projects. The hits, runs and errors spilled in. Planed wood, sawdust, and resin spilled out. I stood in the doorway and marveled at the tools on his workbench. Papa had rows of jars filled with nuts, screws, bolts, nails, and washers. This was the line for the girls, at the doorway. There was nothing he could not build with his rough, cream of wheat hands. I remember the two-story dollhouse that he built for us. The walls were papered for goodness sake! The last piece of furniture that he made for me was a mahogany bookcase. I can still smell the varnish and see where he placed it in my bedroom as young woman.

I would have given anything to apprentice for my grandfather and take up the craft. What a blessing to follow in his footsteps as my father and his grandsons have. I have

envisioned, seen myself being scooped off the burgundy floor, away from my knitting, for a real whiff of sawdust. When I left N.Y. in the late '70s dreams of that apprenticeship faded.

I may never become the master craftsman like my forefathers; however, I have my own tools and a fine, working knowledge of them. I am glued to every home improvement episode on HGTV. Something happens to my senses when I step into home improvement stores. I wander around for hours and never skip the lumber aisle for a whiff of what will turn sawdust. I personally think that someone should bottle the aroma. My daughter knows that I will never be disappointed when she buys me tools for Mother's Day.

My father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and Jesus were all carpenters. How can it not dwell in blood, in spirit? My tools are silent today. Here with pencil and sharpener, I peel the shavings. I fill white space and work the wood. Papa would be proud.