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Water Wheel

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Author Bio

I am a senior English major with a writing concentration and a film minor. I am an intern with the college's department of Communications & Marketing, and will begin working for the Eisenhower Institute's communications team as a journalist and photographer next semester. Writing is my passion, and I hope to pursue it in any fashion I can for a career.

Water Wheel

Frank Arbogast

I carefully guided the quarter inch piece of plywood along the whirring blade of the table saw, sawdust flying in every direction, bringing the sweet, slightly burnt smell of freshly cut wood along with it. My father watched over my shoulder as I finished the cut, turned off the saw, and examined the newly formed edge. There was a small nick in one corner, likely from sideways movement at the end of the cut. I pulled the plywood back and lined it up for another pass.

Every time the table saw started up, the lights in the basement flickered. I'm not sure exactly why, something to do with the circuit board, my dad said. The saw also made a terrific noise when you flipped the switch: a roar, a buzz, and a metallic grinding all wrapped in one--you could feel it vibrating through the concrete floor. I guided the wood through, careful to keep my hand steady through to the end. More confident about this piece, I turned and handed it to my dad.

"Not bad," he said, holding up the piece to the fluorescent light overhead, nodding slowly. *Not bad* is actually his way of saying *pretty good*, although sometimes it can be hard to tell since, depending on the circumstances, it could range from *not so great* to *excellent, I'm proud*.

The sweet smell of sawdust reminded me of other projects that had passed over the table saw in our basement: the Pinewood Derby cars that finished in second place three consecutive years, each designed, cut, sanded, and painted to perfection. The flower box built as a Mother's Day gift that only just recently fell off the front of the shed after withstanding ten years of wind, rain, and snow. Or the recipe box with dovetailed joints and a rich mahogany stain made for my high school girlfriend.

This time around, saw dust hung in the air as we cut away the pieces to a model water wheel, the centerpiece of an exhibit for my National History Day project on the Lowell Mills. I had been working on it for months, researching, writing, and designing the exhibit, even visiting museums and the mills themselves to take pictures and notes. The deadline was the next day, and it was going to be a long night.

Right there along with me, just like with all the other projects, was my father, making sure I sanded every edge, measured precisely, and didn't nick the tips of my fingers on the table saw, as he had warned me about so many times before, just as he had been warned by his father before him.

My middle name is Carroll, given to me by my dad, whose first name is Carroll. His middle name is McNeil, given to him by his dad, whose first name was McNeil (although everyone called him Arby). After his second stroke, Arby was barely able to walk and spent most of his time in his armchair in the living room, the only room that was air-conditioned in the small ranch-style home that my father grew up in in Miami. I never saw my grandfather walk, but I sat in wonder hearing stories about how he used to fly.

Arby flew bombers over the Pacific in World War II, navigating massive rigs of riveted steel over hostile waters. After the war, he signed on with American Airlines, traversing the country several times a week. On family visits to Miami, I would sit on the white carpet, chewing sticks of Juicy Fruit that he kept in a jar on his desk while he told me about flying. In between his brief stories and anecdotes, my grandpa would chew on a cigar, wearing it down to a brown nub that he would carefully set down on the edge of the desk.

Years later, my father told me more about my grandpa's life, like how he helped to invent the first curbside check-in and fought to keep the airline's first African American from being fired during the turbulent 60's. It was rare to see my dad get so excited, to sound so proud as when he told me about Arby, about their fishing trips in the old metal canoe, with his strong paddling stroke and long, graceful cast. Even about chopping fresh mangos off the tree in their backyard, slicing them up and eating them with vanilla ice cream. These stories were usually saved for special nights between the two of us, when he deemed it the right time for me to learn more about where I came from.

"Boys, time for dinner!" my mom called from the top of the stairs down to us in the basement. We were at a good stopping point, having made all the cuts we needed, leaving the assembly of the water wheel and the cutting and gluing of the poster that went along with it for after dinner.

Every night, our family congregated in the yellow-tiled kitchen with its red and white apple wallpaper (a relic of 1980's interior decorating) for family dinner. I sat facing the stainless steel stove and brick-covered part of the wall, where hand-stitched pot holders hung, my back to the sink. My mother sat right in front of the fogged-glass window, the sill underneath scratched raw from dog claws gripping the wood to get a view of the turkey that would roam around our backyard in the autumn months. Across the table from me were my two older sisters, Jane and Maggie. Jane looks just

like my mother, and Maggie looks more like my father. My father always sat to my left, at the head of the table, where he still sits today even though all the kids have moved out.

My family ate pasta often when I was younger. It's not because we're Italian; we're not. We're a blend of Irish and French and Polish. So, we're American. We ate a lot of pasta because it was easy to make and we all liked it. Pasta with red sauce, salad, and bread was a staple in each of our weeks. I learned a great deal about eating spaghetti by observing my father eating there at the head of the table. The round soup spoon held firmly in the left hand like gripping a pen, fork in the right twirling the spaghetti into tight coils. Lean over the plate so no sauce splashes onto your shirt (but if it does, rub it down with cold water immediately). But most importantly, bread shouldn't simply be buttered and eaten. Bread is key to the process. Rip it into small pieces and wipe the plate down in circular passes to soak up the excess red sauce. Once the few remaining pieces of ground beef are cornered, lift them up onto the bread crust with your fork. And only then is your plate clean.

When I was younger, this was a very important technique to master. Up until when we were in junior high, each of us three kids had to ask permission to be excused from the dinner table. Generally, this meant that we had contributed something to conversation (as the youngest, I usually had very little to contribute) and had made an honest effort at finishing our food, whether it was something new or familiar. We could usually get up after a brief argument of how we tried to finish everything but were just full. I always wanted my plate to be clean, however. My parents would believe me if I said I was full, but my father wouldn't look too impressed, and wouldn't let me get up from the table without a comment or two about the remaining food. If he deemed it an honest effort on my part to clean my plate, then he would take it and scrape the remaining bits of pasta with his fork onto his own.

On this night, I was especially hungry and finished two servings of pasta, salad, and a piece of bread to take care of the excess sauce in a matter of minutes.

"Back to work, then?" my dad asked. He had finished right after me. Neither of us talked too much at the table, seeing that eating was the primary objective. While I would usually get up from the table and go to watch TV, my father would instead sit and drink wine, moving each sip carefully over his tongue to savor all of its flavors and notes, listening to my sisters and my mother talk. I think I learned the habit of eating quickly from him, but not drinking slowly; I have yet to learn to do that. That night, however, we both got up together and went to the living room to fit the pieces of the wheel together.

The work went slower than we had anticipated. The wheel was designed to fit together without the aid of any glue. Notches were carefully measured and cut so the whole structure could be slid into place, piece by piece, but this turned out to be more difficult than it had sounded at first. One AM rolled around, and the girls had gone to bed. The TV had been on before, probably showing a Red Sox game, maybe even a Revolution game, I can't remember. We always watched soccer together; it was the one sport we had both played. My dad played on his high school's first soccer team in the '70s and had been teaching me the game since I was five years old. But now, hours after the game, the only light shone through lamp shades in each corner of the room, tinted yellow and orange. The only sounds were of wood creaking as we knocked pieces into place with a rubber mallet, or the occasional *Oh, come on*, or *Damn* when something slipped out of place. That was, until the phone rang.

My dad slowly put down the mallet he was working with and looked towards the kitchen, where the phone was. The ringing pierced through the quiet stillness that settles over our house at night, which is nestled at the edge of the town forest, the trees muffling the far off traffic, leaving only the rustling of leaves in an evening breeze. In the warmer months, the light, high-pitched croaks of the frogs could be heard from the swamp at the east end of our property, nicknamed "spring peepers." He got up and walked to the kitchen, and I listened as he held the receiver to his ear.

It was a call that we had been expecting for some time, but didn't know for sure when it would come. We tried our best not to think about it, and it didn't come up in conversation since my dad was so tight-lipped about anything that might be bothering him.

"Hi, Ivan," he said in a low voice, greeting his sister who, was at the hospital in Miami. There was a minute of silence while we both listened, silence so thick that I was afraid to breathe. "Oh, right," he said, barely above a whisper. "Well, I guess we've been expecting it for a while now. Thanks for letting me know." A deep sigh and the light beep of the phone hanging up. He came back into the room, walking slowly and carefully around the floorboards that always creaked, looking down at his feet.

We waited in silence, neither of us sure what to do. He looked up at me after a minute, and I saw a face that I had never seen before. The face that was always so steady, so sure of what was going on and what needed to be done, was lost. His eyes were soft, and his eye lids wilted. The corners of his mouth hung low, weighed down by the news that had just come in from Miami.

"Arby just passed away."

I kept watching him, seeing for the first time not my father, who

always knew what to do, but instead a son who was remembering the fishing trips and the fresh mangos, remembering looking up at a strong man who flew half way across the world and back. I saw, quite simply, a son who missed his father.

“Dad, I’m so sorry,” I said, shaking my head and searching for the right words. “I’m so sorry.” But nothing else needed to be said. I got up and gave him a hug, and we didn’t speak for a long time, letting the weight of the air hang down on us, feeling what needed to be felt. Then, with a deep breath, he straightened up, brought his shoulders back, and looked me straight in the eye.

“Let’s finish this wheel,” he said. And so we got back to working at the last few pieces until they snapped in place and the wheel was able to spin smoothly and silently.