

Traffic

Late afternoon and between shifts, the shop was as still as an empty church. The saw and the big fans were silent, the compressor quietly hissed, and the sun cast yellow shafts across the work floor, revealing an infinity of wood specks coruscating in the light. In the dampness of summer, the sawdust stuck to our skin and to our clothes and we'd taste it gritty in our mouths and breathe it into our lungs until it was a part of us. The air had an organic, leathery scent. I recall as a boy, sitting in this same spot with my grandfather, watching wood dance in the light and him saying that they were magic pieces of stardust. But this place never held any magic for me and if it did, I never opened my eyes wide enough to see it.

I slid the tongue-and-groove bottom of the next drawer into place to square up the dovetails, shot in a few staples, wiped away the excess glue with a damp cloth and stacked it with twenty-three others of varying sizes. At one time this might have been a skill, but now it seemed as rote as cutting grass. My hands ached and I sat on one of our low worktables. At the front of the shop my dad bowed over blueprints with a protractor, a note pad, and a Cuban cigar clenched in his teeth. A column of smoldering ash fell on the plans and he snatched them up quickly and shook them. A fat man dancing.