

## Wood

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*A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.*

I had the airport shuttle driver pull around to the side of my little house. He even helped unload my suitcases and boxes.

Fumbling for my keys at the back door, I heard Max's low meow. Well, *someone* was glad I was home! I moved everything to the back porch before opening the door; as soon as I opened it I had Max weaving his way between my legs, purring madly.

"Hello Max, I missed you too, pretty kitty," I told him as I moved things in. "Can I get the door closed, please, so we can stay warm?"

I took my carryon into the kitchen. How nice -- fresh flowers on the table! I picked up the note from Lily.

*Welcome home! Max was a slut, and Henrietta is pissed -- put out both shoes!*

I laughed and bent down to give Max more attention. We all have our homecoming rituals -- Max would be inseparable for days. Henrietta would let me know how upset she was that I left *her* house by pooping in one of my shoes after I went to bed. I'd learned -- I had a pair of old shoes I put out for just such occasions. Did she know that was one of *my* rituals?

The mail was sorted and stacked. The refrigerator had a fresh carton of milk for my tea.

I looked at Max. "If I sit down, you'll be in my lap and won't let me up. So I'm going to start laundry first. I have spent most of the day sitting, even if it was at airports and on cross-country planes." I bent down to pay attention to my boy cat. He rubbed his face on my pant legs, pausing momentarily to sniff, then covering the offending spot with Max-scent.

I took the suitcase with my dirty clothes to the laundry room, Max once again weaving between my legs as I walked. By supper tomorrow, Henrietta will have forgiven me.

I put my bag on top of the dryer, and Max immediately hopped up on it. "Sorry, kitty, but I need to empty this," I told him as I deposited him on the floor.

I was a little surprised when I opened the bag; the clothes weren't as I'd remembered packing them. I thought about my carefully sharpened and packed lathe tools in the big bag -- had airport security gone through my checked luggage?

I moved quickly to check the big bag; all was well.

"It's a crazy world, Max," I whispered, returning to laundry. I opened the washer and started loading colored things. I'd packed practical -- two weeks at a woodworking school. But I'd learned so much, far more than I'd expected. And experienced more...

I moved clothing into the washer piece by piece just to be sure. I'd taken a "good" outfit for the more-formal evening, and that needed dry cleaning. I sighed as I remembered how I'd gotten sawdust on it.

What was this? Lumps or something in my favorite soft cotton nightie?

I fumbled with it... "Oh my God," I cried as I unwrapped them. I sat on the floor, holding them in my hands, feeling the tears start to flow.

The two boxes he made -- he put them in my bag -- he must have done it this morning.

He must have done it this morning while I was running around looking for him, wanting, needing to say goodbye, to hug him once more, running around calling his name until the shuttle driver insisted on going.

I held them, feeling them, looking at them -- the dark one in my right hand, the light one in my left. So expressive, so *him*. I'd watched him the last two days making them, frantically, possessed by the process of creating them.

Max hopped into my lap, up on his back feet, his front paws on my breasts, kneading them gently as he purred and looked at me...

"Oh Max..." I whispered, remembering *his* hands, *his* mouth on my breasts.

I wanted to learn more, increase my vocabulary in speaking with and to wood. I wanted to learn turning, lathe work, and I wanted to learn it right. Talking to people, one school kept coming up. I'd heard of them. They have a reputation, not just for being good, but also for exclusivity. Not snooty or pretentious, but they don't take everyone, or take them right away.

So I was surprised when an application packet arrived in the mail; a carver friend had taken the first step for me! Oh Craig, I don't know whether to thank you or not right now! I filled out and returned the packet quickly, including photographs of a number of pieces I'd done, not only the juried ones, the award winners, but the ones that spoke to me strongly.

They wanted me. They waived the normal fees; I only had to pay for tools and supplies. Even at the discounts they got, it was expensive. But it was worth it.

The first day of class was spent on safety lectures, introducing us to our tools, learning to care for them, sharpen them. They're very strict on safety, and rightfully so. Carelessness while using power tools can be very dangerous -- and blood stains can ruin a piece.

I held the two boxes, moving them in my hands, remembering *his* hands, the way he held the tools, the connection he had. I knew that connection -- holding a tool, looking at a piece, and knowing, feeling what it was to become. Remembering his hands as he guided mine on the lathe, remembering his hands as we made love.

Turning beads with a skew is a basic lathe technique, our masters told us. Watching Bob and Rick that first session, it looked so simple, so easy. I remember that morning, watching them, I laughed softly -- you could tell they'd done this so many times, the effortless way they held the skew, placing it on the piece spinning in the lathe, contacting, turning the skew smoothly first on one side, then the other, producing pretty beads.

And my own first attempts, the skew catching on the work, lifting the handle as I turned the skew, all the other small things. Not frustrating, learning -- I knew it would take time.

Pausing to watch others, seeing him for the first time, arriving late to work at the lathe station next to me. He hadn't been in the safety lectures, the sharpening class. Nineteen, twenty years old? Brooding intensity, unkempt light brown hair with wood chips in it. Grayish long-sleeved T-shirt with duct tape securing the cuffs at his wrists, well worn denims, well worn boots. Yet when he started working -- he made two pulling cuts with a gouge, rounding and smoothing his workpiece in seconds, something that had taken me minutes. Switching to the skew, lightly marking the piece, then repositioning, turning bead after bead, effortlessly.

I went back to work, remembering what Rick told us, keeping the heel positioned, turning the skew against the work, smoothly, good -- catch! Smile, pause, and try again.

Rick and Bob, our master instructors, were working their way through the shop.

I turned to him, next to me. "I'm Dina -- could you help me?"

He looked up, managing a half smile. "Sure."

He stepped closer. A few inches taller, and when had he last bathed? Brushed his teeth? Not recently!

"Here," he said, picking up the skew, positioning my hands on it. "Bottom third, lightly against the work, and turn..." He guided my hands, strongly yet delicately. We turned the right side of the bead, then the left. We marked another bead and turned it. We marked a third, and he released my hands. "Do it," he told me, bad breath and all.

I focused on the feeling, holding, positioning, turning. It felt right, and when it feels right, it looks right. I did the other side, and it felt as smooth.

“More, right away!” he told me.

I smiled, knowing the wisdom of his words. I marked another and turned it. Marked another and turned it -- catching on the left side.

“You raised the handle. Do it again, both sides, turn it deeper,” he coached.

I did it, his hands guiding mine once more. He stepped back again and I turned two more, each feeling better than the last.

“Now a bigger one, about twice that size,” he told me, “turn and pull, smoothly.”

Easier said than done, but on the third one, with his help, I did it, turning the other side of the bead on my own, smoothly, easily.

He stepped back.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Alex,” he said, blue eyes flashing.

“Thank you, Alex -- you’ve done this for a while, haven’t you?”

He nodded. “A few years, yah.”

Rick stepped up. “Ah, you’re learning from a real master,” he said.

Alex blushed a bit and stepped back to his lathe.

Rick looked to me. “Let’s see,” he suggested, nodding to my lathe.

I returned to the lathe and turned three beads, two the same size, one larger. The larger one could have been smoother, but I was getting it.

“Yup, you’ve got it. Work a new piece for a while. We’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

I stopped my lathe, unchucked that piece, and picked up another from my supply box. We were turning yellow pine, a soft, forgiving wood. I used the center finder and marked both ends of the new piece, and chucked it up. I turned it by hand, adjusting the tool rest to barely clear. I started the lathe and picked up my large gouge.

I felt him standing next to me. Wordlessly his hands guided mine, making a smooth, strong pull from one end of the piece to the other. I learned -- in this cut, the interactions between tool, tool rest, and work were different. I did the pull cut going back, and he stepped away. I did one more pass each direction; I had it now.

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From the carving and shaping work I did, I knew the feeling, the tool becoming an extension not of my hands, but of *me*, an extension of that creative urge. I could feel it growing as I stood at the lathe. As I turned my beads, I cultivated the feeling, nurturing it.

I finished that piece, then practiced until our masters drew the nine of us together again.

Rick gave us our task for the rest of the period, holding up a piece that was rounded at both ends, with a series of rings loose on a center shaft, like a baby rattle. Bob chucked up a piece of pine, and as he cut and freed rings using the skew, Rick talked us through the process.

We returned to our stations. I chucked up a piece of pine. I glanced to Alex. He had a piece of pine chucked up, and he was standing back, concentrating on it. I smiled, knowing the feeling. I turned to my own piece. *What's inside you?* I asked it. *What do you want to be?*

I took off the blank piece, and returned my last workpiece to the lathe. I wanted to practice freeing the rings and cleaning up the shaft. I'm glad I did -- it was trickier than I'd thought. Of course, Rick and Bob made it look so easy.

I returned the blank to the lathe. I decided on six rings, and could feel the asymmetry I wanted for the ends. A smoothing pass with the gouge, marking with the skew, turning the rings one by one, freeing them, cleaning the shaft. Then turning the base and the top, switching from the skew to a smaller gouge.

Each of us was assigned a lathe, with a storage cabinet next to it. I found sandpaper and cut the strips I wanted. Sanding the shaft and the ends was easy, but the rings were another deal.

Once more, I smelled Alex next to me. I stopped the lathe.

He folded up strips of used sandpaper, jamming them in the space between the rings and the shaft to more or less hold them in place. "I'll show you how to do the inside of the rings in a few minutes," he whispered conspiratorially with breath that would put Max to shame.

Sanding is a necessary evil in woodworking; it's better to make smooth, clean cuts. Pushing things around, I could do most of the surface of each ring.

"You're going to finish it?" Rick asked from behind me.

I didn't take my focus off the workpiece. "You finish *everything*," I told him.

"Good for you," he agreed.

I'd gotten about as much as I could done. I paused for a breath and turned off the lathe.

I looked to Alex. He was just about finished doing more or less the same sanding step. I looked at his piece more carefully. He had seven rings, with what looked to be no more than a ring's free space on the shaft. Amazing.

He glanced up to me and smiled, then turned off his lathe.

"Very pretty," I told him.

"Here's the trick," he told me, then showed me how to smooth the inner surface of the rings. It's one of those things that's so simple you'll never figure it out until you see it.

Gary, the older man on the other side of me, glanced over as I was sanding. "I was wondering how to do that!" he exclaimed.

I put a finger to my lips. "Shhh!" I told him. "Guild secret!"

He chuckled and went back to his work.

I looked around the shop. Some of our fellow students had left the area. The smokers -- probably headed to one of the few smoking areas for a fix.

I looked to Alex. He was about done sanding.

"Where do we find finishes?" I asked.

"Follow me," he said with a smile.

I took my piece and followed down the hall. The shop areas were open and available twenty four hours a day, with the caveat that you couldn't run power tools unless there were at least two students in that particular shop.

The finishing shop was well equipped, as you'd expect. I found an oil finish I was familiar with and got to work. Alex grabbed something and went to a different part of the shop.

"I like what you did with the ends," he said over my shoulder as I was buffing the finish. I'd chosen a finish that brought out the grain.

I held it up, shaking it, turning it. "Not bad for a beginner," I said. "Where's yours?"

He held up a paper bag, smiling enigmatically.

"Ooh, I like that," I told him. He pulled another small brown paper bag from a back pocket.

As I put mine in the bag, I asked, "How long have you been here?" I knew there were longer classes for some of the specialties, such as marquetry and timber framing.

“Two weeks,” he replied flatly. “I’m here for the summer.” He turned and walked away.

For the summer? I followed him back to the turning shop, stopping at the ladies’ room.

We only had a few minutes before Rick brought us to some semblance of order again -- it’s difficult with a bunch of artistic types.

“Okay, let’s see what you’ve got,” he announced, calling us up to the table in front.

We stood around the table. He started with Gary, who had an interesting piece. He’d tapered his, the rings progressively smaller. Unfinished, but nice. Rick called on Betty next. Okay, he’s leaving Alex and me for last.

The pieces were what you’d expect from artisans new to this particular craft; you’d expect proportions and the overall feel to be right, things like that.

I was surprised when he called on me, rather than Alex.

I made a little show of pulling mine out of the bag. Ooohs and Aaahs from the crowd -- that was nice.

“Why did you finish it?” Bob asked.

I told the story of finishing what I considered a practice piece, setting it in the shop, and having two people squabble over it, having it sell for over \$200.

Bob nodded. “One of my first bowls, I took it to a shop and the owner asked what I wanted for it. I told her I had oh, \$20 or \$30 in it. She told me it wasn’t a bowl, it was a ‘Wooden Vessel.’ Know what the difference is?”

One of the others said, “At least fifty bucks.”

As we laughed, Bob said, “You got that right. Okay Alex, let’s see.”

What a beautiful piece! Where mine had a nice asymmetry, and Gary’s was tapered, Alex’s had a light feel to it. But it was the finish that made it -- a clear finish, except for one ring, which was a very dark brown, almost a burned caramel brown. The effect was striking, and everyone thought so. That one dark ring changed the character of the piece, from toy to enigma.

Max, that fits him so well -- light, with that dark element present, an enigma.

The different pieces were handed around. Alex’s had a rough, dark spot recessed on the bottom, in the middle of the light finish, a different color from the ring. Gary’s had a good feel to it, as did mine, and especially Alex’s.

The guy holding mine, one of the smokers, asked, "How'd you finish the inside of the rings?"

Bob looked to me. "Dina, feel like demonstrating?"

I let everyone know that Alex had taught me. I showed them the friction trick so you could sand the outside of the rings, and then the loop trick for the inside.

"You've all seen the gift shop?" Rick asked. Murmurs and nods. "See things like these in it?" he asked, holding up Alex's piece, and mine. More nods. "We're going to move on, but there's a box behind the gift shop." He held up a little paper tag with string on it. "Anything you finish, if you want, put one of these tags on it with your name and room number, put it in the box behind the gift shop. If the shop folks like it, they'll price it and put it in the shop. If they don't like it, it will magically reappear in your room." He looked at the two finished pieces. "Both of these will sell, and for substantially more than five bucks. If a piece sells, you get half. At the end of your stay, you can take your unsold pieces, or leave them. Questions?"

"Where's the finishing shop?" one of the other gals asked, to laughter from the group.

Rick answered, "We'll go there this afternoon, after we've covered a few more spindle turning techniques."

The rest of that morning was a blur; I looked for Alex at lunch, but he was nowhere to be found. We did more spindle work, and moved to the finishing shop. Surprise -- most folks had cleaned up their morning projects!

Alex showed his finishing secret -- a friction finish I'd not seen before. And I was right when I thought it looked caramelized -- you get the dark color by applying pressure, causing more friction, and more heat. I liked it! Of course, he didn't quite explain how he'd done *all* of that dark ring... Dark mixed with the light...

Oh Max, when was it? A few nights ago? I awoke in the middle of the night, hearing him making noise beside me, whimpering, almost crying. He was still half asleep as I pulled him to me, cradling, comforting, suckling him. Oh I could tell how much he needed that, how much he relaxed in my embrace. But when we first go to bed, he won't let me hold him like that. Why is it, Max, that he needs it so much, and won't let go to enjoy it? And you're right, Max, I enjoyed it too. He did bring out that part of me, the part that needs to nurture, to comfort, to heal. And you're my cuddleslut Max, content to spend the day purring in my lap.

How do I find them, Max, or do you find me? I remember finding a dirty, wet, matted, flea-infested kitty hiding on my back porch, hiding from a storm. Do you remember that, Max? How I bathed you, and groomed you, and held you? That was almost two years ago now.

I looked at the round boxes in my hands again, turning them. Somehow I knew that when I took off the lids, the dark one would have a light inside finish, and the light one would have a dark inside finish. Which one represented me, and which him? He with the dark outside,



so sweet inside? Did I have a dark inside? No. Well, we all do, we all have light and dark, inside and outside.

I felt it before I saw it, another of his signatures on the bottom of the dark one. Yes, the bottom of the light one was smooth, but the dark one...

I watched him over the two weeks. I watched him and learned. I learned as much or more from him as I did from our masters.

You use the parting tool to cut, or part, a piece from the scrap. It's a technique involving ear as well as eye. When you're parting a piece, as the sprue you're cutting gets smaller, the sound goes lower in pitch. And then with a slight motion, you cut through, parting the piece.

But on some pieces, like the dark box in my hand, others I remember him doing, he'd take the sprue down to a small diameter, then grab the piece with his hand, twisting and tearing the sprue. Looking at the bottom of the dark box, I could see it -- the torn piece still there. Such feelings that stirred up in me -- deep emotions, primal things, the biting off of an umbilical cord, violent separation, open wounds, the torn, exposed part of his soul.

Oh Max, how much I'd like to hold him, squeeze him, and love him until he's healed.

It's so silly -- I never knew I could laugh and cry at the same time. Are his artistry and his pain inseparable? Does curing one eliminate the other? If emotional *sturm und drang* drives creativity, we're in for a very, very creative period, Max.

I rolled the boxes around in my hands as Max circled in my lap the requisite number of times and settled down to be a warm purring machine. Something inside the light one?

How I'd changed over the last two weeks -- and I'd changed him as well. Last night I was worried he'd disappeared on me, but he showed up at my door his hair still wet. "I showered," he whispered to me, before we let passion take over and carry us to my bed.

Remembering his face, that first day in class, pine shavings in his eyebrows, those sparkling blue eyes, eyes which held pain, trouble, darkness.

Remembering his face, one morning holding him in bed, holding him, suckling him after pouncing on him, riding him, draining him, his face so relaxed, so peaceful, so content.

Thursday night at the reception, Rick mentioned it to me. "Dina," he said as we stood around sipping wine, "sure you wouldn't like to stay a couple of more weeks?" "Why?" I asked. He glanced around, then said softly, "You've helped that kid an enormous amount." I didn't blush -- everyone knew we were sleeping together. We weren't the only ones.

The reception was an every-other-week thing, the "artists and craftsmen" (that's us) showing our work, people coming in to look, to buy, to drink cheap wine. As I looked around, I realized how much of Alex's work was there. So was a fair amount of mine.

I suggested to Rick, "He brings in a lot of money." Rick nodded. "Yes, he does." Then with a smirk he asked, "Still want to keep that skew?"

That's where it started between us, Max. The third day, I knew the skew was my favorite turning tool. I noticed Alex's tools -- some had different handles, but the metal parts were the same as ours. We had the afternoon free to work on whatever we wanted. At the break before lunch, I asked Alex. "Sorby makes great tools, but I want a new handle for my skew. Care to help?" Oh, he lit up like a little kid at Christmas! I managed to get him to eat some lunch, and he dragged me to a corner of one of the stock bins, an area full of odd sized and shaped pieces. I told him the dream I'd had about my skew, and knew what the handle should look like, and more important, feel like. We practically jumped into a big box of wood, ignoring the spiders and other inhabitants. I knew it should be a dark wood, and it had to have character. I'd find a piece, look at it, and discard it. He'd hold up a piece, I'd consider it, and tell him what it lacked.

We reached for the same piece together, holding it up laughing, It was the one.

We were in our own world together that afternoon, coaxing a new handle from that piece of wood. I sketched out the basics of what I wanted. His comments and suggestions were insightful, and made it more useable. More important, he suggested I turn a test piece first. That helped me change the design slightly, in ways that made it fit my hands much, much better. The turning went well, and he was impressed watching me shape the asymmetrical foot on a belt sander. I enjoy inlay work and did the basic inlays that night. We fit the blade and pressed the ferrule in place a little after ten that night. It had a basic finish on it; I knew I'd be spending another five or six hours of inlay work on it, then more finishing. But it felt grand. I threw a test piece in my lathe and tried it -- and it was now a part of me.

Almost eleven at night, we were both covered in wood chips, sawdust, finish, and sweat.

"I need a shower!" I said, happy and tired, and suddenly, impulsively hugging Alex.

I was surprised the way Alex eyed me.

I took my skew in one hand, and Alex in the other. "I'll wash your back, and you'll wash mine!" Laughing, we headed to my room.

I don't know how it happened; I've had spur-of-the-moment liaisons before. It was like that, yet different. Alex is so different. He was wearing his usual long-sleeved shirt with the duct tape at the wrists to keep them out of the machine tools, denim pants. I started the shower and started stripping; we were both in the shower before we knew it.

In the shower, water running over our bodies, hands running over our bodies, skin against skin! Oh we washed, and more -- his hands on me, his mouth on me. My hair is shorter than his, lighter; I washed his, then mine. I could tell he enjoyed soaping us, working up quite the lather. I knew we needed to get rinsed off and dried, and quick -- I wanted him on the bed!

Oh he was so eager, so strong. I was already on the edge when he slid into me. I didn't expect him to last long enough for me to come, but it didn't matter; he felt so good inside me, on top of me. I held him in place, reveling in the sensation before our bodies took over, taking us on an intense ride.

I tried to hold him to me afterwards, but he resisted. But when I turned to my side, he snuggled up behind me, putting an arm over me, resting a hand on my breasts.

And as I drifted off to sleep I thought about what I'd seen in the shower, and while we were hurriedly drying off -- the scars on the inside of his right wrist and forearm. I'd seen scars like that before. Those were the kind of scars that went far deeper than just the skin -- those went down to the soul. I held his hand to me and went to sleep.

I wake up early in the mornings. I didn't play fair; I got up as quietly as I could and went to the bathroom. When I returned, I inflamed him, rolled him to his back, and jumped him. The sensation of him latching on to my left breast was enough to push me over the edge; from then on it was one continuous orgasm until he was drained and we collapsed together.

I was still glowing when we regrouped in the shop after breakfast. I had my skew wrapped in a piece of cloth from the finishing shop.

Working on a piece later in the morning, we'd moved on to bowl work, face turning, I heard a low whistle behind me. I stepped back from the lathe before I looked around. Bob was there, eyeing my skew.

"Very nice! May I have a look?" he asked.

I handed it to Bob. "It's not quite done," I told him.

"What else?" he asked as he turned it in his hands, smiling and nodding with approval.

I liked the feel of it as well. "I need to finish the inlay work along here, extend the checquering along here" I pointed to where I'd outlined on the handle.

"What are these?" he asked, indicating the first inlay work I'd done.

"Reminders of which side is up when I'm sharpening it," I told him.

He liked that. "Going to do the whole set?"

I shook my head. "Not yet -- none of the others have spoken to me."

Rick came by and looked at it. I already knew where I was going to remove a little more wood to better fit my hands. In talking with him, I mentioned the help I'd gotten from Alex.

And all morning long, Alex seemed more relaxed, yet more focused on his work.

Our turning assignment for the day wasn't going well for me. I'm good with finesse work, the light touch. Yet when I moved to the interior of the piece with a scraper, I blew out a large part of the side. I stopped the lathe and looked at the debris.

"Ooh, bummer," Gary commiserated with me.

I nodded. "Hidden check -- no way to see it from the outside," I told him.

That's life -- hidden flaws, things going smoothly until everything falls apart, like Michael and me. Time to start over. Even Bob agreed when he looked at the scrap. "Nasty," he said, "can't even turn it into a kitchen scoop."

I told him I'd save it for a while -- it might turn into something. One of the unspoken rules of woodworking -- never tell anyone what you're making until it's done.

But my second try was much better; I picked over my supply box until I had a blank that spoke to me. Turning it, I contrasted an angular, sharp exterior with a smoothly curved interior, nice and thin under the lip. I took a page from Alex's book, and used contrasting finishes for interior and exterior.

Alex the enigma -- he helped me, and Gary, learn to use our tools. He gave us so many little tips, expressing in a few words or a gesture things that our instructors had labored upon.

That night, I found him brooding outside about ten o'clock. The look on his face as I approached -- so complex. "Stay with me?" I asked quietly. He smiled and I took his hand.

We were learning the personalities and styles of our compatriots. I mentioned that to Rick at lunch a day or two later -- I grouped people into expressives, abstracts, technicians. I was an expressive, Gary next to me an abstract, Mike and Gail were technicians.

"No amateurs?" Rick asked with a grin.

"They're trying to be technicians," I replied between sips of soup. "How about you?"

He sighed and gave me a strange look, then shook his head. "You've put words around something I've felt for a long time. I'm a technician. I can do *anything* with the tools -- except make the magic I see you do. I'm here to help you develop technique -- then stand back and watch the art happen."

I felt his sadness -- bridesmaid's joy. I put a hand on his. "You make it possible," I said.

"No more than Sorby," he muttered.

“That’s bull, and you know it!” I chided. “You have a feel for the wood and the tools. Anyone who watches you sees that. It’s a gift, like your teaching ability. I’d make a rotten teacher.”

“No you don’t,” he smirked. “Why do you think Bob and I call on you so much?”

“Okay then, Gary would make a rotten teacher, or Claire.”

He nodded. “Yeah, that we agree on.” He looked a little more serious. “What camp is Alex in?”

I sighed a little. “He’s a screwed up kid. Gifted but troubled. Such a talent...”

Rick nodded. “You’re sleeping together.” It was a statement, not a question.

I didn’t know what hat he was wearing: friend, mentor, teacher, school authority figure. “Is that a problem?” Liaisons between students didn’t seem uncommon, or frowned upon.

He smiled a little. “Not for us. He’s 19, so it’s up to him. Please be careful.”

I nodded. “I will be.” For both of us. “He’s here for the summer?”

Rick smiled, but a sad smile that spoke of hidden dark detail. “Yeah, spending time with each group. So far he’s been with Bob and me. But all of a sudden he wants to do inlay work.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “He’s been watching really close as I work my skew handle. Allen showed me a couple of tricks.” Allen was one of the instructors for that art.

Rick nodded. “And you showed Allen one or two, the way he tells it.”

“It’s such a joy to be here.”

“That’s why we’re here,” he agreed.

Oh Max, it was such a joy to be there -- learning from all of them, not just the instructors, but the students. But the other conversation Thursday night at the reception...

Joshua, the director of the institute, walked up to Rick and me. As we made chit-chat, he let me know he and Craig were old friends! Joshua had spoken to Craig, and to a number of the instructors, he nodded to Rick, and they might have an opening, January through March, if I was interested in coming to teach! I’d be working with other, more senior, instructors, but would I please consider it? Then with a smile he walked away! That’s the roughest, slowest part of the year for me, with no tourism in the area, nothing but snow and bills. It would be so nice to escape, go teach, be with people. But Max, who would take care of you and Henrietta? Oh I know, Lily would. But I’d miss you terribly. And already, I miss him.

The boxes Alex gave me, small but so nice. Asymmetrical finials, hand work that I'd shown him. We call them boxes; most people would call them bowls with lids, or jars. They're turned and hollowed on the lathe. You can turn a quickie in fifteen minutes or so, hollowing it and doing most of the work for the lid with Forstner bits. These represented hours of work.

I made a set of three one afternoon, from start to finished in three hours. The shop sold them for \$240; that gave me about \$40 an hour for my work -- the cost of three Sorby gouges.

Not all my pieces went to the shop; some the shop threw back. I brought those home, along with other pieces. Others I'd made...

I'd done another bowl with a straight, angular exterior, sharp lines, and a flowing, smooth interior. The contrast was quite nice. As I was sanding it on the lathe, Bob asked if I was attached to it. I told him I wasn't. He smiled and said he'd like to use it after lunch in class; I didn't have to put any finish on it.

And after lunch, in front of the class, he took it to one of the bandsaws and cut it in half! As I stood there in shock, he and Rick talked about it, dissecting the cross section, how I'd made it light but strong, balancing the rim against the sides. Gary put an arm around me and asked if I was okay. Alex quickly stepped to my side as well. I was finally able to breathe, and then to laugh. Rick cut a half inch rib off it, and held it up against a piece of paper. It did look nice.

Alex twitched; he practically vibrated. I saw an idea grab him and take hold. When we started again, he turned a nice looking bowl, and then did something I'd never expected.

He made a pattern from it! Then he made three more bowls out of different woods, following the pattern! For us artsy-fartsy types, making *two* of something that look the same is dangerously close to "production" work!

He wouldn't stop for dinner. He wouldn't tell me what he was doing as he finished truing the last bowl to the pattern. I convinced him that if he was going to work with power tools any more that night, he needed me, and that meant he needed to take a break for dinner.

He managed a half smile and nodded. He ate faster than our family's old Springer Spaniel, inhaling a bowl of soup, three pieces of bread, and a large chocolate pudding.

We recognized the usual evening workers, and they recognized us. Alex put together a jig -- for the bandsaw. And then another jig. Then he cut all four bowls into sections using the first jig. I helped stack the pieces, keeping them in the proper sequence. Then he started shuffling the pieces, making four new bowls from the parts! I laughed and helped him glue them up. We did a quick sanding, and then he set the bandsaw table at an angle, and using the second jig, sliced them again! We reshuffled and reglued, and managed to get a light sanding done.

His hands were shaking, he was so tired. I held his hands. "Bedtime -- we can finish in the morning. I'll help."

He wanted to keep going. I finally held his head in my hands, our faces a few inches apart. "Alex -- you're tired. If you keep it up you'll make a mistake and screw things up. I will help you in the morning. I will help you." He smiled and nodded his tired assent.

We cleaned up our mess and made it back to my room. I pulled him into the shower again with me. When we got into bed, he was so tired he barely fought as I pulled him into my arms and rocked him to sleep.

I woke in the morning on my side, one of his arms under my neck, the other over my waist, snuggling up to me. I moved a bit, moving his hand on my waist. His fingertips brushed my belly, sending sparks through me.

I separated my legs enough to reach my button, moving my hand over his, pressing his into my belly. I was so hot!

After a while I stopped trying to be quiet about it, moving my hips more, holding his other hand to my breast.

I felt him moving, and I felt him pressing into me, his cock responding.

I pressed back against him as I pleased myself.

He started moving, with a deep breath and then a sighing exhale, his hands feeling, squeezing.

I spread my legs a little more, all the invitation he needed -- he slid into me! Two strokes and I was coming, rolling to my stomach as he rode me, his hands on my waist, pulling. His moans and his movement told me he wasn't going to be long -- he pressed in, his hands holding me. I pressed back, moving, writhing under him, and felt his gift fill me.

There in bed, on our sides, his arms around me, having him still inside me, so content.

He wouldn't stop for breakfast; he had to get to the finishing shop. We went together. I helped him with the final sanding; because of the difference in the woods it had to be done carefully. He started to reach for an oil finish. I told him lacquer would be much better, and we could do a few coats in a short period of time with the equipment available. From the look on his face, I guessed he'd never done a spray lacquer finish. Could I help? Yes, please.

It took almost two hours to get the initial finish. We'd need to wait to do the final coats and polishing, but that would be for durability. The look was there.

We wrapped them in cloth and took them back to the lathe shop. Rick gave us an askew look as we came in, the very tardy students look. I beamed back at him, holding up my cloth-covered bundle; no, we didn't spend the morning in bed! He shook his head and smiled.

"Whatcha got?" he asked.

“Show him,” I told Alex.

Alex picked up a bench brush and cleaned off the table before unwrapping the two he had. I added the two I was carrying. God, they were something else!

Rick picked up one and gave a low whistle as he held it in his hands.

The bowls looked like they’d been formed from a weird deformed checkerboard.

Bob walked over and picked one up. “Not too bad!” was his verdict.

“Think you could turn something like this?” Rick asked him.

“From a glue-up? No way,” replied Bob.

“Nice finish, Alex,” Rick suggested with a smile.

“Ah, Dina was a big help -- especially with the finish,” Alex admitted.

It took a few minutes, but all work stopped and everyone gathered around the table to look at the bowls. It took some encouragement, but Alex haltingly explained how he’d made them. I filled in some details, such as how he used the jigs to section the bowls, how the final sanding had to be done carefully because of the difference in the materials. When someone asked about the finish, Alex all of a sudden could talk! He started gushing about how much help I’d been, how I’d done the finish. I explained how I’d done the lacquer finish, how much a really good setup helped, and what we’d do to add durability to the finish.

As our colleagues applauded, I turned and gave him a hug. He blushed a bit, but hugged me and whispered, “Thank you,” in my ear.

At the reception, our four bowls, my skew, two inlaid boxes, some wooden toys, and some other beautiful pieces were on one central table. Cards told who’d made each piece. No prices listed -- I asked Bob about that -- I wasn’t selling my skew, but Alex and I agreed to sell the bowls and split the take. Well, we agreed to sell them, and Alex insisted we split things equally. Bob pointed to some people circling the table. They were saving the bowls for an auction later in the summer. Was I still insisting on keeping the skew? Yes, I was! That’s a piece that doesn’t belong in a gallery, it belongs in the hands of a woodworker, me!

A husband and wife gallery pair talked to me later on, asking about Alex, about the bowls, and my skew. Was I interested in selling my work? Yes, and I did, through my shop, and through some friends. We exchanged cards; they suggested they could get higher prices for my pieces at their big-city gallery. I agreed; I’d send them digital pictures of some pieces and we could take it from there. Was I interested in selling the skew? No! Was I interested in accepting commissions? I’d be happy to talk about it. Did they think Alex would accept commissions? I



laughed and told them they were welcome to talk to him, but he was young and temperamental; they should work through Rick or Bob.

I found Alex afterwards in the finishing shop. I started telling him how much people liked his work, but I could see that made him agitated. I held him, getting sawdust on my good dress, telling him how talented he was, how good he was, what a gift he had. Standing there, holding him gently, I felt him relax, I helped him relax.

Standing in the finishing shop, holding his hands, I asked if he was interested in doing pieces on commission. He hadn't done that before. I suggested there were people interested; if he was interested, he should talk to Bob or Rick. He nodded and said he'd do that.

Standing in the finishing shop, holding his hands, I asked if he was interested in making love. Very softly he said, "Yes." In bed he was so needy, and I so wanted to hold and comfort him, but he wouldn't have it. We made love; he was driven, coming almost convulsively and collapsing next to me. Then I could hold and comfort him, rocking him to sleep in my arms.

I looked at the boxes in my hands one more time. Yes, there's something inside the light one. I opened it; beautifully finished inside, as I'd expect, so dark, and yes, the rough stem of a sprue in the top. And a strip of coiled up paper. I straightened it out and read it.

*I need somewhere to live after August. Can you help? Alex*

Holding his note, I broke into tears.

"Oh Max, what do I do now?"

FIN

Rev 06/21/2004

Wood

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