

I remember the orange and burgundy blossoms, the pink impatiens and zinnias that were planted and grew around the three sunny sides of the double garage my father had made into a house where we lived until I was seven. I remember the tall hedge of lilacs that bloomed along the alleyway every year. Their height and fragrance masked the trash cans and provided some bounded privacy and quiet. The lot was big enough for a real house to be built on “some day when we have the money”. Meanwhile, having mastered carpentry skills, my Father put in some windows and added a front porch, so that the five of us didn’t have to share the one tiny bedroom.

In the living area there was a stuffed green chair, where my Father sat, every night, surrendering into it, seeming already asleep even as he approached it. I remember his elbow resting on the arm of the chair, his face cupped and half hidden by his large hand.

You could tell he was asleep for sure because his mouth would drop open and sometimes his head rolled off it’s prop. Then he’d lay his head back and you could see his enormous nostrils, with hairs protruding all stiff and white with inhaled paint.

You didn’t have to see his bright blue eyes or his soft smile to see he was the handsomest Daddy ever. It was a relief just to see him there. We felt safe with him there. Sometimes, even though he was sleeping like that, I’d curl up on his lap and say, “I love you Daddy”. I just wanted to be with him.

His shoes were old brown leather and covered with layers of spilled paint. Only a hint of the leather peaked through the cracked splatters at the creases where the shoes would bend when he walked. On his face there were patterns of lines between the speckles on the surface. And maybe because he worked outside, his face managed to stay tanned all year. His cheeks felt tough and when he’d raise an eyebrow, the ripples across his forehead broke through the painted speckles and reminded me of his shoes.

The most vivid thing I remember is his hands. They were huge and strong and on the tips of his long fingers there were circular mazes. His nails were thick and sometimes caked with paint. And it didn’t matter if he were all scrubbed and making fudge or playing Grampa’s piano, these were hands that held an appealing scent of turpentine that never seemed to wash off.

It was these hands that could paint perfect straight lines and even draw cartoons. These hands lifted me up high. With these he made more than windows and porches. He made sculptures in the snow. One winter there was snow enough, so he built an elaborate sled run. He shoveled and packed a tall launching pad, higher than even he was. The drop was steep and the run was banked in a semi-circle out near the street, where it turned back toward the house. It was bitter cold, but he was outside for hours, shaping the run, smoothing the surface, setting in the runner tracks, one section at a time.

When the run was completed, he sprayed the whole thing with a mist of water from a hose connected to our kitchen sink and then let it freeze overnight. I awoke to a sparkling blue-sky morning. The frozen sled run literally glistened. I remember Daddy was delightfully playful and maybe even more excited than we were, when he bundled us up for our sled rides.

I remember carefully climbing up the launching pad, the cold sting watering my eyes, and at once being both excited and scared. I remember the indelible awe of him, when it was my turn to curl up in the fork of his legs and ride, never safer in my life than in those moments, hanging on tightly to the springy tension in his knees as we hurled, bouncing joyfully across the icy smooth masterpiece.