

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

*Rudy Koshar*  
**Rifle**

Wired. Like I had thousand-horsepower legs that launched me around the dining room table, out to the front porch, back to the kitchen, then down the stairs to the basement and back up again. How many stairs? Ten? Twelve? Steep stairs, open boards, exposed to what was underneath. Going up and down the stairs was like flying. Being up above the clouds. Looking down at the human ants below. A concrete floor. A furnace. A workshop with its bench and sawdust and tools and smells. Grandpa, the man who built the house in which I raced around like a four-year-old on amphetamines. Grandpa working on a project, a wooden rifle, just for me, a special gift.

Is it done yet?

No.

When will it be done, grandpa?

When it's done. Don't ask any more. Go upstairs in the kitchen with your grandma. I'll let you know when it's done. You must be patient. Go now.

Upstairs in the kitchen, with Grandma, baking. What did she bake at that moment? What grandmothers with heavy German accents and long braids of hair looped around their heads baked.

You have to calm down, she said. Sit. You have your coloring book. Color a nice picture for me. Or something for your Mutti so that when she comes by after work to pick you up she'll have a big smile on her face. Something she can put up on the refrigerator at home.

I sat. But the crayons wouldn't stay in the lines. Yellow was resistant, red incalculable, green a crayon with ADD. And my fingers? As wired as my legs, as tingly with anticipation as birch leaves before a drenching summer storm that stings your face.



There it is, that rifle. Haven't thought about it in years. But for some reason I hauled it out of a plastic storage bin in the garage. I place it on my desk in the study, examine it. Two pieces of wood, twenty-eight inches long, more than sixty years old now. A historical monument. The trigger is more crudely carved than I remembered. Metal clips, now rusted, made it possible to attach a strap and sling the rifle over my shoulder like Davy Crockett. On one side of the stock, my brother's name, scrawled twice in red magic marker, misspelled. At some point, maybe when I was in high school and he was still my age when I first got the rifle, he'd expropriated the toy for his own use. On the other side, chipped green paint. Who painted it? Just in front of the trigger, ancient masking tape, two layers, where the rifle cracked in two. Why? Rough use? My brother again? Can't remember.



I got up from the kitchen table, having lost the battle with the crayons.

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Before Grandma could look around, I sprang toward the door leading to the basement. Down the stairs again, and I landed on the cement floor on two sneakers. Thwop! Thwop!

Done yet, grandpa? Is it yet?

No, it's not done yet. I still have to cut the barrel, sand the stock, then glue it all together. It'll be at least another hour. You must have patience. Now go upstairs this minute. I don't want to see you down here again. Do you want me to get my strap?

I heard, but I didn't hear. I saw the newly cut stock and the shiny clips for my shoulder strap. Magnificent. I saw Grandpa had made a tiny hole in the muzzle to make it look like a real gun barrel. I thought of how I would defend the Alamo.

I went upstairs again, out of breath. Grandma sighed, if you don't sit, then I'll tie you down, hear?



As I turn the rifle over on my desk, I think of my grandfather's hands. A carpenter's hands that shoveled coal in the Depression in return for damaged lungs and injustice. Hands that worked the Victory Garden in the back of the house during the war. Hands that worked as a janitor in a primary school that my mother, my sister, my brother, and I attended.

I think of the picture I have of him in the hallway. Stern, Lutheran, quick-tempered, especially around a hyperactive four-year-old desperately anticipating his very own rifle.

I went to see his grave months ago. I once walked with him in that very cemetery, less than a block from our house. I remember the blue jays and doves, the quiet disturbed by the rush of traffic from the highway.



Grandma placed a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk in front of me. Here, maybe this will keep you occupied.

The cookies occupied me, but not for long. I ate two, maybe three, hot and moist and sweet. Grandma cookies. I drank half the tall glass of milk. With a white moustache, I ran to the bathroom. I had to pee, the excitement was too much. Then, still zipping up, I was down the stairs again. This time, with a shout.

Is it done? Oh, please, can I have it now grandpa? Please! Is it done yet? Oh!

A hand swept the air. Then tears.



I feel the weight of the gun and look down the sight, which curves to the left. I think about the day my grandfather died. It must have been only months after he'd made the rifle. I'd had an afternoon nap, and awoke to a house in which all the adults' faces had turned to stone. Grandpa was there in the room, yet gone. He was and he wasn't, just as today he is and he isn't.

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I run my hand across my beard, now completely white. I'm two years away from my grandfather's age when he died. A slap remains.