

Gledhill Lumber

The drifter¹'s name was Rocco. Whether this was his first or last name, I never knew – not until I was older – because that is all I heard him called during the few days I saw him around Gledhill Lumber².

I was in Gledhill's store when he arrived that morning in early June, the tinkling bell above the door belying³ his hulking frame as he moved – with surprising grace – past the aisles of nails and screws to where my grandfather stood at the cash register. I was eight years old that summer, and possessed a vivid imagination. Even so, I had never before envisioned a giant. But I saw one then: Rocco was a mountain of a man, tall and sturdy, all muscle. [...] Rocco's hands were the size of catchers' mitts⁴, each knuckle a ping pong ball. Had he extended one of those hands upward, he could have touched the ceiling without leaving his feet.

My grandfather gave Rocco a cursory⁵ nod, then did a double-take⁶ at his size. I gazed on silently from behind my grandfather, staring with the forgivable rudeness of children.

"Off the train?" asked my grandfather, bending his neck and seeing no parked cars through the window.

Clement⁷ is a town of 8,000 today, but back then it was closer to 15,000. It would have been zero then and now if not for the railroad [...].

On occasion those rumbling trains would bring with them drifters. Some of these vagabonds had just been released from the state prison in the next county. Others had never found trouble with the law – only within themselves. More than once, Bruce, Gledhill's co-owner alongside my grandpa, had hired on a new face at minimum wage, only to find them sleeping amidst the bags of concrete the next morning, an empty pint of whiskey at their feet.

"Off the train," confirmed Rocco, his voice softer than I expected. "Yes sir."

"Looking for work?"

"Yes sir."

"Ever worked with wood?"

"A bit."

"You've got some shoulders on you."

"You can thank my Ma for that."

My grandfather smiled. He rarely smiled. "As it happens, we are down a man," my grandfather said. "You can start as soon as you want."

"I'll start now," said Rocco, "if that's all right."

My grandfather nodded. It was very much like him not to inquire into Rocco's personal life – he didn't care much for a man's past, so long as they could show themselves to be worthwhile in the present.

My grandfather turned to me. "I'm going to get – " He looked back at the man.

"Rocco, sir."

My grandfather nodded again. "I'm going to get Rocco started on some things out back. Tell Pete to come up front."

¹ vagabond

² tømmerhandel

³ var i modsætning til

⁴ *catchers' mitts*: baseballhandsker

⁵ flygtigt

⁶ *did a double-take*: (her) kiggede en ekstra gang

⁷ by i den amerikanske delstat Ohio

I went into a back office and came back to the counter with Pete, one of the office workers. With an air of importance, I explained that Grandpa was showing Rocco the yard.

40 "Who the hell is –" Pete's eyes grew to the size of headlights upon seeing Rocco. "Yeah, I'll watch the store," said Pete helpfully.

With the care of a proper sleuth⁸, I slinked after my grandfather and Rocco, out of the office and into the yard. [...] From a distance I observed my grandfather explaining where each different size of board went. Rocco's head nodded as he listened, like a ballplayer taking instruction from a coach.

45 My grandfather soon disappeared from the wood shed, but I remained, watching Rocco work from a distance, edging ever closer to him over time, until at last I was no more than ten feet away.

"What do you got there?" asked Rocco, never once looking me straight on, and never breaking his momentum with the boards.

I looked down at the wooden tomato stake in my hand. "Sword," I said bashfully.

50 Rocco nodded knowingly. "This a dangerous lumberyard?"

I smiled. "No," I said. "I don't know."

"So what do you attack with your sword?"

"Nothing real," I admitted.

Rocco nodded, still moving fast. [...]

55 If Rocco was annoyed with my presence, he didn't show it. Regardless, he was relieved of me soon enough, following a loud grinding sound out in the front of the yard.

"Doesn't sound good," said Rocco, his arms a blur of motion.

I agreed it didn't, and I left Rocco to investigate.

Out front, a train of boxcars⁹ had slowed to a crawl beside the yard – Gledhill Lumber was probably the only lumberyard in the country that still got train deliveries into the late '80s. Many trains crept through town, but unlike the other trains, this one would eventually reach a complete stop. In the meantime, both of the lumberyard's flatbed trucks¹⁰ had been backed up to the railroad tracks, ready to be filled. They would have to wait, however, as between the trucks sat Gledhill's lone forklift. Thick black smoke billowed from the forklift's aged engine.

65 Watching the smoke with a grimace *apiece*¹¹ was my grandfather, two yard hands¹², and Bruce, the co-owner. As the group stood there, Rocco approached from the shed. [...]

"Wood's away," Rocco said to my grandfather.

Bruce gave Rocco a side glance, before giving him the same double-take my grandfather had given earlier in the morning.

70 "Who is this?" said Bruce – not to Rocco, but to my grandfather.

"Rocco," said my grandfather. "Added him on this morning."

Bruce said nothing, but his steely eyes talked plenty. [...] Rocco eyed the forklift, then the boxcar – which had since come to a standstill – and put one and one together.

"Should we get started on the car?" asked Rocco.

75 The yard guys laughed. One of them – they always ignored me, and so I never learned their names – told Rocco, with an air of superiority, "It would take a week to unload a boxcar by hand."

"Oh," said Rocco. "Well, I can start on it anyway, just until you get the forklift running."

The yard hand who'd spoken out looked to Bruce, who shrugged, and Rocco set to work on unloading the boxcar, board by board. With an air of grievance, the two yard hands followed his example.

⁸ detektiv

⁹ lukkede godsvogne

¹⁰ *flatbed trucks*: blokvogne

¹¹ *a grimace apiece*: hver deres ansigtsudtryk

¹² *yard hands*: arbejdere på tømmerpladsen

With Rocco occupied, Bruce took my grandfather aside, out of the hearing of Rocco and the other yard hands, but not out of hearing from me.

"I'm half the business, Frank," I heard Bruce say. "That means I get half a say."

"The man is built like a Mack truck¹³, Bruce. I think we'll do okay by him."

85 "What if Dale wants to come back?"

"Rocco is worth four Dales," said my grandfather. "More, probably. Just look at him!"

Bruce took a drag on his cigarette, finishing it. He flicked the butt onto the gravel. "New hires need to come through me," he finished, before walking away. [...]

90 By 5 p.m., against all expectations on their part, they had emptied the car. While the other yard hands went home for the day, Rocco lay on the cool grass of the railroad bank, resting his tree-trunk arms. From the branch of a nearby tree, I watched my grandfather approach him, watched as he gave Rocco a sandwich, knowing from a lifetime of experience that it would be peanut butter.

"We gonna see you tomorrow?" The question came from my grandfather.

"Yep," said Rocco.

95 My grandfather nodded. "Good working with you today, Rocco. Been a while since I broke a sweat back here in the yard."

Rocco smiled the serene¹⁴ smile of the exhausted. [...]

* * *

The next morning, Pete in the office presented me with a gift – well, pointed me toward it.

100 "From Rocco," said Pete, nodding toward a narrow piece of wood leaning against the store wall, his eyes never once leaving the newspaper beneath his elbows.

I approached the item. It was a wooden sword, the craftsmanship of which rivaled that of any toy in any store. [...]

105 Sword in hand, I made my way through the store and into the yard, where I found my grandfather talking with Bruce. Finishing their tight triangle was Dale, a thin and wiry man who chain-smoked Camel Lights and seemed to sway in any stiff breeze. Far in the distance, I saw Rocco putting away boards in one of the sheds.

110 Until the previous week, Dale had been a yard hand at Gledhill. That was until Bruce, in a fit of anger, told him to choose between Gledhill and the whiskey. To Bruce's chagrin¹⁵, Dale chose the bottle. At least, he had for the weekend, until he'd run out of money. Humbled and desperate, Dale, who was clearly still half-drunk, was now ready to shape up and fly right¹⁶.

115 From my safe distance – always from a distance in those days – I watched my grandpa and Bruce talk, Dale swaying gently at their elbows. At first I could not make out any of the conversation, but as the talking continued, their voices grew louder. In my entire life I only heard my grandfather yell a single time, and this was that time. And while the exact words have been eroded by time, the gist¹⁷ of the conversation remains clear to me: Dale was back on payroll, Bruce was saying, and so Rocco had to go. [...]

Rocco's face showed no emotion as my grandfather explained the situation with Dale. My grandfather never actually apologized, but even so I could tell it was an apology, all the same.

¹³ *Mack truck*: stor amerikansk lastbil

¹⁴ fredfyldte

¹⁵ fortvivelse

¹⁶ *shape up and fly right*: tage sig sammen og holde sig på ret kurs

¹⁷ kernen

120 "I have a friend in Akron¹⁸," said my grandfather, in conclusion. "A great guy. Down at *Goodyear*¹⁹.
Head up there, ask for Jimmy Green. It's a good company. I'll phone him tonight, tell him you're coming."

Rocco nodded, but said nothing. His blank eyes then moved to the sword in my hand, and, as if wordlessly acknowledging my appreciation, he nodded to me, as well. That single nod filled me with more gratitude than any gift I'd received before or since. In this world of adults, where I was forever
125 in the background, forever a wraith²⁰, Rocco alone had seen me – beyond my grandpa, I mean.

As the three of us stood there, silenced by our mutual embarrassment, a train whistle sounded. Quicker than I could have imagined, and like some sort of superhero, Rocco began to run. He sprinted away from us, arms pumping, up the embankment. Once at the tracks, he began to parallel the train. After careful consideration, he grabbed hold of a handle on one of the flatbed cars, and, with a one-
130 two motion, pulled himself up.

I stood beside my grandfather as Rocco left our lives as quickly as he'd entered. [...]

He noticed me noticing him, and said, with a shake of the head, words I have never forgotten:

"In a town like this, a man can be respected, or he can respect himself. Rarely both."

The comment marked the end of the day's drama, and the two of us would never speak of Rocco
135 again. [...]

* * *

That was all 30 years ago, and I only thought of all this, wrote all of this, because my grandfather passed away last month. Going through his things – the endless boxes that hold a life – I came across an envelope addressed to Frank Lutz c/o Gledhill Lumber, no return address. Inside was a newspaper clipping from the *Akron Beacon Journal*. It took me a moment to understand why the face staring
140 back at me from the newspaper seemed so familiar.

"It's Rocco!" I exclaimed to my father, who was going through a box beside me.

"Rocco ..." said my father, failing to recognize the name – and why would he, I realized?

I began reading the clipping. "It's his retirement announcement. From *Goodyear*. He was a vice
145 president."

My father now took the clipping from me. "Big guy," he said.

I smiled. "That's exactly how he looked when I was eight. He didn't age a day."

And he was exactly as I remembered him, except for one thing.

"It's strange, though," I said. "I have no memory of him being Black."

"Children don't see the world like that," said my father, returning the clipping. "Only adults."

(2024)

¹⁸ by i den amerikanske delstat Ohio

¹⁹ producent af bildæk

²⁰ (her) skygge