

# joseph allen costa

## SINNERS AND SAINTS

JUAN AND I HAD JUST FINISHED PUTTING THE LAST of the screws into a base unit for a kitchen and we set it upright, when I looked up to see a sinewy black man standing in front of the shop. At first glance, I thought it was Sarge, waiting to speak to my dad, but Sarge didn't work Thursdays. That side of the shop faces west, and I couldn't get a clear picture of the man through the glare of the sun. He seemed to spontaneously emerge from a blast of yellow light. The shop had garage doors front and back, so anyone off the street could walk right in. The man moved tentatively, like a lost soul, and stopped in front of my dad's office. He appeared to have crawled from the bottom of a hamper and had the vacant look of a homeless person. The man was well over six feet tall, so I picked up a hammer just in case. The twenty-two ounce. With the weight of it I could sink a sixteen-penny nail in three solid hits.

"Maybe he needs a cabinet for under the bridge," Juan said, just loud enough for me to hear over the table saw and the routers. Juan spoke with an accent and looked like he'd been living in the wild, with an explosion of black hair and four days of beard growth. He was a Cuban whose family was lucky enough to have drifted all the way to shore, somewhere near Key West. I laughed at his remark but didn't drop the hammer.

My dad came out of the office, looked up to the homeless man and engaged him in conversation. My dad, the fire hydrant. A thick Sicilian with a barrel chest and a kind, round face. The black man gestured and opened his hand. Dad stared at the ground as if concentrating on the man's words over the machinery, but I realized he was looking at the man's feet. It was cool, mid-fifties, and the man stood barefoot. Our shop was across railroad tracks on the industrial side of Ybor City. If you didn't step on broken glass or screws or shred your feet on discarded metal, you'd likely step on a syringe.

Fausto stood behind the table saw cutting four by eight sheets of three-quarter inch particle board, producing clouds of sawdust that danced in the sunlight,

permeated the air and stuck to our skin and our hair and became a part of us. He was oblivious to the visitor.

Dad motioned for the man to wait and this pissed me off. We were tight and until money came in there wasn't any to spare. Over the summer TECO had shut off the power because we hadn't paid the electric bill. Every month we teetered on disaster.

"If my old man gives this dude any money I'm going to blow a fuse," I said into Juan's ear, keeping a watchful eye on the beggar. "I haven't seen a penny in three weeks."

Del stood directly behind us routing the edges of the mica he'd just glued down. Juan laughed and glanced at Del who was spraying cuttings our direction.

My dad walked out of the office holding a pair of old leather work boots. The man was a packrat and kept all his old shoes piled under his desk. He dropped the pair of low-tops on the concrete and the man bent over and struggled to squeeze his hobbit feet into those size nines. Dad had extra wide feet, and few toes missing on his right foot from his time in Korea, which gave him an odd gait when he walked. The man kicked off the shoes and gestured to my dad. The shoes didn't fit. They were plenty wide, but too short.

I leaned against the cabinet Juan and I had just assembled with my arms crossed. I didn't know why my dad didn't just wave this dude off. Some homeless drunk stumbled in begging for a handout every other week, not sure what made this guy any different.

"Roberto," Dad shouted in English. "Bring me the tinsnips."

I dropped the hammer and walked up front with the snips and handed them to my dad. I looked up to the man, who didn't seem as tall close-up, but was taller than me. We nodded at each other. His eyes looked ancient. He wore tattered, brown cotton pants and a faded Jimi Hendrix Purple Haze T-shirt so thin, you could see errant black chest hairs popping through it. His nappy hair was matted to one side and he had a scraggly beard. His eyes were bloodshot and tinged with yellow. He looked older than I originally thought and there were grays in his beard and hair. The man had been burned at one time in his life and that history was painfully apparent on one of his arms. The discolored skin looked like melted plastic that had welted and bubbled, then cooled in grotesque waves. He had a sour smell like someone

who'd been sweating alcohol but seemed to be steady on his feet and didn't appear to be drunk. I backed away from his sour smell.

"You and Juan stack those units, so they don't get damaged," my dad said to me before turning his attention to the shoes. I nodded and went back to work, satisfied that the man was harmless.

Juan and I stacked the base unit with the others. It didn't have drawers or doors yet; those would get installed later when all the units were assembled. I kept looking toward the front of the shop to watch my dad work on those shoes with the tinsnips. He cut the top front part of the shoes away so the man's toes could stick out and he took his time doing it, like he was crafting a piece of art.

"My dad thinks he's a cobbler," I said to Juan, who shook his head.

The table saw wound down and Fausto rattled something off in Spanish to Juan who went to help him move the stacks of doors and drawer faces he'd cut. They moved the wood to the back of the shop for the night crew to laminate, while I gathered materials for the next cabinet. The varying decibels of machinery quieted, revealing Rush's "Tom Sawyer" squawking from the crappy shop radio, creating a soundtrack of sorts for this unfolding drama. I looked behind me at Del, who was squinting through his one good eye at my dad. Del was a gangly stoner with wavy blond hair who looked like a weathered version of an eighties rock star. He'd lost sight in one eye from a brawl he had the previous year and cocked his head to one side as if he were still getting used to it.

"Your old man likes to take in strays," he said.

"That how we found you?" I said.

"Pretty much," he said.

Now the homeless man sat with his ass on the concrete floor and my dad stood over him watching him struggle. The shoes still didn't fit. I glanced back at Del who was grinning. At this point, everyone in the shop was half watching and half working. The man handed the shoes back one at a time and my dad cut out the backs so they could be worn like slippers. The man put the shoes on his feet and smiled like he'd been fitted with Italian loafers. When he stood up, I could see that his toes hung off the fronts and his heels hung off the backs. I figured that was the end of our entertainment and this guy would be on his merry way. Their conversation continued and I wanted to smash something with a hammer. I wasn't even sure why.

“Robert,” Juan said. “Let’s get the next one going.”

We assembled the next cabinet while my dad and the man engaged in conversation. My dad pointed into the shop and then turned and pointed out the front garage door toward the dumpster and I knew exactly what was up. This vagrant had just become our newest employee.

My dad handed him a broom and a flat shovel and the man went to work sweeping the shop and throwing away the wood scraps piled beneath the saw, though he did put a few pieces aside. I imagined him and his homeless brethren gathered around a fifty-five-gallon drum burning the wood for warmth. He worked quietly, and though he glanced at each of us while working that broom and shovel, he shied away from eye contact and not a word was said. He had a delicate almost meticulous way about him that I couldn’t wrap my head around. After sweeping the shop and throwing away the trash, which required a dozen or so trips to the dumpster, the man looked around, as if surveying the place for the first time, and then he put away the tools that weren’t in use. There was a wall in the shop covered with tempered Masonite, where we hung the hand tools. When I was ten, I outlined all the tools in black marker so we’d always know exactly where they went.

While I was on my knees popping staples into the back of a cabinet to square it up, I looked over to see the man in the boot slippers looking down at me. His thick, overgrown toenails looked like claws.

“Man, I’m thirsty as hell,” he said to me. “Think I could have some water?”

I said there was a jug of cold water in the refrigerator and told him where to find the Styrofoam cups. His arm was hard to look at and equally hard not to, and I couldn’t stop myself.

“Yeah man, I’m still putting out that fire,” he said.

I watched him pour and drink five cups of water. When he finished, he nodded at me and walked to the front of the shop, knocked on the office door, then went in. I’d only worked a half day, because I had classes in the morning, but I was ready to get the hell out of there. I looked around at the shop. It was pristine. As clean as I’d seen it in a while and I was relieved because it was one less thing I’d have to do.

Fausto went to work making the shop dirty again, cutting strips of sapele, a type of African mahogany to be used as inlays in a desk, and the shop filled with a sweet leathery scent and smelled alive. Sawdust sparkled in the afternoon light