

I didn't even want to talk to him, really. I'd only come to the farmers market to say hi to a friend, buy one of those fair trade chocolate bars she was selling, maybe sit at her booth & chat for a while in the Sunday heat.

I bought my bar and wandered through the public park, along the short gravel aisle of tables & tents. This is a small town, and even in a rural area the amount of people turning out to buy homegrown veggies and fundraiser hotdogs doesn't support more than about 15 stalls. You'd think there'd be more love for local fruits & veggies, especially here, where it's your friends & neighbours growing them. I guess even small towns don't do what they do best anymore. Support local merchants and their local products.

One of them was Allen Murray and his hand-carved woodworking. Each of his pieces – mostly bowls and cutting boards and jewellery boxes – were clearly of amazingly high quality. They were smooth and finely finished. At the end of my chat with him, I actually bought a live-edge bowl that was carved from a chunk of white pine. I hadn't even intended to buy anything more that day. And, in the exchange of that money, I also bought the rights to a story of his. Allen agreed to let me tell this particular tale.

This is the story of how Allen Murray became cursed. How a haunted piece of wood haunted him, in turn.

Allen was talkative. Exceptionally so. A lot of market vendors are like that. If you stop and look over their wares, they start picking items up and telling you stories about them. Stories that you never asked for in the first place. Most of the time, I hate these single-serving conversations. It's probably supposed to be an expression of friendliness, but it just comes off as sales pressure. It pins you in place. Over the course of my chat with him, I watched as a young couple of twenty-somethings endured his various sales pitches for over 5 minutes. Their experience started with an innocent gesture to an olivewood cutting board, and descended into tormented eyes shifting blankly as they awkwardly longed for a polite escape from his folksy onslaught. They eventually broke away and wandered to the mini-doughnuts food truck. I stayed behind.

See, I was rather taken by Allen, and I knew just enough about woodworking to ask a smart-sounding question or two. Which was great, since it kept him talking (he was pretty interesting) and kept him distracted from his usual talk track. The density of some wood, or the frequency of which he machine-sharpens his chisels.

I mentioned how, in the course of his work, it's lovely that every piece becomes imbued with a story. Or how you do, yourself, while working it. It takes on a part of you, becoming

amorphous or imperfect. And you take on a part of it, as well, becoming harder or more precise. Allen understood the notion, but I don't think he saw the mysticism that I did. He's much more pragmatic than that.

In the June sunshine, three kids ran by, laughing and squealing, and he visibly winced at their high-pitched shrieks.

Allen Murray is somewhere between 60 and 70 years old, and he's been working with wood "for over 45 years"; his words. That means that the year that I was born, he was just starting out in the craft. In the time I'd had an entire childhood, 12 years of school and 2 years of college, 20 years in advertising, 11 different homes, and a failed marriage; he'd carved an infinity of bowls and cutting boards and jewellery boxes. Pretty spry for an older man, he stood perfectly upright and spoke without faltering. He wore a pair of light brown slacks that were probably bought twenty years ago, and tucked his plaid shirt into them. His hands were precise, and showed no signs of the shakiness that other men of his age sometimes did. His eyes were sharp, his speech was clear, and there was an inch-long growth of frosty white on top of his head. He had a grandfatherly air about him, and a bemusement for the foibles of life. He had a way of noticing things. I guess 45 years of feeling for the tiniest types of knots in all varieties of woodgrain taught you something about paying attention to life's little details.

He handed me a jewellery box that I recognized was carved from a burlled piece of wood. Tiny spirals adorned the top of it, preserved forever by care & stain. He told me what type of wood it was made from (I can't remember anymore), and that it was once sought after by kings & queens, as it came with a particularly spicy and heartwarming scent. That every jewellery box he made was carved from a single piece of wood, and executed with zero clearance. Exactitude was his stock in trade, if charming tales wasn't.

He then told me about how he made "sibling cutting boards", as he called them. Simply put, he crafted what looked like one long board, and then he'd cut it in half—the end product made two boards that belonged beside each other, and shared a grain. And it was a great way to sell twice as many cutting boards, wink wink.

Finally, he motioned to something on his table that had caught my eye early on. It was a glass bell jar, about six inches tall, nestled on a wooden base. That alone stood out (every other piece of his was arranged on plastic props from the dollar store), and the bell gave off distinct "monkey's paw" vibes. But don't go picturing his table like an ancient Chinese bazaar shop; it was commonplace enough and it clearly belonged in this small-town outdoor market, white linen tablecloth and all. But the bell jar wasn't the only thing noteworthy; what it held was the true feature. And old Allen Murray must've either seen my eyes

brush over it, or he'd reached that point in the usual sales routine. If someone had hung around this long, they'd actually have interest enough for this Blackwood story.

"Now *this*," he said, casually & comfortably lifting the glass bell off of its platform, "a man gave to me once, as a single block of wood."

He removed the carving from its enclosure and set the glass lid to the side. It was pure black, and it looked like a salt shaker, only it had no holes on top. As he held it, his hands spread apart and he revealed that it was forged in two pieces; a bottom receptacle and its top. He tapped the two of them together, and they made a surprising clack-clack sound. I'd've guessed the sound was plastic.

"When he gave it to me, I guessed it was ebony. But no; this is African Blackwood. It's very dense, but very light; hold it." He handed both pieces to me and I was surprised at how light they were, and at the fact that there was no indication of grain or pores like you normally see on wood. It was actually as much like plastic as anything you'd see at, say, Walmart. He went on: "a kilogram of that goes for £6,000, and it's not very common to get ahold of a piece of it. It's incredibly dark, as you can see, and part of its reputation is that Blackwood comes with a curse."

I marvelled as I turned it over between my unskilled fingers. It felt enough like something-other-than-wood for me to treat it

pretty gingerly, and I sensed I was holding something beyond a homespun handicraft. Allen kept his speech going, talking now about how the stuff was so dense you couldn't use traditional woodstain on it, but I stopped him short. I was listening very closely, but the notion of a haunted piece of lumber had me hooked. I asked abruptly about that curse he'd mentioned. He tripped up in his talk track.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, he muttered: "Oh, that's, no, there's no curse or anything." He then dove effortlessly back into how he'd used bits of its own sawdust to stain the thing, smearing them into its minuscule grain as it turned on his lathe.

I don't know, I guess I was surprised that he'd gloss over what was clearly the most interesting part of the piece's story. It was a challenge to resist stopping him again, but I didn't want to throw him off awkwardly once more. Maybe if I simply listen to his story long enough I'd hear the part I was craving, organically. He went on, reassembling the thing, replacing the lid back on top.

"I've got an idea to give this to my son, in my will. I'm going to get ahold of [some kind of] Holly, which is a real pale white, and carve the same thing for my other son."

I was nodding and smiling, enjoying the man's creative energy as he spoke. Coaxing that curse out of him.

He then went a little quiet. It was the first unplanned span of silence in his entire lecture. It only lasted a moment, and it was over as quickly as it began, but it's fun to watch a talker get caught between thoughts. He turned the black piece of woodwork in his callused hands, and his eyes glazed slightly as he stared into a patch of space just beyond the edge of his folding table. I had the impression that he'd either forgotten something, or remembered something else.

I guess he wasn't quite as dismissive of that "curse" thing as he seemed to have been. Maybe he believed in it for a second, just then (although, knowing what little I know of Allen's practical nature, I doubt it). Maybe he sensed my bated breath. He went on, and it became clear that he hadn't stopped thinking about the hand-wave response that he'd given just a minute ago.

"Yeah, there's no curse or anything. It's just a story that goes along with the wood, I think. I'd say it probably goes way back, back to the days when bein' superstitious was basically just the same thing as bein' imaginative and tellin' other people about it." He stared down at the piece in his hand, a last look before returning it to its enclosure, and offered a more-or-less silent chuckle. "The guy what gave this to me said that everyone who works with Blackwood loses something they love. That's what they say. Which doesn't really make sense, does it?", he stammered a bit, thoughtfully. "I mean, that kind of thing happens all the time anyway, right?"

I couldn't tell if he doubted this omen, or if he saw some truth in it. A person's attitude on these things changes after a while, once they get around to thinking about them. As your life goes on, and you survive a couple decades of "you win some, you lose some", you can look back on something you were once disinclined to believe and realize that there might've been something to it after all. 20/20 and hindsight and all that. It might not have been that Allen believed it or anything. In his face, I saw that he simply wanted to doubt it more than he did.

And here I stood, on a sunny Sunday morning in an open-air farmers' market, wearing a chambray shirt and faded red converse, wondering what this man had lost since he was given a piece of African Blackwood. Loved, and since lost. And of course there's no right way to ask another person, amid rows of tables piled with fresh veggies and handmade soaps and Guatemalan earrings: "What have you lost lately, Allen? What have you loved but no longer have? What's slipped through your fingers? Do you know? Can you remember? Did you even notice it as it left your life?"

"No," he said, and for a moment I thought he was actually responding to the furious questioning echoing in my head. He wore a grin as he tucked the wooden relic back into its bell jar's protection. "No, I'd never sell this. My sons will love them."

The storyteller in me wanted more. *So are you cursed, or not?* Memo to self (and to you, reader): never introduce a topic



into conversation that you aren't willing to make good on. I stood there wishing for mystical arts and fulfilled prophecies, as Allen Murray jangled on about cedar shavings in potpourri pouches in every closet of his home. From portent doom to potpourri in two sentences flat. Kind of incredible, really.

Myself, I couldn't keep it in.

"Allen! What an amazing story, though! That's so kind of a random stranger to just, like, gift you a precious piece of something like that. Imagine." All of a sudden I considered the idea that it wasn't "a random stranger" after all. I've heard stories of djinn appearing to those who are soon to discover a lamp, and of men in hooded cloaks with sinister riddles masquerading as warnings. Haven't we all?

"Oh, it was, he's a great guy. I knew him okay, seen him a few times anyway, at the markets, but he moved back out west before long. I sent him a pic of it; must've wrote his number wrong 'cause he never really replied." I imagine Allen sensed that I was hungrily awaiting something dramatic, or maybe he was just backed into the corner of having to tell me more, because he then gave me exactly what I craved. His fingers fidgeted with the piece, clacking the lid against the base a few times, as he spoke.

"I remember the night I carved the thing. Cold night. Guess how many times I had to sharpen my chisel that night? It was

only *this* long when I was done.” (he made a hand gesture measuring about 4 inches or so). He went on: “My wife was upstairs the whole time. It took me about 6 or 7 hours on the lathe, and I was determined to finish, once I’d started.”

I smiled broadly, a little open-mouthed. What happened next, Allen? What’s been taken from you, in a cosmic exchange that you were barely participating in?

“I finally came upstairs. Shut the basement door behind me. I took off my socks and wiped my face with the dishcloth; I poured a big glass of scotch and I plunked down at the table and stared into it. After a minute she came over and started pouring a glass of water and said ‘You done? What in *the hell* were you *doing* down there?’ – the wood is really tough, and dense, right – ‘It sounded like you were skinning live children downstairs, for God’s sake.’ ”

Allen laughed lightly and reiterated how difficult the Blackwood was to work with.

“It’s tight stuff! And she was right; it squealed and shrieked the whole time. You wouldn’t believe. I was wearing earplugs *and* one of them big noise-cancelling headsets; and I *still* had to grit my teeth at it. I swear I could hear the screech of it right through my fingertips.” He stared into space for a quarter of a second longer than a man not reliving a horrible memory, and a dull ‘clink’ sounded the final replacement of the glass bell jar’s

lid. The Blackwood was now in its protective field, wholly preserved and held prisoner inside.

That was it. I got it. *Thank you Allen, I mused, you're cursed indeed. And I got you; I captured what haunts you, man. And it's far worse than I'd've guessed; I bet that no, you didn't even notice it, did you?* He didn't act as though he did.

I scanned his table and deliberated over what I'd buy from him. It was all so expensive. The white pine bowl felt soft and porcelain-smooth (and was \$40 cheaper than the next piece up). A scan of my debit to his Square. A wrapping of craft paper. A stolen business card. And a bemused approval to write his tale.

I slipped the bowl into my tote bag and stepped back as another kid ran down the aisle of tents, laughing and squealing. Allen flinched, almost as if in pain, as the kid shrieked; shrilly, as children always do.