**My Lucky Horseshoe pattern 2018**

My neighbor whistled, spitting a bit of foam onto the plaster dust covering my arm.

“You’re a stubborn sonofabitch.”

“Part of my charm.”

“You look like you just staggered out of 9/11, Memphis style. Want a beer?”

I stared at the mountain of lathe and plaster from when the house was originally built in 1912. I was in over my head and he knew it. Ben, a rotund man, bald, and ten years younger than I, was a concrete contactor. He had torn his guest house down and covered his backyard in a pool, pool house, outdoor kitchen, patio, carp pond with a motorized stream, and an elevated deck. His colored concrete was poured into molds that made it look just like cobblestones in freakin’ colonial Wiiliamsburg. I liked him.

“We know how to get shit done, don’t we?” I flashed back to the days of my youth in Findlay, Ohio when a friend’s mother said that manual labor was for those not smart enough to hire someone else to do the job. Findlay, Ohio. The Great Black Swamp. A land once believed to have been chosen by God himself to be blessed with an inexhaustible supply of gas from the center of the earth.

The chunks of plaster were layered with decades of wallpaper: 1920 and stopping around 1968 with flower power and smiley faces. I had removed 5 doors and a pantry closet. I stripped the walls down to bare studs. I wheeled loads of dirt from below the apartment where years before, I had found a horseshoe that my then ten-year-old son lost at baseball game that his team also lost 18 to zip. Horseshoe. Carriage house. That’s when it started making sense. That’s when my trouble started.

“What are you going to do with that old lathe and flooring?”

“Haul it to the corner. Trash, I guess.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Termites messed up a lot of it.”

“Good hard oak. I’ll put it in my chimnea.”

“Sure. Help yourself.”

I didn’t even know what a chimnea was.

It had all started with a hump on the kitchen wall. After knocking the plaster loose, I found a bunch of old dead wisteria vines. Then termite damage. Then water damage. Then fire damage. I was an urban archeologist. I couldn’t stop. I found bottles, bottles, and more bottles when I stripped open the wall beneath the stairwell. I found bottles inside the walls along with nests of evicted squirrels and other rodents. I found a little booklet from 1920 describing the construction and use of prosthetic appendages, apparently in demand after the first Word War. I even found a bottle marked “Findlay, Ohio.” My hometown. Coincidence? Hardly. God’s hand was once again at work. Northwest Ohio shipped glass all over the world in the late 19th century. When I was a kid, we dug shards of glass dinnerware from the old factory sites and sold them to a man near Riverside Park for a penny apiece. I had kept a few shards that I later buried beneath the apartment. I’m getting ahead of myself.

“So, what’s your plan for this place?” Ben handed me a beer as he tossed his empty onto my rubbish pile.

“I guess rent it out. Maybe Airbnb.”

“Huh?” Ben was a contractor, remember. “You better get a permit.”

“I’m not changing anything.”

“Doesn’t matter. You need a permit.”

“Sure.” I began to visualize the days before electricity and indoor plumbing.

“What does Marge say?”

“She doesn’t know.”

Ben whistled and shook his head. Marge liked Ben. More than I did.

“She just got off work. She’ll be out in a minute.”

She was impressed by his ability to steer crews of workers on and off his property as his backyard morphed into a mini country club.

“Well, if you want my advice, I’d suggest you get a permit right away. The Landmarks Commission can get pretty ticky.”

My old neighbor, may she rest in peace, used to say that. I was never sure what it was short for. Maybe “tic” as in “particular”. Maybe clockwork, in the sense of, “I don’t know what makes them tick.” Maybe it was just some Southernism meaning persnickety or something. Anyway, Ben made it sound like it was an experience I didn’t want to have. A run in with the ticky Landmarks Commission.

“They never had a problem with my roof. And that was something that really showed from the street.”

Ben laughed and shook his head.

“You were such a slow-motion wreck. No one could believe you’d finish it. We had bets going.”

I had to laugh, also. I knew they were dying to put me on the YouTubes with the fire department putting me into one of their aerial baskets. I guess I showed them. I’ve got floating copper valleys where that bastard couldn’t even imagine going and a standing seam copper roof on my porch that I created with honest-to-goodness iron roofing tools that I got from an old roofer in Findlay back in 1973.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, you pulled it off.”

“Thanks.”

“Cost me a hundred bucks.”

“You shit.”

My wife emerged from the back door with a Coors Light beer in her hand.

“Hello, Ben.”

She said it in a way like he was there to rescue her. Like whatever I was doing with the carriage house would spread pestilence and carcinogens throughout our family for generations and Ben alone could save her.

“Did Nordal finally give up and call you over?”

“No! I did not.”

Marge smiled and tilted her neck into her shoulder a little while crinkling her forehead. She looked adorable. I was a jealous teenager. She took a sip of beer.

“He wants my scrap lumber for his … uh, for his, Ben?”

“For my chimnea,” Ben said with cocky nonchalance. Bastard.

“Yes. He says it’s good hard oak and with a little sanding and stain will finish up nicely.”

“Nordal, a chimea is an outdoor terra cotta fireplace.”

“Oh.”

It was no longer my concern, anyway.

“Nordal! What happened? You’re bleeding.”

Sure enough, there on my arm, the blood, beer, and plaster dust had made a gruesome sort of paste. Ben laughed.

“Wounded at the battle of Mansfield and Goodbar.”

“Shut up, Ben. It’s nothing.”

God whispered to me. I started seeing myself as a wounded World War I veteran in 1920, tending to a well-to-do Memphis family while living in an apartment above a carriage and a fine horse that I would groom daily, holding a brush in my prosthetic hand.

“Look there! He even has a medal and everything.”

I had forgotten that I had pinned on a medallion I found beneath the kitchen floorboards of the apartment.

“A genuine U.S. medal. Is it Civil War?”

“Please. Give me a break.”

“You look so brave. And handsome.”

Marge looked amused as she encouraged Ben.

“I just liked it. I didn’t want to lose it.”

“Come on, Nordal. Let’s get washed up and put a bandage on your arm before it gets infected.”

She looked closer at my arm and winked at Ben.

“You might need stitches. Good heavens, it’s a purple heart.”

“Knock it off, you two. They didn’t give out Purple Hearts in World War I. Well son of a gun!”

I saw that it really was a purple heart medal. Maybe the horse groomer with the artificial hand was given the award at some later date. I made a note to myself to do a little research.

“Come on, let’s get inside. I’ll give you a full report later, Ben.”

Ben chuckled.

“See you later, Knight of the Woeful Renovation.” He started singing The Impossible Dream as he did little jig on his way back to his Babylonian Garden.

Inside, my wife cleaned off my arm and pronounced her diagnosis. As the principal at Immaculate Conception Elementary School, she knew when to seek a higher power.

“You need stitches. Get in the car.”

“We can walk.”

The hospital was only a couple of blocks away. The air was cool and crisp. We could stop at the Thai restaurant on our way back if it didn’t take to long to get stitched up. I cheerfully held a gauze pad on my forearm, visualizing a severed hand. I had already decided that I could create a prosthetic hand like the one pictured in the 1920 booklet. As we walked my wife pressed her hand over mine. Together we plugged the hole in my arm as we left the battlefield.

I managed to take the medal off and slipped it into my pocket before we reached the hospital. If I were to be admitted, I didn’t want it to be lost. I once lost my watch when I had an ultrasound on my heart. I had the staff search for it for about twenty minutes, but they never found it. That night it fell out when I kicked my shoes off for bed. I guess I didn’t notice it since I was partially sedated.

Anyway, it was a weeknight and they weren’t particularly busy in the emergency room. My wife helped me fill out the forms as a nurse asked a few routine questions.

“Did the injury happen at home?”

“Yes.” My wife answered as if I were too damaged to respond.

“Were you by yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Hartman!”

“Yes?”

“No. I mean, you’re Mr. Hartman. I thought I recognized you. I had you for acting class.”

I tried hard to place the man. He seemed familiar.

“Did you pass?”

“Oh, yeah. I loved that class.”

“Ha, ha! I’ll bet your family got a kick out of that scene you did.”

I was fishing for additional information. I’d been retired for 7 years.

“Yeah. You had me dressed up like Fred Flintstone for that caveman thing.”

Nothing was coming to me. I tried to read his name tag without him noticing.

“Well, let’s get you on out of here. Were you able to get help without assistance?”

“Yes.” My wife answered, trying to get us back on track.

“Were you drinking?”

“No.”

“Yes.” I corrected my wife. She looked surprised. “Two beers. And a shot of whiskey after I got wounded. And Ben gave me a beer. I didn’t finish it.”

“Would you say that you were inebriated?”

“Yes.” My wife jumped back into the action.

“I am not! Maybe a little tipsy. After I cut myself. We walked here. No problems.”

“You cut yourself?”

“Well, not, like, intentionally or anything.”

I looked at the others waiting to be seen. I stepped up my game and groaned.

“What is it?” said my ever-protective lovely wife.

“Nothing.”

“Did you hurt anything besides your arm?”

“Well, some plaster fell on my head but I’m sure it’s all right.”

“We should check for a concussion.”

I was asked a few questions and they checked my sight. Everything checked out, so I clutched my chest. I had fallen off my bike a few days earlier and I was still concerned about my ribs. Really. And my hip that had been replaced in 2011. I thought they might check that, also.

“When the plaster fell, it knocked me off my ladder. Maybe I should have some x-rays.”

I had gone too far. Marge’s face betrayed a Thai dinner slipping away.

Several hours later my examination was finished. I only had 8 stitches and a bottle of pain pills. It was well past midnight when we made our way through the now crowded waiting room. People of the night stared at us suspiciously.

As we walked home, past the darkened restaurant, I murmured to the moon, “maybe tomorrow night.” Marge’s expression told me that my mission was brave and noble. Or, that it was a mistake to combine alcohol and pills.

After a blissful night of sleep, I resumed my carriage house work with new vigor. I no longer called it renovation or even restoration. I decided not to even create a goal or an agenda. The work was going to lead me where it wanted to go. I bought a horse.

I began to fashion an artificial hand like the one described in the 1920 booklet. Although I found many interesting things during my excavation, a prosthetic hand was not among them. I had no way of recreating the miracle metal that they advertised in the brochure, but I came up with something similar using parts from an old trash compactor I had stored in the garage. Strips of rubber from a torn bicycle tube held it in place on my wrist mimicked a muscle. I added a leather loop to my horse brush. (No, I didn’t actually sever my hand, although I imagined how it might happen.) I kept my horse at Shelby Farms. I hadn’t told Marge about the horse or my hand. All in due time.

“What on Earth?” Marge looked at me as if my face were peeling off.

“What?”

“Where did you get that?”

I realized that I still had my helmet on. I had purchased a white helmet with “CD” inside a blue triangle on the front. It generally looked like a World War I helmet. I planned to paint it green. I think it was from the 50’s. Civil Defense.

“To protect my head in case more plaster falls.” I lied. Deceit is not my nature. Marge didn’t believe me.

“What’s with the trousers?” I had tucked them inside my socks to look more like a soldier. “You look like a demented Boy Scout.”

“You don’t understand demolition.”

“I think I do.”

I knew what was coming.

“I’m going to call Ben to help you.”

“I have a horse!” I was desperate. She narrowed her eyes and bored through me. I slowly removed my Civil Defense helmet and held it at my belt buckle. It was awkward.

“Did you say that you have a horse?”

“Yes?”

“You have a horse.”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

“It’s at Shelby Farms.”

“So, you haven’t been going to Home Depot?”

“Sometimes.”

“Interesting.”

“Jerry.”

“What?”

“My horse is named Jerry.”

“OK.”

I named my prosthetic hand, “Myrl.” I hadn’t told Marge about my hand, yet.

“I can show you the buggy. It’s on the West side.”

“Of course. How did I miss this?”

“While you were at work. It’s a beauty. We can trot around Midtown.”

“How many buggies do you see around Midtown?”

“I’ll work it out.”

A certain authenticity is required for a carriage and horse to properly enter and exit even a humble midtown estate like ours at Goodbar and Mansfield. The century-old oak tree blocking the porte-cochere to the backyard would have to be removed.

I heard Ben talk about his “porte-cochere,” so I tossed it around casually in conversation because it sounded sophisticated. “Time for me to visit the old Porte-cochere,” I’d say at some fancy party, thinking that it was some sort of French outhouse. Marge looked it up on the interweb and set me straight.

The concrete driveway would need to be restored to cobblestones. I considered asking Ben to make a driveway with his concrete cobblestone forms, but I didn’t want to get Marge too excited.

My other big challenge was to convince Marge that Myrl, my alter-ego persona with a prosthetic hand, was her driver and manservant. I began sleeping some nights in the carriage house among bare studs and exposed plumbing.

Ben pretended to do some work on his pergola. He was spying on me. I had located a 1940’s sink and commode. However, the cast iron bathtub seemed impossible to wrestle up the steep narrow stairs, so I had to rethink things. I needed to go back further. 1920. I moved my plumbing collection to a place where it couldn’t be seen from the street and studied a small area for an outhouse and a pump. They wouldn’t have to really work. It would look just like Marge’s favorite movie, The Miracle Worker. Well, not the outhouse.

My wife’s grandmother lived near Delphos, Ohio. She never had indoor plumbing. I remember her two-seater, spotless with wallpaper. I could build a duplicate privy and present it as an anniversary gift for Marge. I’d tell her it was a potting shed, of course.

After unveiling the potting shed outhouse on our 40th wedding anniversary, I lead my silent wife up to the apartment where she was spellbound by a fully functioning water pump at the kitchen sink. I had rigged it to pump and return water to a tank in the horse stall below. It was all in fun. I prodded her to pump the arm. After about 30 pumps, I took over and soon water gushed into the ancient steel basin that I found in a scrapyard in North Memphis. I cautioned her not to drink the water. She shook her head in wonder and left quickly, probably to tell Ben about it, or so I wouldn’t see her tear up. The pump was exactly like the one that was in her grandmother’s house near Delphos. I sat back smugly and waited for her to return with Ben.

It was after dark and Marge still hadn’t returned. I lit an oil lamp, a beautiful Teardrop with Eyewinkers pattern made by the Dalzell, Gilmore, and Leighton Company in 1888 in Findlay, Ohio, which was, I might have mentioned, my hometown. I sat back with my Great Uncle Marvin’s autographed book about the history of Maytag gas engines.

It was still dark when I woke up. The lamp had burned out. I had fallen asleep using a huge bag of horsehair as a pillow. I had gathered the horsehair at Shelby Farms and planned to mix it with mortar and plaster. I retrieved the lathe before Ben was able to burn it in his whatchamacallit. I let him have the oak flooring because it had been added later, anyway. And it was termite damaged. Surprisingly, the red pine beneath the oak was in very good condition, except where there was some old fire damage. Thank goodness I didn’t knock over my lamp in my sleep. They’d be calling me Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. Ha! Ha!

After putting on my artificial hand, I felt my way to the kitchen and pumped about a hundred times before giving up and dry-wiping my face with my handkerchief. I was disappointed, but not surprised, that Marge hadn’t come to get me. She respected my space when it came to construction work. I had removed the windows and hadn’t found authentic replacements so there was enough moonlight to find my way around once my eyes had cleared of dust. The mosquitos were brutal. I started thinking about the Yellow Fever epidemics that plagued Memphis in the 19th century.

At sunrise, I emerged from the plastic sheathing where one of the doors once hung. My wife’s car was gone. She had already left for work. I’m sure she didn’t want to disturb me knowing that I was probably exhausted from mixing plaster. A man sat in a pick-up truck. He was looking at our carriage house and making notes. Probably trying to learn my secrets. I sauntered up to him, but he drove off before I could tap on his window. I saw the curtains close quickly over at Ben’s house.

I fixed some breakfast and showered. There was a note from Marge on the counter that I thought about reading. The newspaper was still in its bag on the front porch. Marge must have been running late and tossed it on the porch on her way to her car. She was always doing little kindnesses for me. She was a Catholic. I wasn’t, but I always attended church with her. It was a good time for me to dream up new projects.

My day was uneventful. I shifted things around in the backyard, sorted miscellaneous hardware, and burned plastic sheathing off some copper wire to be sold as scrap. Alarmed by the smell and black smoke, my neighbor had called the fire department, but I had finished before they arrived.

Before I knew it, it was 3:30 pm and Marge would soon be home from work. It was time to get busy on my carriage house project. But before I could pull the first nail out of a piece of used lathe, the man in the pick-up truck reappeared. He hopped out, waving his clipboard, as he came up my driveway.

“Hello there! Nordal Hartman?” He seemed a bit nervous. I wasn’t sure why, since I’d left my helmet and jacket inside.

“Yep. What can I do for you?” I saw Ben on his ladder trimming wisteria.

“Doing a little renovation here?”

“Not exactly.”

“Restoration?”

“Well, I’m just taking it one step at a time. Maybe it wants to be an honest to goodness carriage house again.”

“Ah. Well, I’m with the zoning office.” I had already guessed that. I also figured Ben had called them on me.

“I paid my fee and did the paper work.”

“Yes. I have your crude drawings right here.”

“Well?”

“You need a permit.”

“I called the Landmarks Commission several times. Each time I was told that I’d hear from them the next day. That I was on the top of the stack.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

“The lady didn’t seem to think I needed a permit.”

“Everyone needs a permit.”

“I’m not adding anything new. I think the Landmarks Commission lady was quite impressed that the house was returning to its original use.”

“There is no more Landmarks Commission. It’s all part of Planning and Zoning, now.”

“Wow. Am I in trouble?” I glanced at the place where Marge usually parked.

“No. We just need to get you fixed up with a permit.”

“The pot-bellied stove isn’t even connected to the chimney.”

“Let’s take a look.”

“I super-glued the door shut on it. I don’t have a welder.”

“How about that latrine there?”

“That was an anniversary gift to my wife.” I could see that he was softening.

“Really?”

“Well, it’s really a potting shed.”

“Nothing underneath?”

“Well, sometimes, when I don’t feel like running into the house …” I stopped, thinking, “Shut up, Nordal! You’re talking too much!” Luckily, the man just chuckled with a knowing bit of shared manliness.

“So. What’s your intentions for this building?” He held his pencil on his clipboard, ready to take notes.

“It’s a carriage house.”

“Yes?”

“Well, we’ll keep our carriage in it.” I swallowed.

“And…?” It wasn’t going well. I needed Marge. But I really hoped he’d be gone by the time she got home.

“A horse.” I whispered.

“You have a horse?”

“Yes.”

He looked at me suspiciously.

“My wife knows.” Again, he seemed to relax with that manly camaraderie.

“Well, I’d like to see that.”

“Jerry.”

“Huh?”

“My horse is named, Jerry.”

“Ah. Mind if I have a look?”

“We’ll have to ride in your truck. My wife isn’t home from work, yet.”

“What?”

“I keep it at Shelby Farms.” I waved to Ben who was working on his pergola.

“Well, you can’t have a horse and buggy on the city streets.” I pondered for a moment about how the Amish got around in Memphis.

“No. Of course not.” Agreement seemed to be my best chance.

“It’s quite impressive what you’ve done here.” Ah! I was making progress.

“You go to Viet Nam?” He was looking at the mechanical hand that I had forgotten to remove. “Us old soldiers always find a way to get things done, don’t we? Might take us a little longer but we get ‘er done, right?” I toyed with the rubber straps around my forearm. “What branch?”

“The Howard Branch,” I said. Thinking about the creek that ran by our house in Ohio.

“Ah!” he said knowingly. “Well, let’s just tick off a few things here.” I winced, hearing that word, “tick,” again. “Who are your mechanical contractors?”

“All the electrical and plumbing have been removed.” I indicated the pile of pipes and burnt copper wiring. “Listen, my wife will be home soon. Could we wrap this up?”

“Even demolition requires a permit.”

“I’m not demolishing anything. My wife has a heart condition. If she sees me being taken off in handcuffs you might need to call for an ambulance!” That wasn’t true. My wife was as healthy as a, well, horse.

“I don’t have any handcuffs.”

“I find your manner quite aggressive. I plan to call my lawyer.” Actually, the only lawyer I knew was a friend who played me regularly on Words With Friends.

“If this is a habitable structure, you need to follow the rules.”

“Is there a rule that I have to have plumbing and electricity?” Two could play that game.

“What do you do with waste?”

“Good heavens! I do what anyone does.”

“So, you don’t actually live here? I need to know how this structure is being used.”

“I already told you, it’s a carriage house. You’re upsetting me.” Just then my wife came out the back door. With all the stress, I didn’t notice her car. She didn’t see us behind the pile of plaster chunks, pipes, wiring, lathe, and empty beer cans. She was in her slightly threadbare terrycloth bathrobe. She was not expecting company. I think she’d been drinking.

Thinking quickly, I plunged to the ground face down and hooked my prosthetic hand around my other wrist behind my back.

“Go back inside, Marge! I can’t bear for you to see this!”

The man slowly backed away, putting his pencil in his pocket. His eyes glistened. Marge looked to Ben who was clipping away at his wisteria. This was going very well.

“Listen. Why don’t I come back another time?”

“Nordal!”

“Marge, go back inside. Please!”

“Nordal. Who is this? What have you done?”

“Nothing’s wrong, ma’m. I’m with zoning. I just came to look at your building.”

“Carriage house.” I defiantly spit out a piece of charred plastic. Marge looked profoundly at my hands and then back to the government official.

“Why is he restrained like this?” Marge looked affectionately at the tall man who was on his knees, gathering the papers that he had dropped.

“Marge! Go inside. I can handle this!”

“Lady,” the man said as he rose with his papers, “he did this to himself.” Marge melted like a schoolgirl.

Cuffed prostrate beside my compost pile, I was alone. I hissed like a caged muskrat.

“Petulant neighbors! I am suffering for their petulant estates,” I cried, using a word I learned playing Words With Friends. I couldn’t see Ben, from my position.

“Nordal, don’t say anything more. I’ll call Wayne.”

The man crept back to his truck. He dug for his keys before noticing them on the ground beside me. I kicked them toward him. A satisfying, petulant gesture from the victor.

Before picking up his keys, he unhooked my wrist.

“There. See? No harm done. You two work this out. All approved. No electricity. No plumbing. No structural changes. No problem. It’s all good. Here’s a temporary permit.” He handed me a signed certificate that I would petulantly display for Ben.

I rose from the compost pile as he drove off. I had owned that rapscallion from city hall. At least until I got a formal notice to appear before the Zoning Board in a public hearing. That’s a story for another day.

I put my good hand around Marge’s familiar waist. She nuzzled closer under my protective arm. The effect of the wine she’d been drinking.

“You’ve done well, Nordal.”

“Someone has to stand up for traditional ways.”

“Well, let’s have a look at your work.” I bit my lip and fumbled with the straps on my hand.

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“You have. Now let’s look.”

I knew Marge would never agree to give up her screened porch to allow a carriage passage, with or without a horse.

I had easily peeled away 80 years of god knows how many lives above a lucky horse shoe. Now I was the unlucky one. The overseer of a sturdy carriage house with no horse. I began to cry.

“I’ll call Ben.” My whimpering turned into heaving sobs.

I wiped my eye with my hook as Marge lost a slipper when she stumbled slightly going up the back stairs into our house. I smiled great love.

A grain of sand started to become a pearl inside my shell. I would light my Teardrop with Eyewinker pattern oil lamp made by the Dalzell, Gilmore, and Leighton Company in my hometown of Findlay, Ohio in the 19th century and ceremoniously open the gun cabinet that I inherited from my Great Uncle Marvin. The one who wrote the book about Maytag gas engines. (Remember? I have a signed copy.) Since I didn’t have any guns, I stored many treasures from my hometown in Northwest Ohio, including several painted chunks of glass that I still had from the old man who bought shards from me for a penny apiece when I was a boy. Before he died, he scattered many of his shards on the lawns of houses that had been built where the mighty glass factories once stood. That’s what I would do. I would bury the shards in the earth where Marge’s concrete man would soon be making a floor on the DNA of carriage horses long gone. Someday, someone might discover these pieces of goblets and lamps, painted white with neat lettering and link them to my old friend’s book. (I have an inscribed copy of it, also.) And people would wonder and marvel at how the shards came to be buried beneath this carriage house in Memphis, Tennessee.