

Runes

Mary Lane Potter

No place on this mottled and worn wood has been left unmarked, no place untouched—by water, heat, light, hand or tool.

“THIS COULD BE A BEAUTIFUL PIECE!” HE SAID, running his hand over the contours of my six-foot solid cherry table. “You should sand it down, coat it with marine varnish, protect it, like a coat of armor, keep it in mint condition. Weird shape though. Wider at the middle than the ends.”

“It’s an old design,” I said, as I continued setting the table for dinner, our first meal at my apartment—chicken with olives and preserved lemons, couscous, homemade harissa, romaine with fennel and oranges, a cherry-almond tart. I hoped he hadn’t heard the snarl in my voice. When I had tamed it into pleasantness, I added, “Boat-shaped. Curved like a dory.”

“Or a woman!” He slid two fingers down the long edge opposite me. “But look at all these scratches and stains, and this water damage. You could erase all that, easy. Who wants to look at those?”

I do, I wanted to say. Every time I sit down to eat or feed friends, family, strange men like you; every time I bend over its amber warmth to write,

sketch, wrap dolmas, roll rodanchas, pinch hamantaschen, lay challah, fragrant with anise on a rack to cool; every time I stand by its honeyed frame folding laundry, cutting dress patterns, singing blessings over the wax-dripping menorah, lighting yahrzeit candles for my dead. Over the years, sunlight has darkened the pink cast of the newborn wood, ripening it to a radiant red-gold brown whose warmth beckons like the body of a lover held close. And its smooth surface—five wide planks seamed invisibly and adorned with nature’s striations and knots—has been etched with an artist’s care.

I study them, the impressions left by time, and sometimes I caress them. The ones whose origins I can trace: ashen water rings, a ghostly circle where a too-hot soup bowl rested, dull patches where the oil finish has worn away, a Macanudo cigarillo burn, traces of permanent marker from my son’s protest posters, a blackened four-inch scrape dug by my daughter’s runaway Exacto blade, khaki blotches where wild orchids once sat; and the ones whose history eludes me: stains dark and irregular as liver spots, slim caramel curves intertwining like limbs, a cluster of crescents pressing into another, two long ochre gouges embracing two shorter ones, five dents forming a tiny petroglyphic hand signaling “Welcome,” a dotted line the color my hair once was—burnt umber, scattered spots as white as the pigmentless discs freckling my shoulders, a pair of scratches glistening like the stretch marks on my belly, a pinkish-gray splotch the size of the oval scar on my left calf from a burn caused by a motorcycle exhaust pipe, a divot the

size of the place on my right breast where I lost a piece of flesh—“No big deal then,” I shrugged, smiling, to the surgeon when he showed me the X-rays, where his scalpel would slice. “It is,” he said, fixing his eyes on mine. “We’re removing part of your body.”

No place on this mottled and worn wood has been left unmarked, no place untouched—by water, heat, light, hand, or tool. Yet it’s sturdy enough still to hold my weight when I stand on it to change a bulb in the track high above me. To bear a friend’s knotted body as I massage it. To give birth on, if need be, the way my cousin did on her kitchen table, her mother cutting the cord with a paring knife. And, like the proverbial woman of valor, that image of wisdom incarnate, more precious than rubies.

Go and sand what you will. I don’t want erasure. No tabula rasa for me. Leave the clean slate for babies, for innocents, their emptiness to imprint. I don’t want purity. No immaculate being for me. Leave the unspoiled life for holy virgins made of marble and cast in plaster. I don’t want impregnability. Leave invulnerability to idols, graven images to be worshiped and toppled. Give me living flesh, an image teeming with flaws, alive with risk, an image of all that is sacred, all that is dear. Give me the experienced body, the body wounded with living, beautiful in its scarring and pitting, the body written, etched into meaning, carved with secrets, histories hidden and plain, signs and wonders, blazoning a message more cryptic than ancient runes carved in stone, a singular script that can be deciphered only by one who loves. Bring me the lover who can read my runes. ❖

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