

DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

It Went On

a 321Lumina.com book



by Blurt Snodgrass

It Went On

It Went On

A Drake & Voss Novella

Blurt Snodgrass

321Lumina.com

Chapter One

He arrived on a Thursday morning in May carrying a small wooden box.

Not a large box — the size of something that might once have held cigars, or a small collection of letters, or the tools of a specific trade. The wood was walnut, dark and warm, the grain running in long uninterrupted lines across the lid. The joints at the corners were dovetails, hand-cut, the fit so precise that the seams were nearly invisible until the light caught them. A small brass latch, tarnished to a good patina, the kind of tarnish that happened over years of handling rather than neglect. Nothing written on the outside. Nothing to identify it except the quality of its making.

He set it on the desk.

He did not open it.

He sat in the client chair and looked at Flora and said: "I want to find the man who taught me to make this."

He was fifty-six. The kind of fifty-six that had been built by physical work — not bulky, but solid, with the specific quality of someone whose body had been doing skilled manual things for thirty years and had shaped itself around the doing. His hands were the hands of a woodworker: the calluses in the right places, the small scars of the work, the nails kept short and clean. He held the box on his lap after he set it down and picked it up again, the way you held something you had made and knew completely.

Nancy came in, hung her coat, wrote the name from the phone call. Wrote the time.

Read both.

Good.

She looked at the box and she looked at the man's hands and she wrote something small in the margin that Flora didn't read.

"Tell me," Flora said.

"I'm a woodworker," he said. "Small things primarily — boxes, bowls, the kind of objects that are about the making rather than the having. I've been doing it for thirty years." He set the box on the desk again, between them. "This is the first box I made. I was fourteen years old. The wood is white oak — I chose it because of the grain, I remember choosing it. The dovetails are not perfect, if you look closely. The back left corner is slightly off." He paused. "But they're close to perfect for a fourteen-year-old who had been working with wood for three years."

"Who taught you?" Flora said.

"A neighbor," he said. "In the building where I grew up on Van Ness Avenue. I was eleven years old. His name was Tibor. I never knew his last name — he was just Tibor, the neighbor, the man with the tools." He paused. "He was older, maybe sixty, sixty-five. Hungarian, he had a strong accent, English that was functional but limited. He had a table in his living room and tools he kept in a specific order, every tool in its place, and he worked at that table in the evenings when he got home from wherever he worked during the day." He looked at the box. "I walked past his open door one afternoon. He was making something — I don't remember what. I stood in the doorway and watched." He paused. "He looked up and saw me. He looked at me for a moment and then he said: come in."

"You came in," Flora said.

"I came in," he said. "He put a piece of wood in my hands and he showed me how to hold a plane, and that was the beginning." He paused. "Three years. He taught me for three years. Every evening I could go, every weekend. He taught me how to read grain, how to choose wood for a specific purpose, how to make joints that would hold. He taught me to finish — that the finish was the last conversation between you and the wood, that it mattered as much as everything that came before." He looked at his hands. "When I was fourteen my family moved to the East Bay. We moved and I never saw Tibor again."

"Why didn't you look for him?" Flora said.

"I was fourteen," he said. "And then I was fifteen and sixteen and life was other things. By the time I thought to look — really thought to look — I didn't know his last name and the building had new tenants and it had been ten years." He paused. "And then more years went by."

"And now," Flora said.

He looked at the box.

"My son," he said. "He's eleven years old. His name is Sam. For the past year he has been coming into my workshop and watching me work — not asking questions, not trying to help, just watching. The quality of his attention is —" He paused. "I recognize it. I was that child. I stood in Tibor's doorway and watched with that quality of attention."

"You invited him in," Flora said.

"Last month," he said. "I put a piece of wood in his hands and showed him how to hold a plane." He paused. "And I thought about Tibor. About the moment when Tibor looked up from his work and saw me in the doorway and could have closed the door or ignored me or told me to go away. Instead he said: come in." He looked at Flora. "I want to find him. I want to tell him that the thing he started with an eleven-year-old boy on Van Ness Avenue in 1985 has continued. That a man of fifty-six is passing it to his eleven-year-old son." He paused. "I want him to know it went on."

Flora looked at the box on the desk.

The walnut, the tight dovetails, the small brass latch.

"Tibor would be elderly now," she said. "If he was sixty in 1985 he'd be ninety-nine now."

"I know," he said. "I know he may not be alive." He looked at the box. "But even if he's gone — especially if he's gone — I want to find someone who knew him. Someone who can hear that it went on." He paused. "Someone who can carry that."

"Leave the box with us," Flora said.

He looked at the box.

He had carried it for forty-two years.

He picked it up and held it for a moment — the weight of forty-two years of making, of the craft that started in a neighbor's apartment with a plane and a piece of wood — and then he set it on the desk.

"Be careful with it," he said.

"We will," Flora said.

Chapter Two

The building on Van Ness Avenue had been converted to condominiums in 1997. Nancy found this through the property records — a rental apartment building from before 1997, converted during the property boom, now owned unit by unit by various buyers.

The building's rental records from the 1980s were not publicly available, but Nancy had methods for rental records, and what she found, through the property management company that had handled the building before the conversion, was a list of tenants from the mid-1980s.

In 1985 the building had a tenant listed as T. Koves.

T. Koves.

Tibor Koves.

Nancy found him in the immigration records — a Hungarian immigrant, arrived in the United States in 1957, naturalized in 1963. Born 1924 in Budapest. He had lived at the Van Ness address from 1971 to 1992, twenty-one years, before the records showed him moving to a different address in the Richmond.

"He was sixty in 1985," Nancy said. "When Owen was eleven."

"Yes," Flora said.

"He'd be a hundred and one now," Nancy said.

"Yes."

"So he's gone," Flora said.

"Almost certainly," Nancy said. "But —" She looked at her notepad. "He was in the Richmond from 1992. I can find the Richmond address. I can find whether he died there, who he lived with, whether there's family."

"Find the family," Flora said.

She found the death record first.

Tibor Koves had died in 2011 at the age of eighty-seven. He had died at the Richmond address — a house, not an apartment, which meant he had owned it or lived with people who owned it. The death record listed his next of kin as a woman named Eva Koves, which was either a daughter or a wife.

A daughter, Nancy established through the county records. Eva Koves, born 1955 in Budapest, who had come to the United States with her father in 1957 — two years old, carried by a father who was fleeing something, who had left everything behind and arrived in a country with a two-year-old daughter and whatever he could carry.

Eva Koves was now seventy years old.

She lived in the same house in the Richmond where her father had died in 2011.

She was a retired librarian.

Nancy called Flora.

"His daughter," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said. "Eva. Seventy. Still in the Richmond." She paused. "She came with him in 1957. She was two years old. She's been in San Francisco for sixty-eight years."

Flora looked at the box on the desk.

The walnut, the dovetails, the brass latch.

"Call her," Flora said.

Eva Koves answered on the fourth ring with the voice of someone who was in the middle of something and had decided to answer anyway. A voice with the faintest trace of an accent — not her own accent but her father's, inherited in the way accents were sometimes inherited, the cadence and the slight particular music of a language that was not the primary one.

Nancy introduced herself. Said she was calling about Tibor Koves. Said she was a private investigator trying to find information about him on behalf of a former neighbor.

A pause.

"Van Ness Avenue?" Eva said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

"A child," Eva said. "My father taught children sometimes. On Van Ness. There was a boy, I remember my father mentioning a boy who came to learn."

"His name is Owen Fairweather," Nancy said. "He's fifty-six now. He's a woodworker."

A silence.

"A woodworker," Eva said. Something in her voice that was not quite emotion — the sound of something that had been in the distance for a long time and had just become visible.

"He still has the first box he made," Nancy said. "Under your father's instruction. He made it when he was fourteen. He has kept it for forty-two years."

The silence went on a moment longer.

"My father died in 2011," Eva said. "He was eighty-seven. He was making things until a year before he died — he made things his whole life, he couldn't not." She paused. "He talked about teaching. He said it was the best thing, to teach someone to make something with their hands. He said: when you teach someone to make a thing, the thing lives longer than either of you." She paused. "He would be glad to know. About the boy. About the woodworker." She paused. "Would you ask Owen Fairweather to come? I'd like to meet him."

Chapter Three

Owen came in on a Friday to hear what they had found.

He came the same way he'd come before — the box under his arm, the woodworker's hands, the quality of someone who moved through spaces with care.

Flora told him about Tibor Koves. The Hungarian immigrant who had arrived in 1957 with a two-year-old daughter and whatever he could carry. The twenty-one years on Van Ness Avenue. The Richmond house he had moved to in 1992 and where his daughter still lived. The death in 2011 at eighty-seven, making things until a year before.

She told him what Eva had said.

When you teach someone to make a thing, the thing lives longer than either of you.

Owen held the box.

He held it the way he had held it in the client chair the first time — with the full knowledge of it, the forty-two years of it, the precise dovetail joints and the slightly off back left corner that told you a fourteen-year-old had made it.

"He said that," Owen said.

"His daughter says he said it often," Flora said.

"He used to say things like that," Owen said. "In the workshop. He would say something that sounded simple and I'd think about it for a week." He paused. "He said: the wood has grain and the grain has a direction and you go with the direction or you fight the direction but you cannot pretend the direction isn't there. He was talking about wood." He paused. "He wasn't talking about wood."

"No," Flora said.

"He came from Budapest in 1957," Owen said. "1957 was —" He paused. "After the uprising. He was one of the people who left after the uprising."

"Yes," Flora said. "I think so."

"He left with a two-year-old daughter," Owen said. "And his tools, presumably. And his knowledge of how to make things." He paused. "And he made a life here. And he taught people. And he said: the thing lives longer than either of you."

He looked at the box.

"His daughter wants to meet me," he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"I want to meet her," he said. "I want to take the box." He paused. "I want to show her what he started."

He went to the house in the Richmond the following Saturday.

Flora didn't go with him. This was right — it was his door, his meeting, his bringing-of-the-box. She had found the door. Walking through it was his.

He called that evening.

He called from home, she could tell — the specific acoustic of his own space, the warmth of it.

"She looks like him," he said. "Around the eyes. I recognized the eyes from somewhere I hadn't known I'd stored the memory." He paused. "We sat at his workbench. She still has his workbench. She's kept it exactly as it was — the tools in their specific order, every tool in its place." He paused. "I ran my hands along the bench and I could feel forty years of sawdust in the grain of the wood. He never sanded the bench. He said: the bench is for working, not for looking at."

"Yes," Flora said.

"She showed me the things he made," Owen said. "She has them everywhere — the house is full of the things he made. Small things, medium things, the occasional large thing. She said: he made things his whole life. She said: when he couldn't work anymore he sat at the bench anyway. He just sat there." He paused. "I understand that."

"What did you show her?" Flora said.

"The box," he said. "I brought the box. I told her the story — the doorway, the plane, the three years. I told her what it had become, the thirty years of making, the workshop, Sam watching with the quality of attention that I recognized from my own watching." He paused. "She held the box for a long time. She said: he always said it was the teaching that mattered most. She said: he would be so glad to know this." He paused. "She cried. Not dramatically — Eva is not a dramatic person. She just cried quietly and held the box and then she gave it back to me."

"She gave it back," Flora said.

"She said: it belongs with you. She said: it always belonged with you." He paused. "She asked me to bring Sam. She said: I want to meet the child who watches the way you watched." He paused. "I said I would."

Flora looked at the cork board.

The twenty-five things.

The Farallon Islands above the door.

Find the before.

"Owen," she said.

"Yes."

"Your father-in-law," she said. "Or whoever taught you that she was right — that the box belonged with you."

"No one taught me that," he said. "Eva was right. The box belongs with me. It's the first thing I made and it's the proof of what was started." He paused. "But I'm going to make something for Eva. A box of her own. Made by the person Tibor taught." He paused. "It seems right."

"Yes," Flora said. "It does."

Chapter Four

He came in the following week to settle the account.

He came with the box and he came with something else — a small piece of wood, a sample, the kind woodworkers carried to show the quality of a material, a piece of walnut with the end-grain exposed, the rings visible, the age of the tree readable in them.

He set both on the desk.

Nancy quoted the fee. He wrote the check.

He looked at the cork board.

"I want to add something," he said.

Flora looked at him.

He reached into his jacket and produced a photograph. A man at a workbench, older, seventies perhaps, bent over something small, his hands on it, his face intent on the work. Not looking at the camera. The photograph taken by someone who understood that the work was what mattered and had photographed the work rather than the worker.

"Eva gave it to me," Owen said. "She said: I want you to have it. She said: it's what he looked like when he was most himself."

Flora looked at the photograph.

Tibor Koves at his workbench. Hands on the work. Face intent.

She went to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned the photograph below the twenty-five things.

The twenty-sixth thing.

A man at a workbench, hands on the work.

Owen looked at it.

He looked at it for a long time.

"Eva is coming to my workshop next week," he said. "To see where the work went." He paused. "And Sam is coming with me to the Richmond the week after. I told him: there's a woman whose father taught me to make things. I want you to meet her." He paused. "Sam said: why. I said: because the chain of it matters. Because it goes: Tibor to me to you. And she's the piece that connects it." He paused. "Sam thought about it and said: okay." He almost smiled. "He's eleven. Okay is a lot."

"Yes," Nancy said from her desk. "At eleven, okay is a great deal."

Owen looked at the cork board.

He looked at the twenty-six things.

He looked at his box, still on the desk, the walnut and the dovetails and the brass latch.

"The thing lives longer than either of you," he said.

He picked up the box.

He held it.

He put it back in his jacket pocket, where it sat with the slight weight of forty-two years, the weight of something that had been made and kept and brought here and taken away again into a life where it still had work to do.

He went to the door.

He stopped.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"The note on the card stock," he said. "Above the door."

Flora looked at the card stock in Nancy's handwriting, gone slightly yellow.

What do you actually know. Not what you feel. What you know.

"Yes?" Flora said.

"Tibor used to say something like that," Owen said. "He used to say: what does the wood tell you. Not what do you want to make. What does the wood tell you. He said: if you start from what the wood tells you, the thing will be right. If you start from what you want, the thing will fight you." He paused. "Same question. Different material."

"Yes," Nancy said. "Same question."

It Went On

Owen looked at the card stock for a moment longer.

Then he went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

Chapter Five

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the May office, the warmth of the season fully arrived now, the window open, Clement Street in its late-spring mode — the gardens visible over the fences, the evening light long and generous, the city in the good part of the year that people who lived here knew was real but forgot to count on.

"He carried the box for forty-two years," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"He didn't know Tibor's last name," Nancy said. "He didn't know where he'd gone. He carried the box and he didn't look." She paused. "And then Sam stood in the doorway."

"Yes," Flora said. "Sam stood in the doorway and Owen recognized the quality of attention and thought of Tibor."

"The chain of it," Nancy said. "That's what he said. Tibor to Owen to Sam." She paused. "And now Eva."

"Eva is the piece that connects it," Flora said.

"Yes." Nancy held her tea. "She's been in that house since 1992. Thirty-three years. Keeping his workbench. The tools in their order." She paused. "She didn't know anyone was going to come. She just kept the bench."

"She knew someone might come," Flora said. "The way Eleanor Drake kept the records for thirty-three years. The way Eilidh Forsyth kept the recording for twenty-seven years. The way Felix Arroyo kept the map." She paused. "Some people keep things because they understand the thing might be needed and they've accepted the responsibility of the keeping."

Nancy looked at the photograph of Tibor on the cork board.

The hands on the work.

"He taught someone," Nancy said. "And the someone taught his son. And now the daughter who was two years old on a boat or a plane from Budapest in 1957 is going to meet the grandson of the thing her father started." She paused. "She carried him here. He was two years old and she was twenty-five and she carried him from one life to another." She paused. "Everything that came from him came from her carrying him here."

Flora looked at the photograph.

Tibor Koves at his workbench, hands on the work, face intent.

She thought about what it was to carry something across a great distance and arrive somewhere new and set it down and begin.

She thought about Marion Voss arriving at this office in 1979 and beginning.

She thought about herself arriving in 2001 and finding the sign.

"The chain of it," Flora said.

"Yes," Nancy said.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read both.

She looked at them again.

She looked at them a third time.

Good.

She set the pen down parallel to the notepad.

"Good?" Flora said.

"Good," Nancy said.

They sat in the May office with their tea and the evening light coming through the window onto Clement Street and the cork board with its twenty-six things and the case note in her mother's handwriting and the photograph of a man with his hands on the work and the Farallon Islands above the door.

Flora looked at the wood sample on the desk.

Owen had left it. She hadn't noticed until now that he'd left it — the piece of walnut, the end-grain exposed, the rings visible.

She picked it up.

She turned it in her hands.

She could see the rings. The years of the tree's growth, each one distinct, the record of what the tree had been through — the good years wide, the difficult years narrow, the whole of it there in the cross-section, the complete record of a life lived in one place.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy looked at her.

"Look at this," she said.

She held up the wood.

Nancy looked at the end-grain, the rings, the record.

"The whole life of it," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said. "Right there. If you know how to read it."

Nancy looked at it.

"We know how to read it," she said.

"Yes," Flora said. "We do."

She set the wood sample on the desk.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page.

She wrote the time.

She waited for the next case.

Three weeks later a postcard arrived.

No return address. San Francisco postmark. A photograph on the front: a close-up of wood grain, the rings of a cross-section, the years visible.

On the back, in two handwritings — one she recognized as Owen's, one smaller, rounder, the handwriting of a child who was learning to form letters with the same care you'd bring to a dovetail joint:

Owen: Eva came to the workshop. She ran her hands along the bench. She said: he would have liked this bench. She said it exactly the way he would have said it.

Sam: I am learning to hold the plane. It is harder than it looks. Tibor was right.

Flora read it.

She passed it to Nancy.

Nancy read it.

She looked at the second handwriting — the careful letters, the child working out the weight of the plane and the direction of the grain.

She stood and pinned the postcard to the cork board below the twenty-six things.

The twenty-seventh thing.

Tibor was right.

She stepped back.

She looked at the cork board.

Twenty-seven things.

She turned.

"Good," she said.

Flora said: "Good."

The work continued.

In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.

The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.

The note on card stock gone slightly yellow.

The postcard from Inverness. The postcard from Penang.

A folded note: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.

A single sheet: He wrote back.

A postcard of a table: I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.

A cream note in fountain pen: You cannot smell your own smell. But you can know that it exists.

A card on good paper: Tell him he was right.

A postcard of a lake: She sang the song on Wednesday. She knew all the words. She held my hand.

A cream card: Tell Cecile she has her grandmother's eyes.

A torn piece of paper: Tell Flora. Today.

A note in careful English: The book is home.

An envelope from 1999 in a hand that was not theirs.

A postcard of the Great Highway: We walked. The fog was in. / She thinks like her mother.

A postcard of the Gulf of Guinea coast: Now he's in the record and you're in his record.

A photograph of a viewport: darkness and faint cold light.

A deep-sea postcard: I'm going back down in March. This time I'll know what I'm looking for.

A postcard of the Louisiana bayou: He played for two hours. I understand now what he was doing for forty years.

A small folded paper: After the noise. Still.

A letter on architectural letterhead: She said her mother would have approved of Drake and Voss.

A case note in Marion Voss's handwriting: Find the before.

A letter in an envelope addressed to a man who had been looking for eleven years and found.

A photograph of an old man in a pew: mouth open, singing, looking ahead.

A note: That's him.

A photograph of a man at a workbench: hands on the work.

A postcard of wood grain: Tibor was right.

The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.

Neither of them had fixed it.

Neither of them ever would.

End.