

COLLECTIVE TASK
Florence workshop task: “Things that get finished for you (passed out)”
Assigned by Kristen Gallagher

FINISHING IT
By Jeff Shapiro

I was twelve when my mother, father, sister, dog and I moved to Dudley Road. Goodbye to the childhood home, the suburban dream, suburban nightmare, the modern-style, late-Eisenhower-era split-level that was genetically identical to the other hundred-and-forty-six split-levels cloned by the same builder, each on its own rectangular quarter-acre of neatly gardened land, up and down the middle-class sidewalked street. Young families behind every door – two parents, two kids, and a dog. Everyone Jewish, us included. Everyone except the D’Angelos, but they owned the souvenir concession for the Boston Red Sox, so everyone wanted to be their friend.

Dudley Road was different, though only a mile and a half away. Rambling old mansions owned by gentiles with patrician-sounding names. The house we bought was falling to pieces. Only reason we could afford it. But what a house! Gorgeous hundred-year-old grandeur set far back from the road amid nearly three acres of woods. A carved gumwood staircase climbed from the entry hall, and a separate stairway in back led to two extra bedrooms that used to be the servants’ quarters. Fireplaces in my parents’ room, my sister’s room, the dining room, and the library.

Four fireplaces meant firewood. Lots of it.

Different house, different way of doing things, Dad decided. So he asked for advice from gentile Mr. Burdock, our new neighbor, who recommended a firewood supplier. Truck came and delivered a cord of nicely aged pine and oak. Dad bought a splitting axe, and Mr. Burdock gave him a lesson on how to use it.

A week later, a Saturday afternoon in December, just before dusk, Dad figured he was ready to hand on to me his newfound skill.

There we were in the cold, darkening woods. No mother or sister in sight. Only Businessman Dan and short, skinny, twelve-year-old me.

Dad showed me how to balance a log upright, then stand wide-legged while lining up. You don't want the axe to come down on your toes, he said. See the grain? Pick a point where it goes straight toward the center. Try to whack it along the grain.

He had learned a lot from Mr. Burdock. Everything except the trick of pre-soaking the axe in a bucket of water to expand the handle and stop the axe-head from sliding off. Mr. Burdock probably counted that as common sense too simple to require mentioning.

Dad took the first whack to get the log started. Want to give it a try? he said. Aim for the crack we got going here.

Lifting the thing over my head scared me. I spread my legs, lined up, swung. Heavy axe bounced off the log, sent it sideways, almost hit my foot.

Dad set the log upright again. Told me to keep my wrists straight. Make up your mind and swing like you mean it.

I did. It worked. One log down.

We took turns, and both of us got better at it. A game of overcoming hesitation and shooting for the sweet spot where the wood seemed waiting to split.

When our wheelbarrow was piled high with sap-smelling, fireplace-ready wood, daylight had faded from the deep gray forest.

Last one, said Dad. He swung and slammed the axe into a mean son-of-a-bitch log that had no intention of cooperating. Dad grunted on the next whack. Not a dent. Another slam, rewarded now by a crack.

I'm tired, he said. Big knot in there where a branch used to be. You work on it for a while.

I swung and swung. Son of a bitch wouldn't split.

Want me to finish it? Dad said.

Please.

He lined up, slammed in hard. Re-aligned, slammed some more. Almost there, but the halves clung together and wouldn't let go. Time to put it out of its misery, said Dad in typical Dad-style.

Feet wide apart, eyes taking aim, he swung with fearful force, swooshed the axe down. No impact. No whack.

He lifted the handle. The head was gone.

The next one or two seconds melted into absurd suspension. We had time to look each other in the eye, time to realize the axe-head must have flown high into the air – five solid pounds of sharpened steel. In our minds, the same thought: *Hope it doesn't fall on him, hope it doesn't fall on me.* We both blinked, and resisted the temptation to look up, not wanting it to hit us in the face. We bent our necks and protected our heads with our hands, not caring how silly we looked. We squinted, cosmically aware for the first time ever of naked mortality, our own and each other's, speechlessly hoping this wasn't the moment of doom for either.

A second or two later, the sound. A thud amid the muddy rotting leaves not far from our feet.

Breath came out of us and became a laugh, edged with the unaccustomed knowledge that neither of us would ever live forever.

Splitting wood was finished for the evening. Couldn't do much without an axe. We put the mean old log on the wheelbarrow. Burn this son of a bitch whole.

Mom and I don't keep secrets, Dad said, wheeling wood toward the house and dinnertime. But maybe we don't need to tell her about this one.