

## thrice great hermes

#46

by stanley lieber

grandpa died.

étienne received a call at work directing him to place another call, which was in turn answered by his father. "he's gone," dad said.

grandfather. vidya editor albene, archetypal mystery to étienne, a man who had rarely spoken in his presence. étienne's primary memories of the departed were sensory: the flash of slicked-down hair, the lingering stench of his cigars, the dark forearms exposed by the rolled-up sleeves of his flannel shirts. when city councilmen had dropped by the house to transact business, étienne would crouch near the smart rows of municipal law books (within reach of grandpa's recliner) and strain to hear the top notes of their conversations. snatches of each exchange would drift in from the front porch, and, in his memory, such dialectic as was joined by his grandfather would rarely disappoint.

undoubtedly, étienne's father had known him best. grandfather's enigma had weathered the short time they had all spent together living under the same roof untroubled by the erosion of mere familiarity. he simply didn't say enough to incite disagreement. but étienne recognized in himself a certain tendency toward what he regarded as his grandfather's habits. he, too, mostly kept to himself unless work demanded a performance.

toiling mostly at night, grandfather would sleep through the day, rousing only for dinner, the paper, his programs, and an after-dinner nap in his recliner. grandmother had synchronized the household to a tidying of general algorithms, first of all ensuring that no one would awaken grandpa before it was time for dinner. improvising, interlocking, and multitasking the rest. most days, grandpa enjoyed his full measure of sleep.

étienne didn't know much else. as a child he'd accepted it all at face value. there had been no reason to ask questions about grandpa, because grandpa had always been around, would always be around, and those were the given, obvious facts, like getting clean water out of a faucet.

he remembered combing the backyard for grandpa's discarded cigar butts, which he and his cousin bill would load into a toy cannon and fire at passing cars. had grandpa even noticed?

étienne called his sister, who had already heard the news, and then he called his mother, who had not. he secured permission to leave work, and found himself taking greater care than was usual with the preparations to close down his station for the day. he wiped down his monitor, his desk, the armrests of his chair, and, lacking for any other pressing responsibilities, withdrew from his office for the remainder of the day.