

CONTROL POINTS

*Completing this project properly
is about finding answers,
real answers*

JOB NAME: PELLETIER
PROJECT: TILE FLOOR LAYOUT

MY SON GREW UP RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME
TODAY AT PELLETIER'S PLACE. HE TOOK
HIS FIRST LONE STEPS INTO ADULTHOOD,
TODAY MY SON BECAME A MAN.

BRENDAN CAME TO ME AND TOOK THE
HOOK-END OF THE CHALK LINE IN HIS
RIGHT HAND. HE WALKED WITH THE BLUE
COTTON STRING HELD LOOSELY IN HIS
FINGERS ACROSS THE 16-FOOT WIDE ROOM
TO THE PENCIL MARK HE HAD MADE ON
THE PLYWOOD SUB-FLOOR. I HAD MADE A
CORRESPONDING MARK ON MY SIDE OF THE
ROOM AND WE CROUCHED TO PULL THE
LINE TAUGHT BETWEEN US. AS HE BENT
DOWN TO PLACE THE STRING AND WE
TIGHTENED IT, I LOOKED DOWN AT MY MARK,
THEN SLOWLY DOWN THE LINE TO HIM.

I KNEW HIS END OF THE STRING WAS ON
THE MARK BY THE WAY HIS EYES ROSE
FROM HIS WORK TO MEET MINE. HE
REACHED FOR THE STRING, PREPARING

TO PLUCK IT, AND IN THAT MOMENT I SAW THAT HE HAD GROWN UP SO GODDAM FAST, HIS EYES HELD MINE, NO LONGER A BOY'S, NO LONGER A CHILD'S. MY SON THE MAN EXAMINED MY EYES FOR THE READY SIGNAL I HAD GIVEN HIM A THOUSAND TIMES BEFORE. BUT INSTEAD, I HELD HIM THERE, IN THIS LAST MOMENT OF HIS BOYHOOD. I WANTED SO MUCH FOR JUST ONE MORE SECOND TO BE HIS POP, HIS DADDY BEFORE HE LEFT HIS MOM AND ME AND WENT AWAY ON HIS LIFE'S JOURNEY, BEFORE I TRULY BECAME HIS OLD MAN.

HE HELD THE LINE OFF THE FLOOR, CREATING A STRING ARCH—ONE OF THE STRONGEST, MOST ANCIENT SHAPES IN ARCHITECTURE. WHAT HE READ AS THE SIGNAL IN MY EYES TO SNAP THE LINE WAS REALLY MY SOUL DAMMING BACK A FLOOD OF TEARS. THE STRING LEFT HIS FINGERS AND LEFT A LINEAR MAKER'S MARK ON THE FLOOR. IT SNAPPED TO THE PLYWOOD, WHICH SOUNDED MORE LIKE A POWER LINE-SNAPPING THUNDERBOLT TO ME THAN THE DRY PLUCK OF COTTON

STRING HITTING BOOT-BLACKENED
THREE-QUARTER PLY. INSTANTLY HE HAD
HIS TAPE OUT AND MOVED TO PULL THE
NEXT MEASUREMENT. HE QUIETLY WENT
AT THE WORK THAT HAD BECOME PART OF
HIM NOW WHILE I SLOWLY REELED THE
STRING BACK INTO MY CHALK BOX.

I CROUCHED THERE, SO PROUD I COULD
BARELY HOLD IT IN, I WIPED MY EYES
WHEN HE WASN'T LOOKING, SO HAPPY TO
WITNESS THIS MOMENT. I WAS REVERENT
TO WHATEVER FORCE GRANTED ME THE
GIFT OF BEING HERE FOR IT. I WATCHED
THE BOY MARCH ACROSS THE FLOOR WE
HAD BUILT INTO THE MANHOOD OF HIS LIFE.
HE WALKED INTO A WORLD WHERE HIS OLD
POP-AND HIS MOM-WAS NO LONGER THERE
FOR HIM AT THE END OF HIS DAY, BUT NOW
A PHONE CALL OR A LETTER AWAY.
HE'LL BE GONE TO COLLEGE IN A MONTH,
ALREADY ONE-UP ON ME, AND I'M
REMINDED OF ALL THE MISTAKES I'VE
MADE, BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW THAT I
COULD PLAN MY LIFE.

HOW-TO:

THE TRICK TO LAYING A NICE TILE FLOOR IS TO CENTER IT IN THE SPACE OR SPACES THAT GET TILE. SINCE YOU CAN'T DO THAT WITH THE ACTUAL TILES, YOU HAVE TO DO IT WITH A TAPE MEASURE, CHALK LINE, AND PENCIL.

1. FIND THE CENTER OF THE ROOM TO BE TILED ON BOTH A NORTH/SOUTH AND EAST/WEST AXIS BY MEASURING THE ROOM DIMENSION IN THREE PLACES ALONG EACH AXIS: LEFT, MIDDLE, RIGHT. ASSUMING THE ROOM IS SQUARE, SNAP CHALK LINES BETWEEN THE CENTERLINE MARKS OF THE FACING WALLS IN EACH AXIS, CREATING A CROSSHAIRS THROUGH THE CENTER OF THE ROOM. THIS IS WHERE YOU START SETTING TILES. IDEALLY, ONE TILE WILL FIT INTO EACH CORNER OF THE CROSSHAIRS AND THE PATTERN WILL RADIATE OUT FROM THAT POINT.

2. DETERMINE HOW LONG A RUN OF FOUR TILES, INCLUDING SPACERS, IS.

3. MEASURE FROM THE CENTER OF YOUR CROSSHAIRS TO ALL FOUR WALLS. DETERMINE HOW MANY UNITS OF FOUR TILES WILL FIT IN THAT MEASUREMENT. INCLUDE THE FRACTIONAL TILE THAT'S LEFT OVER. THE TILES DON'T FIT EXACTLY USUALLY. IF THE RESULT IS THAT YOU CAN FIT 12 TILES EACH WAY, WITH ABOUT $\frac{1}{2}$ A TILE LEFT ON THE BORDER, THAT'S GOOD: $\frac{1}{2}$ TILES ON THE BORDER LOOK OK.

3. IF YOU END UP WITH "SLIVERS"—TINY STRIPS OF TILES—THAT LOOKS BAD AND MUST BE FIXED.

- SOLUTION: ADJUST YOUR STARTING POINT BY MOVING A SINGLE TILE OVER THE CROSSHAIRS, AS IF THE CROSSHAIRS WOULD DIVIDE THE TILE INTO EQUAL QUADRANTS. RE-PULL THE MEASUREMENTS TO THE WALLS.

- OR SHIFT YOUR QUAD OF TILES SO THAT ONE AXIS IS DIVIDED IN HALF BY THE CROSSHAIRS.

• THE KEY HERE IS TO ALTER THE CENTER; REDEFINE WHAT "CENTER" MEANS, SO IT CAN BE ULTIMATELY DEFINED BEAUTIFULLY (AND INVISIBLY) BY THE BORDERS.

4. MAKE CERTAIN YOU END UP WITH SIZEABLE TILES ON THE BORDERS IN BOTH AXES, ADJUSTING NORTH/SOUTH AND EAST/WEST TO AVOID SLIVERS AND GET EQUAL SIZED TILES ON THE ROOM'S EDGES. (NOTE: THE NORTH/SOUTH BORDER TILES DON'T HAVE TO BE THE SAME DIMENSION AS THE EAST/WEST BORDER TILES, AND PROBABLY WON'T BE. AS LONG AS N/S BORDER TILES ARE EQUAL TO EACH OTHER AND E/W BORDER TILES ARE EQUAL TO EACH OTHER, THE JOB WILL LOOK RIGHT.



COMMENTS:

I WITNESSED MY SON'S JOURNEY INTO MANHOOD. MY LOVE FOR HIM FLOODED EVERY CELL IN MY BODY AND IT BROUGHT ME TO A DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT A GOOD LAYOUT IS. JUST AS WE SNAPPED LINES FOR THE FUTURE LOCATIONS OF ARTHUR PELLETIER'S KITCHEN TILES, TILES THAT WOULD SPILL INTO OTHER ROOMS—ROOMS WHERE ALL OUR CONTROL POINTS CHANGED IN AN INSTANT—I HOPED THAT SOMEHOW THIS THIN BLUE COTTON LINE WOULD TETHER BRENDAN TO CONTROL POINTS. CONTROL POINTS THAT I HOPED WOULD GIVE HIS LIFE CONTEXT, MEANING, AND SENSE. I HOPED THAT, AS HE MOVED THROUGH THE NEW ROOMS OF HIS EXISTENCE, MAYBE ROOMS WHERE NOTHING ADDED UP, I HOPED HIS PAST—THAT THIS SUMMER—WOULD HELP HIM SOMEHOW. I HOPED HE WOULD LIVE HIS LIFE KNOWING THAT I WOULD WALK THROUGH FIRE FOR HIM.

NO MATTER HOW PROUD I WAS OF MY BOY I WAS LOSING HIM. I WAS GROWING OLD.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SELF-PITY AND INCREDIBLE ANTICIPATION FOR BRENDAN'S VOYAGE, I HOPED THE CHALK LINE STRETCHED NOT JUST ACROSS THE FLOOR, BUT ACROSS A GENERATION AND OVER THE HORIZON OF HIS FUTURE. I HOPED WITH EVERYTHING INSIDE THAT IT WOULD STRETCH TO ME, TO A HAPPY TIME, AND TO PEACE IN HIS LIFE...A PEACE THAT I'M STRUGGLING HARD TO FIND.

I REGRET THAT I DID NOT HAVE THE WORDS TO TELL HIM ALL THIS EARLIER TODAY. MY BODY WAS BLASTED WITH EMOTION AND I KNEW IF I OPENED MY MOUTH I WOULD CRY. I CHOKED BACK THE FEELINGS AND THE TEARS. IT WAS ALL I COULD DO TO JUST TAKE IN EVERY SECOND, EVERY DETAIL OF THIS MOMENT.

THE LAYOUT FOR MY OWN LIFE HASN'T BEEN GREAT. I AM NOT THE MAN I THOUGHT I'D BE. FOR TOO MANY YEARS, I DID JUST ENOUGH TO GET BY—BUT NOT ENOUGH TO BE GOOD.

I REACTED-INSTEAD OF PRO-ACTED-TO SITUATIONS IN MY CHAOTIC LIFE AND I WAS UNAWARE THAT I HAD THE POWER TO MANAGE HOW I LIVED. THE RESULT: I RAN INTO THE SAME FAILURES OVER AND OVER AGAIN. EVERY NEW STUPID MISTAKE LEFT ME SURPRISED, ANGRY, AND WITH A PROBLEM I HAD TO WORK MUCH HARDER AT THAN NECESSARY TO UNDO.

FAILURE AND MY BEAUTIFUL WIFE KAY WERE MY TWO GREAT TEACHERS: THE TASKMASTER AND THE GENTLE SAGE WHO SHOWED ME HOW TO CHANGE AND WHO TAUGHT ME THAT SO MANY OF LIFE'S HURDLES DON'T NEED TO BE SO HIGH-IF YOU MEASURE YOUR WORK SPACE CAREFULLY BEFORE YOU START INSTALLING TILES, THEY TAUGHT ME THAT THESE MEASUREMENTS RAISE QUESTIONS AND WILL FORCE ME TO LOOK AHEAD AT THEIR IMPLICATIONS, WHILE I CAN'T USE A TAPE MEASURE TO PREDICT THE FUTURE OF MY LIFE LIKE I CAN PREDICT WHERE TILES WILL LAND, THE LOGIC WORKS. HERE'S WHAT I MEAN:

MEASURING YOUR LIFE MEANS ASKING—
THEN ANSWERING—HARD QUESTIONS. AM
I TRULY HAPPY? AM I CONSTANTLY
FRUSTRATED? IS THERE SOMETHING
WRONG HERE? IF I LAY THESE KITCHEN
TILES LIKE THIS, WILL THEY FLOW INTO
THE HALLWAY AND PANTRY LIKE THEY
GREW THERE? ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING
IT IS, HOW DO I FEEL NOW AND WILL I
FEEL DIFFERENTLY TOMORROW? SHOULD I
CONTINUE ON THIS PATH, WHATEVER IT IS?
OR, SHOULD I CHANGE DIRECTION? HAVING
A GOOD LAYOUT HELPS ANSWER THESE
QUESTIONS. IT GIVES THE ANSWERS
CONTEXT. I'VE ALSO FOUND THAT IT
TAKES COURAGE TO FACE THE REALITY
OF THESE MEASUREMENTS.

TOO MANY TIMES I HOOKED MY TAPE ON
SOMETHING—MEASURED IT—BUT DIDN'T
HAVE THE GUTS TO FACE WHAT THE
MEASUREMENTS MEANT. SO, I STEAMED
STRAIGHT INTO STORMS THAT WERE
AVOIDABLE. I LITERALLY ALMOST TILED
MYSELF INTO A CORNER. YEARS LATER, I
BUILT UP THE COURAGE AND CONFIDENCE

TO BELIEVE IN MY MEASUREMENTS, THE MEASUREMENTS ARE REALLY MY FEELINGS, INSTINCTS, AND GOOD SENSE— AND I FINALLY BELIEVED I WAS TAKING THEM RIGHT, THEN, AFTER HALF A LIFE OF LOOKING, MY 18-YEAR-OLD SON FINALLY SHOWED ME THE VALUE OF A PLAN.

THE LESSON I LEARNED THAT DAY IS THAT I COULD MAKE MUCH OF MY LIFE HAPPEN—INSTEAD OF LETTING IT HAPPEN TO ME, SO COULD HE. I LEARNED THAT WHILE EVERYTHING IN MY WORLD IS NOT WITHIN MY CONTROL (AND IT SHOULDN'T IT BE), THERE IS MUCH MORE I CAN DETERMINE WITH A SIMPLE PLAN, CAREFUL OBSERVATION OF REPEATING PATTERNS, AND A LITTLE VISION.

I LEARNED THAT BRENDAN'S LIFE COULD BE BETTER THAN MINE.

Ripping the roof off and pulling all the siding down in thousands of small nail-popping eruptions spoke to my inner animal. Sweat gushed off my forehead, soaked my shirt, and dripped off the end of my nose like water from a downspout after a good rain.

The building stood with its ancient, age-blackened and bronzed skin: solid 1x6 and 1x8 pine planks nailed perpendicularly across the studs and rafters. For the first time since the 84-year-old house had been built—long before my father ever picked up a hammer and nails—the building's insides stood naked, exposed to the weather. Between the pine boards that had touched edge-to-edge and end-to-end in their sappy youth, I could now easily see through the gaps as the moisture evacuated the xylem and phloem of their desiccated vascular systems, shrinking the boards. You could put your eyeball to one of the gaps like a little kid peering through the slats of a stockade fence and see through the building.

Until plywood's mass availability in the 1950s, buildings were skinned or sheathed with one-by material. That skin, even when my father started building, let alone today, would be both wildly expensive, slow to install, and not as effective as many modern sheathing materials such as half-inch plywood or $\frac{7}{16}$ Oriented Strand Board (OSB—a lot of homeowners call this stuff "particle board"). Whatever you use, its purpose is to give the frame rigidity and provide a nailing base. The skin, like a person's skin over muscles and skeleton, keeps everything in place. This skin on my father's shop had labored over the course of its 8.4 decade career, straining to hold up the overloaded shelves on the inside while flexing back against the live load of snow, rain, and gravity outside. Over the years, it had lost some grip and moved.

I was excited to start laying out the foundation, once the last of the roofing and siding were in a tire-squishing pile in the dump trailer; I thought that I was way past ready to turn the corner from tear-down to build-up. I knew what I was going to do and where I

was going to start, having already focused a ton of mental energy and anticipation getting ready for framing. The primary reason I was excited, though, is because framing is a fun mix of skill and hammer-pounding adrenaline—something else that speaks to my inner animal. And because framing is so athletic, it's also fun to go fast.

My heart pumped gallons of blood through my veins. I reached for my tape more like a gunslinger going for his six-shooter rather than a timid (albeit middle aged) apprentice afraid to do the wrong thing. I snapped it free from its formed leather pouch at my left hip, hooked it on the end of the concrete block foundation wall, and walked to the other end about a dozen times faster and more purposefully than I had ever moved on a weekend round of gut-growing golf with my buddies. I snatched my white hexagonal pencil with my free hand, ready to record the measurement before I stopped walking. Finally—finally—after all this tear off, after half a year of thinking and planning the art studio, while barely surviving the interminable and ineffective counseling sessions Rache and I attended trying to resurrect our marriage, I could start. I was ready to rebuild.

Looking down the top course of my father's perfectly straight run of blocks, to make sure the tape hadn't slipped from where I hooked its silver L-shaped nose, I held it firmly in my left hand while my right hand wrote the measurement on the block for the pressure-treated 2x6 sill plate or mud sill that would be bolted on top of these blocks. There was something wrong, though—which I characteristically and immediately ignored—right at the point where the straight run of blocks met the existing wood frame. I made my mark, then pulled my tape along the second side of the three-sided, rectangular foundation wall, scribbling my second sill plate dimension on the side of the block. Inside me, somewhere between my guts and my head, the forces of “stop and check” waged a little war against “keep going, this is fun.”

The indulgent “keep going, this is fun” brigade drove me down the third side of the foundation wall, and I raced to hook my tape and get the last measurement so I could start cutting, start the dance of framing, and start showing my mother, who was outside kindly putting lunch on the patio table, that I was actually making progress. “Stop and check,” who’s forces are weaker, but more prudent, launched a final, well-strategized sortie and I looked up at the problem I really would rather have ignored because I lacked the will to face it head on. “Trust yourself,” I heard my father’s voice say from somewhere in my youth, something he’d told me so many precious times. “Listen to your guts.”

My body in motion wanted to stay in motion and my energized muscles kept sending vibrating communiqués to my legs and limbs to keep marching, but a calm from inside me outranked them and I decided to face the problem head on rather than hope it wasn’t there. I decided to stop and check. I picked up my father’s decades-old, four-foot level, and the green antifreeze liquid and thin black lines on the vials showed me the way.

My father’s four-foot level looked older than I did. It was sawn and milled from old-growth mahogany, then bound in brass corners to keep it true. This “whiskey stick” (so-called because the vials on old levels have alcohol in them to keep the liquid from freezing in winter) was heavy, too, like dense exotic hardwoods usually are, and I felt my muscles strain against its mass as I held it to the rear corner post of the gap-toothed brown frame. I noticed the sun’s light being broken up by the full green leaves of the 80 foot white oak tree next door, then seamlessly reforming, like water parted by river rocks. The light passed through the green antifreeze vial of the level and into my eye, where I was hoping to see the transparent air bubble floating in that inch-long space between the thin black lines that divide the arc-shaped glass vial into thirds. Unfortunately, the bubble floated way to the left. I held the bottom of the level against the building with my boot, then tilted it away from the building

until it read plumb. In just four feet, the building had racked one inch. Over 10 feet, the length of the wall studs, it was even greater. I put the level down and stood back, absorbing the impact of a second, unforeseen, and major delay. No matter how much I wanted to start framing and building, I had to start fixing.

Facing this conclusion elicited a brief, but concise commentary on the matter, consisting of a single, universally understood syllable: “Shit.”

* * *

On the way to the coffee shop, as much to avoid solving my problem as to buy a jolt of buzz so I could get at it, I sat on the ripped vinyl of the steel spring benchseat of my father’s blue Ford F-250 pickup. The stiff suspension was good for hauling lumber and tools—and really good for plowing snow—but it telegraphed every bump in the roadway right through the vehicle, and my butt bounced up and down like I was hanging from playground swing made of bunji cords. The Solid State radio was off and the damp spring air filled the cab as I drove slowly through my hometown, not necessarily looking for anything, but hoping I would find something good to juice my spirits.

My father and I had shared countless breakfasts at Lavallee’s Diner. Even though our town has gotten its Starbuck’s and fast food chains since, the competition has both helped and hurt local businesses. And, even though I left this town, this place, these people, this town never left me. The path my mother walks, the people she talks to and sees and loves, the roads my father drove, and the houses he fixed are all here. This is where I came from and I can feel it inside me—no new coffee blend or breakfast deal could match the history and laughs we had here in the town’s oldest greasy spoon, run by a family with whom I grew up. It is also the place my mother worked until I was 12 years old, slinging plates, refilling coffees, marrying ketchups, and making friends that would last her to this

day while she saved money to go to the college she had planned to attend—a piece of her life postponed—because I was a surprise.

But as great as Lavallee's was to me, the damn place could use a face-lift and a hyperlink to imagination.com. Back when it was the only game in town, people had no choice, so the Lavallee family could've served coal on sheetmetal and the town folk happily would've come there to eat it. But it's different now. People have more choices than they used to. There's more competition for people's desires, and there are more empty booths and counter seats than I recall from my youth.

"Large, please. Black. To go," I said without looking at the woman tapping keys at the register. I was trying to take in and analyze what I remember Lavallee's to have been and match that up to what it's become, captivated by one waitress, who I think is one of the owners. Even at about 60 years old, she passed out plates of eggs, bacon, and pancakes with the habitual deftness of a nimble-fingered card dealer in a Las Vegas poker room, smiling and talking to her friends and the dollar tippers about their grandkids and opining about local news.

"\$1.50, please." I thought I heard something ...Don't I have a wall to fix...look at her whip those plates out...my dad and I used to sit over there a lot...my marriage has unraveled...did I just get more sad...

"\$1.50, please." I looked up from my thoughts into a pair of gently smiling brown eyes that yanked a breath through my solar plexus and every detail of her face was instantly mimeographed in my mind as if I was looking at her through a memory. Her teeth were just a little crooked, but that imperfection made her look pure, genuine, and so cute. Her neck was outlined by a black choker necklace under the collar of her white oxford shirt and the subtle outline of her collarbones suggested a lean, well tuned body. The cotton shirt was buttoned just enough to be appropriate, but unbuttoned enough to suggest the succulent promise below. I could tell

she sensed I was lost in my thoughts.

I put a twenty on the counter, although I would rather have placed it in her hand, risking a feathery but thrilling touch. I knew that in two more sentences we'd like each other, and that in three more sentences.... I shouldn't talk to her—I'm a married man, I thought to myself, even as I felt a fire starting to burn.

"Sorry," I said, "brain cramp." She laughed kindly and took the money while her eyes stayed on me a second too long, flickering a primitive, beautiful message of interest and pique. She handed me my change, coins rattling out of her hand into mine before she pressed the bills on top of them. Then she turned and walked on to her next customer seated at a cracked vinyl booth. I left a dollar tip on the scratched glass counter case as I watched her walk until the counter obscured what the caveman in me was pleased to see. Rachael and I—despite the fact that I still longed for her, for her touch, for her full, gentle lips to be on mine—hadn't been naked together in the same room for nearly a year. "Stop and check" didn't have a prayer against "keep going, this is fun."

Maybe it was the supercharge of being noticed that fueled me, or having someone beautiful laugh warmly at a silly joke, or perhaps it was the shutter-speed moment of magnetism that brought it all together. Maybe it was the creaky old floors, memories, and ceaselessness of Lavalley's that coaxed some creativity and willpower into my mind. Or, maybe I knew the answer the whole while, and just needed a little help and time realizing it. The coffee didn't hurt, though. So, I did what my father would have done to fix the wall.

I did not do a seat-of-the-pants sales pitch to solve this problem. I couldn't. Unlike presentations I had given to a thousand high-end customers that came to our real estate firm looking for primo homes with spectacular views or prestigious frontage. What I was doing with my father's shop was not about being liked, or about showcasing the details of someone else's work that I would high-

light as I glided through a house for the first time, trying to make my customers believe that I knew everything about it. No, that doesn't work here. Framing doesn't care if you have a friendly smile, and gravity could give a shit if you like the neighborhood. Completing this project properly is about finding answers. Real answers.

In my father's notebook, he is careful to lay everything out before he talks about how to put the pieces together. He is careful to have a base before he builds. He is passionate that there is order and logic in what he does so that later—when he has to improvise anyway—he's not undoing problems he could've avoided in the first place. I knew from just a few pages of his notebook that he thinks he failed at this, but I also know that from the view of a boy, who revered his dad, he succeeded heroically.

Fixing this problem was just the beginning for me, and the beginning must be right for the end to work out in a building. And for the first time in too many years, I was confident; I knew what to do. I decided to face the problem head on, and make a plan. As I decided what to do about this small detail, in this small building, in this small town, I began to see something important: if I could decide what to do here, maybe I could decide what to do about other aspects of my life.

I made a plan.

* * *

With the sheathing still nailed across the studs, there'd be zero chance to rack the shop walls back into plumb. The physical forces I'd have to exert in several directions at once would be far too much for me working alone, so I decided to keep tearing the building down and pull off the sheathing.

From inside the garage, I swung an eight-pound sledgehammer like a battering ram into the sheathing, starting at the bottom course near the door on the west wall of the building. The front wall faced

south, like a church. This addition—which at this pace I might actually finish someday—was on the west side. The impact from the steel hammer head shook the building and vibrated through me as the 1x8 board and rusty eight-penny bright basics tried like hell to stay where they were, holding on now as much by habit as by design. I separated the board from three studs and moved over to the fourth, swinging the drop-forged head this time like a monstrous sand wedge, increasing the force of the blow, while decreasing the steel surface area at the point of impact. The sheathing board this time, instead of squealing loose from the studs, shattered both along the grain and in half. I noticed, along the wood's jagged breaks, that underneath its tarnished skin, the pine was blonde and new looking. It even smelled like a new pine board and I was overwhelmed with the notion that I had destroyed something precious and irreplaceable.

This time I stopped.

While I didn't know what I would ever do with these boards, I knew destroying them wasn't the answer. Eighty years ago they were second-rate material and hidden behind siding or under shingles. But they had survived too long now to still be second rate. I dropped the sledgehammer ("Sluggo," my father called it) and dug a nail pick out of the box of hand tools. Instead of the full-scale physical onslaught I had readied myself for, one that would be hard but mindless and fun, I chose tenderness and time for these pine antiques that had stood sentry for so long. I started at the bottom, and pried every nail loose, then removed each board carefully. I set up a tarp and some "stickers" and stacked the boards carefully, making sure to keep them straight.

Stripping and stacking the sheathing took two pound-shedding, dust-eating days. I dug and pried out every nail I could find on the wall and roof sheathing. Once each board was stacked as though it awaited investigation in a museum laboratory, the building was, as my father would have said, "back to the bones." The spindly studs

were flimsy now and I could rack the walls where they needed to go. I duct-taped the level to the northeast corner post then nailed an eight-foot long 2x4 kicker brace, leaving the nail head proud so I could get it out later. Next, I nailed a 2x4 block to the floor parallel to the kicker brace. I then moved the wall until the level's bubble was between the lines. Moving and adjusting, moving and adjusting. There would be areas down the line where I could be less critical of how the work played out, but not here. This needed to be right on.

Finally, I got it. I sunk sharp-headed 16 penny spikes into the block on the floor and another one into the corner post, then added another brace. With one wall in line, I could fix the others without the whole building flopping around out of control. I braced the other four walls during the next hour and took a breath, letting out the tension that had built up while solving this problem. The sky had turned gray, the air humid but still cool, and I was covered with dust and dirt. My muscles ached—the muscles in my hands I had previously only exercised by typing were on fire—but I made it the long way around, back to the beginning, again.

I took a break before cutting the sill plates and went inside for a drink. My mother had put beer in the fridge for me; my watch read 6:30 p.m. She was out, busy as usual. I sat alone at the kitchen table, opened the sweaty brown bottle, and found myself wondering if I looked like my dad, who did the same thing in this chair about a trillion times. I sponged sweat from my forehead with the crook of my right arm then hung my head with my elbows on my knees. All I could see was our old floor. My next thought was of Arthur Pelletier's kitchen floor tiles. The burnt red of terra cotta 8x8s poured into my mind like water spilling flawlessly over the rounded edge of a marble park fountain. The memory further coalesced and the tile gave way to tape measures, a chalk box, and my father, all appearing in the synapse of ether between my mind and our exhausted linoleum.

The Pelletier kitchen really had three parts: a pantry, the kitchen itself, and a mudroom off the back door. “The problem with these chopped-up rooms is that you have to find the one best layout line for your tile, so it flows into each room without leaving slivers or looking like the whole pattern is set off center. Then, you have to figure out how that layout can carry into the other spaces and still look like it grew there,” Dad said.

We measured and he thought through the implications of his measurements. We snapped lines and laid dry tiles to see how they’d run out and meet other rooms. “You can’t always see the problems or rewards ahead, Brendan,” he said looking at our lives with his carpenter’s eye, “but you sure can look for them when you start.”

Back then I thought he was just talking about avoiding slivers and shoddy work, but his real message wasn’t obvious to me. He was being my father the best way he knew how.

“I’ve come to learn that the best carpenters aren’t always the fastest or the ones who build the biggest houses,” he used to tell me. “They’re the ones who have learned to see three moves ahead of what they’re doing. Everything in a building, much like a family, depends on everything else. If you can understand the principles—the greater truths—and how the parts go together, you can understand the building, putting you in a better position to adjust to mistakes and unforeseeable events.”

The Budweiser bottle, felt cold and wet in my hand. The half-flat, cola-esque fizz of the beer on my tongue and the light taste temporarily quenched my thirst. I pulled my elbows off my knees and drew my mind back from memory into the present, satisfied at this time not to look three steps ahead, but to enjoy this moment and let myself believe my dead father is still alive, somewhere, deep inside me.