3/4" Marine Ply

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I ARRIVED IN SAN DIEGO the day before Christmas to visit my mother and to clean out her garage. I am the fourth of seven children, most of whom live much farther away than L.A. I got started early, and made the 100 miles from my porch in West Los Angeles to my mother's porch in La Mesa in less than two hours.

The garage itself was an amazing sight and by far the most interesting aspect of the home. Several years ago my sister Bonnie painted Dad's favorite landscape on the garage door. It was the Grand Tetons as seen from the east, across Teton Lake. Bonnie thought he'd like it there. He did; the neighbors didn't. But, notwithstanding the comments they made about the "appropriateness" of a garage door painting, Bonnie went ahead, with Dad's blessing.

There was a precedent. Dad's mother, Bea, painted a wildlife scene on her garage door over thirty years ago. I was about ten then, and it was my introduction to Art. A swift, crashing stream burst over rapids and exposed rock, slicing a quicksilver path between dense evergreens that hugged the banks. In the distance craggy peaks split a deep blue sky. On an exposed rock in mid-stream two giant brown bears swiped at each other, their teeth flashing. To one side a silver trout lay forgotten, the subject of the duel. That scene will always define how I look at Nature, not as a quiet pastoral scene but as a staging ground for deadly conflict.

I heard Grandma's neighbors disliked the scene at first but were won over by the utter brazenness of a painting eight feet tall by fifteen feet wide. Grandma was an amateur but her aspirations were grandiose—at least in terms of size. The painting became a popular tourist destination. I never considered whether it was acceptable to paint a garage door that way or not. It was her garage and she did with it what she liked.

Dad's garage was in the same tradition. With the Tetons painted on the door, you knew there was something going on inside. He was always in there, fixing or building something. And if you made the mistake of wandering by, he had a job waiting for you, either steadying a socket

wrench or holding the drop light as he lay under the car, tightening a bolt. I used to go over the back fence and through the neighbor's yard to avoid passing the garage, because Dad always had a chore in there with my name on it.

We moved the day after Christmas in 1968—Dad never let holidays get in the way of our working schedule. He took apart the attic in the old garage, numbered the joists and planks, and reassembled it in the new one.

Our new house was poorly designed. It was shaped like a "U" with the front door so far down the throat of the "U" that you were only twenty feet from the back yard. I'm sure now the fact that the garages in both houses were identical in size was the real reason Dad bought this ungainly new home.

We kids helped Dad rebuild the attic in the new garage. Everything fit like a puzzle. The stenciled numbers my sister Gail painted on each piece of wood are still visible today.

As soon as it was completed, the attic filled up with boxes of Halloween costumes, camping equipment, school projects, and a two-year supply of cracked wheat. Once, in an attempt to prepare us for Armageddon, Mom and Dad made us eat the cracked wheat for breakfast. It had to be soaked overnight so it wouldn't break the enamel on our teeth. In the morning it was drained, doused with milk, and buried in sugar, but it still tasted like gravel. When we mutinied, even Dad had to admit that there were worse things than going hungry.

Along the south wall of the garage Dad built his work bench. As a pharmacist at a large community hospital, he had access to what was thrown out when they remodeled. Over the years he managed to bring home counter tops, chests of drawers, and electrical wiring.

In a non-stop burst of creativity one weekend, Dad built a chandelier from several cast-off patient-room lamps, each of which had a cone-shaped lamp shade pointing upward from a round base and another long, bendable arm that ended in a shade which could be pointed down for reading. A sheet of aluminum one foot wide by six feet long was painstakingly bent into the shape of a stop sign. One of the light fixtures was attached to each face of the sextagon, the long bendable arms pointing down like spindly black spider legs ending in cone-shaped feet. The other lamp shade cone of each fixture pointed heavenward, lighting the ceiling, far above. Inside the aluminum box, glass vials filled with colored water were suspended. A light shone down through them, glowing red, orange, and yellow, like some sort of fiery booster rocket. Opinions as to its beauty varied of course, but we all agreed on one thing: it would always be called the "Lunar Landing Module." Like a great black spider

hovering overhead, it was such a strange and marvelous invention that people always smiled when they saw it.

On my way home from high school during my freshman year, a neighbor kid drove by, saying my house was on fire. I laughed and waved him off, but when I looked to the sky, there was indeed a plume of black smoke boiling over my neighborhood. I ran home as fast as I could.

Our tax dollars were at work. Everybody was there: firemen had strung hoses from the end of the street and two red pumpers were parked cockeyed in front of the house, which was indeed on fire. Mom was running about, giving orders, and surprisingly enough, everyone—even the police and firemen—was taking them.

When the smoke cleared and the blackened water dried, we discovered a box of home-movie film had been placed too near the water heater in the garage—and had ignited. Fortunately, the garage was only connected to the house by a breezeway, and the structural damage was limited to the north wall of the garage and the roof. But the emotional damage was extensive. In the attic my mother had kept photo albums, letters, and keepsakes—much of it was reduced to soggy ashes.

I remember her crying, not over the damage to the garage or the simple embarrassment of setting your own house on fire, but over the burned and ruined photos and movies, which Dad had captured on his Super 8 movie camera. Every Christmas, at the crack of dawn, we'd line up in the hallway, from the youngest in the front to the oldest in the back, dressed in the new pajamas Mom had made. When Dad was ready, the door would open and in we'd march, braving the blinding bank of flood lights as Dad filmed us. In later years he transferred the surviving films to video, placing all the Christmas movies in order, starting with 1957. I have to laugh. Furnishings and gifts change from year to year, but the expressions on the kids' faces remain the same: tiny hands shield eyes blinded by floodlights, eyelids are stuck together with sleep, bed-head hair sticks straight up—Christmas at the Kemps. And once the presents were opened, Dad would film each of us sitting proudly amidst our holiday plunder.

When I was eight years old, go-carts were the rage. Dad became a revered figure when he built my brother Virl and me a go-cart that was more than just an apple box nailed to a skateboard. Instead of using the traditional feet-steering method, Dad held up a flywheel from an old dryer. "This gives me an idea!" he said, and set to work.

The cart itself was shaped like an "I," the main frame a sturdy 2x10 about six feet long, with 2x4s connected to each end. The 2x4s had hefty lawn mower wheels mounted on each end. The rear 2x4 was nailed sol-

idly to the frame, but the front 2x4 pivoted for steering. A padded seat amidships gave easy access to the hand brake, which dragged on the ground, slowing the vehicle to a stop (hopefully) before impact.

All this was pretty standard, except for the steering mechanism. Here's where Dad's ingenuity blossomed. Using a broomstick, a length of clothesline, and the flywheel, he guaranteed technical superiority over all other neighborhood go-carts. He nailed the clothesline to one end of the front 2x4 by the wheel, brought it up, and wound it around the broomstick (which was set at an angle to form a steering column), then back down to the other end of the 2x4, by the other front wheel. The flywheel was mounted on the raised broomstick end and became the steering wheel. We drove it like a real car—we turned the flywheel right and—lo and behold—the go-cart went right as well.

I was pleased but not amazed. After all, Dad rebuilt a Model A he found in a vacant lot near his house when he was only twelve. So when the neighborhood kids came by to see our state-of-the-art go-cart, Dad dismissed their oohs and aahs with a wave of the hand. "Just using what we had, is all," he said, and turned back to the workbench where he was rigging up a radio to an old car battery so he could listen to KNXT news radio while he worked.

Two weeks after getting my driver's license, I was in an automobile wreck. I was turning left at an intersection and didn't see the car roaring over the rise from the opposite direction. The Mustang was totaled, and its driver badly shaken up, but I was driving our two-tone green 1960 Dodge Sierra station wagon. I didn't get a scratch, but the front end of the Dodge was badly mangled.

That Saturday Dad took me to a wrecking yard and we found another Sierra with the front end intact. He supervised while I removed the grill, bumper, hood, fenders, and radiator. It was a very hot day, the dust was thick in the air, and I was soon covered with grease and sweat. I paid the man $100 for the parts and we took them home.

As we looked over the replacement parts, I commented that this shouldn't take too long. Dad smiled and said I might be surprised. He said he'd be available for consultation but I was to perform the work myself. He turned and went inside. I stared after him, slack jawed. I'd never be able to repair the car by myself. I knew it and he knew it. But there I was anyway, alone in the garage, with this impossible task ahead of me.

After the shock wore off, I ventured inside and found Dad sitting in his lounger, reading. "Dad," I said meekly, "you're kidding, right? You're gonna help me, aren't you?" He never even looked up from his *National Geographic*. He just said, "Nope." After a long moment, I turned and went back outside. I stood before the mangled monstrosity I'd created and

cursed my father. I kicked the bumper, stomped around for awhile, and bored withering, hateful stares through the wall that separated the garage from the living room. Eventually defeat settled over me. After a while I picked up a wrench, found a bolt that needed loosening, and began working.

It took me more than two months to fix the car. Dad would come out occasionally and give advice, and a couple of times he even got underneath the car and helped. When he did I was so thankful, so filled with gratitude, that I wanted to hug him and cry. But then he'd crawl out, hand me the wrench, and say something like, "It's right there, you just gotta use your eyes," and my heart would turn to glass. I'd want to punch him in his big stomach and yell at him. But I never did, because I knew there would be a next time and I'd need his help again.

He treated everyone like that: he never did something for you just because you asked him to and he knew how. He seemed to know when you'd get more out of doing it yourself, even if it meant a poor job and the family car out of commission for two long months. I guess he knew the difference between giving a man a fish and teaching him how to bait a hook. As I fixed the front end of the Dodge, as on so many other occasions, he was showing me how to cast a line out into life's river.

Because my father had no hidden agendas, he was unprepared to defend against those who did. He was forced to retire early after a fifteen-year battle with a hospital administrator who, shortly after joining the hospital, called Dad into his office to discuss pharmacy policy. It was common knowledge around the hospital that Dad was a faithful Mormon. The administrator asked Dad if that was true. Dad, thinking this a good opportunity to share his faith, nodded. The administrator leaned forward and hissed, "My wife *used* to be a Mormon. I hate you people—you're a bunch of self-righteous prigs. And if it's the last thing I do, I'll have your job."

Dad sat back in disbelief, stunned. He hesitated a moment, then stood and left without a word. When I heard the story, I thought how different I was from my father. If it had been me, I would have been across that desk in about a half second, with that guy's tie wound around my fist and our eyes inches apart, saying, "Fine. If you want a fight, you got it. But if you come after me, you'd better be ready for nuclear war."

But Dad saw a man whose soul was miserable and small; a man who desperately needed the things Jesus taught. I saw a jerk who needed his ears cuffed.

Eventually, the administrator put Dad in working situations that, at his age, he couldn't cope with, and he was fired. But he never went to war against his aggressor. He just went about his business, doing the best

he could and not giving in to hate or anger. At the time I thought he was really just afraid to fight.

When Dad retired, he and Mom decided that they'd like to volunteer as missionaries for the church for a couple of years. They were assigned to go to Guatemala. The prospect of learning Spanish at their age was daunting, but they were excited to go to such an exotic place.

But life throws a mean curve ball, and the day after receiving their assignment, Dad was informed by his doctor that he had Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), commonly known as "Lou Gehrig's Disease," an incurable, fatal illness. ALS results in a slow, creeping paralysis in which the brain sends the muscles signals they do not hear. The victim is slowly paralyzed from the extremities inward, yet the mind remains clear. The body simply dies around you, yet you have total awareness of what is happening.

We couldn't believe it. No one in our family had ever faced anything like this. We thought it must be a mistake or at the very least a trial that our faith would overcome. So Mom and Dad accepted their assignment and left for Guatemala.

Dad instantly felt a deep compassion and warmth for the Latino people. He admired their openness and humility. He and Mom toured archeological sites he had read about for so many years. They visited marketplaces and tried to speak with people in their fractured Spanglish. But after a few months, Dad's condition deteriorated to the extent that he could not walk without assistance. He would not allow himself to become a burden on others and so they sadly returned to the States.

My father believed in a God who is interested in each of us. Once back home, however, he was perplexed that his prayers were apparently going unanswered. He couldn't understand why God wouldn't heal him, at least for the period of time he was trying to share God's word. He had manifested faith and had worked hard. But the diagnosis remained: he had eighteen months to live, at best.

Someone said, when we pray for strength, God sends us barbells. ALS seemed tailor-made to test Dad's notorious self-sufficiency. When it comes to building things, I've always said that if you gave Dad the raw materials, he could build you a nuclear bomb. Apparently, there wasn't anything he could not fix, reuse, or recycle. But ALS was a problem that no wrench or nail could solve—and Dad was deeply concerned at how he was going to beat it.

Dad studied his disease in earnest, hoping there was a little-known treatment that might help. He also studied the scriptures, trying to glean an understanding of why his life had taken this turn. But most of all he prayed fervently, asking for peace of mind and the ability to accept his

fate, if that was God's will.

When the doctors noticed his extremely high white-cell blood count, Dad agreed to chemotherapy. But although the white cell count was reduced, still the disease maintained its inexorable march forward, although it slowed. Now, instead of eighteen months, he had three years of slow paralysis to suffer through before the end.

Through his medical studies he became more of an ALS expert than his doctors, whose practices involve helping patients prepare for the end. Most of Dr. Kervorkian's "patients" are ALS sufferers. Dad said once that although he could empathize with their desire to end their lives, that road was not for him. I was amazed at his strength and courage and suddenly realized that my father was not afraid of a fight after all—he just didn't bother with the little ones.

At the same time, a prominent church leader's advanced lymphoma suddenly went into remission. At a family gathering, someone commented how wonderful it was that God had answered the prayers of so many in healing this man. We all looked at Dad to see his reaction. He said simply, "I guess I'm not as important as he is." Everyone protested, but later Dad asked me what I thought. I looked at him, sitting heavily in his lounger, his hands nearly useless at his sides, his hair thin from the chemo, but his eyes bright and expressive. "Maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe he *is* more important than you, or maybe he still has something important left to do on this earth. And maybe you've accomplished everything you were supposed to do here. Maybe your time is up."

Dad nodded. "Maybe you're right," he said, and looked away.

Dad was no talker. When he was a kid, he punctured an eardrum, which left him with an incessant ringing in his ears all his life. This, combined with the cacophony of family life, left him irritable and headachy. When we seven children would engage in heated debates around the dinner table, he would excuse himself and go out to the garage where it was quiet. Ironically, with ALS destroying his body, all that was left him now was speech, and even that was fading. He had always been a physical man, handling greasy car parts, hefting a ten-pound sledge, kicking my bed to wake me on Saturday mornings. Now, with his body closing down, he would look at me, his eyes full of emotion, his mouth working, but the words were slurred and hard to understand.

Months passed. One day I arrived for a visit. As I passed through the garage, I noticed that the workbench was dusty. It struck me that Dad hadn't been out here in over a year. I went inside and was shocked at his deterioration. He sat listlessly in his easy chair, unable to hold a book to read or even to concentrate on television. Strangely, he had lost little weight. He was still substantial, but the heaviness in his muscles was not

vibrant; it was becoming dead weight.

One eerie characteristic of the disease is the way the brain's messages are garbled. Individual muscle groups in Dad's legs and forearms continually jumped and twitched, as if they were reacting to continuous shocks. In the early stages of the disease we would watch this strange phenomenon and shake our heads in disbelief, trying to imagine how it must feel to watch your own body go out of control.

This time, as I entered, I noticed that the muscle twitches that had so long been a visual reminder of the disease had vanished. Dad was pale and his breathing was shallow. His arms and legs lay motionless. Mom sat nearby, feeding him something that didn't require much chewing. His eyes brightened when he saw me and he immediately burst into tears.

The effect was so alarming and disarming, that I cried as well. I knelt down by his side, squeezing his hand. His grip was weak and his hand was cool. His body was shutting down, and only the radiance in his tearful eyes indicated the fire in his heart.

On 16 August 1990 my sister Bonnie called to tell me that Dad's time was short. I hurried down Interstate 5 and arrived in La Mesa at 11 a.m. He had been placed in a hospital bed in the living room under the Lunar Landing Module chandelier. It was hard to look at him. His breathing was labored, his skin was cold, and his eyes had lost their lustre. He was close to the end, but true to form, he had planned for this moment months before. He knew he would have a hard time letting go when his time arrived. So, using his pharmaceutical knowledge, he had prepared himself a morphine mixture that would dull his senses enough to allow him to release the tether. Mom had already given him the medication, and it was taking effect. Unable to swallow, he hadn't eaten anything in several days. Bonnie rubbed ice over his parched lips.

I sat down on the bed and held one hand as Mom held the other. I spoke softly, trying to give him strength as he faced the dark doorway. His eyes began to glaze over and his breathing was short and intermittent. He was visibly receding from us. We cried and hugged him. We tried to be strong and hold back the tears. We knew we could not be with him where he was now. During the last fifteen minutes, he breathed just once a minute. He would look as if all life had passed from him, and we would exchange devastated looks, then he would gasp for another breath, startling us. This was worse than anything I could have imagined. After several of these episodes, we just wanted the misery to end, to see him released from the bondage of a body that so cruelly imprisoned his spirit.

Finally, he seemed to relax and the light went out of his hazy eyes. In that instant I was no longer holding my father's hand. I had an image of

him, suddenly a million light years away, in the arms of his own father. Mom, Bonnie, and I exchanged looks of sad relief. Then Mom said, brightening, "You know what? He can finally hear in *both* ears!" We laughed and cried at the same time.

At the mortuary the night before the funeral, the family gathered to dress and groom Dad's body for burial. We entered a darkened room where his body lay on a gurney under a drape of white linen. A sense of the sacred surrounded us. We spoke quietly. As we moved his body to dress him, I noticed the markings a lifetime of work had given him, familiar scars on freckled skin. I touched the white lines and was reminded of the times he'd cut himself or banged his thumb while repairing or building something. Buttoning the white shirt over his barrel chest, I recalled his intimidating presence as he stood over me, commanding me to perform a chore. As I glanced at my siblings and mother, I knew they were all feeling the same things. Someone said that it was strange—this looked like Dad, but it wasn't him, really. It was just a body, and he was far, far away. We all nodded, hoping it was true.

At the funeral I paid attention to the music and eulogies, but the profound weight of the moment seemed to glance off me, narrowly missing my heart. I expected to be overwhelmed with grief. I had been there when he died; I had experienced that tragic moment. With his body in the casket at the front of the chapel, I expected the loss and sadness to engulf me. It didn't. The emotions were there but I was strangely disconnected from them. Then I thought, *Maybe I have more faith than I thought. Perhaps not even the death of my father can put a dent in it.* But that wasn't true. I didn't feel faithful. And then an assassin idea came unbidden, the most criminal thought ever: *Maybe I don't feel anything because there is nothing to feel. Maybe I never really loved him at all.* This made things worse and I sunk into a miserable depression that took a long time to dissipate.

But it did dissipate, finally, and I began to watch Mom for signs of healing grief. She said she cried when she was alone, but she wasn't tearful around me. As she threw herself into a flurry of activity, I thought maybe she was still in denial. I figured that she really *was* feeling the loss, but didn't want to show a lack of faith. I imagined her telling herself, *What do* you *have to be sad about? Don't you believe you'll see him again?* I wondered how she'd answer that.

Once Dad was gone, Mom didn't change a thing beyond removing his sick bed from the living room. Everything else remained as before. His clothing remained in his closet, dresser drawers still held his belongings. I was afraid for her in that lonely, empty house, which was so full of Dad's industry. He was in every piece of paneling, furniture, and mold-

ing. I wondered if it might hurt her to see the one she had loved so much everywhere she looked.

It occurred to me that I might be able to help her past the denial stage by making small changes to her environment. Doing anything inside the house was out of the question—she'd never permit it. I figured the garage would be the perfect place—she rarely went out there anyway. Once we cleaned it out, she would discover that she had survived and would see that Dad was not really in the things he'd collected. I hoped she'd see that her surroundings didn't need to remain unchanged for him to still be safely kept in her heart. I didn't want Mom to forget Dad, but I saw her retreating into loneliness and despair. I called my older brother, Virl, and told him my plan. He agreed and said he'd be glad to help.

On the day before Christmas, we raised the garage door and surveyed the area. We knew it would take more than one trip to the dump to clean out a garage that Dad spent forty years filling up. Carpet that had been replaced in the house had never made it past the garage floor. I guess Dad thought his cars deserved deep plush underfoot too.

Workbench drawers groaned with their heavy burdens. A drawer for wrenches, a drawer for screwdrivers, one for sockets, one for wire, another for switches, another for all manner of electrical doodads and gizmos that had meaning only for Dad.

Overhead hung two dozen quart glass mayonnaise jars, their lids attached to the low attic ceiling, their insides full of every kind of screw, bolt and nail. I took one down. I was always amazed that in my entire life I saw only one of those jars fall. It was luck, I guess, but the long lag screws securing the lids to the ceiling must have helped, too.

I unscrewed a jar filled with 8d nails and recalled all the Saturdays I spent pounding bent nails straight again, only to go with Dad to the lumber yard where he would buy brand-new ones, while my refurbished nails languished, unused. In later years I came to understand why he made me straighten so many nails. And if you had a dad like mine, you'd know, too.

Virl backed the trailer into the driveway and we got to work. We hauled out armfuls of scrap wood, aluminum electrical conduit, old iron bars, and appliance motors of every description. Around our house the only part of an obsolete washing machine that ever made it to the curb was the metal shell. Everything else was kept for future use. When Dad built a living room addition and moved the front door to the true front of the house, he raised the entryway to the same level, which resulted in a three-foot high crawlspace underneath—a perfect place to store almost anything you would probably never need again. I reached behind the water heater, opened the access door, and switched on the light Dad had

rigged. The crawlspace was full. I shook my head wearily. "I'm not cleaning that out. No way," I said, closing the door. Virl nodded. "Let the next owners worry about it." (But if you ever need a motor for a 1964 Kenmore washing machine, it's in there. Help yourself.)

We hauled out broken screen doors, every shape and size of wood, aluminum metal flanges, and cans of thirty-year-old paint. The paint cans struck me oddly. Most of them were so old they didn't even slosh when I shook them. Dad hated painting so much he'd just panel over the wall instead. Of course every room in Mom's house is paneled.

Occasionally, we found objects that literally shouted Dad's name. We found a series of name plates from the grills of all the cars he had owned: the Oldsmobile sedan, the Dodge Sierra I wrecked; the maroon Ford LTD; the Chrysler Imperial with fins so large we called it the "Batmobile." We even found several painted ceramic mermaid figurines Grandpa had given to Dad. They were vaguely risque and Virl and I laughed. Dad was so proper, he never hung them up in plain view but had stored them secretly in a deep drawer. We put them back. They must have had some sort of meaning for Dad. We would respect that sentiment.

I hauled a dusty ammo box out from under the workbench. It looked familiar. I opened it and air that had been trapped for years escaped, smelling of old rubber. Inside I found a yellowed rubber bag with Dad's childhood marble collection inside: bright green and yellow cat's eyes, silver steelies, large, pitted black shooters. Dad had played with these marbles when he was a kid, and I played with the same marbles when I was young. The smell of the bag transported me back thirty years to a hot summer sidewalk, squatting on my haunches, a marble in my hand, concentrating on the trajectory. I was five years old again.

Virl opened the tool drawers. Dad was like Noah: he'd collected two of every kind. He was happiest in two places in this world: behind the wheel of an airplane or in a hardware store. I have inherited his love for hardware stores and can wander the aisles, drinking in the intoxicating smells and marveling at the inventiveness of a new kind of wrench until my legs give out and I return home, drained yet strangely refreshed.

In the spaces between the ceiling joists, Dad had crammed lengths of wood, aluminum siding, electrical conduit, and anything else that wouldn't fit in a drawer. I reached up and began pulling things out, marveling at how every nook and cranny was filled. Then I pulled out a piece of 3/4" marine-quality plywood, four inches wide and eighteen inches long, painted a bright bluish green. I'd seen it before, but I couldn't remember where. I stared at the wood, turning it over in my hands, my ears buzzing. Suddenly I knew why I was there in that garage, the day before Christmas. *That* green piece of plywood was why—it was a talisman.

In 1962, when I was seven, Dad took the family to the Seattle World's Fair. Our Sierra station wagon was new then, a shiny two-tone green, with modest fins, Naugahyde bench seats, and seat belts Dad had installed (long before they were standard equipment). Because there were eight of us, we couldn't afford to stay in motels. But Dad had a plan. He built a plywood box nearly as large as the car roof, two feet deep, painted it to match the car, then secured it to the rooftop like an oversized luggage rack. The box had a lid that could be removed and slipped inside the car over the tops of the bench seats, upon which he and Mom slept. My brother and I slept on top of the car in the box itself, and my sisters slept snugly inside the car, on the seats beneath the lid. We camped out in style all the way to Seattle without ever spending a dime on a motel.

During our drive north I sat in the rear-facing back seat. In between reading my stack of science fiction novels, knitting a wallet (Yes, my mother taught me to knit, thank you very much), songs, and the occasional fight with my sisters, I would wave so persistently to people following us that they would pass just to avoid having to wave back at me for the hundredth time.

We toured the sequoia forests of northern California, drove through a tunnel cut through the base of a huge redwood tree, climbed on every statue we found, and gawked up at a giant cement Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, in the California redwood forest.

When we returned from our trip, Dad converted the box into a bunk bed for my brother and me. The box itself became the lower bunk where Virl slept. I slept in the upper bunk, which was made from the box lid.

When my brother went to college a few years later, Dad took the bed apart and made Virl's bunk into a large six-drawer dresser, which my sisters used for many years. The lid made its way to the garage and served as the foundation for my model railroad set. It was attached to the ceiling with ropes and pulleys and we could lower it, setting it on two sawhorses, when we wanted to play with the train set.

Five years later the train was long forgotten, but the dresser remained and stood in my room. It was the year before I left for college. I had ceased connecting the dresser with the travel box because by then it had been painted a dark brown. The dresser still stands in one of Mom's unused bedrooms. As I stood there in the garage, I remembered that piece of plywood through all its permutations, from the moment Dad picked it out at the lumber yard, until the moment I found myself holding the last slice of it, thirty years later.

Feeling its substance, it began to dawn on me: Dad really *was* gone, and with him his ability to see something new and useful inside something old and worn. To him, a piece of plywood wasn't just lumber: it was a travel box, a bunk bed, a train set base, or a dresser. I had shared

most of my life with this piece of plywood as shaped by my father's hand. It had joined me on an unforgettable family vacation, I had worn the paint off the ladder climbing up to sleep in a bed made from it, I had played trains on it, I had placed my clothing in its drawers, until at last I held a remnant of it—the craftsman's busy hand finally still and the wood at rest, no longer to be cut and nailed, sanded and painted.

A thunderous wave of loss came rushing forward, burying me. I staggered under its weight. I sobbed, unaware of anyone else, my grief finally loosened. My mind moved ahead to an empty future: my as yet unborn children would never know him, never see his squinty smile or watch him measure and plan, saw and nail. I would never hand him another wrench and wonder how he was going to fix *this* bit of mechanical trouble.

During the time we spent cleaning the garage, Mom came out only once, then quickly went back inside. I glanced over at the piece of green plywood and understood. I felt foolish about my pop psychology "stages of grief" notions. In her own way, Mom was grieving already, coping the best way she knew how, privately and silently. How could she not grieve? Dad's imprint, smell, and essence surrounded her wherever she went in that house and every day reminded her of his absence. In trying to help my mother begin her own grieving, I unwittingly chose the perfect place to begin mine. Perhaps her grieving began the day he died and she went into their bedroom to get something and opened his closet and saw his B-24 pilot's hat sitting on the shelf. Maybe it was the next day when she entered the den and saw dozens of his airplane photos on the wall. Or perhaps she even began to grieve two months before he passed away, as she crawled alone into the bed they'd shared for forty years after kissing him goodnight as he lay in a cold hospital bed in the living room.

But for me the grieving began the day before Christmas, in the garage where I had grown up under my father's watchful and stern eye, surrounded by the materials with which he had built his life and mine. I stood holding a simple piece of 3/4" marine plywood, reminded of the greatness of my father. On that day I knew I missed him only a little less than I would miss him every day for the rest of my life.