

We have a history now - my father and me, the House, and Henry. I'm just a kid, but I can see it, feel it, and I think that the history has somehow become physical and weighs something, maybe a lot.

I'm destroying pieces of drywall, grinding them into the floor, watching my father. He is sitting on a half empty paint can in what he claims, imagines will be the dining room. He is wearing blue jeans, a denim work shirt, and work boots. It is a perfect, sunny day outside, blue sky, not a cloud anywhere, ideal temperature – just a tee shirt and shorts for me, and some of the sunlight and outside air fill the room. I know that he has been dreaming, looking out the window, but he starts staring toward the floor even before the words are out. It is just four words, “We have a problem.” I know that he has heard them before – more than once, even said them, once. But this time, the words have impact and seem to hit him, like a ball, maybe a cannon ball as I look at him again. He is a second slow to respond, hesitant to stand up, staggers a little as he starts to walk. Somehow I know that this is a pivotal moment for him, for me . . . and for the House.

Remodeling the House has lasted a while, all my life as far as I can remember, too long for my father. He still says that it will be a perfect house for Grandma, but I have thought for a long time that “will be” had better come soon. I think that my dad needs a break, to go back to just his “day job”. I imagine the House as he dreams it. The House is on a small lake in the center of our city. My father preaches that I will swim, fish, and boat on the lake in the summer and ice skate when it freezes over in the winter. I believe him absolutely. The House is a five-minute walk from a grocery store, a pharmacy, a pizza store, a hobby store, a toy store, a pet store, a movie rental, and a huge football stadium. It is also just a few doors from my elementary school and a short distance from my future high school. The House really is perfect, except. Except that my father is alone now in wanting to finish the remodeling.

For me, the House has been a constantly changing play structure filled with endless possibilities for mischief and reprimand. In the future, I will understand that the House was clearly unsafe. But for now, I have trouble understanding why my visits are limited and supervised. I'm a big kid. I can handle myself. I do not stab myself with rusty nails or cut myself on the endless variety of broken glass. I only inspect and examine, carefully. I do not fall off the stairs where the two treads are missing. I do not plunge through the hole in the floor where the upstairs bathtub used to teeter, but I do gingerly test the rotted floorboards. I do not drown in

the lake, but when unnoticed, I investigate the shoreline. My little sister is a non-factor in the House remodeling. She arrived a year and a half ago. She only visits the House as an extension of Mom, incarcerated in her arms, forbidden to touch anything. I suppose that the smoke is a problem.

My father has regaled us with stories of the evolving House on multiple occasions. I know them by heart, almost as if I was there and conscious of every event. The House started badly, with my grandmother's reluctance to move from the rest of her family and friends and leave the only city she had known for many decades. But my grandfather had died, and we are now her only close family. My grandmother does not know how to swim, does not like the water, is afraid of flooding, and does not want a lake in her backyard. I think that my father had trouble convincing her that the House was perfect. After she finally bought the House, she accidentally began the remodeling with a bottle of window cleaner and a roll of paper towels.

Her first encounter with the House lasted four minutes and ended with her vow to sell. With the previous owner's furniture removed from strategic locations, deep stains sprouted from the carpet. More stains covered the countertops and cabinets and were completely immune to ammonia-based cleaners. Deep gouges accentuated everything. My father cajoled my grandmother back to the House, but her second encounter as owner led to indictments of the roof, the windows, the floors, the doors, the stairs, the bathrooms, the kitchen, even the fireplace. "How could I have been so foolish?" "How could my son have been so blind?" My father said that what really mattered was "location". My grandmother countered and condemned the House as a death trap needing demolition. For my father, the need to remodel the House was born in a firestorm.

My grandmother did not move into the House for a long time. Meanwhile, my parents were initially united in feverishly plotting the House's reincarnation. First they tried general contractors, but they were nearly all unaffordable. One contractor was a possibility, but he would not allow the sub-contractors who would actually do the work to talk directly with my father. In a face to face meeting between my father, the contractor, and a subcontractor, my father would ask a question of the subcontractor, the contractor would repeat my father's words, then the subcontractor would answer the contractor, and the contractor would repeat the answer to my father. That setup was too weird for my father. So he decided to serve as the general contractor and subcontract out the work himself. He reasoned that his grandfather had

built houses and that his father was a Seabee. Never mind that his grandfather had died before my father was born, and that his father had rebuilt engines and runways as a Seabee in World War II, also well before my father was born. Maybe my father thought that knowing how to remodel houses was genetic. Big mistake, it was not genetic.

Regardless, I think that subcontracting started out well for my father. He found Henry, a man who laid tile and could remodel a bathroom. As far as I can tell, Henry was skilled and resourceful as a tile man, but Henry knew little more about remodeling houses than my father. I only knew Henry as a remodeler and as a chimney. Henry smoked so many packs of cigarettes a day that even without a cigarette, smoke seemed to come out of his nose and mouth. He did not smoke when I was at the House, but I could smell the disgusting odor and made comments. Still, my father and Henry seemed to be friends and to have entered into an odd but resilient partnership. I think that Henry won my father's respect when he was able to move and redirect a huge copper pipe, a DWV (drain waste vent), about three feet so that my grandmother could have her bathroom remodeled the way she wanted. My father was the first to say "We have a problem," and Henry solved the first problem. Unfortunately, from then on, my father solved the problems.

According to my father, Henry said, "We have a problem" dozens of times. Each time, somehow, it was an ever bigger, harder to remedy, catastrophe. Henry said, "We have a problem" when the new windows were too big to fit in the brick openings, after he had accidentally shattered an old window while taking it out. "We have a problem" when the house flooded, and every story filled with three inches of water ruining brand-new kitchen cabinets. Henry had decided to forego covering the open roof with a tarp the night before a monsoon, reasoning that by gazing at the western sky at dusk he could predict the weather. "We have a problem" when Henry had accidentally spray painted the new slate floor, then tried unsuccessfully to remove the paint by flooding the floor with kerosene and lighting it on fire. The flames shot five feet into the air, but somehow didn't burn the House down.

"We have a problem" when Henry hired people. It was the middle of an economic slump, and there were people lining the highways, holding up signs that read, "I'll work for food". The first man had been out of work for six months, but took off for hunting season after only one day on the job. There was a retired minister who ended up preaching to the neighbors from the roof instead of nailing shingles. A former CIA spy wanted to install a satellite antenna

in the new garage floor to listen to "secret" transmissions.

Then Henry tried his relatives. I liked Curt, his nephew. He paid attention to me. I was "Little Dude". He was "Big Man". He only wore gray; gray shirt, gray pants, gray ball cap, gray "shades". He taught me "duck shots" (throwing stones at ducks and geese on the lake). He said stuff, I said stuff. He said "bummer", I said "bummer". He said "chick", I said "chick". One day, Dad brought the House's phone bill, over \$300, "1-900" calls. Curt did not claim innocence. It must have been a mistake. I tried to help. "Hey, maybe he was trying to order from a TV commercial, 'call 1-800-something- in the next ten minutes to receive a second one free!', and he just dialed a nine instead of an eight." No one was paying attention to me. I dialed 1-900. Nothing, then "If you want to make a call just hang up", then a blaring beep, and I had everyone's attention. When the dust settled, Curt was doomed, and I had sealed his fate.

Why, how my father had stuck it out with Henry for so long, I don't know. They were polar opposites. Henry hadn't finished high school, my father finished grade twenty. Henry was heavy; my father was thin. Henry was short, my father tall. Henry was not athletic and nearly fell off the roof twice, my father was agile and could scramble over the roof like a monkey. My father didn't smoke. I think the key was that my father and Henry genuinely liked each other, despite their differences. I also think that Henry and my father had made a deal, not just about remodeling, but also on some other level about getting to know and respect each other.

Regardless of the strength of the partnership between my father and Henry, I know that lots of things have changed since they started remodeling. Mom has gradually shifted sides, I think because my sister came. I have heard her complain often to my father that he needs to spend more time at home, that the House remodeling had become too distracting, that my sister and I are getting "short-changed". Last week, for the first time I think, she criticized Henry in front of my grandmother. The comment silenced my father but energized my grandmother. She had found another house in the neighborhood.

The other house was newer and newly remodeled, in "move-in" condition. There was a bedroom and study on the first floor. Two days ago we visited the other house. It didn't smell, no smoke. It had a little basketball court in the driveway, no nails or pieces of broken glass, no lake in the backyard. My father seemed to leave the other house in a daze. Maybe he was just tired, but, for sure, he was alone. Yesterday he found water in the basement. "That proves it. The lake is a leaking into the House. I won't live with a wet basement." My father tried to say

that the bottom of the basement was twenty feet above the lake, but I think that I am the only one who heard him. He seemed to be defending a lost cause. I wonder if water can leak uphill, the way milk spreads on my clothes when I spill a drink.

That day in the future dining room as I hear another "We have a problem", I can see the accumulation of frustration and disappointment. It looks like a mountain. I can sense the inevitability that history will repeat itself, and that there will be further refrains. I can see how those four words have changed meaning over time, dramatically, emotionally. I can sense that the House is almost gone, unfinished. I feel that for my father, the House is almost becoming a memory, rather than a dream. He must feel that he has wasted everything, especially time. I begin to feel that he is about to leave the House for good.

Somehow, though, I know that the House is not over until I say that it is over, and I haven't spoken yet. Why should a kid have anything to say? Why should my opinion count? But at this moment, in this divided family, I can feel that a kid's opinion matters, a lot. Somehow I know that I will make the ultimate decision on the House, either with silence or by saying something. What no one knows is that I am sold, really sold, on the House. As he starts to walk, I grab my father's hand and pull him back. "Dad, I like this house, this should be grandmother's house."

My father stops and looks at me as if he hadn't seen me before. "What?" I pause. Maybe I'm wrong; maybe I shouldn't have said anything. Maybe it will go the wrong way, like trying to help Curt. But it's too late: more words tumble out.

"Dad, I think that Grandma should live here. I want to come visit her on the lake." As I hear myself, I am convinced. I will say the words again and again, as I become evidence, a witness.

Mom and Grandma go silent. The other house is sold. Indecision evaporates and time blurs. Eventually, the House is finished. Grandma moves in, and unbelievably, she likes the House. Henry and my father have done a "good job". Neighbors praise the House remodeling, probably, in part, because the noise and clutter are finally gone. For a while I become a kind of hero, a little bit of a legend in my family, at least for a kid. I have clearly become my father's ally. Henry becomes my friend and slaps me on the back whenever he sees me. I imagine that my little sister will idolize me, but there are limits, and that doesn't happen. However, the ultimate tribute will not come for another two years. One day my grandmother receives a note

in her mailbox. The people that bought the other house want to know if Grandma would be willing to sell her house, the House, to them. Since they don't know the history, they can't imagine the absurdity of their question or how big a compliment they had delivered to Henry, to my father, and to me.