

My Dad Builds the House

by Gary Moshimer

Before the saw came my fist through the wall. Now I kneel on the crumbled drywall in my son's closet holding a flashlight, peering into the hole at the plumbing parts I'm supposed to replace. On the other side of the wall the bathtub faucet drips. It is my second biggest enemy, the first being my lack of confidence. My wife believes I can do this, but not I. She went out and bought the replacement stuff from Lowes. The guy in plumbing was impressed when she told how I single-handedly built my son's room, studs and wiring and drywall. That's not the same as plumbing, I told her. You just don't feel like doing anything, she said, and stormed out to drive around in the dark. And I put my fist through the wall.

We've been snapping a lot lately, since David went away to 'that place.' Between the little explosions we walk on eggshells, as if our son is dead and one of us is to blame. But he isn't dead. Not really. What came and took him away when he turned seventeen was 'dementia praecox.' That's actually what the doctor called it, instead of 'schizophrenia.' Whatever you want to call it, it still means voices in his head and not believing what he sees and thinking that people or aliens are after him.

Funny, but cleaning out his closet I found lots of aliens and little monsters, collected over the years. He loved anything odd and not of this world, things that might whisper unexpectedly or glow in the night. Or silent, brooding things. I hope I didn't contribute by buying these creatures. But Dr. Winter assures us it's all about brain chemicals and heredity. My wife had an aunt with this type of illness. She ended her life.

I take the little drywall saw and my flashlight (now I kick myself that I didn't put a light in his closet) and cut a bigger hole, stud to stud, all the way down. It's a slow process, and my wife is right: I don't feel like doing anything. I'm always tired. I take more naps. I barely get through the day at work. My head is heavy and my neck bowed and my shoulders knotted beneath the constant weight which

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is the worry about David, if we'll ever get him back. The doctors say there are always new medicines; recovery is a possibility. But in his experienced eyes I don't find the word 'probability.' We're holding on to hope, even though all my research says he'll never be the same person he once was. So in a way, he is dead, and my wife and I are still in a long process of mourning, never-ending and debilitating because we talk to him almost every day.

I see that the 'mixing valve,' which is apparently the culprit in these slow leaks, has the plastic hot and cold water lines threaded into it. That is promising: I have the pipe wrench for unthreading those puppies. But the pipes running up to the shower head and down to the faucet are copper, all one piece and soldered into the valve. Soldered! I don't do solder. Hah! I want to call my wife right now and tell about the soldering. Certainly she would not want me burning down the house. But she won't answer her cell if she's driving, especially if she sees it's me. I decide to unhook the threaded pipes and then reattach them, just so I'm not lying when I tell her I tried. The morons who did this plumbing put in no shut-off valves, so I have to go to the basement to turn the water off. It was here, last fall, that I found David paralyzed in the back corner behind the water heater, standing stiffly against the block wall, eyes open but unseeing. I couldn't wake him up or make him walk. I had to call the ambulance. This catatonic state lasted four hours. Afterwards he said he went into the basement to hide from the people who came to kill him, but they found him. They said if he dared move a muscle they would slit his throat with the steak knives they had stolen from the kitchen. David had one of my giant drill bits clutched in his right hand. When he finally blinked and sat up in the ER, he was watching them file away, hearing them say that they would be back, that they always knew where he was.

I close the hot water valve above the water heater and the cold one over the well pump. I feel the sudden jolt of water arresting in the pipes, and a similar thud in my chest, my blood halting momentarily.

As I'm placing an old towel under the pipes I find something

propped against the stud. It's a Polaroid photo of me, kneeling by the bare studs with hammer in hand. There's sweat and a fleck of blood on my forehead. The caption on the picture, in David's child handwriting, says, 'My dad builds the house.' I'm wondering how this picture got here. I must have had this wall open when I was doing his room. Funny how you forget. Against the opposite stud is a folded piece of paper. My hands tremble as I open it. It's David's drawing, me as a stick figure holding a saw with giant teeth. I'm smiling. The smaller figure next to me -- David I assume -- has a sad face, while behind him looms a big-headed, angry thing with open mouth and jagged teeth. There's no writing on this one. I lean back against the wall, studying them with the flashlight for a while.

After I take the wrench to the pipes, twisting weakly a couple times with no result, it's time to call David. There is a certain time when he can take calls.

"Hello." His voice is formal, wary. He no longer calls me Dad. He treats me as an acquaintance.

I make the mistake of telling him about the wall, and what I found. I thought maybe he'd find it funny, but everything is serious to him now, and full of portent. "You shouldn't have done that. Now it's all out."

"There's only these pictures, Dave."

"You don't know. It's been moving around in there for years, just waiting." His voice is flat, but sometimes it splits, a lower, hollow one beneath his normal, like someone else inside him. Maybe the thing with the jagged teeth.

I decide to drop it. "Mom says hello."

"Alright. Goodbye." He hangs up just like that.

"Love you," I say to the dead phone. I sigh, place the pictures on the kitchen table, and head back down to turn the water on.

When I return to the closet I hear the hissing sound. Looks like I did do something -- a fine mist from the cold water line greets me. Just for kicks I punch another hole in the wall. I sit on the floor and turn off the flashlight. Maybe I'll go out and get a blowtorch, make myself all young and strong for a little while, yell to no one, burn

down the room I made but save all the creatures, bring them to David and say, "Look. Remember when we bought these? How excited you were? They are your friends. They will not hurt you."

Somewhere in the house a door slams. She's home. She always comes home. She'll lock herself in our bedroom, but tomorrow she'll go out and get us some new microwave dinner to share. I'll call the plumber and he'll be done in an hour. We'll watch TV and then sit and listen to the silence where the drip used to be, knowing the silence holds a scream yet to come out. It's just a matter of time.

But for now I keep my eyes closed and feel the water on my face, pretending it's a time when all of us lay on the grass under the sprinkler, back when the grass was green and the sun meant joy and not shadows. Back when the plumbing was new, when I could build a house.

