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Floor Plan

My right arm is stuck between the lowest shelf and the wall. To my left, my mom tugs at the shelf, yelling at my dad to stop hammering at it. I've discovered that whoever carpentered this closet built the shelves right into it. Each shelf is moveable, but not removable. Having tried and failed at lifting the shelf, I'm resigned to kneeling now, face-first into the open door of the closet. My mom is still wrestling a corner of the shelf to get it off my arm. My dad hasn't stopped pounding the other corner with the mallet, each blow with escalating frustration. The shelf slips up for a moment, then falls back down on my arm.

I'm starting to think we're nowhere near qualified enough to finish this project.

It began with the removal of the carpet. After twenty years of bemoaning the wall-to-wall mint-green shag that covered much of our upstairs living space, my parents finally made the decision to tear it all up. Things moved quickly: A first wild slice with a carpet knife exposed foam padding and raw plywood. Everything was torn out in a day, in a fervor. Construction of the pine floor commenced soon after.

All of that happened before I came home for spring break. Upon entering the house I could taste the dust. I went for a glass of water and wiped a layer of sawdust from the lip. I felt like Tom Joad returning to his Oklahoma farm. Upstairs was the dustbowl itself: A table saw, chop saw, jigsaw, and drill were stationed before the fireplace atop a new carpet of Eastern White Pine sawdust. "Maybe I should vacuum," I suggested naïvely. I had no idea how prolific the dust would actually be until we started working the next morning. The chop saw alone created so much dust that we threw the windows open, despite the late-winter chill.

Though we were the resident construction crew, the tools weren't our own. They belonged to our friend Gregory Stafford. Draped in flannels, with stooped shoulders, a gruff face and tourniquet handshake, Gregory was a true Maine woodsman. An unshakeable grin made him seem more like a lanky teenager trapped in the body of a hardened carpenter. Whenever we made a mistake, like the time I cut a board too short three times in a row, he just laughed. "Don't worry," he'd reassure us, "we'll just scrape a little wood putty on it. Happens all the time."

Just as the tools belonged to Gregory, so did any glimmer of confidence we had regarding our ability to be full-time carpenters for the week. When I walked on the first boards my parents installed, I was walking on work done under Gregory's tutelage. His guidance started with the snap line, which put us on firm footing.

Laying a snap line between two points takes several steps. First, blue viscous chalk must be poured from a bottle into a device that looks like a hybrid between yo-yo and tape measure. The chalk infuses a long, retractable twine inside the device. The next step is to attach the loop end of the protruding twine to a nail at one point, then walk backwards, keeping the chalked string hanging loosely above the ground. When the other point is reached, the string must be reeled in until it's taut. Holding the contraption lightly against the floor, the final move is to take

a piece of the line, pull it tight in the air, and snap it down for a laser-straight blue blaze across the floor.

Two nights after arriving home from college, I found myself making snap lines. I confined myself to my dad's office, where I snapped five lines from north wall to south wall, perpendicular to the boards. Snap lines were established along the joists, structural beams like studs but under the floor. Top-nailing the boards along the snap lines became a solo show: I slid around the office floor on my knees, a clunky ballet, pulling a yellow one-pound box of coal-black three-inch square-head nails along with me. When I went to bed that night, the percussive thud of the pounding hammer reverberated inside my head.

The man who delivered the pine in the first place was Bjarki Gunnarsson who, in my mom's words, was "the guy you would want from central casting as the guy who delivers your wood." He had shoulder-length hair and deeply carved Scandinavian features. Gunnarsson, originally from New Jersey, was a competitive sailor and finance major at Roger Williams. He worked hard and played hard in New York after graduation, but escaped to Maine to avoid what he called the "rat race." He and a classmate, both in their mid-twenties, bought a wood mill and dedicated themselves to the pine flooring business. Gunnarsson drove to our house with our boards swaddled in the cab of his truck. He spread a towel along the windowsill of the northeast bedroom, my parents' room, then slid each board up through the window. At the beginning of the project, the stacks of flooring in the living room were worrisomely tall. But as things became more two-dimensional, the boards spread out over the floor quickly.

Now, the piles almost gone, all that remains uncovered is the inside of the closet. But the final pieces are hard to lay into place with this shelf pinning my arm to the wall. My dad is still trying to free me by pounding the underside of the shelf with a massive double-headed rubber and steel mallet. Eventually the shelf pops up, a result more of desperation than of willpower. I slip my arm out, and I'm free and relatively unscathed. The last boards have been put into place, but the floor is far from done.

In the morning my dad and I drive to Viking Lumber to pick up more supplies. Helping us out in the store is a man with no name tag and the roundest face I've ever seen. He has soft eyes that peek owlishly from within a laterally ambitious beard. He's even more of a Mainer than Gregory. We tell him what we need and he responds "yep" or "nope" and says little else. The only time he deviates from this script is when we ask for Minwax natural stain, "number two-oh-seven, like Gregory told us to buy." "Nope," he corrects, "two-oh-nine." We buy two-oh-nine.

The most cumbersome thing we pick up while out of the house is the oscillating rectangular pad sander. The machine looks like a Soviet-era spacecraft. It's extremely heavy, and has no descriptive markings other than hand-written sharpie scrawl reading "ON / OFF." We pay the rental fee and get it back home, after much pushing and pulling. We turn the machine on and it roars to life, floating on a cushion of tossed up pine dust. As we guide the machine from wall to wall we form an odd sort of parade. I'm pushing the sander, my dad holds the power cord, and my mom vacuums the debris.

It's varnish time. Skittering across the floor in our socks, my dad and I pour a puddle of two-oh-nine into a paint tray and slide the spreader along the grain of the first board. Immediately the pine jumps back to life. The board takes on a rich yet subtle amber glow, dark knots contrasting the pine slats like crows flying against a cloudless evening sky.

Except for the bubbles. Gregory had warned us about the bubbles. The bubbles don't look like birds in the sky. They look like the sky is breaking out in angry pustules. We nudge the bubbles with our spreaders, moving them around frantically. But after a week of cutting, pounding, scraping, nailing, sawing, measuring, crawling, snapping, and sanding, we look at the bubbles and say, channeling Gregory, "Don't worry, it'll be fine. Happens all the time." The remaining three coats of oil stain and polyurethane go on as easily as if we were putting fresh sheets on a bed. We head downstairs and wait for the finish to harden.

Emerging from the kitchen in the late afternoon, we find that our previous upstairs surely must have been replaced by another. We live in a completely new home. Our old barn is stretching, taking in a deep breath, relieved to be free of the ancient carpeting. Where light streams in the windows, the floor radiates like an electric filament. We explore corners of a room we're seeing for the first time. We don't want to cover up our hard work with clunky, immovable furniture. So on the way back to the airport, my parents buy four beanbag chairs.

As my plane lands in Newark, I pull out my phone to find a text message from my mom with a photo attached: I see a small table in the center of the living room, with a modest dinner spread out on top. Evening light streams in from the southwest, making each board resonate with golden energy. There's no more dust. The beanbag chairs float over the strips of pine. There's a fire in the fireplace, fueled by pine scraps and unused boards. I walk into my dorm room and take a look at the swirling grain of my wooden floor for the first time.