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My father built our family cabin from the ground up, board by board, on a patch of land he owned free and clear. It backs the forest where I learned to ride my first dirt bike; one he designed, cut, and welded to fit me when I was too small for anything else. It's where I fell in love with campfires, the ravens circling home at dusk, and the deer that wake with the dawn. I don't know if, or why he loved the forest. By the time I was taller than his waist, we wouldn't have much to say to one another. We wouldn't for many years. Then he was gone.

I have limited knowledge of a man obsessed with Land Rovers, experimental aircraft, and vanilla ice cream. Family folklore tells me he built a working airplane in the garage, just to see if he could. I was seven, then eight, as the cabin went up over a long series of weekends. Rotating scores of friend volunteers were welcomed with

cold beer and conversation around the campfire. Breakfast was served every morning from a Coleman stove balanced on sawhorses. I occasionally pounded in a crooked line of nails he would straighten; unaware this was all the time we would get.

WHAT MY FATHER BUILT

written by :: meghan marsden

***Meghan Marsden** is a novelist who writes about the unplanned journey; the one where life kicks your feet out, and you learn to get up again. She was born with the heart of an untamed mountain child, mistakenly raised in a metropolis. She's spending 2020 finding her way home. You'll find more of her published works by clicking [here](#).*



He noticed the tremor first; received the official diagnosis at age thirty-nine. Parkinson's. In an insidious process that began long before I was even an idea, toxic chemicals from a machine shop he worked in poisoned his brain. An engineer who performed logarithms in his head, he slowly lost his mind and himself, long before we said our goodbyes. I took care of him for twelve years before he passed. I thought his disease stole the possibility of him ever taking care of me again. I was wrong.

Twenty-twenty was a hard year for our family. My dad gave me and the kids a place to go, an option when we needed it. He built it for us, board by board, on our own patch of land in the middle of the forest I grew up in.

I see him in invisible lessons, I don't remember him teaching - respect wildlife, carry extra gas, tend your campfire responsibly. I hear his voice inside my helmet when I ride my dirt bike. I pass his words to my children, teaching them to let out the clutch, watch for snakes, and low hanging branches. Ideals he lived by, continue in me: there are no strangers in small communities; you never know when you'll need a favor or have the opportunity to lend a hand. If someone needs help, go help. If you need help, ask.

I learn from him, now, all that he didn't have time to teach, by inspecting the things he built, wired, caulked, constructed, or hung. I learn, *repeatedly*, why he swore at the plumbing. I find evidence of his mistakes. His spirit tells me not to be afraid to try, even if I have no idea what I'm doing. Failures are part of the process.

We're rebuilding the deck this year, continuing what he started, laying down invisible memories in his grandchildren so that they will know him too.

My father died on September 4, 2013. I haven't set foot at the cemetery since the day we buried him. Not because of all the years we didn't talk or because I feel cheated. I just know he isn't there.