

Renovation

One day my father and our old baseball coach begin converting the attic of our house. They decide to make two new bedrooms that will be connected by a hallway. There will be a few closets and a bathroom, too. My brothers and I learn that the ceilings in the bedrooms will follow the roofline of the house, instead of being flat like the ceilings on the ground floor. We are very excited about this. The bathroom will have a shower instead of a bathtub. The bedrooms will have dormer windows in which we can sit, and from which we can spy, unseen, on the neighborhood below. There will be a staircase, which my father proudly says will be carpeted, a first for our house. My brothers and I are very excited about all of this, and we climb up into the attic whenever we can to watch our father and the baseball coach measure and saw and pound nails.

My father is not a trained carpenter, but the baseball coach knows everything that must be done, and what to do first, and then what to do next, and next. My father is very good with his hands, and always a quick learner. Together, they make steady progress over the course of a month, working nights and weekends. The heat is stifling in the attic, even when the sun has long set. The men roll up sleeves and mop foreheads and call for glasses of ice water and sometimes a cold beer. There is no electricity in the attic, yet. They run long electrical cords up from outlets downstairs to power their circular saws and drills and light bulbs. They have cut holes in the tops of closets on the ground floor and my brothers and I string the extension cords through for them. As the men work, the air fills with dust and sawdust, and with the screams of the saws and the thuds of the hammers. They bend forward when moving around, to avoid hitting their heads on the low rafters, which slant downward to meet the walls at a height of three or four feet.

One day it occurs to me that we don't really need the new bedrooms, although my brothers and I are happy and excited about them. My brothers and I have worked out amongst ourselves where each of us will sleep. We are impatient for the work to be finished, and we ask our father about it every day. He always tells us, "be done before you know it." I want to ask my father why he is making more bedrooms, but I am afraid to ask him. I think I know, but if I am right, I don't want to know.

My father pulls into our driveway and stops the pickup in front of the garage. Two of my young brothers are in the pickup bed, and they jump out onto the ground and run off toward the house. Another brother and I are in the pickup cab with our father. He turns off the ignition, but he doesn't open his door. The three of us sit in silence for a moment. I usually know when my father has something important to say. When he talks about something important it takes him a little time to get the words started. During such moments, I feel my chest and throat tighten, as if they are being squeezed; my breathing becomes shallow; my heart races. I feel as if I am balanced on the edge of an abyss, into which I might find myself falling at any moment. My father's moods and notions, I have noticed, have precipitated the majority of momentous events in my life. I have become hypersensitive and careful in his presence.

This is one of those times when it takes my father some time to start his words. My brother and I are uneasy and quiet, alternately glancing over at our father, and then quickly looking away.

"What do you boys think about a new mother?" our father asks us. He looks at us, then at the steering wheel. I realize he has been thinking for a while about how to talk to us about this, and that it is not easy for him.

My brother doesn't say anything. I look at his face and see that he is sullen, his eyes unblinking and bottomless. He stares at the pickup floorboards. I think I know what he would say. He has taken our mother's passing very hard. I know his sadness. I want to make everything better for my brothers. I decide to speak for the brother next to me, and for my smaller brothers, and for myself, and before I know what is happening, I have.

"I don't want another mother," I say. My voice is a blend of petulance and anger. I feel myself begin to shake, and I cross my arms tightly across my chest. I look at the floorboards. I am surprised at my answer, because I have learned it is best to give my father the answers he wants to hear. He doesn't want to hear that I don't want another mother. I have answered him without thinking. Now, I am afraid of what he might say or do. My words jumped from my mouth before I could consider anything. But I know they are true. I want to go on speaking for my brothers and for myself. I want to tell him my mother has been dead just four months. I want to tell him I haven't yet figured out how to feel normal again, if I ever will. I want to ask him, doesn't he even miss her. I want to tell him how unfair and pointless and stupid this is, and that I don't ever want another mother.

But I don't go on. I am afraid to go on. I feel a hopelessness descending upon me, enveloping me in a dark shroud, closing off the light. I feel like I am sinking. There is a raw moment of clarity, in which I know with certainty, and with a profound helplessness, that life will go on and on, and that it will never again be what it once was. There is no other way. My brother and I look at the floorboards. My father doesn't say anything. After a few seconds, he opens the pickup door and we get out of the pickup and go into the house. My father doesn't mention a new mother again. A few days later, one of my father's friends tells me how my father needs a wife to help him raise my brothers and me. It's very hard for my father, being alone, his friend says. I don't say anything, but I nod as if I understand.

In time I do begin to understand. It must be very hard for my father. It is true, I don't want another mother, but a new mother is what is best for all of us, I come to realize. After a while, I regret my words to my father about not wanting another mother. I probably hurt his feelings when he was doing what he thought was right, and for this I am sorry. I think it would be better if getting another mother could wait awhile, but I know my father is a practical man, and that he always does what he thinks he must do. In our little town, he doesn't have many prospects, but he always does his best at everything, and with surprising results most of the time. I know he will do the best he can in finding another mother.

The sawing and hammering continue in the heat of the attic while the summer passes. There are the new bedrooms, the closets, the bathroom, the carpeted floors, and the stairs. Soon, there is a new mother and new children.

The days go by in a blur, and as months pass, I begin to emerge from my messy fog of emotions. I don't feel as heavy anymore. I begin to notice things again.

One day I find a little stone on the side of the road. Over time, its surface has been worn as smooth as a marble. I hide the stone in a little space in the fork of a tree. I think about the stone sometimes during the summer and fall, and when I do, I come to the tree and peer into the little space. The stone is always there. It makes me feel good to see it there, safe and smooth and hidden from the world. This is a time of great change for my brothers and me. I don't know how hiding a

little stone in a secret place could mean anything to me, and I don't know exactly what it means, but it means something. I try to hold on to that something.

Eventually, though, I do forget about the stone and its hiding place. A year or so later, after so many things have changed in our lives, I by chance walk by the tree. I suddenly remember the stone, and a faint glimmer of what it might have meant shines mysteriously, but only briefly; then the glimmer fades. I run over and look into the little space, and the stone is gone. But it will be okay. I know that I don't need it any more.