

THE WORKROOM; OR, THERE ARE OTHER TOOLS BESIDES THE HAMMER

It wasn't until I owned my own house—and spent countless hours ripping down plaster, installing conduit, painting trim, and generally correcting the insults and injuries inflicted on the building by its previous owners—that I began to realize what keen observers of the human condition the Three Stooges were. The way we hurt those we are most trying to help, the chaos and destruction that lurk beneath the surface of our interactions, the yearning for the Grail in our fruitless attempts at inventing spotted paint—anything profound I might have had to say about the difficulties of striving to maintain a livable space for myself and my young family had already been expressed far more eloquently by a trio of short and extremely homely ex-vaudevillians.

Nevertheless, since as Nietzsche said, “That which does not kill us gives us something to brag about at barbecues,” I soon became pretty flip with home improvement advice for anyone unlucky enough to be around. It seemed only equitable that those wishing to be initiated into the ranks of the home owner should have to make as many mistakes and sift through as much misinformation as I did. Adding the modifiers “flange,” “toggle” or “grommet” to any recognizable hardware term would quickly send inexperienced or passably knowledgeable fixer-uppers into retreat. Combining all three—thus creating the “flange toggle grommet”—was the trump, to be used only against those climbers who had purchased much bigger houses than mine.

A few months after our own purchase, my older brother Patrick and his wife bought their first home, a big lovely house of the Arts and Crafts school. Since their home still reflected a recognizable style, any work they had to do would need more care; our house was of old yet indeterminate style, so all we needed to do to receive compliments was keep the cracks in the plaster patched and refrain from painting in Day-Glo colors. With thirty years of apartment living between us, Pat and I both faced the ominous revelation that we and we alone were responsible for fixing our own plumbing, and that certain now-indispensable tools were just too big to fit in the kitchen drawer. After much commiseration, my brother and I fixed on a solution independently, yet almost simultaneously: Our problems would be over if we could only build a big workbench like our father's.

The irony of this panacea would be lost to everyone but my family and our old neighbors. My father was as adept at household repairs as a seagull at snooker. For Pat and me to invoke his spirit by building a workbench would be like taking singing lessons to emulate William Shatner. But we were each bound and determined to erect an elaborate workbench—complete with a vice, a pegboard

wall, and little screwdriver wells—to pattern ourselves after our father, who, left on his own, would have had a devil of a time assembling a functional breadboard.

While our father was not in anyway good or ambitious in the area of home improvement, he did enjoy the use of the workroom in our house as his sanctum sanctorum. Almost every man I've ever met has expressed the need and desire for a similar locale in his life, a place where he can work or not work at his own pace, somewhere to pursue doomed experiments and wrong ideas, someplace where his failures would not be on public display—indeed, where such efforts would not be failures at all. So utterly convinced of his ineptitude around the house, my father didn't spend an inordinate amount of time down in the workroom. That might have led to home repair ambitions, which in turn would have led to projects, which probably would have led to some failures, which I don't think he would have allowed himself to have. He did, however, have his space.

Even with its lack of use, my memories of the workroom are as strong or stronger than for any other room in our home. A trip to the workroom was a mainly sensory experience; the sounds, the smells, and even the light seem so specific to that time and place. The activities I remember most in the room were my father soaking his paintbrushes in turpentine-filled orange-juice containers within arm's length of our furnace, and cleaning his nails with an ivory-handled steak knife of unknown origin. And always, always with a Winston in his mouth. It would be nice if I could describe the hours of worldly wisdom that passed from father to son in patient exchanges and Platonic dialogue—what our more dithery era has christened bonding. It would have been nice, had it ever happened. My father was almost pathologically tight-lipped, and my brothers and I had to absorb what lessons we could from example and, in the home repair realm, from non-example....



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