

“The lectricity out?” She yells through the darkness upstairs.

“No, you’re having a stroke!” I respond with a joke that only I ever find funny – thirty years together and she is still puzzled by my humor. I want to say duh as I am sitting in the dark as well, but this is no time to start an argument. When there is no response, I continue “It’s out, but let me see if it is just us or everybody, going outside!” I shout at a level that I think she can hear, stepping outside before I get a response.

My eyes adjust to the early evening twilight coming through the windows. I find a flashlight on a shelf near the door, both proud and surprised it is still there. I walk outside with the bright light leading the way, I step in front of the house, immediately noticing every other house illuminated thus I am on my own. The electric box groans as I pry open the heavy gray lid, propping it open and aiming the light at the bank of breakers. Immediately I spot a switch in the middle – not on or off. It moves freely as I flick it – it’s not supposed to do that.

I lean against the house, knowing there are extra breakers in the garage. I rub my head and smile as my mind returns to dad’s house so many, many years ago.

The house was dark, lifeless, an eerie calm throughout as the gentle breeze of perfect spring weather stirred. Friday afternoon, not one repair company would commit until Monday. I was surprised any actual companies were called, because dad fixed everything, or tried. He hung up after one last call and stood, staring my direction, but past me.

An entire weekend without television loomed ahead – an unhappy situation. Dad would not survive an entire weekend without the escape. His neighbor Eddie examined the rusted electrical panel on the side of the house and quickly spotted a problem. Dad was confused, but he listened closely to Eddie’s explanation.

“Your main breaker is shot, right-cheer.” The burly man with wild hair and even wilder beard towered over dad, me, and the panel as an introduction to electrical wiring class unfolded. I wanted a pencil and notepad to take notes, this seemed important.

“Okay, this, well, okay this one.” Dad listened intently while pointing to the square black plastic switch in the panel. There was nothing obvious from looking at it, it did not flash red or smoke, yet the house was dark.

“You just puller out, hooker up and pusher in.” Eddie’s hands danced and pointed ending with palms upturned like it was all obvious. Dad made a sexual joke about the description, and they laughed while I was confused.

“You got one?” Dad uttered the question sitting in my mind, where was the replacement or new one?

“Do I look like an electrician?” Eddie laughed, a deep, hearty laugh, giving dad a wild look and winking at me. I did not know what an electrician looked like, but apparently it wasn’t him. He looked like, well not sure what he looked like, but the blue overalls and thick boots made me think of the guy who ran the junk yard we frequented. On the other hand, he knew the issue, why couldn’t he fix it?

“No, I guess not.” Dad conceded the answer to a question different from the one asked.

“Ace’ll have one, it’s a fitty, just tell them, they’ll hook you up.” The guy waved wildly in the direction of the interstate; I remembered Ace Hardware being in that direction.

“Sure, sure, got it, sure, preciate it, well, see you tomorrow, maybe.” They shared another laugh as Dad patted Eddie on the shoulder. We walked as a group to the front of the house and Eddie returned to his home. His nickname was Fast Eddie, it was stitched on his bowling shirt – had and dad on the same team with Saturday night league games.

We returned inside, sat at the kitchen table with the late afternoon light shining through the window. Dad anxiously sketched a rudimentary diagram. I did not know why he was drawing anything. The lines and boxes snaked through the outline of the house with rooms marked.

I observed the drawing, thinking of a map my brother and I had drawn when I was five. Our map traced and marked the burial spot for a treasure chest in the backyard – the map ended with an X just behind the parking spot of dad's boat, which was in front of the large oak tree (there was no actual treasure). I followed the lines on dad's map with my eyes, my fingers hovered nearby, as dad explained and re-explained his plan which, in my mind, was simple - get a new breaker and install it - we were not rewiring the house.

“Well, let's see if we can find a new one, right?” We hopped in his Camaro and followed the familiar route to the hardware store.

It was a quiet drive to the hardware store as he seemed to be in deep thought. The hardware store was bustling. I reflected on the number of projects that had brought us here – new faucet, leaking toilet, new door, paint and installing new seats in my car. These trips were special, he and I bonding while tackling a new problem and, most often, solving it.

Dad approached a store clerk who smirked at the rudimentary drawing, but he understood the need and provided the part. While there, he grabbed a case of oil for the car and bottle of cigarette lighter fluid and flint. It seemed overly optimistic to think of anything outside of the electricity.

“It is weird to think this controls the whole house.” I talked as we left the parking lot, holding the new switch, slowly turning it in my hands, the hard plastic edges, and its surprising heaviness. I flipped the switch between on and off a few times – it was hard to move.

“Be careful, don't break it.” Dad motioned to me while making a turn.

“I won't.” I smiled thinking of me breaking a breaker, but I kept it to myself.

“I figure we deserve a last meal before getting the chair.” Dad made electrocution jokes as he pulled into our favorite sub shop. He always ordered the number twelve called The Works, it was the best. He motioned for me to go inside, saying we should sit down and enjoy our last meal.

“Two whole twelves with everything, two Cokes and one of the strawberry things.” He peeled off a couple bills while whispering to the cashier, she laughed. I was so excited that he remembered I loved the dessert, but could I handle a whole sub at eleven years old? There was no better experience than sitting and eating one of the sandwiches with him. It was a ritual; we’d go there during every project, like a strategy session. It was our place.

“I think this works, we can watch the car from here.” He found a table by the window as he wanted to keep an eye on his prized possession. We quietly inhaled the sandwiches. A few older cars whizzed by the and he commented on their design and whether having ever driven one. Surprisingly, I ate the whole sub without a problem - a perfect mix of cold cuts, cheese, veggies plus vinegar and oil. I peeled open the dessert and slowly savored every bite.

“Whatya think? You think this will work or I’ll get zapped?” Dad grew serious as the breaker still had to be installed. He sat holding the new breaker, staring at it. I was surprised as I hadn’t seen him bring it inside.

“There is no live circuit until the breaker is fully attached to the metal grid in the box. Push it in and connect the wires - screwdrivers are insulated, should be good.” It made sense to me.

“Yeah, I like how that sounds.” Dad got up for a drink refill and a few words with the cashier, she wrote something on our receipt, he pushed it into his front pocket.

He was whistling while firing up the car. We sped down the freeway, barreling around the curves, back and forth, before settling in the front yard. We sat in the quiet car, eyeing the house with suspicion.

“Well, I guess there is only one thing to do.” We stood in the kitchen, reviewing the rudimentary diagram again for some unknown reason. The new part sat on the table. I stared at it as he picked it up and again turned it in his well-worn hands. The crooked pinky always caught my eye – a broken joint suffered as a teenager and never repaired. Further up his arm was the self-inflicted tattoo with his first initial and half of the second. It always made me wince, imagining the pain.

The walk to the electrical box seemed like a mile as we prodded, not really wanting to be there. I peered up the nearby utility pole, remembering Dad's other neighbor Mike climbing it to add a jumper wire that provided free access to cable movie channels.

We faced the gray box. Dad slowly swung it open and up (like a book facing down), the lid snapped and locked open. We both stood with hands on hips, surveying the two vertical rows of black breakers. Some were labeled 15, others 30 and then a big one clearly marked 50 – the target. Each breaker had a switch to turn it on/off. Dad's fingers gently brushed over the breakers lightly tracing their layout like a blind man reading braille. Finally, his middle finger rested on the big breaker at the top right – he pushed its switch that moved freely since broken.

“Well, I guess there is only one thing left to do.” He forced a smile, reached out, patted me on the shoulder followed by a gentle squeeze. Usually, he'd give a harder squeeze and I'd squirm, but his attention was elsewhere now.

“Yeah.” It was the most I could muster. I was scared.

“Okay, well, nothing left to do but do it. You should step back; somebody needs to be available to call 911.” I didn't remind him the power in the house was out, so the phone wasn't working.

My mind drifted to a day fishing at the lake when I was eight, we had returned to the dock to leave. The keys had slipped from his hand and disappeared in the dark water. He stood shaking his head and cursing before giving me a wink and disappearing in the water, there was a long silence as my mind raced before he resurfaced holding the keys. It had frightened me, so much that I had turned away to hide the fact I was on the verge of tears.

“You okay?” He stopped, arm and hand suspended in the air, awaiting a reply.

“Yeah.” I was not crying this time, but I felt my heart beat throughout my body, my stomach in knots.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” He shot me an uncertain grin and slowly reached for the breaker - firmly grabbed and pulled the left end up and completely

removed it - suspended in the air with two wires connected. I stood completely still. He held up the old breaker reminding me of looking at him after pulling one of my loose baby teeth and holding it up for inspection.

“And now, well.” He rubbed the stubble on his chin, a half-smile formed before grasping the small loose breaker and using the screwdriver to loosen the screws - the wires broke loose, bounced, and settled, pointing upward as they were finally free. He retreated two steps and laughed, turned to meet my smile, my grandmother would describe the smile as a shit-eating grin.

“Well, one more time, right?” Dad was now prepared and focused.

I said nothing but watched as he attached the wires and pushed the breaker back into its slot in the panel. It snapped in and he slowly flipped it to the on position. Nothing visible, no sparks or fireworks, and dad was still standing. I finally exhaled.

“Well hell, that wasn’t so bad. Go check’r out.” Dad stared at the panel, motioning for me to go inside, never looking at me while speaking.

I hustled inside and immediately felt elated as the lights were now on, it worked, and nothing was broken. Mom would be surprised that her exe could fix anything.

“It’s good, everything is on!” I ran outside to him still standing by the box. He turned and we exchanged a high five.

“Well, sunuvabitch.” He pulled back the panel cover and let it go, slamming shut with another final push to secure it.

We both stood there for a couple more minutes, both relieved and surprised.

I can still see dad standing there shaking his head and smiling, sweat glistening on his forehead, he basked in the glow of fixing something, anything, which he loved as I do. I can see his smile alongside mine on every successful endeavor and my curses echo his when things do not go as planned.

“What is it? You see a problem?” She breaks my trance as she comes around the corner of the house.

“Crap, you scared the shit out of me!” I feel every inch of my body flinch as her voice assaults me.

“Sorry, I thought maybe you had turned into a statue, just standing there.”

“I think so.” I hand her the flashlight, trot to the garage, get the replacement and screwdriver. I return to the box, hold the new part in the air, but she is not impressed or scared as I was so long ago. I turn and quickly and easily (thanks to Fast Eddie and Dad) replace the part, instantly we see light behind the windows. I turn and give her a high five, we laugh and return inside.