

The Abstemious Son

My father is Basque, which is a charitable way of saying he's uncompromising and proud, hardheaded when the need arises. At seventy, he's better fit for battle than a man who's travelled his path has a right or even a need to be. Dad came over from Bilbao when he was twenty-three years old and I'm convinced he was involved with the leftist separatist group there—*ETA*—and fled to America to avoid prison, or worse. We don't talk about those days.

He's in the shop now, chatting with our plumbers as they unload their truck. We run a construction company, which he started the year I was born, and where he's made a name for himself building high-end homes. I grew up on job sites and learned the trades, then went off to UC Davis and picked up a diploma in Civil Engineering. I graduated on a Saturday and started working with Dad as a full partner the following Monday. That was eight years ago, and I've taken about ten days off since then.

"Let's get out of here, Benny." Dad poked his head in through the office door. "*Ama* says dinner will be on the table in twenty minutes."

I nodded. Mom just called to tell me the same thing. Dad still peppers his conversation with the old language, more so as his day progresses and he tires, or as he works his way deeper into a wine jug after dinner. "This bid goes out tomorrow. I'll finish checking the numbers and then I'll head home."

He looked to the plans spread out before me. "The community center?"

Dad doesn't want to touch this project. His insistence that we build only homes has frustrated me since we started working together and my pushing him to think broader goads him. That's how we work. "It'll be good for the company."

He shook his head. "We grew this business doing what we know. We can't risk our reputation messing around where we don't belong."

Last year, I pressured him into taking a strip mall job and a library renovation project that earned us fat margins and a couple of write-ups in the local news, but he wants nothing to do with change. I still haven't figured out if construction is the right course for me, but I'm determined to put my signature on whatever I do. "We can talk about it later."

"Later," he agreed. That's how we handle disagreement in our family. He pointed a thumb over his shoulder to the shop. "The boys reminded me you have a softball game tonight."

I nodded. "8:00 o'clock." Dad's never played a game, nor has he skipped one of mine. He's in his glory when he dons a jersey with the company logo and name emblazoned across the back and struts around the complex buying drinks for his cronies. He has it in his head that his generosity is free because he can deduct the expenses from his taxes, and nothing I've ever told him has disabused him of that idea. "Are you coming out for a beer?"

"I go there to work," he said, smiling. "I get a lot of referrals from that ballpark." I'm not aware of one. Nodding at the blueprints, he added, "Don't be

long, Beñat.” That’s my name, but people know me as Benny. “*Ama* made your favorite dish.”

“I won’t be ten minutes.” I don’t have the heart to tell him that veal chops with mushrooms is Ander’s favorite. Ander is my younger brother and we haven’t seen him in three years.

Dad finally stepped into the office and signaled with both hands for me to come to him. He’s a hugger and I don’t recall a time that he departed my company without an embrace. Last week, he got up from his chair when we were watching a basketball game to get himself a beer and he hugged me on his way out, and then kissed me on the forehead when he returned. He’s a pain in the backside, but he’s a lovable one.

I turned to my spreadsheet after he left. Our advantage is that we’ve got the best crews in the city and we won’t have to subcontract much of the work, which would eat into the profit. Dad’s philosophy is to pay our workers well and drive them hard. No one who’s any good has ever quit us and the weak ones sift themselves out because Dad is as relentless as he is unforgiving. I’ll leave the iron work, paving, and heating and air conditioning to people who know those trades, and we can handle the balance. Dad will worry that a job like this will spread us too thin, but I’ll deal with that and with him when the time comes.

A din of voices from the shop broke my concentration and I rose to my feet, curious. One of them was Dad’s and both were emotional and charged, but I can’t peg the second person.

Are they laughing? Was Dad crying? I heard quickened paces coming toward the office and moved to the door, where I met my father, his eyes glistening and his hands trembling as he reached for mine. He said, "Ander."

And there he stood, my brother, in the flesh. He's aged a decade, but he's still wearing that careless grin and those laughing eyes. He's shaggy and thin and he looks like the images of Dad I've seen in photographs taken when he was younger. "Look at this," I said. "Look what the cat drug in." I lunged at him and we held each other. I've missed this kid so much my heart hurts.

Ander wiped a tear from my face that I didn't realize was there. "The cat's away, big brother. I'm here to play."

I've googled his name every day since he left, trying to keep track of him, and I know too much about him now. The thing about Ander is that he's like our dad. My father was almost forty when he married Mom, who was already three months down the road with me. All the stories I've heard about his younger days suggest he was as wild as my brother is now, but they've lived in different times. The world was more forgiving when Dad was young, back when a man could still outrun trouble. I took Ander by the arm. "Let's get you home. Mom's going to kill you and I'm not missing that for anything."

My father watched us. His boys are together again, and the joy is spilling out of him. Ander has always been special to Dad. It's nothing that's ever made me jealous; I'm that way with Mom. I think when parents see something of themselves in their kids it strikes in them a joy and a fear that never fade.

Ander is his father's son.

“I prayed for this day to come,” Dad said. “You don’t know how many bargains I made with The Boss.” He thought a moment and with a voice of resignation, said, “I’m gonna have to pay up now, I guess.” To Ander, “Where the hell have you been?”

“I’ve been everywhere, *Aitatxo*.” The endearment nearly buckled my father’s knees and Ander braced him tighter in hands that are both callused and cracked. “I’ve been wandering the earth,” he said. “Eyes wide open. I’ve loved every woman who’d have me. I’ve drunk too much, laughed like a fool, and cried like a baby. I’ve slept in cars, two jail cells, and once a Ferris wheel. I’ve worked every menial job you can think up, even hauled pigshit for a while.” He scratched at his unruly hair. “I’ve been living, Dad. That’s where the hell I’ve been. Now I stand before you broke and broken, wise and wizened...” An open-mouthed laugh as he shook his head. “Hairy and harried.”

Dad gave me a look suggesting he didn’t catch a word of that. “He lost his mind is what he did.”

Ander has always been an orator, inspired once he’d drawn a crowd. I winked at Dad. “You may be right.”

Ander’s bearing stiffened and he grew serious. “Forgive me, *Aitatxo*. Forgive me for what I’ve done to you and *Ama*. And to myself.”

Dad waved him off. “I forgave you the day you left.”

Ander looks like he’s been dragged by the heel through hell’s backyard, but that smile is constant. “Let’s go see Mom,” he said.

He's changed, but his feral blade still has its edge. I could sit and listen to his tales, even believe every word, but he's Ander. Trusting my brother defies good sense. I pulled him close again, afraid he might slip away. "You won't believe this, but Mom made your favorite meal tonight."

Ander lifted a brow. "Veal chops?"

"With mushrooms. And she'll try to convince us she had a dream or a vision, or some mystical prophet told her through her tea leaves that you were coming home."

"Maybe one did," Ander said. "I'll tell her I had a premonition that she killed a fatted calf and I came to see if she still knew how to cook it right."

Dad laughed; family is his world, but Mom is his life, hippy quirks and all. He wagged his finger at Ander. "Tell her she can't cook, and she'll throw you out of her house." To me, lip quivering, he added, "Your brother's home."

"He is." And I thought, if he breaks this old man's heart again, I'll strangle him. I know I'm pushing and it's too soon, but I asked, "What are you going to do with yourself, Ander?"

"I can still swing a hammer."

Dad's tone went somber. "There's always work here for you."

"We'll start you tomorrow," I added. Ander hugged me again.

I want to believe he's sincere, but there's so much history. The kid had everything growing up—looks, talent, intelligence, and the right home life. In my senior year of high school when Ander was a freshman, he played on the sophomore football team and varsity baseball team. He earned academic and

athletic scholarships to USC, only to piss them away partying. The university expelled him, and our parents put him through rehab, then tried to kick start him at community college. He flunked out again, didn't want to work in the family business, and aspired to rule the world. He almost made it everywhere he went, but he had no anchor and he failed utterly. Then one day he left.

"You're a part of the business," Dad said, "but nobody works tonight."

He'd aimed this last part at me, and he's right. The bid is ready; I've checked the numbers three times and I think we can get the job. "We're starting the groundwork on a hillside project out in Patterson tomorrow. A big home with a new architect. Can you still operate a shovel?"

"He can do anything he sets his mind to." My father's unfailing support of his younger son has helped Ander through life as much as it has hindered him. Dad believes in him, though, so I'll put Ander to work convincing him that the community center job will be good for us. My father laid his laborers' hands over our shoulders and led us out through the shop. "Call up the boys, Benny. Tell 'em we won't make it out to the ballpark, tonight."

Ander held us up. "Softball?" I nodded and his smile widened. "Let's go. I can't remember the last time I set foot on a diamond." To Dad, "We'll bring Mom out. The poor soul needs a break from the two of you."

The game was a rout. Our team is a mottled assembly drawn from the ranks of our employees, and despite half of them turning out in blue jeans and work boots, and the entire outfield chain smoking through the game, we aren't bad.

With Ander, we were unstoppable. He was a brick wall at shortstop and in four plate appearances he hit two homeruns, a triple and a double. The other team was applauding his efforts by the final inning.

Now with a dozen people circled around him, he's regaling the crowd with anecdotes from his past and plans for his future. I love the knucklehead, but I wonder about him. He's never developed the discipline it takes to get out of bed in the morning, or to climb back into the same one again at night. Born on a mountaintop, he never had to climb, but the fact that he's drinking water and not beer suggests that he spent some part of the past three years at lower elevation. His climb may yet be ahead of him.

Mom has asked a couple times if I'm feeling well. Her skill at sensing the slightest emotional anomaly is unnerving, and I don't know how to respond to her. I left the group to order a couple pitchers of beer and to set my mind straight. As I watch my family from the bar, I accept that I am troubled tonight. Ander is home and it's like he never left; I'm happy for him and for our family, but I feel a hesitation that I am unable to name.

A hand clapped me on the back, and I turned to see Arlen Knowles, another builder who hasn't been around quite as long as Dad, but his shop is the biggest in town. He's smart, wary, skilled at getting work, and though he's not known for top-shelf quality, he runs a good site. Dad and Arlen have never been friends, but they've always been friendly. Arlen strikes me as artificial, almost condescending toward Dad and his Old-World values. He's thrown a few jobs our way over the years, but Dad never failed to be too busy to take one of

them, protecting his reputation like a kitten among wolves. I offered my hand.

“Hi, Arlen. Are your boys playing?”

“They’re out on Field 4 now,” he said. “I see your brother is back.”

“He’s home.”

“That’s good. Is he going to work for you and Martin?”

“With us,” I corrected. The bartender delivered my beer.

The table erupted in laughter in response to a tale Ander was weaving.

“I’m happy for you,” Arlen said, observing my brother. “My best to your folks.”

“Thanks. Go on over and say hello.” I reached for the pitchers.

“You aren’t bidding the community center project, are you?”

This is where I need to be careful with Arlen. “You know how Dad likes to stick with what he knows.”

“I guess I do,” he said, laughing. “But I heard you were soliciting quotes from subs.”

I hiked my shoulders in feigned defeat. “I tried to talk him into bidding the project, but he dug in.”

Arlen shrugged his sympathy, though I caught a flash of relief crossing his face. “I’m going to get that job, Benny.”

“Good luck.”

“And I want you to run it for me.”

Life has taught me to duck and cover when an unidentified object comes flying my way. “Is that right?”

“That little mall on K Street was tricky work on a tight schedule,” Arlen said. “I didn’t bid it because the timeline was unrealistic, but you got it done a week early. You should be running real projects, Benny. Let Martin and Ander build their homes. They’ll be happy. They’re two of a kind.”

“How so?” I know how, but I’m curious to hear his take.

“Your father sewed plenty of wild oats in his day. Some of them right alongside of me. From what I’ve seen, the nuts in your family don’t fall far from the asylum window.” I know Arlen’s sense of humor, and I can’t argue his point. “Is Ander here to stay?” he asked.

I said he is, but I don’t know. The reunion at home was touching and everyone wept. We held each other for so long, but he’s... Well, he’s Ander.

“Then do him a favor and step out of his way. If he thinks he’s edging you out, he’ll disappear again. You’ve got bigger things ahead of you.”

I know when I’m being played, and what greater manipulator is there than the truth? “He’s home, Arlen. We’re family.”

“Come work for me and do what you were meant to do.”

“I don’t know...”

He smiled like he’d set a hook and getting the fish into the boat was now only a matter of maneuvering. “I’m expecting to get this community center project, and I’ve got an inside track on a renovation in the Bay Area of a 200-store shopping center. My superintendent—you know Calvin—he’s retiring this winter and I’m too old to run these jobs myself.”

“I appreciate—”

“The money is good, and you won’t be competing with your father.”

I watched my family again. They’re content. Fulfilled. So, what’s bothering me about this offer? Ander might be willing and in time able to take charge, and Dad might even understand my position. But something I can’t get a grip on is burrowing in me. “What makes you so confident you’ll win the community center job?”

He waved off my question. “I’ll get it.”

An out of town company would have to pay lodging and meals for its crews or sub out much of the work to locals. There are three other outfits in town besides Arlen’s that can manage this job, and the story I’ve heard is that the four of them decide among themselves who gets each project this big as it comes along. The company whose turn has come up submits a comfortable bid, while the others render offers so far afield as to price them out of the job. Everyone wins in the long run except the customers.

“Where’s that beer?” Dad waved from his table when he noticed Arlen.

I raised the pitchers, leaving. “I’ll think about your offer.”

“You do that.”

“Or maybe I’ll bid on the center.” I smiled and Arlen laughed outright.

We reached the shop in the morning eager to start the hillside house. Ander jumped into the fray, getting trucks and teams out the door to the three homes we have in progress, and finally loading Dad’s pickup with the job boxes we’d already set up for today.

Dad enjoys pushing the earth around and I can see him and Ander working the heavy loaders in a ballet of orange steel. I feel an affection for these two men that had gone dormant in me. Ander's return has brought life back into Dad that had been gone so long I'd stop noticing its absence. I understand now what I was struggling to name last night, what stung me when Arlen made his offer.

"Are you coming?" Ander called out from behind the wheel of the truck.

I want to ask him if he's going to stick it out with us. I know what he'll answer, and I can't say I'll believe him when I hear it. Men like Ander and my father need to be tethered; they need each other in a way they'll never need me. "I'll catch up to you," I said, "after I get this bid in."

Ander spoke to Dad over his shoulder, watching me. "Can you believe this?" he said. His grin was wide now. "What some guys will cook up to avoid honest work?"

"Get out of here."

They drove off and I turned to the bid packet on my computer. Arlen is too confident, and he'll come in fat on his proposal. I'll swipe the job out from under him, but then what? I'll never work for Arlen, but he did get me thinking about my direction. I'm wrestling with the idea that I'm no longer needed here, now that Ander is home.

What I noticed last night as I watched Benny and Dad at the ballpark is that they belong together. More than that, the obstruction that I'd been so hesitant to name and the fact that I've been hiding from since my first day

working as a partner is that I *don't* belong. I haven't yet found my place, but it isn't here. Not anymore. I've been holding the company and Dad together until my errant brother found his way home. We'll get the community center project and Dad, with Ander, can run it. That should anchor them.

And what about me? I'll go. I can't say where, but it's time I set out on my own journey. I'm sure I'll find my way once I start looking for it.