



# HUMBLE

BY MARK LOVE • PHOTOS BY CATHERINE JACKSON

I got an email last week from Larry, the owner of the coffee house where my latest creation now lives, a cabinet designed to store bins of roasted beans so that they could be easily brought out and sampled by customers. “We love it!” Larry said. “But one of the sliding doors is dragging and hard to open. Can you come over and fix it?”

Impossible, I thought. Those doors were perfectly fit and burnished with wax. There must be some other explanation. I phoned and left a message asking Larry for more details. He was busy and unable to respond for several days.

Saturday, I was visiting a friend’s art gallery just a few blocks from the coffee house, so I decided to pop in and suss out the situation. Larry showed me the problem. It was not, in fact, a malfunction of the door itself, but something much worse. The cabinet was actually too small for the

coffee bins it held. They stuck out just a bit too far beyond their shelves, and thus the inside of the door was dragging against them. I was dumbfounded, knowing that I had built the thing precisely according to the specifications Larry had provided.

“Did you buy different bins than the ones you had spec’d?” I pleaded. “Nope,” Larry said. “These are the ones I sent you measurements for.” I felt a rush of blood to the back of my neck, accompanied by the slightly dizzying fear that I might have made a major mistake, one that could only be explained by my own negligence. I couldn’t remember the dimensions he’d sent me for the bins, as it had been several weeks since I designed the thing. And I didn’t have a tape measure, anyway. I knelt before the cabinet, unsure on which of us the culpability for this situation rested, but wanting very much to save face regardless. I knew deep down that it was possible I

had messed up, that my calculations had been careless. I felt desperate for a tape measure and a copy of Larry’s original email, the one with the bin dimensions. I had to know. My entire sense of self depended on it.

I swallowed my pride just long enough to assess the situation and devise a plan to fix it. Thankfully, the cabinet would not need a major overhaul, as I had first feared. Instead, I could slightly modify the door.

But that didn’t settle the question of blame. As I pulled the door from the cabinet, I resisted every urge to say something, knowing that this would make me appear petty and defensive. I also knew that the moment I got home I would pull up the original email, print it out, and bring it back with me when I returned with the door—along with a tape measure. We would settle this question. I’d be able to prove that Larry had simply given me the wrong dimensions

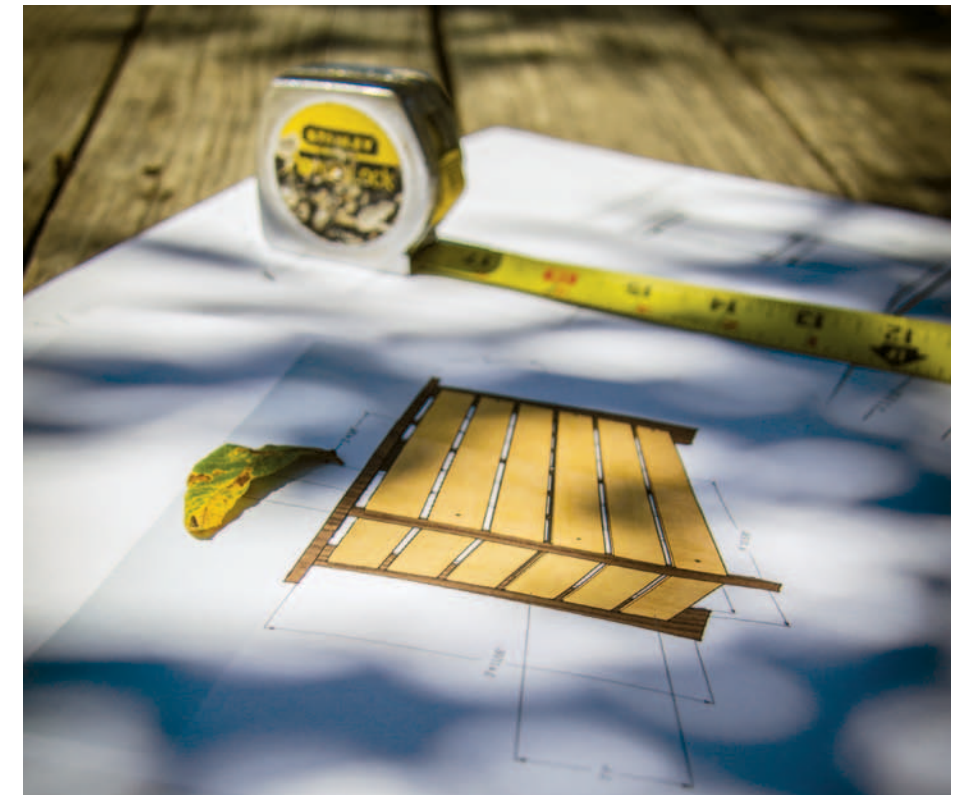
in that email; that this situation was in fact his fault. That I, the professional, had not made a mistake.

I’d still remedy the situation at no charge, of course, because that’s just how swell a guy I would show myself to be. But I’d find a gentle way to let Larry know the truth, one carefully crafted so as not to make me look too smug.

When I got back home, I made a straight line—not to the shop to fix the door, but to my computer to find that email. I found the dimensions, printed them out, and only then got to work making the changes to the door. Once it was done I set the door on my bench with the printout and my tape measure, the Three Things I must not forget when I return to the coffee shop Monday morning.

Monday, April 30th—which I realized after waking up that morning, was the eighth anniversary of my father’s death. It’s not as sad a marker as it was the first few years after my dad died. As time has passed, this square on the calendar has caused less grief and inspired more reflection. Each year, I tend to spend this day thinking more about the man my father was than about my great personal loss.

I posted Dad’s picture on Facebook first thing, along with a message about how much I miss him. Suddenly, my page was flooded with his admirers, each one leav-



ing a brief memory of the impression he made on their lives. I was reminded what a gentle, humble, wise man my dad was, even—or perhaps especially—after his debilitating stroke, which left him unable to speak or care for himself for nearly six years prior to his death. A man who had chosen humility had been handed humiliation, which he met, amazingly, with grace. As I read each brief eulogy I remembered my dad—how quiet and strong, how giving and unassuming, and most of all, how humble he was.

As I collected my Three Things and began the drive to the coffee shop, I thought about Dad and the stories he inspired—some that I’d lived with him and some that I’d only been told about. I stopped and got my hair cut on the way, which always makes me think of Dad, who worked in his father’s barber shop until he graduated college. This, in turn, reminded me of a story my mother likes to tell, from a time when my parents first started dating.



My father and grandfather at work.

My grandparents’ house was only blocks from the college my dad attended, so he lived at home with them. My mother came over one day and found my grandfather outside working on a fence in the yard. It was a fence he had only just installed a few weeks earlier, and now he appeared to be tearing it apart and digging up the posts. My mother asked why. My grandfather said that the woman next door, a widow, complained about the fence because it was over the property line and therefore he had essentially taken some of her yard from her. So he was going to tear it down, move it over one foot, and rebuild it. “How did that happen?” my mother asked. “It didn’t,” he said. “It’s not true.” She was speechless for a moment. “Then why are you moving it?” He didn’t answer. Instead, he just smiled and went back to work.

Although I never knew him personally, that’s who my grandfather was: a man who would much rather show a person love than prove he was right. It’s also who my dad was, something I saw with my own eyes, time and time again.

I arrived at the coffee shop and parked. I picked up the modified cabinet door and looked at my tape measure. I thought about Dad and my grandfather, let out a slow breath ... and left the tape measure in the car.

EDITOR: TIM JOHNSON