I'm a construction estimator. My talent and worth rest in my ability to compile and calculate costs for a variety of building and construction projects. I live alone on my 12-foot-square island with one north window and the sand underfoot feeling suspiciously more like 26-ounce, low-pile Berber (over a 3/8-inch pad).

It's Friday. Awash in faded triangular scales, solar calculators and incomprehensible architectural plans, I measure, enter, convert and SWAG my way through the workday until the muscles at the back of my neck grow too restricted to further relay a pulse from brain to fingers.

And then I go home.

As I drive, the vast, myriad detail of the day races around in my brain. Unrelated and unwelcome shards of data pelt away at more pleasing thoughts: the width of the hearth, the gas piping spec, water table depth, addenda number 3 . . . and more. "Why am I thinking about this?", I say to myself as I try to push it to the back of my mind. The clattering continues, ebbing and flowing throughout the drive until-finally-weariness brought on by the week begins to creep in to calm some of the clamor. Relief.

I pull into my driveway (3 1/2-degree pitch; 3,500 PSI concrete), hit the garage door button (1/3 horsepower auger-drive operator with two controls)
and navigate my way through the (16-by-7 flush insulated; no lites) overhead door. I line the car up perfectly with a mark I made on the back wall and stop my bumper a perfect 10 inches away. Wife and kids are gone tonight. Perfect. I pace 13 steps from car door to back door and fumble for the (Weiser®) key to the back door and stick it into the (Troy style x 3 brass finish entry) knob.

“Five sloppy spring-loaded pins. A child could pick it.” I turn the key. “We’re all gonna wake up dead some day” Reflecting on the impossibility of my last thought, I enter the kitchen and make a beeline for the (21 cubic foot white Frigidaire® with ice maker) refrigerator. I reach for a (Budweiser®) beverage. Kicking off my shoes, I plop dormant on the sofa and sit without moving for 45 minutes. Mind and body are in neutral. After awhile, I’m sure a shot of Christian Brothers® would go well with the beer, but there’s no way I’m walking the 7 feet to the liquor cabinet. The remote control is on top of the cabinet, so it looks like television is out too. I look around the room for my imaginary French maid, but she’s still not there, and I’m still not rich. I find France on the globe next to the sofa.

THE WEEK STARTS

Content in complete exhaustion, I reminisce on the week. It started out good enough. On Monday, I took a little one by just $400: a storage building for one of the local parks. My number was $69,500 and the second-place guy came in at $69,900. That was sweet. It was a little one—but still sweet. Getting it was great, but it’s always nice to know someone else is in the same neighborhood. An estimator's greatest fear is coming in too low. More than one comrade has ended up on the street for leaving too much on the table. This one turned out okay though. Tuesday and Wednesday were unremarkable; mainly getting ready for the bid on Thursday.

On Thursday, things started going downhill. The bid for the fire station was due at 2 p.m. I’d been fiddling with it off and on for the last couple of weeks but only really got into it on Tuesday morning. The plans were a mess, the specs boiler-plate, and the architect pompous and defensive when I called him with questions. I’d worked with him in the past, and he was always the same-zero help and scared lifeless to make a decision or accept responsibility. Of course Andy, the city engineer and
BID DAY

Thursday came, and I spent most of it on the phone. We’re a small office, so Tim (my boss) and I both do estimating and project management. The fax blared non-stop as Tim streaked in and out of my office every six minutes with little other purpose than to let me know he was worried that I was going to miss something. When I let him know I was getting annoyed (which I have no problem doing), he went out to bother Becky, our receptionist. At least he was out of my hair.

The fourth addenda arrived late Tuesday afternoon. It was 33 pages long. The bid date and time remained the same. We knew they wouldn’t extend it, because the still-not-yet-complete plans were three months late hitting the streets, and the city didn’t want to move the ground-breaking back. The mayor wouldn’t have it. “Looks bad, especially after the last fiasco,” he said.

You see, this wasn’t the first go-round for the fire station. I had bid it about a year ago (along with 14 other GCs). The low bid (it wasn’t me) came in $420,000 over the architect’s projected $750,000 budget. I believe the architect’s quote at the time was, “Well, the bidders didn’t understand the intent of the

They did try to negotiate it down with the low-bidder, but the talks stalled and the city ended up going back to the drawing board. The architect charged the city for the additional revisions. Good gig.
There must have been a lot of GCs bidding the station because we were getting really good coverage. The plans had been in all the area plan rooms, and we were getting a lot of unsolicited proposals. By 1:15, I had 13 plumbing bids and 20 electrical. Gustave Electric (who was low with me) pulled their bid at about 1:47. Someone must have talked. The toilet accessory guy called me at 1:51 to “see how his number looked.” I love those guys.

This time I came in fifth out of 18. It was an open letting, so the bids were read aloud. Pretty good number. I was about $48,000 over Douglas’s low bid of $802,900. All the bidders were bunched together pretty tight. No silly highs or lows. Only $50,000 over this time, so they’ll probably be able to make it go. I didn’t attend the letting. We sent Becky with my mobile phone. I stayed at the office to field any last-minute bids:

At five minutes to 2, I gave her the base bid number to write in. We’d written in the alternates earlier, so all she had to do was seal the envelope and give it to the receptionist. She called me later with the results. She said the letting room smelled like a gym sock. Of course it didn’t help that she was sitting next to a very nervous Bubba Douglas. Bubba seldom bathed, had nowhere near 32 teeth, and had a strong, strong crush on Becky. Bubba’s bid was read first, and he was low. As the other 17 num-
bers were read, Bubba was nervous. Bubba was sweating.

Once Becky called and gave me the news, all of the pent-up stress and emotion from the day began to leak out of my body. I went from exhilaration to exhaustion in under a minute. I guess everything in nature really does achieve equilibrium. I exhaled in full for the first time all day. It was no use starting anything else because I knew that I wasn’t going to accomplish a lot anymore today. Tim went golfing. Becky came back at 3:40 but left early because she missed lunch. She needed to let her dogs out.

I answered the phone for awhile, but it was all subs and suppliers wanting to know how they looked on the bid. I told the ones I liked; the one’s I didn’t, I didn’t tell. I was feeling kind of playful, so I started telling everyone who called that they were low with me. I’m sure Bubba would see the humor in that later on.

**IT’S OVER**

Friday was pretty uneventful, and I was still tired from Thursday. I woke up feeling “run over” and pretty much coasted through the whole day. In the morning, I set up a couple of spreadsheets for bids coming up and faxed out some bid requests to subs and suppliers for those jobs. At noon, I ran around to check on the jobs. I told Becky I’d be about an hour and half but I didn’t come back until 3:30. “I got hung up,” I told her. She glanced up knowingly, smiled, and went back to reconciling her lien waivers. I went into my office. Tim was gone now for the weekend, so the week was officially over.

Now I’m home and all is quiet. Real quiet. “Boy, that (sound-deadening, friction-fit, R-11 fiberglass) insulation in the walls really works,” I think as I force myself up and over to the (black cherry with raised panel doors; dove-tailed drawer bodies) cabinet.

God, I’m glad the week’s over, and I don’t have to think about work.

**About the Author**

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