



My Father's Tools

By Chris Villiers

MY FATHER'S TOOLS

I'VE SEEN that box in all the stages of my life. Like a child's favorite blanket or a mother's compassionate hug, it was always there when needed. Yet, easy to overlook.

Thinking back on it now, I'm amazed at how many events — how many different places and different emotions — I associate with that steel gray box.

When I played downstairs in Long Island — in the little room Dad carved out for my rocking horse and "Rolly Polly" punching bag — it was there. Not every day, just on weekends. That's when Dad trowelled brick for the fireplace, mitered lumber for the bar in the corner, and nailed hardwood paneling to create a family room from what had been a bare, unfinished, concrete basement.

A few years later, when he dug a septic line for Mom's washing machine, that box played an integral part. I remember happily digging in the dirt with my plastic shovel while he dug down in an eight-foot-deep the trench with pickax and hoe. Occasionally, he'd ask me to toss him some tool — some device for measuring or striking precise angles. I'd hand him what I thought he was seeking and he'd always accept it with a cheery "Thank you." Yet, seconds later, he'd be

out of the trench, rummaging through the box himself until he found just what he needed.

I probably was six years old at the time — maybe a bit younger —so I didn't realize that would merely be the first time that I'd feel a mixture of admiration, frustration and pride while standing before my father's toolbox.

When he got laid off or when the Machinists went on strike — which happened more often than any of us care to admit — I'd watch through the living room window as his afternoon carpool left him off at the curb, stopping just long enough for him to lift that heavy box out of the trunk. Weeks later, when he returned to work, I'd watch from the same window early in the morning as he loaded the toolbox back into his coworker's car.

I still remember how proud he looked, that autumn day, when, he came home carrying his toolbox and told my brothers and I that he was going to become an engineer. The toolbox would be retired. He got a job across the country. From now on he would work with his head, not his hands; he'd wear a white shirt and come home clean.

And I remember how proud he was five years later — after yet another layoff — when he got out those old tools again and went back to work with his hands.

I may have grown older, but I am still baffled by his assortment of taps and dies, precisely ground steel bars, calipers and protractors, and cutting bits best used on milling machines. Not the tools of your typical suburban handyman, but the tools of a jig builder whose hands helped craft ships and airplanes.

Rainy Saturdays in the garage often were spent helping him with projects around the house. He tried as best he could to explain how each tool is used. He

even pointed out the ones he milled from dropped-forged steel for special one-time jobs. But, right at the point that I'd start to become engaged and determined to actually learn how to use these specialized tools, he'd always say the same thing. "Don't do what I did. Make something of yourself. Go to college, get your degree. People who work in the office make a hell of a lot more money than I ever did."

With his lower-class New York accent, his *getcha dah-gree*, the lesson wasn't lost on me or any of my four brothers. Though, over the years, we've all had moments of regret.

When I first moved out of the house and rented a drafty sixty-year-old shack on Seattle's Brooklyn Avenue four blocks away from the university, my roommates and I borrowed his tools to patch up the place and keep the wind from freezing us that winter.

And when I bought my first used car, the first place I took it was to Dad's garage. He provided the tools and showed me how to pull the engine — not once but twice. The first time to replace the starter motor with a rebuilt one; the second time a few months later to replace the rebuilt starter motor that no longer worked with a brand new one shipped direct from the factory in France.

When I needed a pair of precision calipers to hold a summer job in a sheet metal factory, he had a spare set to lend me, and he took the time to show me how to use them. I was a bit embarrassed my first week on the job when, there I was, the college kid, using old-fashioned calipers with slide-rule type instrumentation. Everyone else was armed with the latest Germany technology with dial read out. But Dad's free calipers were just as accurate as the \$250 models my coworkers carefully oiled down and packed in velvet-lined cases every day at quitting time.

Dad's tools were there again after I got married and bought my first house. Catherine and I remodeled almost every inch — including the entire kitchen — and Dad dropped by on weekends to shuttle over tools, suggest ways to tackle jobs and offer support. While remodeling the house, it hit me that I should have learned more of what he was teaching during those rainy Saturdays in the garage. But, when I was a teenager, I was certain that I'd never need to cut an exact angle in a piece of aluminum, install a door runner or upgrade wiring for a new range.

After my daughter was born, his tools appeared again in a roundabout way. He crafted the doll bed she still plays with; the wooden trains she pulls across the family room floor with a stuffed purple dinosaur riding in the coal car; and the birch biplane that was originally intended to be a decorative ornament, not a child's toy.

DAD'S SEVENTY-SIX now. His toolbox still occupies a place of honor in the garage.

I visited last week. He was up on the roof — laying new shingles to keep the house from leaking for another twenty or twenty-five years. Once again, I helped him score a 36-degree angle in a block of solid maple and, once again, I felt like I was twelve years old, baffled by the complexity of his tools, awed by how much had been accomplished by my Dad and his generation because they worked with their hands.

Dad's toolbox was there when the team crafted assembly jigs for the first-generation jet fighters, milled parts for the first 747s that spanned the globe, and fabricated the Lunar Module out of some sort of Space-Age aluminum foil in a

My Father's Tools
By Chris Villiers
© 2000

clean room on Long Island. His tools welded barges that ply cargo containers up and down the North Pacific, frigates still sailed by the U.S. Navy, and the massive ferries that carry hundreds of cars — and thousands of commuters — across Puget Sound every day.

My four brothers and I heeded his advice. We saw him come home with welding slag in his eyes, his body sore, his fingernails encrusted with thread-cutting oil. We heard his stories of working all day while standing on the frozen harbor of the Brooklyn Naval Yard or laboring under a steady Seattle rain at Foss Tug and Barge.

We all went to college. We got our degrees.

We work in offices now. Our tools create spreadsheets and reports, confidential marketing studies, white papers, and even sound bites for the evening news. Important stuff — or at least we think so while we're doing it — but it can't hold a candle to Dad's toolbox.

His tools put man on the moon.