

The Measure of a Man

The crackle-finished steel boxes still stand at the rear of the garage, where Dad left them ten years ago when he retired. I drove up from Columbus for his retirement party and helped him unload them from the back of his pickup truck. We took the drawers out of the rollaway, lifted the boxes down, and put the drawers back in. Then he wheeled the rollaway to the back of the garage.

“That’s done,” he said. He locked both boxes and hung the keys on a nail. As far as I know he never opened them again.

My earliest memories are of him coming home from work. He came in the back door, sat down at the top of the basement steps, and took off his shoes. He undressed in the basement and threw his dirty shirt and pants into the corner for Mom to wash. She kept them separate from the other clothes because they were full of grease and grit. After he showered he put on pajamas, slippers, and an old terry cloth robe.

Mom had two cold beers ready for him, one on the kitchen table and one in the refrigerator. He gulped the first down in a single long swallow, then poured the second into a glass as he lit a king-sized Kool. He drank at a leisurely pace while he smoked three or four cigarettes.

When I asked him if he was tired Mom put her finger to her lips, “Shhhh,” she said.

After he stubbed out his last cigarette he kissed Mom on the cheek and me on the forehead and went to bed. I can still smell that mingling of beer and smoke when he kissed me.

After he died Mom said I should go through his tools and take what I wanted. I unlock the toolboxes and open the smaller, the one on top, and push the lid back, revealing a compartment running the length of the box. The contents are neatly arranged: a photo taken the day he retired, the flash reflecting back off his glasses; a Playboy calendar from 1989, the year Dad retired; and finally, four small rectangular blocks of hardened and ground steel with Dad’s name stamped on one side. I pick one up and find it surprisingly heavy; its edges and corners are sharp and I wonder what he might have used it for. I put one in the cardboard box, along with the photograph, to take with me.

In other drawers are pens and pencils, rulers and compasses, squares and micrometers, all sorts of measuring devices, and in another drawer a thick machinist’s handbook. In the rollaway box are the mechanic’s tools: Crescent and open end wrenches, ball peen hammers, drift punches and pry bars, grinding stones, and some tools with which I am unfamiliar.

The toolboxes stood on the U-line, where Dad was the die troubleshooter the last ten years he worked in the auto plant. When the Stamping Division celebrated its 75th anniversary open house, Dad took me through. It was summer and I was eight years old. I’ll never forget the noise: crash, bang, clang, and underneath it all a steady thudding sound. Or the smells of grease and oil and dirt. There was dirt everywhere, on the floor, on the sides of the presses, and on the

towmotors that hurried up and down the aisles. Above us cranes swung huge stamping dies in and out of the presses. When we reached the U-line Dad ducked under the yellow tape marking the tour route and went straight to the first shift man. He took a small notebook out of his pocket and showed something in it to the man. He pointed to the stack of steel, then to the press, then back to the notebook. The man threw up his arms and walked away, leaving Dad standing alone.

Sheets of steel went in the front of the press and came out the back, with a different shape, and dripping a milky-colored fluid. The men all wore glasses and long-sleeved shirts and gloves with gauntlets. The presses cycled up and down: thud, thud, thud. Parts went in and parts came out, dropping onto conveyor belts and moving to the next press. Always there was the steady hiss of escaping air. The noise scared me but when Dad came back he took my hand.

"I want to be a die maker, too. Just like you," I said when we were safely outside.

"No, you don't."

A small notebook with a grease-smudged leather cover catches my eye. The first thirty or so pages are filled with numbers and writing, in his small neat script. Information he used as a troubleshooter, I guess. But in the back are some items of a personal nature, some dates. The date he hired in at General Motors. The date he got his journeyman card. The date I was born. And there's one entry that catches my eye, that I can't forget. "Had a close call today." That's all it said. I never would have known what happened if I hadn't talked to Uncle Emil at Dad's funeral. He and Dad were talking about guys getting hurt and Dad told him a story.

According to Uncle Emil dad was working a roof die in a press when he heard a funny noise, like wood cracking. The magnesium safety blocks went flying and Dad dived out of the press onto the floor just as the press slammed shut. Dad said he was so scared he couldn't move. He just sat there until someone came to help.

I'm pretty sure I know when it happened. I was in high school. It was early evening and I was working on a history paper. I heard his car in the driveway and looked out. It was too dark to see much but I heard him and Mom talking.

"Did they send you home early?"

"No."

"What's that smell?"

"I messed myself," he said so softly I could barely hear.

"Oh, Karl."

I take the Playboy calendar out of the box and leaf through it. He crossed out each day that he worked, which left very few unmarked. He worked seven days a week for as long as I could remember, sometimes ten and twelve hours a day. The work was there, and he was glad to have it. "Hard times'll come again," he said. "You mark my words."

The week of the 4th of July is marked "SHUTDOWN." This was the only time he took

off, except for holidays, and we spent the week in Cincinnati, visiting relatives. My dad's family was German, and all of them were dead except for a couple cousins that we didn't claim. Mom's family was Hungarian. She was born after they came to the United States, but her brothers were all born in the old country, and worked as mechanics of one sort or another.

We stayed with one of them. In the evening the others came and brought their families. The women gathered in the kitchen and dining room, drinking rum and Cokes. The men circled their chairs around an old washtub on the patio, drinking beer or Uncle Leo's blackberry wine. They smoked and drank and ate, cutting off chunks of sausage and slices of cheese with their pocketknives, and making sandwiches with soda crackers. When the first light of dawn came the washtub was full of empty cans; the men rose and stretched and went off to work.

I didn't notice that Dad was different until I was older. We kids weren't allowed to hang around the men, but we had two tents in the yard near the patio, one for the boys and one for the girls. We hid in the bushes and listened to the men talk about forming sheet metal parts for cars: fenders and hoods and roofs, of forging axles, and of overhauling engines and bleeding brakes. And they talked of women. "My boss's secretary, she got the biggest bazzooms you ever see. I like to slip some sausage in her," Uncle Rudy said.

One night, late, I had to get up to go to the bathroom. I walked past the men wearing only my jockey shorts.

"Hey, Davey." Uncle Rudy pointed to my tiny erection. "You a big man already," he said. He grinned and shook his fist with his arm bent at the elbow, and even my dad laughed.

When I was older I noticed that Dad always sat at one end of the semi-circle of men around the wash tub. There wasn't any physical separation between him and the next man, but even as a child I sensed that he was not a part of the group. Uncle Emil, always the good host, tried to involve Dad in the conversation. "What do you think, Karl?" he'd ask when they were discussing a metal draw or trim condition.

"I don't want to talk 'shop'," Dad always said.

He'd drink three or four beers and eventually drift off to sleep, the event signaled by the rip-saw-sound of his snoring. His hands were folded across his belly and his chin slumped down on his chest. Uncle Emil brought a blanket from the house and draped it over Dad and carefully tucked it in around him. The brothers talked quietly, and smoked and drank, until time to go to work.

I hoped to get to know him better when he retired, hoped he would open up a little. But after he pushed his tools to the back of the garage he sat down in front of the TV with a Bud and a pack of Kools. The only time he was out of his pajamas was when he took a shower.

When I came to visit he was watching a John Wayne movie, Rio Bravo, I think. I sat down on the couch next to his Lazy-Boy.

"Hi, Davey," was all he said. He lit another cigarette, and tapped it on the green ashtray, even though there was no ash yet. The skin under his chin hung in folds, and on his face matched the color of the ashes in the ashtray.

"How're you doing, Dad," I finally said.

"Hunh?"

He wouldn't take his eyes off the screen, so I went to the kitchen and sat down with Mom. She'd quit smoking but still liked her rum and Cokes.

"He won't let me get close," I said.

"Me, either."

"I'd like to get to know him."

"Good luck."

Lung cancer finally took him. Near the end he said, "Morphine's a God-send, Davey. Without it, it hurts like hell. But it binds me up so bad my bowels don't work anymore."

The shiny block of steel stands alone in a corner of the cardboard box. I wonder about its purpose, what he could have used it for. I pick it up, and again am surprised by its weight. It's heavy and smooth and inscrutable; there's no telling what lies beneath its surface. I put it back and arrange the mechanic's tools next to it, holding each one for a moment, trying to draw from it some sense of the man and of his life. The 12" Crescent wrench is open part way, scarred from use, with grease still in the crevices. I slide the tips of my fingers over the initials KJK that are etched on the handle. They're still rough, though they must have been there for forty years. I run the jaw back and forth, and a tingle goes up my arm. I'm a logical person, like my dad, and I know this all sounds too sentimental, but these tools are all I have of him. On impulse I put the other three blocks in the cardboard box.

Sometimes I think I should have been the die maker. I love working with my hands, and I think I have a knack for it. I work on my cars every chance I get: change oil and brake pads, replace spark plugs and wiper blades.

Every Sunday morning after Mom left for Mass Dad pulled the car up under the soft maple tree. He spread an old flannel baby blanket on the fender and hung a trouble light from the hood latch. We cleaned and gapped the plugs, checked the points and belts, and tightened all the bolts and screws. When we were done he wiped every speck of dirt and grease off the engine, then did the same with his tools. He worked steadily and paid attention to details, yet I always wondered why we never got into the "guts" of the engine. When I noticed the water pump leaking and suggested that we replace it he said he would take it to the garage. "They'll know what to do," he said. "If they break a bolt they'll be able to fix it. We don't have the tools." I never could figure if he lacked confidence or he just didn't want the hassle.

I plan to use the same tools my father used, and over time hope to have some of the same experiences, feel some of the same feelings, maybe even know some of the same things. I know this is a long shot, but in time, I hope to come to know my dad.

I kiss Mom goodbye and put the box of tools in the trunk of my car. I catch the interstate and head back toward the city. I have a good job, good pay and benefits, just like Dad did. But it

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occurs to me that I'm crossing off the days until retirement just like he did, and hating my job just as much as he did.

Back in my apartment I set the box on the kitchen counter, open a beer, and flip on the ball game. It's the Reds and the Cardinals. In another ten years I can retire. It's always been something to look forward to, but for the second time today, I wonder. Are my dad and I more alike than not? Or am I just imagining that our lives are so similar?



photo submitted by Amber English