

Life In Dad's Laboratory

Leisure activities for the majority of fathers include some combination of golf, grilling, sports, and TV. My dad, however, confined himself to inventions that could kill his children.

It's not that Dad necessarily wished any of us dead—at least not on most days. He simply didn't consider items like a cut lamp cord with exposed wires and a plug on one end to be health hazards. I suppose he wasn't so much negligent as absent-minded—or obsessed with his numerous weekend projects. Presumably, lawyers had not yet coined the term child endangerment. Or maybe Dad simply hadn't encountered the concept.

Early in his career, my father worked as an electronics technician. But he acted as though he was an engineer. Frequently, he labored in the garage, creating or repairing electrical and mechanical devices. I was convinced he tore stuff apart for the sheer thrill of it. And maybe to enrage Mom.⁷⁴

Dad didn't so much live in a home with four small children as our family resided in his laboratory full of questionable experiments. Our kitchen counters were routinely littered with inedible nuts, bolts, washers, and screws. Finding a capacitor in the cupboards was as likely as locating a cookie. Assorted screwdrivers could be found strewn across the dining table, alongside greasy wrenches. And drinking glasses situated next to the sink might contain anything from kerosene to paint thinner, which is why I had to have my stomach pumped at age two.

I suppose Dad relied on Mom to remove perilous clutter from the proximity of small hands. But she had trouble keeping up. This best explains why, when I was seven, my younger brother almost electrocuted himself.

Oh, he lived through the ordeal. Thank goodness! Otherwise his death would have been considered my fault, and then I would have even more guilt than I currently carry.

I'd been watching television in our den that day when, all of a sudden, the set quit working. "Da-a-ad, the TV went out!" I hollered.

I knew who to call on for repairs. Dad could fix most anything containing tubes and wires. Merely being told something had busted spiked his testosterone level. Faulty mechanical or electrical components, which he perceived Idiots & Children: Life In Dad's Laboratory **75**

as direct challenges to his intellect, were as welcomed as rich relatives or embraced the way wealthy kin would have been. If we'd had any.

Immediately Dad surfaced from his bedroom. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I was just sitting here, and the TV went off."

Dad ambled toward the set. Stooped behind the TV, he shouted, "Alan!"

My baby brother sat frozen on the floor, his hands clenching a broken cord that he'd plugged into an electrical socket. The 110-volt current had caused his fists to contract around the bare wires. He sat there, suffering a continuous shock, emitting no sound whatsoever.

Somehow, Dad pried Alan from his power source. I'm not sure whether he unplugged the cord first or tugged Alan free. But as soon as my brother let go, he began wailing. Burns and blisters lined his palms. Initially, I didn't understand what had happened. Until that moment, I hadn't registered Alan was even in the same room with me.

"Didn't you *see* him behind the TV? Didn't you see him plug that cord in?"

No, I had not. I was, after all, only seven. Had I been sixteen, I might have replied, "Didn't *you* think leaving a damaged cord on the floor might be a bad idea?" Instead, I mentally chastised myself for being a careless, horrible big sister. 76

I'd nearly let my brother die on my watch—despite being unaware I was on duty. The irony here is that Dad still tells this story and laughs about how unobservant I was.

By the time my second brother was born, in addition to electronics, Dad had become infatuated with concrete. It seemed nothing gave him greater satisfaction than watching grey liquid harden to solid form. To the best of my knowledge, he'd never worked in construction or been provided any masonry guidance. He simply woke one morning and decided he'd build a brick patio, complete with a three- by six-foot indentation filled with sand. He christened that rectangle my brothers' sandbox.

Unfortunately, the neighborhood cats claimed this feature for their communal litterbox.

I don't remember anyone ever removing the kitty turds. But I do recollect the solution Mom devised to prevent my siblings from ingesting feces. As disgusting as that sounds, they needed disincentives. One brother in particular often mistook the cat poop for candy. Mom would station me (then age nine) in front of the picture window overlooking the sandbox. "Watch them," she'd command. "And don't let them eat cat doo-doo."

As much as I'd like to profess diligence in this matter, there's no telling how many *manure nuggets* were consumed before I noticed. Prone Idiots & Children: Life In Dad's Laboratory **77**

to easy distraction, my juvenile mind skittered from one thought to the next. I'd be watching the birds in the cottonwood tree that shaded the patio or maybe studying other kids my age meandering in the alley opposite our chain link fence or thinking about how oppressed I was by having brothers who I had to protect from *everything*. Then abruptly my gaze would return to my charges, and I'd see my youngest sibling licking a cat turd as though it might be a Tootsie Roll. "Mo-o-o-om! They're eating cat poop a-gain!" And then Mom would come running from whatever household task (or soap opera) she might have been engaged in to intercept the taste test in progress.

I'm not sure what Dad had been thinking when he built an outdoor sandbox without a cover, but I doubt he considered his handiwork would become a feline attraction. He probably never even noticed we *had* roaming pets. Two of those cats belonged to us.

I don't mean to suggest that all of Dad's construction ideas lacked merit. What they shared, though, was extended opportunities for illness and injury.

Once, Dad crafted a pair of wood stilts from scrap lumber and turned me loose with only this instruction: "Don't fall down."

Bumbling along streets and sidewalks, poised high above the pavement with no protection, I 78

became somewhat famous in our neighborhood. My friends' parents often exited their homes just to see me maneuvering like a clown on those red-painted stilts. No one had taught me how to perform on circus equipment. As I recall, my ability to remain upright depended solely on fear of public embarrassment and personal fractures.

Before the mini-bike craze hit during the late Sixties, Dad built a similar novelty in our garage. He used a lawnmower engine to power a shrunken version of a motorbike. The toy cycle ran about 15 mph and stood barely three feet tall. If he'd patented the design, he'd have likely become a millionaire. Instead, he spent hours trying to make the bike street legal so he could ride it in a parade—which he eventually did.

Once all four of his children were old enough to at least float for several seconds without sinking, Dad decided to build a swimming pool. To accomplish this, he had to dig up part of the patio he'd previously constructed. Why he didn't think to tear out the sandbox will forever remain a mystery. Instead, he removed a triangular section of the deck near the alley. But what he *should* have pulled was a construction permit.

The story I'm about to relate identifies why we have city ordinances governing most residential construction.

Dad's so-called swimming pool wouldn't Idiots & Children: Life In Dad's Laboratory **79**

have made a decent koi pond. It lacked a drain, plumbing, or electrical equipment. Presumably, he'd thought all he needed to do was dig a sloping hole to a depth of four feet, reinforce it with concrete, and fill his creation with a garden hose. Dad had apparently failed to research the effects of stagnant water or appreciate the benefits of chlorine. His kids had said they wanted a pool, and he'd built them one the fastest, easiest way he knew how. So what if they were now at risk of contracting typhoid fever?

An aboveground swimming pool purchased from Sears probably never crossed his mind.

For the first few weeks after the pool was finished, my brothers and I splashed around and declared our father brilliant. But slowly the recognition set in that something had turned terribly wrong with our watering hole. The surface color transformed from transparent green to murky grey. Next, a hairy-looking algae developed along the walls, and fish eggs appeared like magic. Mosquito lava and tadpoles soon took over. Our swimming pool shape-shifted into a community science project that drew daily visits from other children who wished to see how long it took tadpoles to lose their legs.

Fortunately, we knew when to quit swimming and start questioning Dad's expertise.⁸⁰

But Dad didn't.

He decided to convert the pool to a fish pond, which nature had pretty much already accomplished without his assistance. The whole situation slid south from there, eventually causing Dad to hook a sump pump to his failed design. He had the joy of emptying "the cement pond" many more times, following subsequent heavy rains.

When I was ten, Dad allowed me to help shingle a roof. Our house didn't have a high peak, so the most I could have fallen would have been ten feet. Probably wouldn't have broken anything too vital if I'd tumbled. I made sure to keep my shoes on, and I only struck a finger once or twice. "Hit the wrong nail?" Dad jokingly asked.

I didn't realize it at the time, but all these projects were pointing toward something more ominous; Dad was preparing to build our next house—alone. OK, not entirely by himself. He had a wife and four children to use as helpers.

I was twelve when Dad commenced installing the tile surround in his newly built master bathroom. He showed me how to wipe down the tiles, once the grout had hardened. And then he left me alone to conduct the work. Unfortunately, my attention to detail—and time—hadn't improved much with adolescence. In fact, I don't recall possessing a watch or being Idiots & Children: Life In Dad's Laboratory 81

anywhere near a clock that day. I figured Dad would return to instruct me when to commence cleaning the wall tiles. But after what seemed like a half hour had passed, I dabbed at the ceramic squares and wondered why he hadn't shown up. I'd let the grout set up so long that it was now affixed to the walls like barnacles to a boat.

"What did you do?" Dad reprimanded. "You were supposed to wipe the grout off in ten minutes!"

"I didn't know what time it was," I said, waving a bread-loaf-sized sponge.

Over the next many months, it became my duty to apply a steel brush to that grout and break free all the excess. I labored at this during the summertime, with no air conditioning to make the task tolerable. Dad had figured out (for the most part) how to build a house. Yet he'd lacked the skills to install central air (or possibly the income to handle the related electricity costs), so we had to "make do" with an attic fan.

After that, Dad bought a welder and built a trailer from an old truck bed. At age fourteen, again without much instruction, I drove a tractor that pulled the metal caboose. From inside the repurposed truck bed, my brothers picked field corn while Dad sauntered alongside the trailer. Every time I popped the tractor clutch, the trailer 82

tipped backward and the tailgate swung open, spilling my siblings onto the ground. Though this did not make me popular with them, it did wonders to relieve rural monotony.

I can't help but marvel at the magnitude of the construction projects my father attempted. A clot of guardian angels undoubtedly assisted his children's survival. Either that or the *Law of Idiots & Children* ("God protects...") worked in our behalf. My dad's proclivities for hazardous projects contributed to my eventual parenting style—which my brood declared *over-cautious*. A pity they never appreciated their good fortune.