

The day I feared Dad's love would go up in smoke

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Dad held property in high regard, perhaps because he'd had very little of it growing up, not even a bicycle. Our bicycles were to be put on the porch at the end of the day, in case it rained. If you used a tool, you returned it to its proper place, and you certainly didn't touch anything that didn't belong to you.

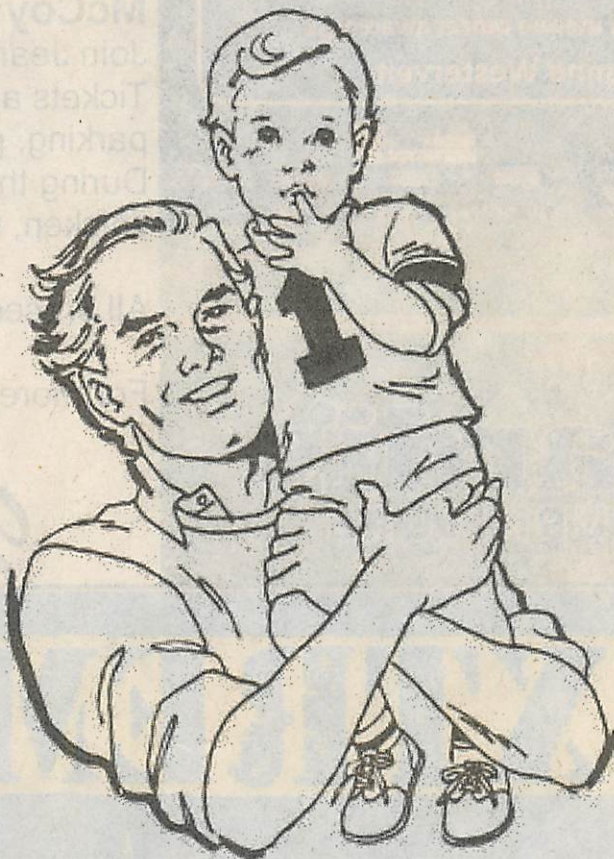
Dad was also a belt-spanker and hand-spanker, and one could expect such punishment with varying degrees of severity, depending upon the infraction. It was a dangerous way for me to live, as every day presented so many ways to incur his wrath. My mother covered for him by calling him a perfectionist.

School just out, summer hovering on the horizon, infractions were in the air. When I was about 7, Dad and my older brother had driven from Newport up to Boston to buy my brother skis at off-season prices. I had exhausted a neighborhood friend-search and sat sullenly on my bed. My mother was somewhere around.

Between gazing at my baseball trophies and emptying my ceramic piggy bank, it occurred to me that the thing to do was to go down into the basement and try my hand at soldering. I'd never actually done it myself, but I'd watched my father solder stuff plenty of times.

How hard could it be?

Plugging in the iron, I removed a spool of solder from the cupboard beneath the workbench. Unraveling a few inches, I touched it to the iron and watched silvery globs of it fall inside the lid of a peanut butter jar. Resting the iron on the edge of the lid, I was looking for some wire to cut and solder back together when I heard my friend Ernie calling me from outside. I left the basement and went to find him.



Ernie was on my Little League team, Scotts Rug, and he'd just gotten back from Edward's Sporting Goods down on Thames Street with a brand new baseball bat. It was a nice 26-ounce Mickey Mantle model and I swung it a few times. I told him I'd get my glove and a few balls and we could go up to Vernon Playground and hit some balls.

That's when we smelled smoke. The soldering iron! I ran down to the basement where flames were sweeping the workbench. Somehow, the iron had rolled off the lid and fallen onto a stack of Popular Mechanics magazines. I tried putting it out with a sheet my mother had on top of a laundry basket but that caught fire too.

"Mom! Mom! Mom! Mom!" I ran outside. "Mom! Mom!"

She was visiting next door and

came bolting out.

"What is it?"

She could smell smoke and called the fire department.

They showed up within five minutes, complete with Pat Reilly, my father's tennis partner, who was a fireman, and put it out. The workbench was ruined and the cupboard beneath it and all the contents. Flames had scorched the ceiling above the workbench.

I actually heard Pat say to my mother before they left, "Your husband's gonna love this."

"Get into your room!" my seething mother commanded me, "and stay there until your father gets home. You could've burned our house down!"

"I have to go to the bathroom," I said.

"Then go to the bathroom and then get into your room."

I went to the bathroom. Then I threw up. I couldn't read. I couldn't do anything except wait. It was late in the afternoon when I heard the car pull into the driveway and doors open and close.

I started crying. I was frantic. On pure survival instinct, I took a pre-emptive strike and ran downstairs and burst out the front door to get to my father before my mother could.

My brother was standing alongside the car admiring his new Head skis, and my father was walking around the front of the car holding a basketball he'd bought for me, which made my crying even more frenzied.

"What happened?" He demanded. "What's wrong?"

I couldn't speak. All I could do was cry harder and harder.

My mother appeared in the door and just stood there with her arms crossed. My father handed me the basketball and walked up to the porch and through the front door with my mother.

"No!" I screamed. "No! No! No!"

"What the hell's the matter with you?" my brother said. All I could do was cry. I was shaking. My brother had never seen anything like it and didn't even have a sarcastic remark.

Finally, my father came out of the house. I tried to run away, but I couldn't move. I was welded to the spot, shaking and crying hysterically. My father came toward me, but instead of beating me he took me up in his arms.

"It's all right," he said, hugging me, kissing my cheeks. "Calm down. It's fine . . . it's fine. You're OK and nothing's been damaged that can't be fixed."

I clung to him, sobbing, drenched in sweat, my heart racing.

Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, is the author of the Rhode Island-based novel "Irreplaceable."