



Measuring Up to Her Dad

Around his father-in-law, he felt like a sissy. It took just a few swings of the hammer to change all that

ILLUSTRATION BY MILES DONOVAN



ONE DAY LAST FALL, AFTER NOTICING THAT the gutters of my new house were full of leaves, I asked my father-in-law, a contractor, if he knew a good gutter guy.

Laughter.

"We can do it," he said. "I'll bring a ladder. Otherwise it will cost a hundred fifty bucks."

By "we," did he mean me? I hoped not. This is what happens when you have a father-in-law who collects 40-foot ladders and you're scared to death of heights.

"Maybe we should just..."

"Don't worry," he said, the skin of his face, hardened by summers working in the sun, creasing as he chuckled some more. "I'll do it."

I want to be as tough as my father-in-law. I really do. I've known him for 10 years now, and for most of that time I've felt inferior in his presence. The first time I met Charlie was much more nerve-racking than the usual meet-the-parents. Liz was 19, I was 26 (I wouldn't have trusted me, either), and she'd just told him we were dating. I felt squeamish about how old I was, but he was nothing but cordial and treated me with respect. The fact that he was a contractor and built like one, and I was a writer—and built like one—didn't help. Over the years I gradually grew more comfortable around him, but no matter what sort of career triumph I had, I still felt inadequate. When Liz and I bought our first house, things got worse.

We purchased what looked to me like a perfectly fine old house in need of a kitchen update and some fresh paint. To Liz and her dad, however, it was a fixer-upper. Charlie and Liz's brother Mike—it's a father-son contracting business—said they would do the work for free while we lived with Liz's parents. In weeks, our 1927 colonial was gutted. Charlie

and Mike took down most of the plaster walls so they could rewire, insulate, and drywall. They did a lot of work on Saturdays, and Liz and I would often stop by to see the progress and lend a hand where we could. When I asked if I could help, the offer was often met with, "Well, there's nothing really at this point that *you* can do." I would go out and buy everyone lunch, and pick up paint when we were low—and if I didn't document the progress on our house with photos, who would have? But while many men drool at the sight of chop saws, planers, and belt sanders, I couldn't have cared less. What kind of man was I?

I was the kind of man who didn't dirty his hands, who literally sensed a need to wash them clean at the first feel of dust or grime. Seeing me looking utterly lost in our construction zone, always holding a camera rather than a tool—well, I give my father-in-law a lot of credit for not trying to convince his lovely daughter to dump the wimp.

THERE WAS ONE QUIRK TO OUR NEW PLACE:

The door to the basement was in the powder room. Inconvenient, yes, but I figured it was acceptable. I was wrong. Charlie said we would demolish and rebuild it several feet away, and one afternoon he put Liz and me in charge of the demo. This is when my wife taught me how to tear down a wall using the claw part of a

No matter what sort of career triumph I had, I still felt inadequate.

hammer. (It's not just for pulling nails!) As I swung that hammer and the lath exploded around me, I felt a rush. I swung harder. Bigger explosion. Maybe this wasn't so bad.

Over the next several months, I helped Charlie install two microlams—long wood beams, almost as strong as steel, that are bonded together like

Man to Man

Measuring Up to Her Dad

sandwiches—to support the sagging second floor. I helped him cut crown molding on the chop saw. I also patched holes in the plaster-walled sunroom with joint compound, and I recaulked the upstairs bathroom.

But perhaps the most unexpected development since I moved in under my father-in-law's roof 2 years ago is this: The two of us started to become close. I've spent hours in his living room while he plays his beloved clarinet, practicing scales over and over again like a schoolkid or playing along with his Benny Goodman CDs. Sometimes I would take out a guitar and we'd swap (if not licks) stories about our fondness for music.

Liz had often said that her dad liked to read, but I had no idea how much until we lived with him. He must read a book a week, mostly biographies and history. I prefer novels and more current nonfiction, but we are both enthusiastic readers, and this has led to great conversations and several book exchanges.

And I didn't expect Charlie to be the type who was vulnerable enough to cry in front of other people. But I've seen him weep on too many occasions now to remember them all. Family get-togethers always stir his emotions. One time when I was living with him, the tears didn't stop for weeks—Liz's other brother, his wife, and their two small kids had just moved halfway across the country. Three-year-old Jack is Charlie's first grandson, and they had seen each other daily. There was no consoling Charlie. He was lost. For weeks he didn't pick up his clarinet.

OUR HOUSE IS NOW NEARLY COMPLETE.

Only some baseboard trim and the staircase railing remain to be installed. Other, smaller jobs I'm confident we can do ourselves. Heck, I think I can cut the baseboard trim, too. I'm less intimidated by our giant toolbox and less intimidated by Charlie. Though Liz wouldn't let me try, I actually would have liked to take a crack at fixing the toilet that broke last week and flooded the bathroom.

In fact, I find that I now want to take care of this place the way a man should want to take care of his body. Where once I saw the house as a weekend-ruining time suck, I now see it as what it really is: a 1,700-square-foot extension of me. It's a living thing, and I can't call someone every time it hiccups or we want to make it a bit nicer. I'm still staring down a huge learning curve, but it feels good to at least, finally, be *on* the curve.

I was lucky, marrying into a do-it-yourself family. If none of that had been forced on me, if I was still just as skittish around grease and grout and plumbing and power tools as I was the day we moved, this house would be in trouble. It took nearly 2 years of living here before it dawned on me: A man *has* to be able to fix things. It's the difference between owning a home and being a homeowner.

Before we bought this house, I would never have thought of building a garden bed out of raw lumber, for the simple reason that I'd never done it before. But I recently made two. Measured, sawed, nailed together. Nor would I have thought of spending quite so much time with my father-in-law, but now I don't think twice. I can call Charlie and he'll be here in minutes, not only to fix something, but also for dinner, to watch a game, or just to chat. He's become one of the people in my life I find easiest to talk to. And I realize now that even he had to start somewhere. Hammer that first nail, and don't look back. ■

Prove your DIY prowess

Hit the nail on the head every time with these tips from the pros.



REPLACE A LIGHT FIXTURE

Men tend to be afraid of electrical projects, but this is a breeze—as long as you shut off power at the breaker, says Danny Lipford, host of *Today's Homeowner*. After checking for power with an electrical tester, remove the old fixture. Then match the new light's wires to their color-coded mates—first green, then white, then black. If there are multiple white wires, strip a little insulation and twist them together. No copper (or ground) wire? Strip and wind the fixture's ground wire around a screw on the junction box, Lipford says. Now cap each bundle with a wire nut, and wash your hands before attaching the fixture: Dusty wires equal fingerprints on your ceiling.



MOUNT A FLATSCREEN

Measure your set and create an outline of it on the wall with painters' tape, suggests interior designer Dan Vickery of hgtv.com. But first stick the tape to some carpet and remove it, he says, so it won't peel the paint. Locate and mark two studs inside the outline

as close to the edges as you can. Hold the mount against the wall, level it, and mark drill holes over the studs. To conceal the cables, drill a 1" hole behind the TV and a second near the baseboard. Mount the bracket, hang the TV, and pull the cables through.



INSTALL A NEW TOILET

This is an easy way to enhance your bathroom, says Josh Temple, host of *DIY Network's Disaster House*. Once you shut off the water and disconnect the hose, remove the old commode and plug the drain hole with a rag to block gases from the sewer line. Using the manufacturer's template, mark drill spots on the floor for the bolts. Place masking tape over the marks to keep the bit from slipping. Next, use a small masonry bit to drill pilot holes—this keeps the tile from cracking when you redrill the larger holes. Place a new wax ring around the drain. Remove the rag, position your new throne, and tighten the bolts carefully to avoid cracking the ceramic. Connect the toilet to the valve with a new hose, and turn the water back on.

Laura Roberson

HOLIDAY HAPPINESS GUARANTEED

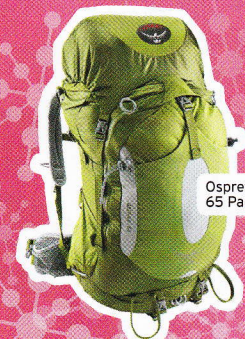
Visit your local REI or REI.com to find a huge selection of great gift ideas. As always, it's all backed by our 100% SATISFACTION GUARANTEE.



REI Shuksan Jacket with eVent® Fabric

MEN'S WATERPROOF, BREATHABLE JACKETS STARTING AT

\$99



Osprey Atmos 65 Pack

MULTIDAY BACKPACKS \$160-\$289



Garmin Dakota 20 GPS

GPS UNITS \$149.95-\$599.95

FIND OUT



For a free catalog, or to find a store near you, call 1-800-426-4840 or visit REI.com. Prices good through December 25, 2009.