

PETER SELGIN

The Building

from *The Inventors*, a memoir

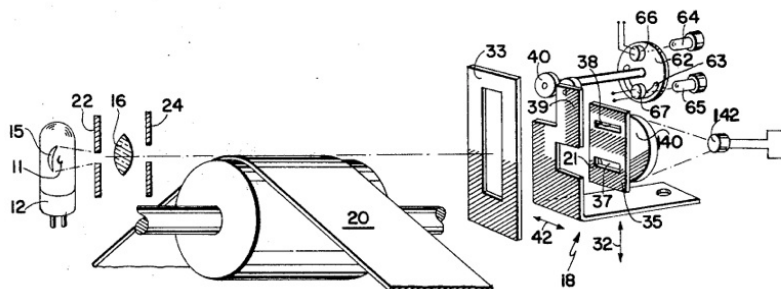


FIG. 2

1.

On the way home from the teacher's carriage house that day you stopped to see your father in his laboratory that you and everyone else in your family called the Building, a butter-yellow stucco shack at the base of the driveway where you lived. During WWII it had been a combination black market farm and bookie joint. Nesting boxes for poultry, industrial incubators, and piles of old telephones had filled its dusty abandoned rooms. The contractor your father hired to convert it, an Italo-Frenchman named Serge, who, among other things, had been a boxer, a floor sander, and a restaurateur, did a lousy job. Within months the "new" floors rotted; gaping holes materialized where chair and table legs and human feet broke through it. The roof leaked. Snakes, rodents, birds, and other wildlife built their nests between

the wall joists. Daylight poked through cracks in the walls. Your father had trouble getting insurance for the place, it was in such bad shape.

This was where your father conceived, designed, and built his inventions, his Color Coders and Thickness Gauges, his Rotary Motors and Mercury Switches, the Shoe Sole and the Blue Jean Machine. He didn't mind the rotting floors, the leaky roof, the spider webs. As for sharing his workspace with lowly creatures, he seemed to relish doing so, the lowlier the better. Once, when the president of an industrial manufacturing firm drove down from Boston to discuss a project with him, instead of greeting the man at the front door, your father made him and his three-piece suit climb in through a back window, a four-foot long rat snake having taken

up residence in the vestibule. Afterwards, the shaken CEO looked on in horror as the snake ingested a whole loaf of Wonder Bread that your doting St. Francis of a father fed to it.

He worked from dawn till dusk, seated at his typewriter or at the drafting table, or standing at the lathe or the band saw or the drill press, or at a bench soldering circuits, or at another bench cluttered with boxy instruments with meters and gauges, performing arcane, Frankenstein-like tests and experiments. Among the metal boxes was one with a round green screen called an oscilloscope. As it shed its eerie light over your father's thin gray hair, his sloping forehead, his wrinkled brow, his aquiline nose, he'd watch the pale green line dance across the screen, and you'd watch him, wondering what he made of it, amazed that he or anyone could draw conclusions from a dancing thread of glowing light.

He smiled when he worked, his face a study of blissful concentration. Whenever you walked by the Building you'd see him there, through the casement window, at his workbench or at the typewriter, his engrossed grin stretching from ear to ear. Other times, when a solder joint wouldn't take or the thread of a screw stripped, your father's thunderous expletives reverberated off the Building's rotting surfaces, to the delight of the neighborhood boys he would occasionally hire to sort screws and other parts from old inventions. Your father's flamboyant blasphemies, along with his Homeric farts, were legendary among the neighborhood kids, who came as much to hear them as to earn a dime an hour sorting screws.

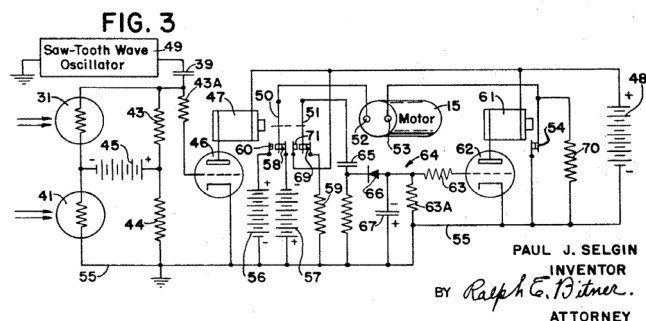
You knew your father was a genius. He spoke five languages and had a PhD from Harvard. He belonged to a society of geniuses called Mensa. Occasionally the society held gatherings. To one such gathering, a picnic in Westchester, your father brought you and your brother. During the picnic an argument broke out between two geniuses. They were arguing over whether or not a can of baked beans placed unopened on the barbeque grill would explode or not. As you, your brother, and your father looked on, the two geniuses advanced competing theories, supported by principles of molecular structure, gas and fluid dynamics, and particle physics. The colorful debate might have lasted forever had it not been interrupted by an explosion. Along with others who'd been standing nearby the two geniuses spent the next ten minutes picking scalding beans out of their clothes, hair, and eye-sockets.

Idiots, said your father under his breath.

He held over fifty patents, mostly for machines that measured and analyzed things, including the first machine that could tell a real dollar bill from a fake one, making it possible to get change for vending machines. "And never made a nickel from it," so the joke went. The patents were all illustrated with drawings like this:

2.

You used to love visiting your father in the Building. You couldn't wait to jump off the bus after school and run down the long dirt driveway, under the drooping branches of the dozen willow trees that lined it. You'd open the outer door and



cross the vestibule and knock on the inner door. To your father's *Is that you, Peter, my boy? Come in, come in!* you would enter, forgetting as always to close the inner door behind you. *Close the door,* your father would say, and you'd go back and close it.

The Building had five rooms. There was the

¹ Should the drawing not speak for itself, the following explication attends the patent application: "Referring now to FIG. 3, the control circuit includes transducers 31 and 41 connected in opposition by resistors 43 and 44 and supplied with current from a source of direct current power 35 which may be a battery. The transducer ends of resistors 43 and 44 are connected respectively to the control electrode, in series with resistor 43A, and cathode of a vacuum tube triode 46. It is obvious that one or more transistors may be used in place of the triode. The control electrode of triode 46 is coupled to a saw-tooth generator 49 by means of series capacitor 39. The saw-tooth wave modulates whatever signal is received from the transducers 31, 41, and even when no signal is received from the transducers, the anode-cathode current is modulated in accordance with a saw-tooth wave. The anode of triode 46 is connected in series with a relay winding 47 and a direct current source of potential 48. The relay winding operates

empty vestibule where occasional snakes lived, the bathroom with the toilet that mostly didn't work, the study where your father kept his books and a spare bed that he sometimes used after fighting with your mother. Then there was the main room where Papa did his inventing, and that held the drill press, the table sander, the

two armatures 50 and 51, each of which in turn operates two pairs of contacts. Armature 50 is connected to one terminal 52 of motor 15 while the other terminal 53 is connected through another pair of contacts 54 to a ground or common conductor 55. Conductor 55 is also connected to the terminals of two sources of potential 56 and 57. The contacts on armature 50 are arranged so that, when the relay winding 47 does not pass current, the motor 15 is connected through one pair of contacts 50 to battery 57. If the relay is actuated, contacts 58 are broken and a second pair of contacts 60 is closed, thereby sending current from the second source of electric power 50 to motor 15 to cause it to turn in the opposite direction. In this manner the direction of the motor is controlled to turn so that portion 22 may be lowered, or when the contacts are operated to turn in the reverse direction, to raise portion 22 and move it away from the object being measured."

grinding wheel, and two lathes, both as big as horses. Here were the benches where your father soldered and tested circuits, and the long table where he drafted his designs and typed on his black Royal typewriter. Then there was the back room, which held the band saw and a machine for cutting tubes and shafts that galumphed like a lame camel. Sheets and hunks of every sort of metal were kept there, along with more bins of spare and used parts.

Under banks of long fluorescent bulbs buzzing and flickering you walked to where your father was working, wearing his pilled motheaten cardigan and stained shorts or trousers. Past rows and stacks of drawers brimming with screws, bolts, nuts, washers, tubes, resistors, capacitors, solar and toggle switches, relays, solenoids, transformers and rectifiers, you walked, careful to avoid the holes in the floor. On the table by your father's typewriter the radio played a mixture of classical music and static.

The Building had its own special smell: a mix of solder smoke, scorched metal, mold, white grease, electrical shorts, flatulence, and orange rinds. Your inventor father ate oranges when he worked. He kept a straw basket of them by his typewriter. He tossed the peels into the gray metal wastepaper basket along with gobs of pulp that he spit out into his palm.

You'd stand by him near his bench, watching him solder a circuit, holding the soldering gun in one hand and the thread of flux in the other, or typing away with two fingers at the typewriter, or behind the lathe, turning its myriad chrome

dials like a locomotive engineer with one hand, the palm of the other hand held over the lathe's smooth spinning chuck, its knuckles and nails black with grime. From the spinning chuck long spiral turnings of aluminum, copper, and brass would spin away and fall onto the floor, where you'd sweep them up later with a dustpan and broom, extracting the longest and brightest, putting them in your pocket for the collection you kept in a carved wooden box behind your bed.

The Building was your father's world, his sanctuary, but it was your world, too, the place where you went to worship your father and experience the Mystery of Creation. Under its glaring buzzing fluorescent lights, between the holes in its floor, within a pall of solder smoke, farts, curses, and radio static, the universe was designed, engineered, tested and created.

In the Building's back room you had your own workbench, with your own (broken) oscilloscope and voltage meter, your own soldering gun, your own drawers of screws and other parts. There you worked on your own inventions, including the motor you built from scratch—well, not entirely, but you fit a rotor and magnet to a winding, and turned the outer casing on the lathe, and fixed a ball bearing to the shaft, and mounted the motor to a bracket, and soldered the two copper wires from the coil to a toggle switch, and added a capacitor for good measure. Then you attached an electrical cord and plugged it in. Before it caught on fire and a wisp of blue smoke rose from the yellow capacitor. You tried it without

the capacitor, but no dice. It still didn't work. But damned if it didn't look as though it might, if it didn't display all the external attributes of a working motor. It was a photorealistic sculpture of a motor, an ironically subjective motor. A postmodern motor.

3.

Your visits ended usually at dusk, when your mother would phone from the house to say that dinner was ready. Before leaving you would empty the wastebaskets and turn off the fluorescent lights and the furnace. Then, with the six o'clock siren howling in the distance, you and your father would walk up the steep driveway to the modest Cape Cod with a brick-accented front and dormer windows where you lived. Summer heat, crickets and peepers. Or October dusk, the air crackling cold, the sun getting ready to set behind a hill, across marshes, meadows and fields.

Halfway up you and your father stop for a pissing contest, the two of you standing side by side, unzipping at the driveway's edge, aiming father-and-son streams into the Queen Anne's Lace, pokeberries and milkweed. While pissing your father was known to recite his favorite limerick:

*There once was a man from Madras
Whose balls were made of brass
In frosty weather they clanged together
And sparks flew out of his ass*

Your father's urine outperformed yours in all four categories, thickness, altitude, distance, and

endurance, its glittering golden stream reminding you, as it rose and fell, of the brass turnings that spun from the lathe. Watching it arch and glitter into the twilight you'd say to yourself: when I can piss that far I'll be grown up.

4.

By the time you arrived at the Building that day it was already dusk. The lights were still on. You knocked on the inner door and let yourself in, remembering this time to shut it behind you. You saw your father there, at his typewriter, typing.

Well, well, he said. Peter, my boy, or something like that, and went on typing as before with two fingers and a smile on his face.

As you watched him you remembered how, when you were small, on hot summer days your father would take you and your brother to a muddy swimming hole under a railroad trestle at the edge of town, how your father would enter the water slowly, inch by gruesome inch, making wincing sounds, as if he were stepping into a vat of boiling oil. Meanwhile all the other fathers ran and plunged, like Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*. You longed for your father to do the same, to run and jump and plunge like the others. You'd plead with him: *Jump, Papa, Jump!* But he'd refuse. I can't, he'd say. *I'm too old.* Those three words—*I'm too old*—how they had tolled like a big bronze bell inside you. At such moments your disappointment knew no bounds. Yes, you had to accept it because it was true: your father was old: born the year the *Titanic* sank. By the time you and your brother entered the world

he was already in his mid-forties; when you came home from the teacher's carriage house that day he was pushing sixty.

But it wasn't age that prevented your father from plunging into bodies of water, anymore than it prevented him from throwing a football or playing catch, things he'd no sooner have done that he would have swum the Bosphorus or climbed Everest. It wasn't his age that made your father old, or that he detested sports of all kinds, or that he was by his own admission lazy (although the same laziness had not prevented him from dragging you and your twin along endless treks down abandoned railroad beds, or doing yoga exercises on a rubber mat in the same back room where he kept a bed and his books). What made your father old was his unwillingness to do things that didn't suit him, that failed to tickle his fancy or satisfy his curiosity. It was his selfishness, his supreme self-centeredness, not laziness or age, that made your father ancient, you thought.

You were thirteen years old, and had come into that time in a boy's life when he begins to find dissatisfaction with all kinds of things, including his parents, especially his father, perhaps in particular his father. So it was with you that day after your visit with the teacher, who was young and charismatic and who had taken a special interest in you, or so you hoped. In any case he'd had you over to his carriage house and offered you Chinese tea and played chess with you and spoken with you quietly over the pops, roars, and hisses of his wood stove.

As you stood there watching your father type, seeing the blissful smile spread across his sagging concentrated face, it struck you on that rainy afternoon when you first visited the teacher that something else had changed forever for you. You realized, not for the first time but with a novel mortified ache of deferred longing and petulant displeasure, that your father, your papa, the human god who'd invented your universe, was an egocentric, self-absorbed old man. 