# WHAT STILL HOLDS

## Christopher Wiley-Smith

THE TOSHIBA LAPTOP HUMS when I open it, a sound I recognize immediately. Air moving where it needs to go, heat carried away before it overwhelms the system. My brother Alex gave me this machine eighteen years ago, already old then, something he'd altered to outlast its warranty. Somehow it still works.

The room where he used it was added onto our house sometime in the mid-1980s, before either of us could name what it would become. It had a sliding glass door that never sealed quite right and thin carpet laid over cement that held the cold year-round. There were small interior steps with a railing that, when we were young, we treated like a dare, leaping from it onto our sister's bed. Later, when she moved out, a desk from the living room was carried in and set against the wall. That was where Alex put his computer.

Next to the desk he kept his tools and spare parts—screws sorted loosely, cables coiled, metal housings leaned carefully against the wall. The room always felt a few degrees colder than the rest of the house, and quieter. When the door was shut, the sound that escaped was the low, steady whir of fans pushing air through machines that ran too hot.

Alex didn't talk about why he liked computers. He talked about what wasn't working. Machines too slow, overheating, poorly designed. He talked about fixes, not feelings. About performance, not purpose.

I didn't understand then that Alex was teaching himself more than technical skills. He was learning that some things could be controlled; that precision, patience, and care could transform chaos into something that worked.

Our father wasn't around then, already gone, the house quieter but no less charged. My mother took pride in Alex's work when he showed it to her. She could see the skill it required. Alex accepted her praise without much response, never especially proud or even relieved. Recognition didn't change how he worked. He just kept building.

Alex learned, mostly on his own, that the problems he kept encountering weren't flaws in the machines themselves but in the housings that contained them. If you took things apart carefully enough, if you paid attention to how heat moved, how air circulated, you could rebuild something that functioned better than what you were given. You could improve it. You could make it hold together.

*The Oregonian* noticed eventually. A feature ran on Alex and the computer housings he was designing in that cold room in northeast Portland. I remember him being nervous about it, careful with his words, aware of how he might be perceived. But afterward, nothing shifted. The article didn't settle anything for him. If anything, it sharpened a sense that more recognition was still needed.

He found that understanding online. The forums Alex frequented were volatile—technical, competitive, unforgiving. You could be praised and ridiculed in the same thread, sometimes by the same person. But they taught him what our home never could—that mastery was possible through disciplined

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work, that failure could be diagnosed and fixed. There, his work spoke first. Precision mattered. Care mattered.

At the time, I didn't see this as anything more than technical aptitude. I was busy reacting differently to the same house, the same absence, the same pressure. I reached outward, hungry for reassurance. Alex turned inward, intent on mastery. It would take me decades to recognize his work not as withdrawal, but as practice.

There is a moral dimension to craft that often goes unspoken. Good work requires restraint. You can't force a solution without consequences. You have to listen to the materials, accept their limits, respect the laws governing how things hold together. Craft demands attention without ego, patience without guarantee of reward.

Alex embodied this. He redesigned housings not to show off, but to solve problems others complained

about endlessly. He stayed up late not because anyone was watching but because the machine wasn't right yet. This was not ambition in the usual sense. It was care.

And yet care, by itself, was not enough to teach him how to live.

When Alex started his business, when Computer Choppers became something others relied on, the logic of craft collided with the logic of worth. Productivity hardened into identity. If the work faltered, so did his sense of himself. The same discipline

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that had once offered refuge began to narrow into obligation.

He never learned how to rest inside the life he was building.

Alex's life did not resolve cleanly. I am not interested in forcing a coherence that wasn't there. But I have come to believe that the years he spent building were not a detour from living. They were his way of engaging the world with the tools he trusted most.

Crafting a life is rarely about finding meaning all at once. More often, it is about learning how to work within constraints, how to assemble something that functions, how to keep going without certainty that it will be enough. Alex did this the only way he knew how—by paying attention, by solving what could be solved, by making things that held.

What he made did not save him. But it mattered. And it still does.

When I open the laptop now, it hums. Air moving through passages Alex designed, heat dispersing as he intended. The keys are worn smooth where my fingers have pressed them thousands of times, doing work he never saw me complete.

It is not a monument. It's something better—a tool he made reliable, then trusted me to use. In that quiet exchange—*here, this works, you might need it*—was everything he knew about care that he couldn't say in other ways.

The machine hums. The work continues. That is the life he crafted, still holding. ✳

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