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Building Home

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I was born and raised in New York—in Queens until I was eleven and thereafter in a Westchester suburb. But I grew up, really, in the shade of three oak trees in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts. When I was six, my parents bought twenty-four acres in the southwest corner of the state, and over the next decade my father built, by hand, a vacation home. There were things I didn't know that might have made the place feel less wild: that the man who sold us the land had let a logger troll through the forest and fell the oldest, most valuable trees; and that, if you headed northwest half a mile, you'd come upon the backside of a popular ski slope, well populated in winter with loud, red-faced families. But my sense of it was that the forest stretched on endlessly, and it was all ours, and I could explore it at my leisure. I assumed that sooner or later I'd cover all the ground there was to cover. I assumed I'd continue to get braver, more adventurous, as time went on.

We had no television there, so I spent most of my weekends and summer days on tentative treks, making gradual inroads into the woods. There was one spot that interested me the most, and I came back to it over and over again: a small grove of oak saplings not far from our house, where the branches arched over each other to create a little shelter. The earth

beneath was mounded and peaty; it seemed to embrace my body when I lay upon it. The more time I spent there on my belly, picking through the dirt (relocating earthworms, wondering at the bugs that curled up under my prodding fingers), the more distinct the spot became from the surrounding woods. It was mine: I defined its borders with my fanned-out arms and legs. I see now that its greatest virtue was its proximity to my family's house—just far enough away for me to establish a private world separate from that of my parents and brothers, but close enough to keep home in sight. Wild, but not too wild.

I was eight then. The natural world was kaleidoscopic, malleable, and infinitely layered. I re-created my own version of home. The small dip in the earth: that was my bed. Those roots breaking the surface of the soil: those were my front steps. The changing sky was my ceiling. I traced a winding pathway to my "front door" with gravel pilfered from my parents' newly laid foundation. I lined a hole with black plastic garbage bags, filled it with water—carried bucket by bucket from the house, fifty yards away—and called it my pool. I worked relentlessly, domesticating the wildness, until winter drove me inside.

That makeshift hideaway sustained me for several years. But one summer something gave. The little grove began to look like what it was: a group of scraggly trees surrounded by scattered gray gravel. I suppose I got bored. I was eleven years old. My family was in the process of moving to a suburb an hour north of Queens; I was about to be uprooted, and I wanted something with more structure, more opacity—walls, a floor, a roof. What I wanted, I told my father, was a tree house.

I became obsessed. As if I were planning a real house, as if I had a serious grown-up budget, I began poring over photographs from magazines and catalogs. I saved one of those pages, ripped out from an old Ethan Allen catalog—a sunny, barnlike space full of florals and cheery country touches, a pitcher of lemonade on the pine table. I thought I could see what lay beyond the frame: a fragrant herb garden, a sleeping cat, a stable

life laced with logic. Nothing of that style actually materialized in my tree house, outfitted as it was, in the end, with a cheap rag rug and beanbag chair from Kmart, a milk crate piled with my favorite books, and some photographs of the school friends I had left behind. But I clung to that promise of everything-in-its-place adulthood.

I spent months sketching, then presented my father with a plan: a triangular tree house bridging three oaks, directly above the old hideaway. We began gathering materials, most of them salvaged—aluminum storm windows and corrugated fiberglass snagged from the street on garbage day, floor planks from an old attic. I accompanied my father on his next trip to the lumberyard. We returned with six sheets of thin mahogany plywood, a material that is both inexpensive and virtually indestructible—bugs don't eat it, and it never rots.

A few weeks later, my father finally stalled work on his own house to build mine. It went up over a single weekend in September. First we bolted three two-by-eights around the perimeter of the trees, to form a triangular base. On top of this went shiplap floor decking; similar to tongue-and-groove flooring, it prevents buckling and forms a tight seal to keep animals out. We framed the three walls on the ground, one with a window in its center, then hoisted them up and nailed them into place. We topped the structure with the corrugated fiberglass sheeting: my roof. The following weekend I bought some paint and covered the front of the house with a blue, cloud-filled sky.

To my surprise, the structure turned out to be tiny, most of the floor space rendered unusable by the triangle's corners, but that didn't matter much. I was four-foot-three and fifty-three pounds, and it was plenty big for my purposes. I liked to lie on my back, picturing myself at the bottom of the ocean. The sun-dappled shadows on the fiberglass roof flickered like waves, and the whole thing gently swayed in the wind. And it was large enough for me to sit cross-legged with my battery-operated typewriter, a birthday gift from my parents, and write. The first document I churned

out was a *Tree House Contract* packed with thesaurus-dependent prose that effectively forced my brothers to sign away their right to enter it, ever, without my permission. I curled my hand around my four-year-old brother's hand and helped him scratch out his first initial on the line. Moreover, I added a clause promising: "And once I learn to read, I will follow these rules too."

Soon after, I recruited a friend to spend the night with me in my new hideaway. We lay side by side in sleeping bags, squeezed into the center of the triangular floor plan. I had intended the structure to be a shelter from the wilderness outside, but come sundown it seemed to have the opposite effect, inviting the spooky outdoors in. Branches scratched violently against the roof, and the darkness outside our candlelit room seemed to stretch on forever. Hoping to dispel our suspicions about circling, hungry mountain lions, we opened the trapdoor and peered below, seeing only blackness and hearing the whoosh of the wind. Our imaginations spiraled further and further out of control, until we finally dropped down the ladder and ran, hearts pounding and pajamas flapping, for my family's house.

Daytime was a different story. In the sunlight, the house was a home base, a place to return to, something to keep in sight, to glance backward at as I ventured deeper into the wilds. Having domesticated this spot, I became braver wandering farther from it. There were new frontiers to explore. I descended my ladder and surveyed the landscape. I discovered new areas in the woods, and for each one I conjured a different dwelling. A rocky outcropping suggested a Japanese teahouse, similar to one I'd seen on a San Francisco postcard; a knee-high field of ferns suited a woodsy A-frame. I found a rotted-out tree trunk, the perfect place to wait out a storm. Fashioning shelters in the woods made me more confident in moving through nature. What had been anonymous (trees, more trees) became familiar, points of reference on my journeys. I could find my way back.

I suppose this was my first notion of architecture. I began to understand the dialogue between a good building and its site. Certainly, building a shelter brought me closer to nature—after all, I may have been too chicken to venture beyond the original outskirts of my family's home without it. It expanded my sense of the landscape and made a wider swath feel navigable. But at the same time, it furthered my dependency on roofs and walls, buffers between myself and the land around me.

These days, the landscapes that move me are those beyond glass; they scroll across car windshields and shiver through dusty living room windows. Framed as such, they are manageable and full of promise; I invent them and move through them confidently. Take away that boundary, drop me solo into a foreign landscape, and my heart pounds. I have no faith I'll find my way.

Three years ago, at the age of twenty-four, I moved across the country to Berkeley, California, where my boyfriend, Calder, had decided to pursue an advanced degree in landscape architecture. I was ready, I thought, to leave the East Coast. California had always appealed to me. My mother grew up in the Bay Area; to this day she remains perplexed as to why she's no longer there ("You married a Brooklyn boy," we gently remind her). I'd grown up hearing about the bridge, the fog, the contented citizens. They scared me, a little, but part of me longed to know whether or not I could be one.

In the months leading up to the move, I reimagined myself, an idealized version of myself, with qualities I now suspect I'll never possess. I bought athletic clothes in improbable colors and high-tech materials and hoarded hiking gear. I saw myself tan (I'm never tan). I figured I'd love California, adapt easily. "What's not to love?" I'd say—in what now seems distinctly New Yorkese—to anyone who asked.

I meant to revisit the tree house—its paint peeling and plywood warping—before I left, but in the madness of the move, I didn't. I thought I'd

sit there in silence, like a girl at her grandmother's deathbed, and hold my breath while hoping for a sign, something to indicate who I was and whether I was on the right track. I hoped that the space would have some knowledge to impart—something about growing up, and slowing down, and priorities. But I didn't find the time, and the moment passed. I packed up and left New York City.

Our apartment in California was a former carriage house, with trees close around our bedroom window. At the right times of day, the room glowed green. From our deck off the kitchen I could see the tops of palm trees, a constant reminder of where I was. Berkeley embodied a poem by Denise Levertov that I loved in college, "O Taste and See," about everything I could hope for—a rich, bounteous, saturated life.

> **The world is**
> **not with us enough.**
> ***O taste and see***
> **the subway Bible poster said,**
> **meaning The Lord, meaning**
> **if anything all that lives**
> **to the imagination's tongue,**
>
> **grief, mercy, language,**
> **tangerine, weather, to**
> **breathe them, bite,**
> **savor, chew, swallow, transform**
>
> **into our flesh our**
> **deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,**
> **living in the orchard and being**
>
> **hungry, and plucking**
> **the fruit.**

A few streets from our apartment, a plum tree bore a sign urging passersby to help themselves. Persimmons hang heavy above front lawns. They dropped to the ground and rotted there. The aisles in our local grocery store were stocked with fruits I'd never heard of before I moved here: pomelos, pluots, cherimoyas. At times, the bounty seemed unreasonable, even perverse.

While living in New York, I carried a compass to find my way through the sea of high-rises. Without it I was hopelessly disoriented, blinking blindly at every street corner, losing track of my lefts and rights. I get lost more rarely here. Directions are given in relation to visible natural features—you're either heading toward the hills or toward the bay. I eventually began to find these brackets immensely comforting; they were my first glimmerings of groundedness, offering a sense of scale and orientation. But for a long time I felt adrift.

Early in his first semester, Calder learned to identify local plant species for a class. He would tell me the names of the trees we passed, as if to root me in our new landscape: *Eucalyptus sideroxylon, Pinus radiati, Melaleuca ericafolia.* I watched his mouth but retained nothing. I tried to learn a bizarre new schedule of seasons: snowless winters, summer days that begin and end with fog, spectacularly hot autumn afternoons. I took walks through the neighborhood. But each day it felt like starting over. All it took was a deep inhale and I was blindsided. I blamed the eucalyptus trees that scented the air. I blamed the orange blossoms. The land felt wrong.

A few months after the move, an old friend came to visit me. In a beer garden strung with lights, he leaned in to tell me, "You used to laugh more. Where's your sparkle?" I promptly burst into tears. Later, trying to soothe me, Calder asked, "When was the last time you really felt like yourself?" Like an internal compass finding north, my mind turned to an image of the tree house. The world unfurled around me, beckoning with possibility. It'd been a long time since I felt that way.

After a year in Berkeley, I went back east to see my family. I was itchy for Massachusetts, where I knew what to expect in June: white-and-pink bursts of mountain laurel carpeting the hills, the mounting buzz of insects, grass so green it glows. (In California, summer means yellow fields and dry grass that pricks you when you sit.) I was eager to see my tree house, the memory and significance of which had grown larger than life in the intervening year. My parents warned me against visiting it. "I think you'll be depressed," my father said. I was intrigued.

I grabbed a large stick on my walk to the site. The house slanted slightly away from me. As it turned out, our bolt-through-the-heart-of-the-tree approach was more than one of the oaks could withstand: it had died of dry rot. My father took it upon himself to save the structure—"I couldn't bear to lose it," he tells me now—and quietly replaced the tree with a sturdy wooden post, set atop a large flat stone to keep it dry.

I stood beneath the gaping trapdoor and banged at the opening with my stick, warning away any inhabitants. Praying that nothing would scurry over my head, I climbed up and hoisted myself inside. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the dim light, but when they did I was shocked. Half-chewed acorns blanketed the wood plank floor. Some creature had methodically undone my rag rug: cloth strips lay in a rhythm of parallel lines, an incomplete project. The curtains and tapestry I had hung so optimistically more than a decade earlier were chewed and draped in furry chrysalises. My heart thudded, like a book closing. Disappointment drove me back down the ladder, and I stepped gingerly from rung to rung, eyes cast firmly to the ground.

And just like that it was over, or almost. That night I lay in bed and wondered. Tried to feel something new. It was still just me, a day older, still searching for something to build. Something to hold on to. I went back to California. In the air, on the flight there, I thought about my world: now

contracting, now expanding, natural as breath. Later Calder curled around me in our bed, his body shaping mine. I began to understand: there's no place to go but forward. The land isn't going to claim me.

The next morning I bolted awake at sunrise, still on East Coast time. Outside, the fog had rolled in; the air was cold and wet. The cherry tomatoes were out in full effect, little red bombs dotting the yard. Walking to the mailbox to get the paper, I reached up to pluck a lemon from my neighbor's tree, barely on tiptoes. The fruit fell into my hands. I pierced its electric yellow skin with my fingernail and held it to my nose. Then I turned for home.