

Drunks

In 1948, when I was nine years old, I helped my father build a house--the house I lived in for the next ten years and where my mother and he lived until he was fired from his foreman's job at ~~the~~ French Oil Milling Machine Company for being late to work a hundred too many times.

We'd just moved from Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley the year before. My father and grandfather had had a falling-out, which can happen when a son works for his father. So we moved to my mother's town, on the western side of Ohio, where post-war industries were just starting up. The idea of buying land and building on it was inspired by the housing project we'd had to settle in since there was nowhere else. It was called Victory Heights, was barracks-like and a natural for returning Second World War veterans, of which my father was none. How we managed to get into the place I'm not sure, but we were there more than a year, on Nimitz Court, while the house in the country was taking shape. All the streets in Victory Heights were named for admirals or generals.

in a city crowded with new jobs and opportunities.
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The road where our house would be was named after a horse breeder who lived nearby. I remember how much better that suited me. Later, my first girlfriend was this horse-dealer's daughter. Everything seemed new and sort made up on the spot after the war, so it wasn't surprising that streets and roads should be named after people still alive. Perhaps it gave them something to live up to.

Garbry Road began at the city limits and ambled a couple of miles or so toward a larger road. It was really a country lane. Our property was about halfway between town and where the road ended. We dug the foundation in the spring, near my birthday; we also dug holes for a row of maples trees, meant to celebrate my birthday--and also, I think, to inspire me to a greater work ethic during the hot summer months and cold winter months it would take to finish the house.

Enough to say about the house ~~itself~~ that my father built it virtually by himself with his own two hands: making something, it seemed to my young eyes, from nothing; ^{creating} order out of a chaos of bricks and boards, sawing and nailing. I carried things, mixed things, messed up things, asked a thousand questions, and generally kept my father company. I turned nine when we started and ten when we more or less finished, though the house, as a perfect construct, was never quite finished. My [^] worked on it the way some people write books, after work. He was thirty-three and putting in sixteen [^], seventeen-hour days. After awhile it may have been psychologically impossible [^] to finish the house, just as it was psychically impossible for my mother not to complain.

Father
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For him
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Nothing else could be or feel this erased, as if ^{a cork} the stone in the chest had suddenly melted ^{into the} bloodstream.

Anyway, the house went up. I remember one early March day, nearly a year into its building, when it was still depressingly cold and snowy and windy and there was yet no roof, I remember sitting ~~at the edge of~~ ^{at the edge} of what would be my bedroom looking up at the dead white sky thinking that nothing else could be ~~like~~ ^{this empty}. In the middle of the ~~empty~~ ^{open} space of the house my father had placed an oil drum and started a fire. All winter he'd started a fire. But this particular day, with spring ^{and the fire climbing into the air} promised by the end of the month, the hopelessness of ever getting shelter over our heads ^{strangely and suddenly} combined with a touch of euphoria in my mind and I felt lifted: I thought what a great thing not to have to have a roof and to live under the sky. I felt watched and oddly cared for and knew that if I fell asleep among these walls that were like ruins I could be picked like an apple from the floor. The hand that does these things could just make me disappear.

The snowblind sky.

whether he was at the wheel or not,

I learned to drink around ^{By} that oil-barrel fire. It was that watery beer made in Cincinnati. ^{at the end of the day} my father would have drunk himself dumb, usually with the help of a little whiskey to build ^{heat} a fire under the beer. I could barely down a bottle. We'd drive back to Victory Heights drunk. ~~see~~ ^{it} would a long time into the future before I ever felt unsafe in my father's company, though I wasn't with him when he wrecked the new car.

as if the paint were still wet.

It was a '48 Chevy Coupe, maroon, a month old, and sleek, [^] He'd won the car in a raffle at the local movie theater. You got tickets for the raffle by buying goods from the town's merchants. Building a house meant a lot of purchases. Half the tickets must have been his. ^{My mother and he} ~~My mother and he~~ were returning from a party in Dayton and he ran a light. The accident totalled the car, but they walked away without a wound. The alcohol must have saved them.

My impression is that if you can stop drinking before you're forty you have a chance. My father ~~though~~ ^{quite} was drunk every day of his life, except for a few Sundays. It's not surprising that he couldn't ^{quite} complete the house; or, as he aged past forty, get to his job on time. He was a kind of ^{failed} house himself--large, complicated, incomplete.

It was meant to be ~~the~~ reward for a job well-done.

The summer we moved into the Garbry Road house he and I drove up to Canada to fish. [^] Just the two of us. I remember ^{the fish} it was a big lake, as all lakes seem to be once you're on them, and it was deep and clear and black cold, somewhere in Ontario. ^{big} We pulled in a muskie and a great deal of pickerel. The northerners would float up under the boat, take a look and pass under--they were hard to catch and mean. The boat was like ^{a small room in a} a house, the cab of his truck, and every closed-in space my father ^{dwelt in} dwelt in it had booze in it. The second evening on the lake my father stood up drunk and began to rock. It was a dance, pathetic yet magical. And I knew we would never turn over.

We were alone.

We ^{were} ~~were~~ out on the water most of the day.