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Building

We were a small crew, just four guys. We framed houses.

George was the boss — a big, smart loudmouth built like a linebacker, but a linebacker who had spent the previous couple of decades tackling cheesecake rather than running backs. He was still freakishly strong and even nimble, despite his girth, and he worked harder than any of the rest of us — something he never tired of pointing out. He wore Bill Lumbergh-style aviator glasses, no matter the season, no matter the weather. I remember thinking that he probably wore them to bed.

Eric was a chain-smoking country boy who could operate or fix any type of machinery in need of operating or fixing. He wanted desperately to be a cop.

Steve was a low-key, ginger-haired oddball — a fine carpenter and, I eventually learned, an excellent photographer. He was married to a Yale art professor, and was an occasional adjunct teacher himself.

I was in my early 20s, and taking time off from college — for the second time. I was pretty good with a saw and a hammer, and privately proud as hell that I could hold my own with the other three.

Steve and I hit it off. For example, we liked the same sort of music — Alex Chilton, Stooges, Replacements, pretty much anything driven by three simple chords — but what remained understood and unspoken the whole time we worked together was that neither of us planned to frame houses forever. For his part, George viewed the two of us as amusing anomalies — liberals who knew how to work. (I don't recall if George had a nickname for Steve, but he routinely called me Tinkerbell.)

Our crew, I came to understand, was roughly more or less diverse as the other house-framing outfits working the Connecticut shoreline in the mid-1980s. Not racially diverse — pretty much every non-union construction crew I recall from those days, in that part of the state, was all-white — but we were culturally, politically, aesthetically diverse, the sort of combustible, memorable mix that's not easy to find these days in any workplace or, as far as I can tell, any place at all.

I didn't know how long I would work for George, but the money was good and I enjoyed what I chose to see as the simplicity of that life: waking early, working like a dog, going to sleep far too late and being young enough, just barely, to bounce back and do it all over again the next day. I had the luxury of knowing that I could leave that life whenever I chose to head back to college, and I was just conscious enough to feel guilty about it.

My dad and mom were not keen on me leaving school, yet again, to work construction. But with my five siblings long gone, out in the world, living their own lives, my parents welcomed me back under their roof while they negotiated an uneasy truce with the stillness that had settled on their home — a modest four-bedroom Colonial that had always felt too small for the eight of us, and overnight had grown too big, and far too quiet, for our mom and dad alone.

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That year, autumn came to southern New England in much the same way that, as one of Hemingway's characters once put it, rich people go broke: gradually, then suddenly. By mid-October the air, even at midday, had a feel of late fall. We hadn't seen much frost — lucky for us, as anyone who's ever lugged 50 pounds of shingles up a ladder to an ice-slick roof can attest — but summer itself was well and truly over. Green was giving way to red, orange and that warm yellow-gold that flares for a couple of weeks each fall, and is seen nowhere else on earth but in the dying leaves of otherwise nondescript northern trees.

One morning, right around sun-up, I drove on to our job site in my beloved, banged-up VW Bug, the first car I ever owned. I bought it for $50, installed a $300 stereo, and I felt like a prince when I was behind the wheel. I didn't see my workmates, but their trucks were already there and I knew where they would be at that hour. I grabbed my tool belt from the passenger seat, got out of the car and walked up a bouncy, two-by-twelve wooden plank to the first floor of the house, sipping coffee as I went. The first floor was completely framed, with not-yet-sheetrocked stud walls, headers and sills mapping out rooms, closets, doorways, and windows.

The people who move in here, I thought to myself, *will see only the skin of this place. They'll never see the strong, straight bones that keep it standing.*

I climbed the temporary staircase leading from the first floor to the second. We had swept the second-floor deck clean the previous night, before leaving the job site. George, Steve and Eric were up there, Eric and Steve smoking, all three of them with cups of coffee in their hands, their tool belts curled up like strange, potentially dangerous animals on the spotless deck at their feet. Steve waved. Eric nodded. George stared.

In the clear early-morning light, the three of them looked like actors on an outdoor stage — minor lords of the exiled court in Arden, perhaps, but clothed in jeans, sweatshirts and battered Timberlands. I walked across that bright expanse of decking, and joined them.

The house we were building was not small. Its foundation had been poured in a clearing in the woods alongside an outcropping of granite that rose through the thin soil and spongy moss like a massive, nubby tonsure. By the time we finished framing the place, the peak of the roof would be well above the tops of the trees surrounding the house. But that morning, on that deck, the four of us stood on a level with the treetops. The scent of cigarette smoke, coffee, old leather

and sawdust eddied about in the crisp air. No one spoke. Even George, who loved to start the day with some sort of insult or provocation, was uncharacteristically quiet.

Anticipation is too loaded a word for what I felt as I stood there, at the edge of the deck, beneath a cloudless fall sky. It was more a kind of primed stillness — a readiness that had nothing to do with the hours of hard work ahead.

I couldn't place the sound at first, but something inside me knew what it was before my mind caught up to it. In that instant between feeling and knowing what was coming — all four of us growing even quieter, somehow, the moment we heard it behind us — I felt a kind of solemn gladness race through me. It was like a wind had kicked up in my blood.

I turned, we all turned, to the north and like something from a myth or a half-remembered children's story the wild geese flew toward us. The urgent, imperative honking that moments earlier had heralded their coming stopped, and as the long, rippling V of the flock flew by, no more than an arm's length above us — so close we could see their bright, unstartled eyes and hear the feathery rush and muffled creak of their wings — I'm sure that none of us breathed.

Seconds later — 15 seconds? Maybe 20? — all of the geese were out of sight, but they were not yet fully gone. They took up their companionable honking again as they vanished beyond the treetops to the south until, by degrees, the sound of them calling to one another faded, in time, to nothing. They were following some ancient, invisible pathway of their own, and it felt as if, somehow, they were drawing out from my heart my own unease and my deep uncertainty about what I was — or was not — doing with my life. I had the grave, exhilarating sense that the birds were physically pulling those useless burdens from me, bearing them away, a long, dark thread unspooling in the air. There was a clean, empty space, then, where that thread had long lain tightly coiled — a space, I understood to my astonishment, that I was free to fill with anything. Anything at all.

Over the years, that space has been reshaped, refilled, emptied out and refilled, again and again, by people, landscapes, loss, fate. But whenever I see — and even more intensely, whenever I hear — a flock of geese on the wing, I recall that first time, in the Connecticut woods, connecting with something wholly wild that was meant to last in a way that men and women can never really hope to last, even if our works, improbably, outlive us. Always, at those moments, I feel a tug in my chest. I stop what I'm doing, and I wait.

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George, Eric, Steve and I stood for a while in the silence afterward, gazing off to different points of the compass. After a time, we tossed our cooling coffees off the deck, put on our tool belts, and we set about framing that second floor.

We worked hard that day, and at quitting time — as the cool evening came down and the brilliant trees faded to shadow — we were satisfied with what we had built.