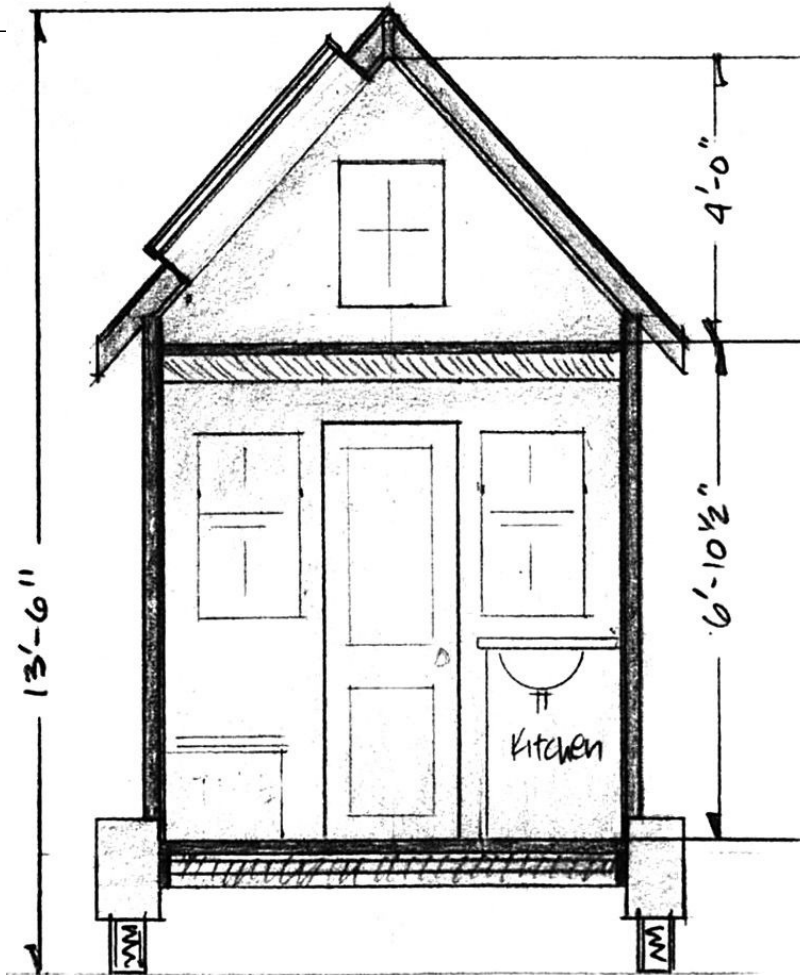




THE
BIG TINY

A BUILT-IT-MYSELF MEMOIR
DEE WILLIAMS





SECTION A

The Big Tiny

A Built-It-Myself Memoir



DEE WILLIAMS

BLUE RIDER PRESS

a member of Penguin Group (USA)

New York

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014



USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia • New Zealand • India • South Africa • China

penguin.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williams, Dee (Builder)

The big tiny : a built-it-myself memoir / Dee Williams.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-101-63471-4

1. Williams, Dee—Homes and haunts—United States. 2. Ecological houses—United States—Design and construction. 3. Small houses—United States—Design and construction. 4. Architects and builders—United States—Biography. 5. Do-it-yourself work—Social aspects—United States. 6. Alternative lifestyles—United States. 7. Sustainable living—United States. 8. Olympia (Wash.)—Biography. 9. Portland (Or.)—Biography. I. Title.

TH4860.W525 2014 2014002151

640.92—dc23

[B]

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For Rita and RooDee

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[HAPPY ENOUGH](#)

[SOUTHEAST STATE PARK](#)

[THE DRIVE](#)

[TORSADES](#)

[A MOMENT OF GENIUS WHILE WAITING](#)

[TINY HOUSE MAN](#)

[FEAR AND LOGIC](#)

[ANTHROPOLOGY 101](#)

[DREAM BIG, BUILD SMALL](#)

[BLONDIE ON THE ROOF](#)

[WHO CARES IF I APPEAR FOOLISH?](#)

[HOBO-A-GO-GO](#)

[THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD](#)

[MODERN CONVENIENCES](#)

[SLACK LINE](#)

[A SIX-INCH DROP HITCH](#)

[KEEPING THE PEACE](#)

[BROKE BUTT MOUNTAIN](#)

[ONE MORE THING](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)



Happy Enough

(OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON, MARCH 2012)

For months now, I've been waking up at four in the morning. I've got this system down: I toss about in bed for a while, left to right, right to left, then lie flat on my back to stare into the knots in the wood ceiling. I watch my dog breathe as she sleeps, watch her legs jolt as she dreams of chasing rabbits. I look out the skylight window, watch the clouds and the moon; I stare at myself in the reflection of the window a few feet from my face, and wonder if I look as shadowy and pensive in real life as I do right now, a thought that causes me to make exaggerated sad-clown faces as in an old black-and-white movie—which cracks me up. I close my eyes and listen to my own whistling breath and I wonder if I have a vitamin deficiency, if I'm aging ungracefully or will die in the next half hour, which leads to the question of whether I'd want to be "found" in this position in these long johns with the elastic blown out at the waist, with dirty dishes in the sink, dog hair on the carpet, and a compost toilet full of pee. I rearrange myself, smooth out the blankets and uncrinkle my forehead, and think about the neighbors. I wonder if they are also awake and worrying about their vitamins.

Later, when I actually see the neighbors, I probably won't follow this line of questioning. Instead, I'll say something neutral like "S'up?" Or if there's more time, I'll bring up the clouds or the wind, or one of a thousand other things I've noticed floating around in the predawn backyard. I might describe the catfight in the alley or the way seagulls were cracking open clams by flying over and dropping them on the carport roof. I might not even mention that. People don't really want to hear about that kind of long-winded stuff when they casually ask "How you doing?" while they're dragging their rubbish bins out to the curb before driving off to work.

When I mentioned my early-morning waking to the old witch down the street, she explained that this is the time the "ceiling is the thinnest," the moment that the earth's creatures have the greatest access to the heavens; the time when nuns and priests wake to pray, shuffling in their prayer shawls and pouring themselves into the cosmos; the time the raccoons waddle down the alley into the nature preserve that is really just the woods behind the grade school; and the most common moment when people die. It is a magical time, or so she said.

Hearing all of that helped me feel less resentful about waking up so early, and now it seems less necessary to punch my pillow like bread dough. Instead, I wake up and I think about the day ahead or the day before, or I might try to decode a particular night sound—a porcupine or feral cats, a possum on the porch, or maybe college kids drunk and stumbling down the alley. I toss about until I can't stand it anymore, until I pitch everything to the side of the bed and carry my dog, RooDee, down the ladder, like she weighs twenty pounds instead of fifty, like this is what normal people do.

If the weather is good, I'll make a bit of tea and amble out onto the front porch to watch the sun crawl over the neighbor's garage. On the surface, it's nearly the same every time: I spend at least five minutes trying to make the dog's blanket (a hairy but warm apparatus) double as a seat cushion and a backrest, then I'll spend several minutes looking for my lost glasses, which I find on my head, and then I might notice that it's warmer today than yesterday.

If it's raining or cold outside (like it is all winter), I stay inside. I might jog in place while I brush

my teeth, or I'll put on a hat and mittens while I light the cookstove. I've even gotten into the habit of warming my underthings by dangling them over the stove while I make coffee. I'm so comfortable with this work that I don't even see it as clever anymore, hardly worth mentioning except for the fact that I think I'm on to something: I've found a way to heat my bra without singeing the straps and to drape my long johns without lighting the kitchen shelves on fire. It's a learned skill, and definitely not the sort of thing I'd recommend for small children, but the facts are the facts: Once I was cold and then I was not, and now I'm fairly certain that I have discovered something that I'll want to do for the rest of my life.

I haven't brought up my warm underwear with the neighbor for the same reason I haven't mentioned my early-morning musing (especially the stuff about monks and nuns, and death, and that sort of hullabaloo). People don't want to hear about your warm underwear and what puts a smile on your face when they're in the middle of chipping the ice off their windshield or digging a drainage ditch across their front lawn to keep their basement from flooding. Winter is hard on all of us.

I live in a tiny house. I don't mean a small house, the kind with one bedroom, one bathroom, a kitchen, and a nook for watching television, I mean a house the size of an area rug that's easy enough to attach to my truck and drive down the freeway. It looks like a mobile gingerbread house, or a cuckoo clock on wheels. I don't mind the comparisons; I like gingerbread.

The main floor of my house is eighty-four square feet. The sleeping loft that extends over the front porch adds more room. It hangs over the kitchen, bathroom, and closet, and stops about halfway into the center of the house, leaving the living room (what I call the "great room") open to the pointy-roofed ceiling.

Every night, I carry RooDee up the seven-foot ladder to the sleeping loft. We've perfected the process: She takes the form of a fifty-pound soup cauldron, and I pretend it is a piece of cake. There's no drama or exaggerated grunting. No veins bulged, butt cheeks clenched, or near-fatal falls; we operate on autopilot. I lift with my knees, my dog acts like a lead ingot, and together we arrive happily.

My bed consumes most of the loft platform, stretching nearly eave to eave, and from there the roof pitches up to a point four feet above the center of the mattress. That's the line I take: knee-walking down the middle of the bed, taking care not to smash my head into the ceiling. I worm my way into my sleeping bag, under several layers of quilts, and curl into a fetal position with my hands tucked into my armpits. RooDee then rolls into the cave at the back of my knees and we sleep.

I sleep with the blankets over my head, barely moving, directing every ounce of body heat inward until, eventually, I turn into a happy little bun in the oven. I might wake up when the rain starts or stops, when it shifts direction or rolls alongside the house like a tumbleweed, and if I'm lucky I'll catch a break in the rain long enough to see that the moonlight is poking through a giant sphincter of black clouds, like something you'd see in a colonoscopy brochure. Nature has such an odd sense of humor.

I have to admit that, up until now, given the fact that this is my life and my day-to-day routine, my little winter ritual has seemed fairly normal. But just now, writing this, telling you about it, I can see how it might seem unattractive and cold, and perhaps a bit odd. But I don't mind; I've gotten used to it, and I like what it connects me to.

I've come to expect that, regardless of my tender feelings, the Arctic wind will still plunge its way past the San Juan Islands, cleverly sidestepping any number of giant shipping vessels, orca pods, and sea life. It will still gather all manner of rain, sleet, smog, and fog that will shower down persistently for months—enough moisture to fill buckets and barrels, and make city parks into lakes; it will march up the alley like a tempest, kicking the lawn chairs and punching at the carport, and then body-

slamming my house. But that's what the wind is programmed to do: work through keyholes and whistle in bottle tops, and make me wonder if my tiny house is being pushed slowly across the lawn like it's rolling through a car wash.

I've gotten used to these sorts of winter high jinks, and to be honest, I like them. I like the excitement of the windstorms and the rain pounding down a thousand different ways, inches from my head. It reminds me of weathering storms while backpacking, climbing, or kayaking—huddling in the dead center of my tent as lightning banged down all around, or hiding from the hail in a blown-out school bus, a piece of junk littering the forest service road that paralleled my hiking trail. The winter weather reminds me that some things never change, and I am still the same girl who loved sleeping in her tree house and who preferred staying outside, and who still thinks reading by headlamp is romantic.

I like trying to decipher nature's antics, like wondering why there are always more geese on one side of their flying V formation, and why the crocuses have bloomed so early this year. I like that if I'm walking home and I notice that everything seems puckered up, furling inward—the moon, the mud in the lawn, the dried-up tomato plants and cornstalks, the raccoons that hide in the plum tree, and the wind circling the lawn chairs—if they all seem condensed, sucked in, and tight-jawed, then that is a clue for me to follow suit and to curl into a tiny ball with my dog curled into an even smaller ball at my knees. And at the end of the day, when it's all said and done, I usually don't mind that I'm sleeping like a stick figure in a cave painting; that I'm tucked in like the cat sleeping under the hood of the neighbor's car, like the gulls circled up in the marina's maintenance barn, or like the adventuresome rabble-rouser I was in my twenties.

I should clarify that I do have a heater—a very nice \$500 propane heater that I can turn on and off at will. It has a little exhaust stack that vents out the back of the house, and a tiny glass window in the front that lets me admire the flames as they dart about inside a four-inch-square enclosure. I installed the heater on the back wall of the living room so I could admire it while sitting on the couch. I can also see it from the sleeping loft, a couple of feet away, and from the kitchen and the bathroom. I can study the fire while I cook food or pee or dry off my dog by the front door, when I crack open a beer take my vitamins, clip my nails or read a book. I can see the heater and its tiny fire from every room of my house because, no matter where I go or what I do, I'm still always in the one room. And therein lies the problem.

My house is roughly the size of a tree stump—a big and tall tree stump, like a giant sequoia that you could drive your car through and then drink hot cocoa on the other side like a tourist, but still a stump of a house, which is why I am afraid of fire. Think about it: A small fire erupts in the living room, which is also the kitchen and dining room, which is also the bedroom and bathroom. It has detonated out of the heater due to some small “oops” in the machinery that causes the tiniest flicker of a flame to brush into the smallest *pssst* of a gas leak. Almost instantly, the fire is massive, a monster devouring the rafters and side walls, collapsing the roof, exploding the canned goods, and buckling the floorboards. In a matter of seconds, my dog and I are left with nowhere to run because there is no other room but this single, highly combustible, highly condensed space the size of a Yule log.

Fire was nothing I'd considered while building my house—not while I was reading about wood grain, kiln-dried lumber, or sustainable forest products; and not while I was hefting great lengths of four-hundred-year-old cedar onto and off my car or even while I was pulling wood out of a pile labeled “Firewood.” It never entered my mind as I installed the wood cabinets, the oak toilet seat, and the old fir door, or while I picked sawdust out of my hair and lovingly sanded the smoky smell off the cedar floorboards that had survived someone else's house fire.

Fire wasn't on the agenda until a delivery truck pulled up, weeks into the building project, and dropped off a propane heater. The instruction manual congratulated me for picking a unit that was designed with automatic kill switches in the event of a fire. Apparently, it had state-of-the-art technology, expert tooling, and a brilliant fireproof design with backups for the shut-offs and shutdowns for the turn-offs. *Hummm*, I thought as I thumbed through the manual, *sure wouldn't want fire*. Then I tossed the manual aside and busied myself with the best place to install the metal firebox.

Months later, on the first cold night of the year, I lit the heater and tucked myself into bed. The fireside glow was beautiful, transforming my small house into a ringside seat at the best mini bonfire ever. Dark amber shadows hung in the corners, and warm firelight gamboled eave to eave along the ceiling, stretching fourteen feet from a spot above the back living room wall to the point above my head.

I sat up in bed for an hour, watching the firelight play tag with the shadows, and I felt myself relax like I hadn't in months. I fell asleep remembering the small campfire my friends and I had made in the Canadian Rockies, in a spot beside a river with snow spires circling the horizon just beyond the forest canopy; that time, I woke up with frost on my eyelashes and the zipper of my bivy sack frozen shut. This time, in my little house, I woke up with my feet twisted up in the sheets. I'd dreamed about racing through a deep thicket, trying to outrun a forest fire, darting with one arm held reflexively over my head and my dog held like a hefty money safe in the other, and all the while the underbrush kept grabbing at my feet, tripping me up, slamming me to the ground. I woke up and looked around the house, realizing for the first time that I'd built a dense, bone-dry tinderbox of a house.

I reread the owner's manual and retraced how I'd installed the heater, double-checking that I hadn't placed insulation too close to the hot flue stack, or exterior siding too close to the exhaust cap. I inspected the smoke detector, nearly deafening myself by clicking the tiny test button. I bought a small bottle of specially made "gas leak detection soap" so I could test every fitting, starting with the knob on the gas tank outside the house and ending with the tiny brass nipple at the base of the heater; checked again, and then a third time. Everything seemed fine, but at night I still dreamed about fire. I carried a hammer up to the loft so I could smash out the skylight window and launch my dog and me out onto the lawn if necessary, and I dragged a fire extinguisher up the ladder and stationed it between me and the heater like a talisman—a warning to the heater to keep its shit together. Then one night, without really thinking about it, I reached over and flipped off the heater on the way up to bed, giving it a little tap and a smile. And that was the beginning of my nightly bundling routine.

Now I run the heater only during the day and late at night when I am awake, and I hardly notice that I'm dressed like an ice fisherman as I lumber off to bed. Instead, I mosey off to the loft in a not-so-sexy pair of wool underwear, curl into a puffy ball along with RooDee, and together we sleep, happily enough.

These days I find that I am happy enough in the same way that I am warm enough—the goal isn't bliss or even comfort in some cases. The goal is to feel alive, even if the primary proof is the chattering of your teeth. There's nothing like ten-degree weather to redouble your appreciation for wool, fleece, and that odd-looking stocking cap that your mother sent last Christmas.

Admitting that I'm "happy enough" makes me wonder if I'm falling short of my potential as a middle-class American; like I should want more out of life than this tiny house and the backyard, and the way it feels to sit on the porch and watch the sun come up. But it works for me, and besides, I'm not sure that I was any happier when I had a bigger, more normal house.

I used to have a three-bedroom bungalow with a nice yard and massive windows that looked out at the gardens in the front yard. It had a furnace that rumbled away in the basement, thumping, bumping

and popping the ductwork, like it was beating back the cold with a tire iron. I felt very safe from the elements.

The heater was a tireless companion, willing to work day and night, whether we were home or not. It puffed away on metered gas, blowing hot air into the bedrooms and the bathroom, the shampoo bottles and the kitchen silverware drawers. It pushed heat into our bodies, letting us walk around in boxer shorts and tank tops in the middle of winter; it prewarmed our shoes, the toilet seat, the coffee cups. It worked constantly without needing anyone's attention and hardly being noticed at all until the gas bill would arrive and we'd all scream "Turn down the thermostat!" and grow very quiet.

The heating bill usually arrived a few days after the electric bill, which came two weeks after the mortgage and insurance were due; then the water, sewer, and trash bill would arrive every three months, and the property taxes would arrive like Satan on a stick once a year. Somewhere in the mix were my monthly credit card bills, tied to all the other necessary household items: a couch, television, window shades, barbecue grill, new hot water tank, bedsheets, telephone, stereo speakers, flower vases, a shower curtain, washing machine, area rugs, garden hoses, lamps, lights, locks, a spade, mattresses, memory foam pillows, wineglasses, a dishwasher, lawn mower, end tables, two cubic yards of garden compost, scrub brushes, butter knives, a refrigerator, wrenches, pry bars, and an assortment of artwork and wall paint to make things look nice. I worked hard back then, strapped to my debt, but I was hardly miserable; I was happy enough "living the dream" as I raced from one place to the next and spent the weekends cleaning the gutters or reading a how-to book on home plumbing repair.

Now that I live in my little house, I work part-time and pay eight dollars a month for utilities. There's no mortgage, no Saturday morning with a vacuum, mop, or dust cloth. I have free time to notice the weather, so if my neighbor asks me how it's going, I can easily explain how "the barometric pressure took a real nosedive at four this morning, causing a lava flow of cooler air to pour into my house through the open windows. It was like waking up in Missoula in September, when you still have your windows open but know things are changing, and quick, toward winter."

All the time I save leaves me free to cavort and volunteer, building other little houses with friends helping to care for my elderly neighbor, or staring mindlessly at the clouds forming into balloon animals and broccoli spears. The other day I spent a couple of hours packing sauerkraut with my friends, nattering about local politics while we shoved stinky cabbage into little jars. Before that, I collected a load of fruit to be delivered all over town as part of a church fund-raiser, and then I took my dog for a walk down along the old railroad trestle that used to be the shake mill but is now just a massive expanse of busted-up asphalt, blackberry bushes, and Scotch broom. It's actually quite beautiful down there, loaded with herons, otters, salmon, and seals; stunning despite the shopping carts that the kids have drowned in the mud and the yellow warning signs about contaminated shellfish.

It's nice to have time to amble around, or do whatever I want; to drop everything and help the neighbor build a chicken coop, or hop in on a spontaneous game of Pickle-ball in the backyard. A year or so after I moved into my house, I volunteered to show it in a green building fair, an event that included vendors like the ReBuilding Center and Habitat for Humanity, as well as local homeowners who had installed solar electric systems, recycled fir floors, and energy-efficient windows in their houses. While I didn't have fancy systems in my house, I still figured it'd be helpful if people saw how beautiful salvaged cedar siding can be, and how wonderful a door pulled out of a dumpster (like mine) could be.

At the fair, I met a teacher who thought it'd be nice to show her students my house, and that's how

a few months later I found myself hosting sixty-four fourth-graders in my yard. They were studying global climate change and asked some very important questions like where do I poop, where's the bathtub, and why not build a giant slingshot to shoot my dog into the loft instead of having to carry her? They wanted to know if I was happy living without a television, without running water, and without space for a "husband" (whoever he was). I offered a quick "Heck yeah!" and then suggested that we all try to fit into the house at one time; it would be the "New International, Intergalactic, Ripley's Believe It or Not, Hotshot, Full-of-Snot Record!" I screamed. All sixty-four of them raced into the house, stood on the toilet, piled onto the kitchen counter, smashed into the loft, and squeezed into the living room like a jar of human pickles. Everyone was giggling and I was thinking this was a great teaching moment, where they'd finally come to see that even something teeny-tiny can be big *enough*, and that's when tragedy struck: Someone "cut the cheese," as my brothers would say, and the entire class emptied out of the house in seconds like clowns pouring out of a circus car. We all collapsed on the lawn, fake-coughing and laughing hysterically, and intensely proud of the new record we'd set.

I probably overemphasized how glorious everything is, using the word *awesome* too many times. I positively gushed about how *awesome* it was to live debt free, not really considering whether any of those kids fully understood how crushing it is to juggle bills, delicately staggering the payments throughout the month and shuffling money from one credit card to another. And they probably thought I was full of shit when I said it was *awesome* to live without a television and refrigerator, "free from that infernal, constant humming and drumming so now I can hear the tree frogs at night . . . blah blah blah."

If I had been perfectly honest, I would have admitted that I'm happy only 85 percent of the time, roughly three hundred days out of the year. The other days, I wish I had running water or that the house was warmer; or I might want a seventy-two-inch plasma screen television and enough space to invite all my friends over to watch the Oscars. I might want a flushing toilet and an endless supply of cheap beer, and a cutie-pie to play naked Scrabble with me in the living room. I might want more privacy and solitude, and for the city to get new garbage trucks so on Friday mornings I wouldn't have to listen to all that hydraulic whining with heavy lifting and slamming back down. I might *want* a lot of things . . . but that doesn't mean I *need* them.

Here's the raw truth: 15 percent of the time, you might find me grouching while slopping my water back to the house, or pouting about how I don't like going to the laundromat to watch my underwear occasionally float by in the viewing window of the nearby clothes dryer. My complaining might result in my stomping off to bed, where I'll check out of my life and watch three or four episodes of *Battlestar Galactica* on my laptop computer screen. In the morning, I'll wake up late for work, cuss, and quickly yank rain pants over my pajamas so I can rush off to the office, where I'll spend most of the day trying not to make loud plastic-pant crinkling and swooshing noises, and hoping that everyone believes I've just arrived from doing something important outside.

Those are the days that most remind me of my old life in my big house where I'd charge around and act like the world owes me more; or where I'd rush through the days and watch television at night and at the end of the week I couldn't remember if I'd actually called my mother or simply wished that I had.

Now, more often than not, instead of feeling pissed at the rain for turning my bones into soggy oatmeal, I'll walk over to my friends' house and they'll make me laugh and feed me warm soup; or, in the case of a particularly hateful moment with my composting toilet, I'll remember watching the little kids in Guatemala roll up their pants cuffs and walk across the muddy mess that was overflowing from

the school's bathroom, and I'll realize I have nothing to complain about. I'll remember like an apple to the head that I'm lucky to have what I have and that I'm not entitled to any more than those kids, or their fathers, whom we'd see walking along the roads at dawn, carrying their machetes out into the fields for the day.

"My house is warm enough" is what I might eventually realize as I fall asleep mummified in my sleeping bag, and later I'll wake up to see that the clouds are sprinting across the moon like a movie where the director wants you to think time is passing very quickly. Nature can be kind like that.

I chose the 85 percent success rate, starting with the crazy decision to build the house myself, one stick of wood at a time; then the decision to build the house on wheels so I could come and go as I please. I chose this path because the idea of building a house sounded like the old, fun me—the woman who thought it was a total jazz-up to hang by her thumbs fifty feet in the air, scaling some rocky crag to get a better view of the valley below. I chose this because I thought I could be happy living in a one-room house without running water or a refrigerator, and I imagined I'd learn something about myself by stripping myself down to the basics—by living with two dinner plates, three spoons, two pairs of pants, a dress, and my wool skivvies. And I figured I could be happy, at least for a while living in the shadow of my friends Hugh and Annie's house, in their old garden plot just off the alley.

I thought I'd find something in all of this, and I got more than I bargained for. I discovered a new way of looking at the sky, the winter rain, the neighbors, and myself; and a different way of spending my time. Most important, I stumbled into a new sort of "happiness," one that didn't hinge on always getting what I want, but rather, on wanting what I have. It's the kind of happiness that isn't tied so tightly to being comfortable (or having money and property), but instead is linked to a deeper sense of satisfaction—to a sense of humility and gratitude, and a better understanding of who I am in my heart.

I know this sounds cheesy, and in fact, it sounds fairly similar to the gobbledygook that friends have thrown at me just after having their first baby. But the facts are the facts: I found a certain bigness in my little house—a sense of largeness, freedom, and happiness that comes when you see there's no place else you'd rather be.

I found myself at Home, and that is (as I hope to tell the next set of fourth-graders) *awesome!*

Southeast State Park

(PORTLAND, OREGON, APRIL 2003)

I was standing in the bathroom of my former house, nervously chewing the inside of my cheek, holding a how-to book in one hand and a screwdriver in the other. This was the fortieth time I'd tried to figure out why the bathroom fuse kept tripping when someone ran the vacuum upstairs or when we flipped on the garbage disposal in the kitchen. It made no sense; the electric lines that ran upstairs and to the kitchen were on different circuits, and according to my book, everything should work.

I clicked the light switch, and as expected, nothing happened. I set the book aside and climbed halfway up the ladder that I had positioned under the light globe. I unscrewed the fixture to unhinge it from the ceiling and pulled on it to dislodge the wires. I'd seen this at a friend's house, and the light fixture was supposed to dangle six or eight inches below the ceiling, hanging off the wires like a dinner plate suspended by metal twisty-ties; but my dinner plate only moved a little, allowing me just enough space to jam in the screwdriver and stir it around like a cocktail twirler, which turned out to be a bad idea. There was a pistol pop and a flash of light, and I fell backward off the ladder with a loud "Aaaak!" I lay there for a while, catching my breath and reflecting on my situation.

It was my own fault, and maybe that's why I found this particular home improvement project so painful. I had rewired the bathroom years ago, just a few weeks after my friends and I had sledgehammered out the old wall plaster and dragged the ancient toilet out the front door, scrunching up our faces and nearly puking along the way. We'd pried up the curling linoleum and crowbarred the moldy subfloor until we could see, between the floor joists, the basement concrete resting eight feet below. I had hired a friend to retile the shower, agreeing to pay her about half the going rate but still twice what I had in my checking account; then, before she got started, I hired a plumber to install a new faucet. It didn't seem like much work: running a short piece of copper pipe from the basement up through the wall, then stubbing it out to receive the new fixtures. I thought it would take an hour or so—easy-peasy—and a half hour after he arrived, he handed me a bill for three hundred bucks. I almost cried, and then I got mad. He wasn't a bad guy, of course. The problem was that I was a new homeowner, suffering from sticker shock and exhausted by the buckets of money I had been handing off to the bank, the realtor, the title company, the IRS, and the City of Portland. Even the locksmith, an older gentleman who reminded me of my grandpa, had gotten a slice of my dwindling pie. I shadowed him as he worked, partially because I was truly fascinated but also because I wanted him to like me, to take pity on me and cut me a deal, but all he did was wink and say, "You're safe now," as he handed me a set of keys and a bill for a hundred fifty dollars.

A few days later, as I was standing in line at the hardware store, I picked up a how-to book that illustrated the best way to fix a drippy faucet, tuck-point a chimney, sheetrock your den, build a deck, replace window glass, install insulation, and repair a door latch. It was amazing, like the book was made for me and my old house and my puny bank account. *If I'd had this earlier, I probably could have soldered those pipes myself*, I thought, *and I can certainly rewire the bathroom!*

This is what happens to people who grow up believing that books perform like tiny life rafts, saving students from having to take the GRE blind, rescuing cooks from bland, overcooked

dumplings, and keeping homeowners afloat by reassuring them that they can do it all on their own.

I suddenly grew cocky as I stood there with that book, positive that I could figure out the electrical work, which should have been a piece of cake (based on the fact that there were only three pages dedicated to this extremely simple activity).

After a few weeks and several long, confused conversations with the men at the hardware store, I was able to connect new lights, a fan, and outlets to the fuse box in the basement. I closed my eyes the first time I turned on the system, clicking the breaker in the fuse box, worried that a giant spark would lunge out at my head, but nothing bad happened. The thing worked; the lights came on and the blow-dryer clicked on, and I got a little dizzy with the success of it all. “Oh my God.” I laughed at my little electricity pun. *I rewired the bathroom; I achieved 100 percent success!* I did a little victory lap around the living room with my hands over my head like I’d just kicked a winning field goal.

The electrical system worked perfectly for nearly a year, until, by chance, I turned on a vacuum cleaner upstairs while Holly, my housemate, was blow-drying her hair in the bathroom. There was a small *pffft* at the wall outlets, and we both lost use of our appliances.

At first, I tried hard to solve the problem, working from memory to draw a picture of the wires and splices that were now hidden in the walls. I consulted with an electrician friend, and stood with him in the basement, staring up at the squirrel nest of pipes and wires that ran below the kitchen, bathroom, dining room, and living room. The previous owner had done most of the work himself, leaving my friend shaking his head and sighing, “This is sadistic.” More time went by, and then, as the edges of my interest got picked apart by other home repair projects, I let go of the need for perfection and resigned myself to occasionally stomping down to the breaker box to flip the blown bathroom fuse.

No one had explained the challenges of home ownership when I went to the bank for a home loan. I was thirty-four, and perhaps the unspoken assumption was that I was old enough to understand that this was a complicated investment. The bank loan would have to cover more than just the house; I’d also need cash for a ladder and several how-to books, and an assortment of other necessary objects to make things right. I would need to buy paint and devote several hours to picking just the right color—not green or orange, but Winter Sage and Tuscany Sunset.

My loan officer didn’t bring up the other costs; there was no mention of his first house, and how I spent a small fortune on coffee because he stayed up late worrying about the way his roof leaked—a leak that persisted even though he’d dared himself to shimmy up onto the roof in the middle of a rain storm, hanging onto the roof shingles like a cat on a screen door, so he could caulk the roof vent. It was a leak that he had finally “fixed” by shoving a plastic pan (an old kitty litter tray) in just the right spot, so all night long he could listen to the rain *plink-plink-plink* in the pan. “And that noise was worse than the leak itself!”

He didn’t say that at the time, though he would tell me all this later. Instead, he encouraged me to fill out some paperwork for a loan, and “If you qualify,” the loan officer said, “we’ll help you get into the best possible house.”

The “best possible” sounded dreamy. Even though I didn’t recognize it, I was drawn to living just like my parents, in a reasonable house, with a beautiful family, where we’d have a Christmas tree in the living room, and every Sunday we’d have pot roast. On some level, in some unspoken, undefined way, I imagined that, by buying a house, I would finally arrive into my adulthood; my parents would begin calling me for advice, and my inclination for doing stunts that began with the words “Hey, watch this” would fade. I’d settle down and fall in love responsibly, instead of sacking impish rock climbers who lived on their boats or in their parents’ basement, or in their old pot-soaked Volkswagen van tricked out for camping. Home ownership would bring me credibility and respect, and approving

nods from all manner of respectable, responsible adults.

I qualified for a \$200,000 loan that I could pay back over thirty years. I remember sitting at the bank, sweating in my raincoat and sipping complimentary coffee out of a styrofoam cup, listening to the banker explain the terms of my loan. None of the numbers made sense—how could someone like me, a state worker making less than a schoolteacher, qualify for a nearly quarter-million-dollar loan? How could I plan for a thirty-year payback when I was still loath to commit to a weekend backpacking trip? Sitting there, I supposed I was simply lucky; my ship had arrived.

Shortly after that, I started driving around with a real estate agent, a lanky six-foot-tall woman who wore long gauzy scarves and a leather trench coat. Her excessive bigness made me feel safe, which was important given the fact that the house-buying process had reduced me to a twelve-year-old. She reassured me that home ownership was a snap, talking about the amazing “sense of home” (something akin to cinnamon buns and warm slippers) that arises through owning a house. She never mentioned that, the day before, she’d walked into a house that had been sealed up and neglected for nearly a year and she’d almost turned and run away, then grabbed her scarf and wadded it over her mouth and nose, hiding from the overwhelming smell of mold and mildew, and the way the ceilings, walls, curtains, drapes, couch, and every other nappy surface in the structure was covered with a gray-black fuzz. “It was like an episode of *The X-Files*,” she’d told me months later, when I asked what was the creepiest house she’d ever been in.

Instead, she focused on the positive, and we gleefully began looking at the “best possible” houses which I imagined would be something cute with a nice yard, in a good neighborhood where I could walk to the bus and ride my bike to my friends’ houses. Within an hour of driving around, I realized she was showing me only dumpy houses that were occupied by sad people who seemed resigned to their lives with moldy bathrooms, peeling paint, and a view of a flashing “Bare Naked” strip club sign. At first, I wondered if my agent had bad taste, or maybe she thought that I had bad taste—that I was attracted to houses that looked hungover, or that I would somehow find comfort in living next to the local bottle factory. After the fifth fixer-upper—a vacant house with porn videos in the upstairs bathroom—it dawned on me that this was what my life savings and thirty years of debt would get me: a lumpy, scabby house that needed a lot of love and elbow grease; that’s what \$200,000 and thirty years of monthly payments could buy in Portland, Oregon.

A few weeks later, in the winter of 1997, I bought what the bank believed was the best possible house: a three-bedroom bungalow with a detached garage, wood floors, gas heat, and a fireplace. It was in an up-and-coming neighborhood, within walking distance of the grocery store, the bus, my friends, the bank, pubs, and restaurants. On paper, it was perfect; in real life, it was a “piece of crap,” as I had scribbled in my notebook when the realtor and I had visited.

My new house was an old house, built in 1927, when it was customary to set rings into the concrete sidewalk out front so your friends could tether their horse when they came to visit. It was an old house that seemed to have good bones, that may even have been a looker in its day but now reminded me of a boozy, broken-down prizefighter with two foggy windows on either side of the droopy bump-out porch, like it was squinting at the street, growling, “I could have been a contender” every time someone walked by.

It wasn’t quite what I had envisioned. The front living room, an expansive room that needed a lot of repair, became the woodshop. For nearly a year, when I’d walk through the front door, I’d confront an assortment of paint cans, tools, tile supplies, and a couple of eighteen-foot wood-skinned kayaks set up on sawhorses. For months, when I needed a break from working on the house, I worked on my kayak.

I never would have guessed that my new improved life and the “best possible” house would include an occasional rat sighting (something that would vex me for at least two years) or a refrigerator that you had to aggressively hug and then knee to get the door closed, but it wasn’t so bad. And more important: It was all mine!

I was the boss, and by setting the rent low, I was able to recruit friends and friends of friends to move in. Together we lived happily enough, with lumpy futon mattresses and three-legged chairs, and lamps and cups and dinner plates dragged home from garage sales or “Free” boxes. We once pushed a couch six blocks and through heavy traffic by balancing it on a skateboard, only to discover as we dragged it up the front stairs that it was infested with fleas and that a rat had made a nest in the bottom springs. We quickly reloaded it onto the skateboard and backtracked, screaming and laughing and scratching our scalps. Living on a budget may have been more fun than any of us cared to admit.

Over the next six years, I had eight different housemates—nine if I count Jenna, who moved in temporarily, sleeping in a small, unheated room off the kitchen that we called the “recycling porch.” It was a sweet room, not much bigger than a single bed, but surrounded by south-facing windows that created one of the more spacious, sunny spots in the house. Jenna moved in for a few weeks, but stayed for six months, until it got too cold on the porch, and she found a job and an apartment across town.

Before Jenna left, she turned her room into what would become one of my favorite spots in the house, repainting it a warm red-orange color and building bookshelves above the door, the window, and the coat hooks she’d screwed into the plaster. She made a comfortable enough bed out of plywood and a lawn chair cushion, and then permanently inscribed poems and pinned tiny bits of artwork on the window jambs. The space reminded me of the small hay-bale clubhouses and scrap-wood tree forts that my brothers and I had made as kids—high-up spaces where you could see things differently, where you could get your bearings and decide whether the argument you’d just had was fixable.

We eventually returned Jenna’s room to the recycling bins, but I’d still sometimes find myself standing there, catching my breath and reading the stuff that Jenna had scribbled on the walls and painted into the woodwork, imagining how simple things would be if the only space I had to vacuum was this tiny button of a room.

My weekend trips to the hardware store had slowly taken the place of my weekends in the mountains, and after a while I couldn’t remember the last time I’d touched my climbing gear except perhaps to dig for some art supplies I’d packed away in the boxes below it. I convinced myself that my house projects weren’t that different from climbing: They almost always involved some moment of fear—that I’d shoot myself off the ladder, nail my foot to the floor, or run a saw through the plumbing—and that moment was almost always followed by immediate relief. In either case (fear or relief) I felt like a champion because I was figuring shit out. I was a doer and a getter-doner, and it was okay to be identified by the neighbors as the little lady who had a dump truck of manure delivered, a load that made the entire neighborhood smell like a dairy barn for weeks.

I figured these house projects were making me smart, even if I didn’t always know what I was doing. I remember calling an equipment rental place one Valentine’s Day weekend, telling them I needed to rent a fourteen-inch “vibrator,” assuming this was the common word for the large vibrating pad sander I needed to refinish my wood floors. The guy laughed into the phone: “Ha, you and every other woman in Portland!” I was so caught up in the project, in getting the equipment and cracking a whip, that it took me a minute to get his joke.

Another day, I wanted to trim some branches off the big fir tree in the front yard; I didn’t want it to take long, just a quick up and down, so I left the ladder in the garage and scrambled up the fir with a

tree saw in my mouth. New neighbors were moving in next door, ushering boxes up their front stairs, when I dropped out of the tree near their porch to say hello and welcome them to the neighborhood. They gave me very uneasy looks as I stood there, and then suddenly seemed to amp up their need to “get moving.” A few minutes later, I went into my house to pee, and as I washed my hands I noticed in the bathroom mirror that I was sporting half of a Fu Manchu mustache—long, bushy hair that started just below my left nostril and ended near my chin. My best guess was that I’d inadvertently wiped tree sap on my face and then nuzzled my dog, thus creating a curious wad of facial hair for the new neighbors to ponder. I spent the next month cleverly trying to catch them as they left their house, hoping to offer a casual “Hello” and show off my hair-free face to restart our first meeting.

The hard work (and possible social isolation) paid off, and over time, the house became home. The front living room was repaired, the woodshop was moved to the garage, and our lumpy couch was replaced with a nicer one—one that I bought from the want ads and that didn’t come with fleas and rats. The kitchen floor was replaced and new appliances were installed, and the house’s shabby exterior was rehabilitated, resheathed, and painted to look handsome and capable again.

In early summer one year, I cut open the back wall and installed two large glass doors so you could wander from the kitchen through the dining room into the backyard. Then I rehabbed the backyard into a little sanctuary, building a brick fire pit in the center of the lawn, not far from the deck that I salvaged from a friend’s house, one ten-foot chunk at a time, maxing out the load capacity of my car along with my luck.

On summer nights, my friends and I would gather at “Southeast State Park” (their nickname for my yard), and we’d throw open the glass doors so that whatever was happening in the kitchen could drain onto the deck and then spill toward the fire ring, where we’d set up our lawn chairs. That feeling of air and people floating unobstructed from one room to the next, from inside to out, was one of the best things about my house. Even in the winter, the big glass doors and windows supported that sense of openness.



I loved my house, but when I look back at it realistically, I was able to enjoy it only a small part of the time. Most of my time at home was focused on mowing the grass, repairing the hot water heater, cleaning the gutters, and trying to keep the garage from listing farther into the neighbor’s yard—that’s how I spent most of my waking hours at home. And more and more, the chance to enjoy my house was even more cramped because of my long-distance commute, racing back and forth for work and up to Olympia, a hundred miles away, which is why I’d chosen this particular moment to try (once again) to repair the bathroom fuse. Once again, the attempt left me slumped on the floor at the base of a ladder, yelling, “Akkkk,” but at least I was trying. And I could always clomp down the stairs to flip the breaker like always, like this is what homeowners do, and what I’d likely have to do again next month or some other day when I least expected it.

The Drive

(PORTLAND, OREGON, OCTOBER 2003)

Last night, as I was driving home from work in a downpour, I slammed on my brakes after spotting three kittens about to saunter across the highway. I pulled over to the shoulder, then backed up, watching for them in the glow of the taillights. I wasn't sure what I would do if I caught up with my little fuzz balls but was certain that something needed to be done. I hate seeing roadkill, and dead kittens would just crush me inside.

I got back to what I thought must be the spot and looked around, scanning the area through the rain and flipping the windshield wipers, craning my neck over the steering wheel as I flipped on the high beams and then the low, and then I spun around in my seat to squint through the dim light behind the car. "Crap," I muttered, unclicking the seat belt and angrily pulling my hood over my head, then pausing to look in the rearview mirror for traffic.

People get killed on the highway. Years ago, my sister was nearly hit when she got a flat tire along the interstate. She had done everything right, crawling out the passenger-side door to avoid the highway traffic—a near act of God because she was nine and a half months pregnant and the size of a small army. She got to the trunk to pull out the spare and that's when a semi came by and the wind shear nearly knocked her in a ditch. A passing motorist saw it—saw my sister in her tan wool coat that wouldn't button over her belly anymore—so he stopped and changed the tire as my sister sat in the car, biting her lip, fearful that this stranger would help her and then pop her in the head with the tire iron. We were taught not to offer or invite aid because, like it or not, helping is a messy, confused proposition; sometimes you get it right and sometimes you get it wrong, and sometimes you have no choice but to trust that the man holding your tire iron, cussing at your old lug nuts, is a deeply kind human after all.

I threw open the car door and stepped into the rain, quickly skirting around the car to the far side of the highway shoulder. "Here, kitty-kitty-kitty," I shouted in a singsong that I hoped could be heard over the rain. I continued walking inside the beam of my headlights, scanning the ditch as I walked, and seeing something that for a moment made my heart skip: a dead kitty that turned out to be a shoe. Ready to give up, I turned to walk back, and a movement by my car caught my eye; a hairy ball crept out from under the car. I got closer, shading my eyes from the headlights and wondering what the hell I'd do with the cat once I caught her, and a moment later, as I bent down to pick her up, I realized I was staring at a baby raccoon barely the size of a beer mug. "Shit!" I whispered as a semitruck plowed by, causing me to do a sidestep and tumbling the kit.

"Hi, little fella," I said, squatting down on my haunches and wringing my hands together like I was holding a bug, afraid to reach out for the animal. In my mind, although raccoons are cute and I love how they can walk around holding an ear of corn in their mitts just like small children at a picnic, they inhabit the general category of fearful creatures called "varmints." Like rats, they carry diseases, have teeth, and show up when least expected, like when you're moving a stack of old flower pots in your garage; they are vicious when cornered and run in packs like street thugs.

"Where's your mama?"

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