

DAVID GIFFELS

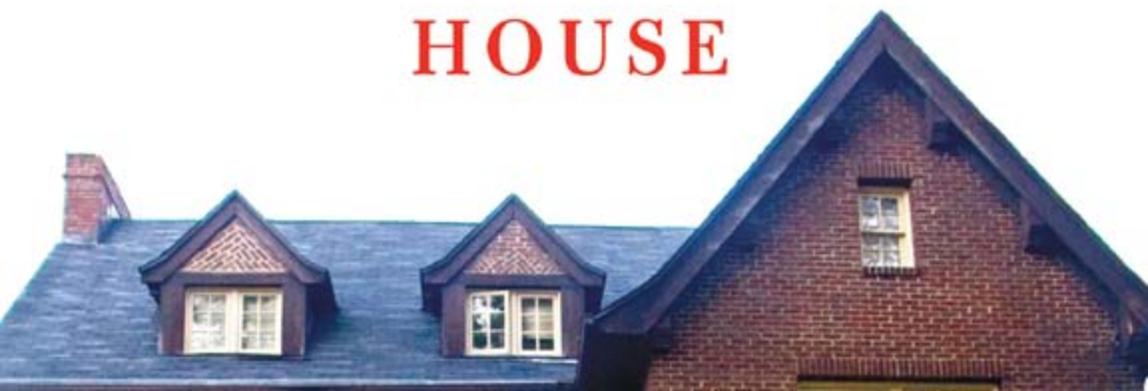


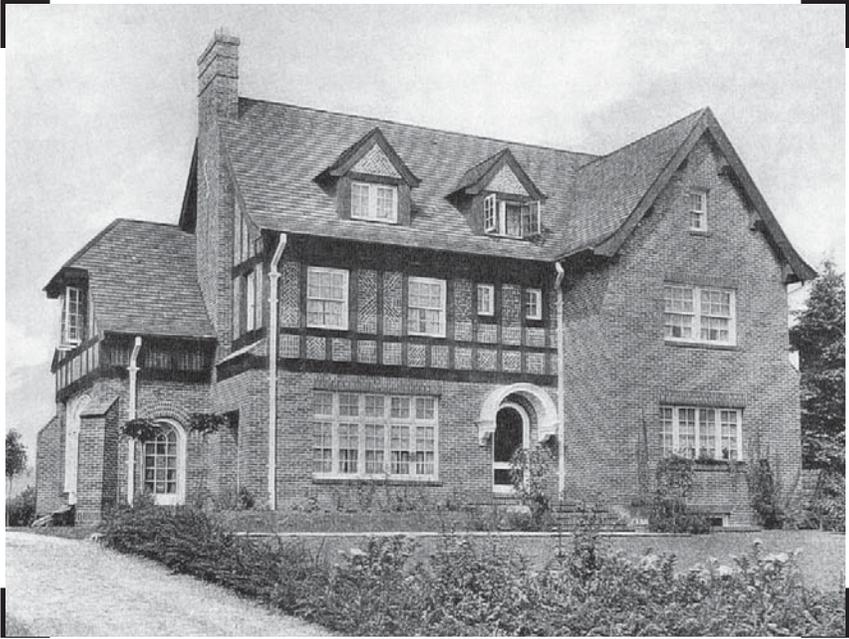
"The story of a man against nature,
a man against himself, and a man
against his own perception of what
makes life meaningful."

—CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

all the
way home

BUILDING A FAMILY
IN A FALLING-DOWN
HOUSE





All the Way Home

[Building a Family in a Falling-Down House]

DAVID GIFFELS

 HarperCollins e-books

[For Gina,
who endures and
endures]

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Part I

[You're innocent
when you dream.

—Tom Waits]

[1

lost in
the supermarket

Main aisle, Home Improvement Superstore:

We are walking with such purpose down the wide fluorescence of the promenade that we are not really walking so much as we are marching, propelled by the triplet American cadences of conviction, desire, and retail curiosity.

We navigate by end-cap billboards.

Adhesives/Tarps/Caulk . . .

We lead with our jaws. Our torsos strain forward in a posture of domestic yearning, pulling us into a power walk.

Conduit/Connectors/PVC . . .

Our arms swing with the edgy reciprocation of a Sawzall, triggered low. We squint at thumb-smearred shopping lists with utilitarian dignity.

I always wonder what that next guy is here for, the one burning holes into the shelves with his gaze. I always wonder what problem he came here to solve and if he's here because he knows what he needs or because he hopes he will find it. I wonder if he ever stops to realize

that he has prepared himself all his life for this moment, the moment in which the truth hits him with such clarity that he experiences the divinations of Meriwether Lewis:

He needs a toilet flange.

Not a wax ring. Not tape or putty. The problem is in the flange and he knows it now, oh he is so certain of this. He lay awake last night working through the possibilities of his problem and now he has arrived.

Faucets/Fixtures/Toilets . . .

Godspeed.

Me, I'm still looking.

I came here for three things:

1. a can of expanding sealant, that magical stuff;
2. another three bags of mortar because this much I've learned:
a single bag of mortar is a fool's errand; and
3. possibly a hinge.

The hinge is a lark. The hinge is a red herring. The hinge is an albatross. A wild goose. The hinge is to replace the one nearest the floor on the billiards room door, because most of the water damage there is down low and that hinge is rusted beyond reason and salvation. It's heavy and antique and I know I will not find one here. But I have to look.

Looking for something we don't think we'll find—this is an understanding we share here in the wilds of the superstore.

We are people afraid of what might happen if our lives became comfortable.

We are people who don't know nearly as much as we want the world to believe we know.

We are fathers. We are desperate to understand our place among people who desperately need us.

Our ambition is complicated.

We look at walls and fantasize about their insides.

We consider the influence of our hands upon our tools, and of our tools upon our hands.

We have opinions about sandpaper.

I've stopped now, between *Lighting* and *Doors*.

A hinge—is it “hardware” or “fastener”?

We do not ask. We seek and discover. We, in the aisles: we are seekers and discoverers. This is our frontier. This is what we have left.

For me, today, it's this billiards room door. Yeah. A *billiards* room. It's not what it sounds like. I am not Colonel Mustard. I am not the kind of guy who lives in a house with a billiards room. Well, I mean, I *do* live in a house with a billiards room. But I am not the kind of guy who relaxes by playing snooker. Because I am not the kind of guy who relaxes. The billiards room is just, well—it all just kind of happened.

It started innocently enough. It started in much the same way curiosity led me to poke into that basement wall, perhaps the only wall remaining in this mansion that I had not been inside. *What's going on inside that wall*, I wondered, so I hammered a hole and reached inside to find out. (We do these things on impulse at my house.) That's when I found the termites. After all this time and all this work, five years of nonstop restoration, just when I thought things were settling down, just when I thought I was ready to allow things to settle down . . .

I reached into the wall and put my thumb against the center beam, and the thumb sank into the wood—*powder! nothing!*—and I realized amid this shocking new information that I was standing directly below the piano in the foyer one floor above, and I was therefore in danger of dying a cartoon character's death, piano crashing through floor, which is something I do not want to do. More than anything else, I do not want to die a cartoon character's death.

I called my father, frantic. And my father, the structural engineer, came right over and looked inside the wall.

“Nothing holding this place up but memory.”

This is what he said.

He laughed. I think he lives for days like this. He is an enabler. I am a provider. I provide him with that stuff that makes fathers what they are, which is mostly trouble that needs to be corrected.

Everything can be fixed, he said. (That's the problem.) We made a plan and I acted on that plan with furious purpose to save my house from falling down. Day after day, night after night, I ripped out the rot and braced it up and poured concrete, a hundred bags. I laid a brick floor (scavenged brick—always, everything, scavenged) and then, carefully, one by one, removed the sticks that hold up the center of the house and replaced each with a new one. Stout posts. Good as new. Better! Better than new! I knew exactly what I was doing, and I didn't have a clue.

Really, that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was the darkest secret of all: when I reached inside the wall and found the studs teeming with termites, the pulp consumed, leaving only the layers of grain, the leaves of a gutted text—I responded outwardly with horror *but inwardly with glee!*

Because just when it seemed that there was nothing left for this place to take from us, I had begun to fear what that suggested: a life without struggle. That prospect frightened me more than the potential implosion of my family's home.

And so I took each step with great flourish and deliberation. I opened the void under the basement stairs, cutting a hole one stud-bay wide, sixteen inches, and wriggled through with my flashlight, into a space where no man had been since 1913, and there I discovered:

1. a glass vial of dried carpenter's glue;
2. a tendril of invasive vine, alive, growing up through the dirt floor, ten feet underground, without light or direction, an albino weed, the sort of implausible invasion that has defined this place;
3. a fist-size tunnel in the floor with the partly chewed remains of a rat poison box, lettered with anachronistic type, the bones long dead;

and I felt complete there in the secret dirt under the stairs and that's why, one Saturday afternoon, while the rest of the world played golf

and sipped illicit midday beers and went to a movie with the kids and did actually bother to ask if Dad wanted to come along but didn't expect anything more than the timeworn excuse—*this work has to be done*—I crawled back in there with a pencil and began to write on a stud, all the way down the two-by-four and along the floor plate and up the next stud. I didn't plan that part, but it revealed itself as inevitable: to write the story of one family onto the framework of the very place that has, for better and worse, defined them. And then to close it in and plaster it over and leave it there until someone else finds a reason to cut into that wall, some generation hence.

And I know now that these shiny new hinges will never do and that I will leave here and go home to make the old one work again. The hard way is all I know now.

ignorance
and arrogance

The search began with the first press of a small cranium against the cervix of my one true love. There was a stranger inside my wife; he was trying to get out, and he soon would require a room of his own. And this would make all the difference.

Actually, he wasn't trying very hard. It probably is unfair to refer to a prenatal child as "lazy," but clearly he was not giving this his all. After twenty-nine hours of labor, the doctor was talking about using a high-tech toilet plunger to extract him. I was learning all sorts of new things that day. They would attach this thing to his head and (I assume gently) drag his ass out of there. Although I had concerns—vividly detailed ones—I had no choice but to accept this as sound medical procedure.

I was in the paradoxical position of all first-time fathers who choose to attend the birth process: trapped between the roles of spectator and participant, dressed in blue scrubs and unflattering shoe covers, standing in the harsh light of delivery with the intention of being helpful, prepared by reading and classes and enlight-

ened conversations and then suddenly cast into an overwhelming helplessness.

I did not know what to do with my hands. These flimsy, shapeless pants had no pockets. I could hold Gina's hand, but there were times when she preferred not to have her hand held. I stood to the side, awkwardly fiddling with my wedding ring. All I could do was be with her, by myself, at her side. I still do not agree with the idea of the father being absent, in the waiting room with a handful of cigars, waiting for the dirty work to be done. But now I understand the impulse.

This labor had begun sometime the previous evening, as Gina and I sat on the couch watching a *My So-Called Life* rerun. The couch, and the accompanying chair and table, were of my own making. I had cut down some trees a couple of years before to clear way for a fence and decided in the process that it was a shame to waste straight limbs of maple, so I had saved the good ones, stripped the logs of their bark, and cured them in the attic. When enough time had passed, I had fashioned them into this set of lodge-style furniture, patterned after an insanely expensive set we had admired in a high-end rustic furniture store in the Pacific Northwest. I made the furniture using only (a) an electric drill with a 1¼-inch spade bit; (b) an antique hand-me-down table saw, which I used to shape crude 1¼-inch (approx.) pegs at the ends of the logs; and (c) a lot of glue. The tabletop was made from slabs of scavenged marble that had once been the floor of a historic downtown hotel, the stately Portage, demolished five years previous.

I had no formal training in furniture making. I had no training at all. Unburdened by rules of proportion and precision, I was free to make a couch that answered only to the Muse and also, much more important, a couch that cost no more than a couple bottles of glue. Viewed from a slight distance, it approximated a living room set.

Gina called it the Gilligan's Island furniture. I didn't care. It was my masterpiece.

My secret fantasy was to use this set of furniture as the portfolio for a new life as a fantastically in-demand hippie logsmith. But this

was only a tangent of the guiding theme of my existence, which is an incessant state of restlessness, which is not the best way to enter parenthood. Even then, in the opening strain, as Gina reached to her belly and straightened with a look of beatific surprise—*it's happening!*—I was feeling profoundly uneasy.

I thought I was prepared for fatherhood. I had refinished the floor in the baby's room; painted the walls; hung a playfully primitive wall-paper border (you can never miss with cartoon bears); put a fresh coat of varnish on the woodwork; plugged the outlets with plastic child-proof covers to protect against accidental death by electric shock; purchased lead-free miniblinds and shortened their cords sufficiently to guard against accidental death by strangulation; installed a tasteful yet inexpensive ceiling fan; assembled the crib; hung a pretty valence; updated the window hardware to prevent the distant, unlikely possibility of death by falling. I had spent more time and attention on redoing that room than any other room in the house. An entire *trimester*; to use the lexicon of my new chronology.

But I also was aware of a private function. I had become intimately attuned to the male counterpart of the nesting instinct, the very instinct that had found Gina baking peanut-butter cookies and scrubbing the kitchen floor in the last hours before this interminable labor began. It is the wild energy of life, unleashed in a race against time. When men redo the baby's room, it is not just because we want a safe and tasteful setting for our newborns. It is also because we secretly believe we will never again in our lives be alone in a room with our tools. Babies' rooms, as a result, are generally exquisite.

So the labor had begun. Gina was handling it almost as if she knew what she was doing. We waited downstairs on the Gilligan's Island furniture until dark, then moved upstairs to bed because it was too soon to depart for the hospital.

Seeing this as "free time," I pulled up a chair at the foot of the bed and set to work painting a table. I had been working on rehabbing this curb-find end table. Turquoise base coat; top to be stenciled with chunky geometric shapes in Chinese red. I was all about remaking

stuff others thought was useless. In theory, this table would be as cool as the insanely expensive ones at the yuppie furniture store, but under my brush that night, it was developing into possibly the ugliest table in northeast Ohio. My handmade stencils had no sense of proportion and the colors were gaudier than they had been in my imagination.

Plus, I was avoiding my wife's labor pains.

False labor. There's such a thing as false labor, right?

I make no excuse for this. I was doing the best I could.

We lay awake through the hours, watching the patterns of nighttime light across the ceiling, listening to the periodic crunch of gravel next door. This was our first house, a "starter." We had chosen it because it was cheap, and because we were charmed by the features of its age: oak pocket doors; tall, well-milled baseboards; anachronistic gas light fixtures; a thick mantel darkened by the patina of its years. We had not chosen it for its "location."

On one side was a bank that included a drive-through ATM. On the other was a house that, while not technically a "crack house," did include at least one tenant who sold crack cocaine for a living. Nocturnal activity ranged from dark entertainment to the kind of anxiety that leads grown-ups to hide under the bedcovers.

The cars came and went in a quick-service cavalcade. At the ATM, the demeanor and alignment of the patrons became more erratic with each passing hour, leading to an undeniable conclusion: anyone who needs quick cash at three A.M. is up to no good. Meanwhile, faded Impalas and out-of-tune Hondas formed a constant late-night parade next door. None ever stayed more than ten minutes. Often, the cars were left running with stereos blaring, and the only consolation for me and Gina was that they'd be gone soon and maybe the next crackhead would be more considerate of the neighbors or have better taste in music.

In between this pageant was our house, which, like many of the houses in Akron, Ohio's Highland Square neighborhood, was a semi-remarkable place built in the 1920s, slipping toward a Rust Belt cliché by the 1980s, and finally reclaimed by younger people, frugal and ambitious. This house, despite scabbed and sun-ruined clapboards

covering its exterior, had much to recommend it: good bones, nice woodwork, front porch, oddball closet with stairs that led nowhere. At first, Gina and I had worked on the house together, stripping the dining room woodwork of paint, ripping out the carpet, papering the walls. We were a team. We were in love. Crazy about each other; best friends. That's how we had been from the start.

Slowly, however, and inexorably, the work became an extension of who I was. I would stare at a room sometimes and imagine what the house might look like without that wall, or if that wall were a different color, or what hypothetical complications might be involved in, say, cutting a little speakeasy window into that wall so that we could say hello to people in the next room whenever the spirit moved us to do so because lord knows these things happen. I became more and more ambitious and I concocted projects that were increasingly absorbing and absurd. I tore out a brick retaining wall that was leaning badly, replacing it with railroad ties. A practical repair. But then I spent a month chipping the mortar from every brick with a hand chisel. Why waste good bricks? Why waste a good pile of scrap mortar? Using the mortar as base material, I laid a patio with the brick, using every bit of material in a deranged fit of recycling and conservation.

This behavior reached its pinnacle when my father, an engineer who had done the site work on the parking lot for a new Kmart in the suburbs, noticed a small mountain of old-style paving bricks on the job site and discovered they would be bulldozed under. I could have them for free if I got in that weekend and hauled them away. My dad, who is simultaneously helpful and dangerous in situations like this, did the math and confirmed that there would be enough bricks to replace my badly corrupt concrete driveway. So I got out there with a borrowed dump truck and some friends and we hauled several tons of street pavers to my house and dumped them in the backyard, which was transformed into the "staging area." I removed the derelict concrete driveway by hand, breaking it apart chunk by chunk using (a) a sledgehammer, (b) a long iron spud bar, and (c) a spare hunk of maple log as a fulcrum. I lugged each of those eighty-pound, pizza-box-size hunks onto a semi trailer;