

GETTING TO HOME

Memoir

BY BARBARA CLARKE

Book Excerpt: "Preconstruction"

" . . . the question that occupies all laboratory and zoo creatures is
'Where is home and how do I get there?'"
From *Elizabeth Costello* by J.M. Coetzee

There are two kinds of adults in America: Those who buy items that need assembly and relish putting Tab A into Slot B, and those who look at the funky directions and the little bag of parts and walk away. I was born into the first group and have spent some portion of my life trying to find suitable outlets for my talent. Given the choice, I always buy something unassembled, bring it home and circle it for a few days. Then, when I feel the time is right I cut open the box and dig in.

I enjoy everything about the process - the initial uncertainty when I look at the drawings, and even the frustration when I incorrectly screw the front to the back, swear at myself, and start again. At the end, I step back to take pleasure in the assembled piece and add one more Allen wrench to my collection.

You would think that my obvious career choice would have been architecture. Unfortunately, despite all the early indicators, Mrs. Kuehner quashed that option.

Back in St. Louis, Missouri, in the mid-1950s, Mrs. K taught a class to all eighth-graders at Normandy Junior High called Practical Living. It was a rite of passage into high school and covered little related to our adolescent lives and nothing terribly practical. Because Mrs. K doubled as the school counselor, she administered an "occupational interest test" of some pages asking either/or questions, such as, "Would you rather build a table or minister to the sick?"

It's too long ago to remember all the details but when my results were in, Mrs. K and I had a brief chat in the back of the room while the "bad boys" in the front scooted their desks like bumper cars into the girls who faked their dismay. Mrs. K looked up, her brow a network of fine creases, probably ticking off the months until her retirement.

Settling back down with me, she said, "Well, dear," (she used that term often with me since I was one of those kids who didn't cause her any trouble and she knew my parents) "your highest interest and ability score is in the ninety-sixth percentile . . . as an architect. But, since women don't become architects, you also show a high interest in the liberal arts and will make a wonderful teacher." I can't blame it all on Mrs. K - I might have gone to architecture school later in my life, but by the time the opportunity came around, I was well into another career.

Fifty years later I decided to finally engage my early aptitude. After moving nearly forty times in my life, I collaborated with an architect, a contractor, a carpenter, and an assemblage of tradesmen to create my very own custom home. As for the word "custom," I have to laugh at what snobbery that brings up for me and yet it's true; there is no other house like it in Eagle Harbor, probably in the Pacific Northwest, and maybe even in the world. That's pretty custom.

So, Mrs. K, in an odd way, this book's for you. I say this no longer in the tone of a surly eighth-grader but as an adult who still remembers you. At long last I've had my architect experience, indirect as it was, and fulfilled this dormant desire to create something bigger than a breadbox. I salute you!

And, imagine my surprise, when beyond the immediate experience of building a house I stumbled onto something far more important. I discovered a deeper meaning of home and how to get there.