

Day 33. They're all the same now though, so I suppose it doesn't really matter. I don't even know why I bother keeping track anymore. All I know is that my hands are angry with me. They have retaliated with a tingling numbness every night – probably from a combination of swelling, tendinitis, and some type of nerve damage. Last night they kept me up all night, except for a few hours. I squirmed around, pleading with the sleep gods to make it go away, but they wouldn't listen.

It was all self-induced. I tend to bite off more than I can chew sometimes, but doing so in this context had repercussions that were unknown to me. I thought real suffering was only possible on hard climbs in the mountains, not on a barn building project with a cushy RV parked next to the building site. But it was a pivotal moment in my life, and I was exceptionally motivated to get dug into the land which I may call home someday. That romantic notion of living and building off the grid, mostly alone, in the shadow of Montana's Beartooth Mountains was enough to drown out the realities of just how damn hard it would all be. Call me naïve. I won't be offended.

The trailer is cold in the mornings. My breath frosts in the air as I get up to fire up a pot of hot water for coffee and turn on the furnace to dull the cold just a little. Hopefully there will be at least some power left in the batteries, but if the sun is out the solar panels will catch it just as it illuminates the eastern front of the Beartooths. I don't normally get up this early in regular life, but under these circumstances I have no time to spare. I've been going at full speed for well over a month without a single rest day and still don't know if the main roof will make it on or not, or if I'll be able to wall in my shop space and have a place to keep the many tons of equipment and materials I hauled here from Alaska and Nevada. It's a bit stressful, like an expedition where the outcome is totally uncertain. It's the first time I've felt this way outside of mountain ranges and rock walls. Committed to the core, as that cliché slogan goes.

Breakfasts are huge. I know I won't be out of the zone until at least 3, which means I won't stop at all until then. Even then it'll probably just be an apple and some chocolate to save time – sometimes stuffed into the nail belt pockets so I can eat while doing something else. Solo building in a place like this is a lot like climbing; lots of laps up and down scaffolding, and one arm hangs from header beams and trusses while nailing and drilling – all satisfying movements for a climber when not too repetitive. If you fall, you get hurt too, and a rescue is a long ways away. Constantly questioning what is possible and safe, riddled with self doubt, the experience rolls on. You won't really know if you can pull it all off until the last day of the trip, and I was getting close to that point.

So much had happened over the last couple months, but I knew soon I'd be back to the normal routine, connected with the events of the world, other people, the internet, electricity that flows without having to do anything but write a check. But for now, this is

what it's like out here. I guess it was all a good decision; buying the land and starting this whole homestead project. It feels good out here. It's just you and the mountains, and maybe a primitive howl if the winds are doing their thing or if the wolves or coyotes are out. My body is thankful at the same time as being hurt. It's real work – a glimpse into what it might be like to do this sort of thing every day, except instead of building, maybe tending to a garden or field or dealing with the animals, or fixing something that is guaranteed to fail at some point -- like a truck or generator which can provoke you and send you into screaming matches with the universe.

Yeah, I grew up in a big city, but with each passing day I feel less and less connected to all of that. I am changing fundamentally, and it feels right. Most days, having the company of only myself, I have plenty of time to ponder that notion. If I can finish before it's totally dark, I sip a beer and walk around the property, grinning and reflecting, but not for long enough before I have to start on some dinner. It's the sanctuary I imagined it would be – in practice finally rather than theory. I'm relieved, and truly blessed even if this is just a taste of the peace I thought I'd find here.

The relief comes and goes, however – both psychologically and physically. Both thumbs have split open at the tips from constant wear and abuse, exposing raw flesh riddled with nerve endings. It's inevitable that they will bash into hammers and beams, and as they do so they send jolts of pain up my arms and into my brain. One wouldn't think wounds so small could be so painful, but it's all part of the game I suppose. Grin and bear it, and embrace the F word when it's all you've got.

In the mornings when the hands are getting started, it takes a long time for the numbness to go away. Like climbing, I have to stop every few nails, or every few roofing screws, to shake them out and get the feeling back so everything can function. I've worked on construction crews before, but you get the weekends off, and time to recuperate. Plus the pace is slower; after all you're building someone else's dream, on their nickel. But here on my turf, I fell into a manic phase, never resting, never taking a day off, and it began to take a toll.

I believed everything that happened was a premeditated test of resilience. The day after I pulled the trailer onto the property, I worked in a freezing blizzard all night to get the water well up and running as I cussed into the wind each time it extinguished the blow torch. A few days later the winds were pushing 50 miles an hour, which seemed somewhat common, so I focused on tasks that didn't require moving big pieces of lumber or steel panels, or on fixing the furnace blower to prevent the kitchen water lines from freezing solid. There was always something to do, and never enough time. Everything was complicated and tedious. I wondered if I'd be able to leave the property in a condition to withstand the winter before I had to return to Alaska. The stress was potent, but so was

the satisfaction of watching the project grow closer to completion every day. Deep down, I loved it all, though most of the time was spent denying that.

My good friends kept the woes and emotional roller coasters in check. Katie and Gus came all the way from Arizona for two days to help me clean out the post holes and raise the posts. Dylan made it out several times from his home in Billings to help with things I couldn't do solo. And Bill – the climber who lives in the shadows of the Meeteetsee Spires a few miles away in a partially underground home he built himself, showed up at just the right times to help out.

My life is blessed with people so good. They restore my faith in humanity, protect me from overwhelming cynicism, and provide the inspiration I need to attempt to live my life with a similar amount of integrity and kindness. Tara, who flew up once from Colorado to help with the posts, drove over a thousand miles round trip to come again to help tidy up the site for winter and bring me back to Boulder to decompress and catch my flight back to Alaska. Just three days later, I miss her dearly.

Most of it seems abstract now – this brief blur in time during which I went manic, driven by the idea that for once I'd have a place within nature that is uniquely mine – a place that combines wilderness with the concept of being grounded to a home. A place that will be there as long as I'm around, to shape and cultivate, within a timeless and immensely beautiful landscape. Maybe I wanted to know what it all felt like so badly that I could be distracted by nothing else, even though my plan wasn't particularly urgent.

At the end of the day, what I have is not outstanding. I have no actual house, no huge bundles of equity tied up in my land, and no major infrastructure aside from a water well. But what I do have is the sense that my little spot under the mountains is there, and I know exactly how it makes me feel. I am safeguarded in a new way, and while I may always be something of a nomad on this planet, now I've got a place, however modest, simply to be, whenever the time is right.