

Alterations and Repairs

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The sign at the entrance to the municipal building said, “Wipe mud from shoes before entering.” Below was a boot brush laden with clumps of fresh, wet mud. The sign was superfluous, I thought. Who *wouldn't* wipe his feet clean of that mess before entering a building? Still, when I opened the door, there was a trail of crud leading down the steps to the basement offices. I followed alongside it, careful not to taint my designer hiking boots, stopping at the secretary's desk to confirm my appointment. She directed me down the hall, in the direction of the trail, which continued past her desk to a door with a plaque that said, “Mr. White, Construction Official.”

The door was partly open. Sticking out from behind a green metal desk was a pair of work boots, caked with drying mud, and a few inches of splattered, faded denim above the ankles. Okay, so maybe Mr. White didn't have to wipe his feet. This was his department, his house, his castle. I myself had once been a government employee and knew the power he wielded over ordinary citizens who were at his mercy for information, approvals and, in my case, absolution. This was an act of contrition, and in the end I would do what I was told. My only hope was that I might transmit to Mr. White my vulnerability, and maybe he'd go easy on me. I took a deep breath and thought of myself as something fragile and well-crafted, something a tradesman would appreciate: a finely carved jewelry box, perhaps. I envisioned that box being carefully sanded and sealed with three

coats of finish: deprecation, humility, cooperation. And when the box was completed in my mind, I tapped lightly on the door, taking the responsive grunt as an invitation to enter the dim, windowless office.

Mr. White stood up halfway, bent over at the waist, as though he were assessing whether I warranted the stretch to his full height. Even in that position he was an imposing man, tall, with broad shoulders and a slight paunch. The skin on his neck was tan and pock-marked. His head, with its thick, crew cut hair, was too big, way out of proportion to the heads of us mere mortals, a boulder among pebbles. I didn't like his eyes, mainly because I could barely see them, could only make out an impressionistic pool of blue behind the thick lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses. They would be impossible to read. (He never did straighten up completely.)

After hasty introductions – “Claire O'Reilly” was all I said – he settled back into the chair behind the desk, and I perched on the edge of the battered brown folding chair allotted to me. Even with the desk between us, he loomed, and I smelled the earth on his boots. In an instant I realized that my jeans were too clean and I shouldn't have worn make-up, but then the next moment was upon me, the time to say my opening line and let my carefully-crafted speech pour forth, smooth as the glossy ceramic tile and gleaming fixtures in my illegal master bathroom. I wanted Mr. White to understand the reasons why we put up the walls and installed the bathroom without getting the necessary permits. I had worked out a bevy of excuses, waverings, and statements of feigned ignorance. I had even practiced confused expressions in front of a mirror. If I had to play the part of an empty-headed female, I would. I had heard that trying to get building

permits in this town for work that had already been completed was like confessing to a felony. The guilty were fined. They were humiliated by Mr. White and the sub-code officials – the specialists who conducted the electrical, plumbing, and fire inspections. At the very least the guilty were forced to open up walls in several locations so the inspectors could see the work. In the worst situations, they were made to tear down the work altogether. Goodbye, children’s rooms. Goodbye, new bathroom. The worst-case scenarios seemed unlikely to me, but it was the threat of their possibility – the fear of unknown punishment – that had led me to delay this meeting for weeks.

The impetus behind my visit to Mr. White, however, was straightforward. My husband, Bernie, and I had to sell our house. After two years of co-habitation and eleven years of marriage, we were getting divorced. He would move to California. I would remain in our small town in New Jersey, but in a smaller home. Our realtor had insisted that we fill out a disclosure statement, and we – I – had trouble with one of the questions:

*“Are you aware of any alterations or repairs made to the Property without the necessary governmental permits or approvals?
Yes or No. If yes, please describe.”*

Bernie and a few of his colleagues in the computer science department at the university thought the answer was “No.” The women in my book group and I said the answer was “Yes,” reasoning that the permits would minimize the potential of future litigation in the event that something should eventually malfunction in the house. It was the world we lived in.

So, there I was, on my own with Mr. White – Bernie refused to

participate in my “insanity” – prepared to do whatever it took to set the record straight, to answer the question in the affirmative, to be completely honest with the as yet unknown, prospective buyers of our home.

“Mr. White, I have a confession to make.” Slight pause. “My husband and I have lived in our three thousand square foot contemporary for thirteen years. During that time we’ve gotten permits to build a three-car garage and to add an office and home gym to the front of the house. That was before we had children. We’ve got two boys now.”

I didn’t mention the bundle of cells, union of sperm and egg that was “on the way,” an unplanned detour down the path of reconciliation for Bernie and me before we turned around and got back to the main road, only to head in opposite directions. Bernie had no idea what was going on inside me. Lately I myself wasn’t so sure. But I had to decide about the future of those cells soon. Today.

“It’s not difficult to reconstruct life before we had the boys. Bernie’s position at the university put him on the tenure treadmill. I was in state government. I thought I was at the beginning of an illustrious career in public service.” I snorted slightly and realized I might be offending Mr. White, so I said, “I even had political aspirations, if you can believe that.” Then I chuckled, trying to erase any contempt I may have conveyed, to put Mr. White at ease, to smooth away those grim lines parading across his forehead.

“We did everything by the book. Got the permits, paid the fees, had the inspections. I’m sure it’s all there in the file. Of course, there was time back then. Real time. Do you have children, Mr. White?”

He nodded, but there was no show of sympathy on his face. His lenses were blurry, making me dizzy. I inhaled, suppressing a wave of nausea.

“What can I do for you today?” His hands were folded on the desk in front of him, on top of my file. Block 40, Lot 22 was written on the folder in black ink.

“We – my husband – did some work on the house without permits, and we’d like to get them now and have the inspections done. Put everything in order. Before we sell the house. We’re getting divorced.”

There. It was out, and somewhere deep inside I felt an immediate relief, an unclenching.

He opened the folder then, bringing it close to his face and moving his glasses up and out of the way to squint at the top page.

“Who owns Block 40, Lot 22?”

“My husband, Bernard Kornbluth, and I. We have different last names.”

“Why?” he asked before setting his glasses back into place and pulling a blueprint from the file. He spread our original floor plans in front of him, and I recognized the past: the wide, open rooms downstairs, the loft upstairs. I had assumed that Mr. White would want to get right to the details of the plan, the nuts and bolts. *What happened? How has your home changed?* I hadn’t anticipated that he would be interested in our names, but I responded to the question in the practiced way I always did whenever others had asked.

“I kept my name when we got married.”

He looked up, and I saw the crevices on his forehead increase in depth, while the ridges soared ever higher.

“Why?” he repeated.

He gave no indication that he was kidding. No smile, no crin-

ling of the lines surrounding the glasses. His face looked awful in the fluorescent light. Red capillaries traversed his nose and cheeks like a road map of the township, and I wondered if new lines appeared whenever a new subdivision was completed.

“Because I didn’t want to go to all that trouble, you know, changing my social security card, driver’s license, all that.”

I smiled wryly. I waved my hand in dismissal of “all that.”

With those gestures I intended to communicate that my failure to take my husband’s name was simply due to bureaucratic hassles. There was no reason to mention the women’s liberation movement to Mr. White, or that I had been the first girl to play in my town’s Little League in 1974. Nor would it have been good form to tout my advanced degree from a prominent women’s college. And I certainly had no intention of disclosing to Mr. White that Bernie had never, ever *demand*ed sex, that we had made love sufficiently often and in mutually agreeable ways throughout the history of our relationship, or so I had thought. There was no need to rock Mr. White’s world with the revelation that just a few months ago, Bernie had been throwing in a load of laundry every few days, keeping up appearances as The Modern, Sensitive American Male, keeping our home neat and tidy while a mound of deceit took root in his office in just a few hours in one afternoon with an older woman, someone infertile and self-actualized and *free*. Why confuse Mr. White or antagonize him with my philosophy of a woman’s last name as a steady counterpoint to her ever-evolving self from birth to death, a journey that might include numerous men moving unpredictably in and out of the revolving door of her life? Although I wanted to, I didn’t pound Mr. White’s flat-top

with a mallet and scream that all the women in my book group were married, intelligent, and witty and had also kept their names. *Their names*. I despised the term “maiden name.” Now that Mr. White knew my background, I’m sure he understood why I might find that insulting.

That’s why I blamed all this on bureaucracy – so I wouldn’t get all worked up into my feminist tirade, as Bernie calls it. And for just a moment I was sure I had gotten through to him because he nodded and tilted his head to the right just ever so slightly as though, perhaps, he understood for the first time how difficult and senseless it was for a woman to change all those documents and records.

“What kind of work are we talking about – Mrs. Kornbluth?”

Okay. So that’s where we were. Mrs. Kornbluth. My mother-in-law. It should have come as no surprise that she would, after all these years, be present somehow at this moment. She had never been able to let go of Bernie. She still cooed over him and let him talk about himself and his ideas for hours every Sunday afternoon. She had never had a job and therefore couldn’t understand how I could possibly give him enough attention. I suppose by her standards, I never did. Certainly once we had the boys it was impossible to devote that kind of attention to anyone but them. Yes, she was here all right, while I groveled at Mr. White’s feet, admitting that my life with Bernie was wrong now, something she had believed all along and rarely concealed.

“Some of this might be hard for you to understand,” I said and stood to lean over the desk, pointing to the blueprints spread out in front of him. “It started out as a wide open, passive solar contemporary. The only interior walls enclosed the bathrooms. The back of the

house faces the south, so we had windows running the entire length of both the first and second stories.”

The house was set three hundred feet back from the road on ten acres. The front yard was thick with native red cedars and wild dogwoods. The side yards were lush with plantings that Bernie and I had established in the early years. The south-facing windows looked out on a meadow with a row of shag bark hickories in the distance, and we grew accustomed to being in the midst of the changing seasons. From early spring until the first frost, Bernie and I had breakfast on the deck on weekends, and I found myself noticing the slightest changes in the woods. An unnatural movement among the brush, then the appearance of a fox. A flicker of white and then the outline of a fawn suckling its mother. All summer long, I came home from work to see a few more blossoms plucked from my geraniums by the family of woodchucks living under the deck. Although I wasn't the outdoors type – I didn't hike or camp – I had seen all those details so clearly.

Yet we were so close to suburbia. A half-mile away in two directions were large subdivisions. Still, we felt like we were different from everyone else. Bernie would agree with that even now. We finished the house ourselves; it wasn't cut from the same mold as the subdivision houses. Occasionally he brought home a joint, and we sat on the deck in the dark and got high and drank too much beer, while the other couples we knew had babies and sought admission to competitive pre-schools.

Bernie refused to give up his pale blue Ford pickup, even though it was being eaten alive by rust. Around the house I wore stained sweatshirts and old running shoes. We were in the middle of the most

densely populated state in the country, in the midst of an economic boom, where malls and cars were hemming in the landscape, but for a long time, it was lost on us.

“We were married on the deck.”

And for a wedding gift Bernie had given me an antique box from Iran, its lid inlaid with mother-of-pearl, its interior lined with velvet. I realized too late that I had spoken aloud. Mr. White looked up and our faces were inches apart. I stepped back and sat in the chair again.

“Like I said, we did the garage and these two rooms downstairs before we had the boys. When we had Jason – he’s our oldest – we had to close in this loft area. It just wasn’t safe for a toddler. Then we realized we needed a more conventional layout – rooms with walls – so we closed in the upstairs. The master bedroom is here now.”

I pointed. “And there are three bedrooms, here and here and here.”

Jason’s room was colorfully crammed with a red Little Tykes car bed, buckets of Legos, and his prized collection of Beanie Babies, while the two rooms across the hall had become a repository for my old social science texts, Hanukkah and Christmas wrapping paper, and odd pieces of furniture that I couldn’t bear to give away although they had already been replaced by chic leather ensembles. There were also boxes filled with photographs of Jason’s first two years, before Adam was born.

“Because we knew we didn’t want to have an only child,” I said. It occurred to me then that Mr. White might be an only child, so I added, “We had always talked about having a large family.”

This was true if you considered a husband, a wife, and three children a large family. The plan was for Bernie to get tenure and for me

to stop working and have beautiful, interesting children who would accompany us on yearlong sabbaticals to developing nations in need of Bernie's computer expertise.

"I'm going to have to go back, make some calculations, check the structural integrity of the entire house," said Mr. White.

I took a deep breath. Here it comes, I thought. The tirade, the recriminations.

"From what you're telling me, I have no idea if the original foundation and posts and beams are capable of supporting these new loads. On top of that, my electrical inspector is going to have to see inside those walls. I can tell you right now that's going to be a problem."

I had anticipated this and countered, "My husband wired the garage and the front rooms, and they passed inspection, no problem. He really did know what he was doing." Of course, I wouldn't trust Bernie's circuitry now even if I wore a rubber body suit. He had burned me badly, but I wasn't going to tell that to Mr. White.

"That's all well and good, but my man is going to need to see inside these walls," he said, jabbing his forefinger on the plan.

Okay, I nodded meekly, thinking of that Iranian box again and all the little bits of inlay that had been falling off in recent years. It was old. Or maybe it had not been well made in the first place.

"What else?" he asked.

"We added a master bathroom upstairs. It wasn't that complicated."

But it had become much more complicated in the past few weeks, the changes I was already feeling inside – *Should I keep my appointment at the clinic after this meeting?* If Bernie and I had been staying together, this third child would have completed our pentagon, the fifth line.

But he had unilaterally changed the parameters. He had said that the *condition* of fatherhood had repressed his maleness – as though fatherhood were a disease he had contracted. He claimed the only way to beat this thing was through sex without the threat of conception. His lover ran some sort of psychotherapeutic workshops in the Bay area and had been in New Jersey for a training course. They had found each other in a coffee shop when both of them had ordered herbal tea. Then she had found him an opportunity in a software start-up out there. He'd be in when the company went public, so I didn't have to worry about child support. "I don't mind paying whatever you want," he had said. "It's all the rest that's a psychic drain." For the first time in his life, he wanted to live in California, on a fault line if possible. I would have full custody of the boys, and my choice was between a triangle and a square. Could I survive in a box, even a money-lined one, with three children?

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" responded Mr. White.

You want to be the judge, Mr. White? Be my guest. You're the one with the absolutes – all those codes in those thick books on the shelves behind you. Maybe you have the answers and explanations that have so far eluded me.

"Tell me what you did," he said.

"A few years ago we took this area of the master bedroom and added a bathroom with a shower, whirlpool tub, Corian countertop, imported Italian tile. The rough plumbing was already there; it was put in when the house was built. I've got the photos to prove it."

I pulled them triumphantly from my purse and set them on the plans. I got up and moved around the desk to stand near his left arm,

careful not to touch him. His eyebrows went up, but I directed his attention to the pictures and the drawings, clarifying where the pipes had been run from the original bathroom. He seemed oblivious to the life within the lines on the pages in front of him, and it occurred to me that he would never understand how Bernie and I had hurriedly put Jason to bed so we could drink champagne and make love in that tub the very first night it was hooked up. It had been a pinnacle. Bernie had tenure by then. We splurged on new furniture, new clothing, a new truck for him. Jason was a happy baby. We spoiled him with books and toys and hip Baby Gap outfits. In our minds the house was complete. It was time to have another baby.

“Any other surprises today?” he asked.

“Just one,” I said. “This room, the exercise room. It used to be the exercise room.” I drew shaky lines with my finger. “We had to – Our second son is impaired, and we had to expand the doorway to this room and to the bathroom downstairs. And we added a ramp to the front of the house for his wheel chair. But whoever buys the house is probably just going to remove that.”

Maybe Adam’s needs had come between Bernie and me. Maybe I had been subsumed by them in addition to the normal demands of motherhood. But what was normal, anyway? Children coming between their parents. Women having to choose. Women forever making choices. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, and before I realized what was happening, I lost my balance and leaned against Mr. White’s arm. He didn’t even flinch. He was solid and warm. I rested there for just a fraction of a second, and in that instant I saw his flannel shirt, soft and worn against my crisp blouse. As I

pulled away I noticed a gob of spackle where I had touched him, and I instinctively picked off the hardened white chunk and dropped it into the waste can behind his chair.

“Thank you,” he said, looking up at me.

Even though I couldn't clearly see his eyes, I knew he was finally interested in *me*, and a sort of panic washed over me. I didn't – couldn't – tell him that Adam's room had become my bedroom too, and a resource center for everything you ever wanted to know about cerebral palsy but were afraid to ask. I couldn't ever describe the file drawers crammed with evaluations, specialists' recommendations, insurance reports, angry letters, phone logs of long conversations with the health insurers, phone bills that revealed Bernie's long, cross-country conversations with his lover, probably while he was soaking upstairs in the whirlpool and I was helping Adam to the toilet. Conversations that should have been unnecessary, words that should have been re-considered, re-ordered, re-directed to support me, to stifle my rising desire for more promises and delicate caresses from the twice-divorced neurologist at the hospital in Philadelphia. Did I say “caresses?” What if I did? What if I had needed them and welcomed them? So what if I admit that here, just this once? That's all it is – an admission, not a request for forgiveness, Mr. White, because that's not within your purview. You stick to the walls and fixtures, the things you can see and touch.

“The septic system can accommodate all these bedrooms,” I said. “The health department will verify that. I just don't want any problems with the new owners when I go to sell the house. I still have to take care of the little things – the dripping faucets, the windows with the

broken seals, the weeds. I haven't been able to keep up with them lately. But the main thing – the reason I'm here – is, well, because I want a clean slate."

Mr. White was quiet for a long time. I moved back to my seat and sat, folding my hands on my lap, waiting for the speech and the moralizing and, eventually, the forgiveness and the penance.

"We may have to open up some walls," he threatened. "But we won't know for sure until we're out there."

Here we go, I thought. Although my limbs had grown heavy, I leaned forward, interested in whatever Mr. White had to say, mindful of his verdict. I dragged a strand of graying brown hair behind my right ear. I was due for a coloring at the salon, but only if I kept my appointment at the clinic. Otherwise, the chemicals wouldn't be good for the baby.

"We still haven't discussed the fire inspection," he said. "Your house was built just before the new code went into effect. You probably don't have any hard-wired alarms. Now, normally, you would be grandfathered in under the old regulations, but in circumstances like these, where you did all this work without –"

"Excuse me, Mr. White, sir. We've got hard-wired alarms all over the place. My hus- ex-husband was diligent about that, so your inspector is free to look at that anytime."

"I see," he said, nodding in – appreciation?

He folded the plans. He reached behind his desk and began pulling papers from a series of stacked, plastic bins.

"You'll need to submit blueprints. Then fill out these forms and give it all to the secretary. She'll call you with the fees." He handed me the forms.

“Blueprints?”

Blueprints meant an architect and an architect meant money, just like a divorce meant a lawyer and a lawyer meant money. I felt the blood drain from my face as though there were a leaky pipe somewhere inside me. If I had been a victim on one of those television medical shows, there would be a frantic but competent team applying a clamp now in just the right spot to staunch the flow. But there was only Mr. White with the foggy eyes and dirty boots and surprisingly clean fingernails.

“We’ll need two copies of two sets of drawings. The ‘before’ and the ‘after.’” He paused.

The *before* and the *after*. As far as I could tell, there was no such thing as “after.” Only “before” stretching into this continuous present like Bernie’s wires snaking through the walls all over the house. When would I let them stop? In which walls would a new continuum begin? The cozy, four-bedroom ranch that the realtor had shown me today?

“Are you okay, Mrs. Kornbluth?”

The mere mention of my mother-in-law had the effect of smelling salts, and I sat up straighter in the chair.

“I’m fine, Mr. White.”

“One of my men will review the plans, and the inspectors will get out there when they can. We’re real busy with that expansion over at the mall.”

He shrugged apologetically.

Of course they were busy at the mall. Everyone was busy at the mall. Bernie was probably over there right now picking out a flimsy little see-through number at Victoria’s Secret to send to his frisky

playmate. But if I had another boy, I wouldn't need to buy much at all; I had saved Jason and Adam's clothing and toys.

What would Bernie say though? Would he balk at supporting another child, even one that he had helped to create? Even if Bernie resented the kids now, we had been at our best when we made them, and I was at my best raising them. *Raising them*, like a barn or a house, giving them a foundation and watching them sprout walls and windows and roofs. Of course, I'd have all the tests done first, to be sure the baby was healthy. But what if he wasn't? My lips were dry. I checked my watch. I had to leave now, this second, if I expected to make that appointment.

"I'll be going back to work," I said. "Maybe in the governor's office." As soon as I said it, I knew it was all wrong. Mr. White wouldn't be impressed by that sort of job. Besides, hadn't I told him earlier that I was ever-evolving? *Or had I?* If I were going back to government work, it was more likely that I was devolving or revolving. No matter.

"We do the best we can," he said, standing.

That was it then. My case was in the hands of his underlings. I had unburdened the history of my home to him, and he had delegated it to strangers. I had expected a fine and felt as if I owed him something. I found myself nodding, almost genuflecting, with the forms in my hands as I backed out of the office.

"Thank you, Mr. White," I said. "Thank you."

On the drive home I thought of the cells inside me – a new foundation had already taken root. Who was I to pull it out? There on the seat next to me was the listing sheet for the ranch with the peeling

paint, just waiting for someone to discover its velvet lining. *We do the best we can.*

I didn't see the dirt on my boots until I reached my front door. On the way out of White's office, I must have walked through his trail of mud. My cell phone rang then. It was the counselor from the clinic. Was I all right? I assured her that I was, but that I wouldn't be able to make the appointment and, no, I didn't want to reschedule. Yes, I was sure. I called the realtor and left a message that I wanted to place a bid on that house and, without bothering to wipe my feet, went inside to pay the sitter. □