

DREAM HOUSE

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When it comes to remodeling, many couples argue about decorating styles or cost. Our conflict was different. David idled in apathy and I rushed into obsession. For two years I devoured interior decorating magazines and planned the renovation of our historic home. Multicolored Post-it notes poked from the stacks of books and magazines on my nightstand—a rainbow of dreams. I tried not to notice my husband's glazed-over expression when I discussed the house, hoping that once renovation was underway, David would show some interest in the process.

On the day before construction began, we planned to move our possessions from one part of the vacant house to another. As I dressed, David lay in bed. "You'll have to do it without me," he mumbled from underneath the bedcovers in his faded British accent. "I don't feel well. The girls can help you." The "girls" being my eleven-year-old daughter, Lyda, and three-month-old Ava.

I stared at my husband. This was my second marriage. His, too, and I wanted it to work. I wasn't sure how to respond

to David. There were a lot of boxes to move. Without his help, it would take the better part of the day, plus I'd have to nurse Ava and change her cloth diapers. David rolled over in bed and asked me to turn out the lights. I tucked my husband in and told him I hoped he felt better.

I dressed in a tattered pair of tan shorts and a faded black T-shirt, brushed my long, auburn hair into a ponytail and dismissed the incident, hoping to shake off feelings of dread. I loved David for his European flair, his sense of humor, and his mind. We shared a passion for rhubarb, candied ginger, travel, and each other.

Shortly after our marriage, we fell in love with the down-on-its-heels, one-story Spanish territorial house, with thick plaster walls, oak floors, and a red terra-cotta tile roof. It was close to where we both worked—he as a university professor, and I as an environmental consultant—and located in a good school district. Uninhabitable when we purchased it, the house stood riddled with termite damage, cracked plaster, and occupied by a vine growing in the enclosed porch that I christened Audrey after the monster plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*. I believed with a huge dollop of TLC and a vision, we could transform the dilapidated eyesore into our dream house.

From the very beginning we had different goals. I grew up in a family that renovated for fun. My father was an engineer and my mother an interior decorator. She designed houses, and Dad made her dreams reality. By the time I left for college, I had lived in six dreams, two of which my parents had built by themselves, on weekends and vacations. I thought renovating was what couples did, and could not imagine life without a house project.

I realized David's model of a happy marriage differed from mine after I traveled to Europe to meet his parents. They host-

ed parties, one dinner fete after another. David's interest in renovation was not in the process but in the house's completion so he could entertain. For me, the journey was far more intriguing than the destination.

There were so many decisions to make, from the choices of doors, to the windows, to the floors, to the color scheme. Thinking we would make decisions together, I handed David a dog-eared hardware catalog and asked which door hinges he preferred—the shiny brass ones or the antique ones?

"I have no eye for details," he responded, returning the unopened catalog. "You choose."

As the weeks turned into months, the decisions multiplied like weeds after a spring shower. Seeds of resentment grew in both of us. With each nail hammered, each drywall screw turned, and each oak floor panel sanded, we grew farther apart until our silence took up more space than words. As the house rose from its decayed shell, our marriage crumbled.

Nine months into the construction, at a time when the project was scheduled to near completion, work halted. For a while we bought the contractor's creative excuses:

"Concrete's hard to come by."

"Can't find reliable workers."

When it came time to confront the contractor, David stood aside while I asked the hard questions. The contractor's feet did his talking. With a fancy Texas two-step, he danced out the door, leaving behind an empty shell. While it would have been a welcome relief to walk away, too, we were stuck. Who would buy someone else's nightmare?

I watched the dust cloud that grew behind the white pickup truck as it sped away. "I'll look for a new contractor."

"And a lawyer," David added.

That summer, David threw up his hands at our renovation and traveled to more overseas conferences—the same

summer my parents celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary by gutting a bathroom. I tried to take command of the situation, but nothing responded. Not the contractor, not the vine growing in the back porch, not the cost of renovation, not my husband sitting in front of his computer. It made me want to blow the tile roof off its studs, turn the sun to stone, raise the floorboards, freeze the computer keyboard—to shake some sense into the matter.

To salvage our marriage, I herded craftsmen. By the time my daughters awoke and my day truly began, I had been on the phone for hours. I spoke in clipped words, for to lollygag would throw the house's new completion date out of kilter (a moving target would further loosen our marriage's fraying fabric).

By the time I had taken the girls to school and put the key into my office door, I had talked to at least four, maybe eight, tradesmen. My fingers would fly across the phone's keypad, starting with the project foreman. He told me who had been late, sloppy with their work, or drunk. I moved on to the carpenter. "Had the cherry wood been sanded and stained?" Next the blacksmith. "What was the progress of the wrought-iron door and the fence?" I dialed the electrician. "Had he found the missing sconce?" I flew to the cabinet maker. "How were the custom bathroom vanities coming?" I cajoled and nudged my flock like a good shepherd, always pointing them in the right direction. If I did not reach them, or my cell phone was dead, or I overslept, the day was shot. Nothing would get accomplished.

Sometimes they did not answer or I was kicked into voice mail, and my fingers idled on the instrument. I kept my demeanor and my eye on the prize. I dialed again and again until my minions spoke to me. I thought once I created the perfect home, David would pay attention to me and show that

he loved me. I made excuses for his lack of interest, saw what I wanted to see, and disregarded any sign that did not fit.

At dinner, I engaged my family with catalogs, magazine clippings, and product brochures. Lyda, thirteen and acting it, argued over design ideas and held fast to her decorating principles. Little Ava, now age three, had opinions on wall color and furniture placement. David opened his inch-thick laptop and Googled his next trip.

I solicited advice and camaraderie from others—from my parents, my daughters, the architect, the carpenter, the interior decorator, the plumber. I spent hours discussing the project's minutiae with everyone but my husband, the person I most wanted to discuss things with.

Money slipped through our fingers quicker than ice cubes melt on a Tucson summer day. One evening, I sat at the dining room table with a stack of bills and a slim checkbook and prepared to write check after check for the next day's construction meeting. David, holding the latest edition of the *New Yorker* and wearing striped boxer shorts and a navy blue T-shirt, tiptoed across the dining room on the way to the bedroom, his heels barely touching the wooden floor. I used to find his step endearing, but lately I thought it indicative of our relationship; he sneaked across my life, slipping through it without participating. When I asked him how we would pay for everything, my concern was met with comedy—he suggested I rob a bank.

I refinanced the house. In addition to dealing with mortgage brokers and accountants, I coped with drug-addicted faux painters, workers who didn't show, and laborers who created busywork for themselves and expected to be paid for their long hours. When I discussed the workers' shenanigans at dinner, Lyda and Ava asked questions regarding the soap opera while David text-messaged his colleagues.

After five and a half years, a lifetime in a marriage, our dream house glistened underneath the cloudless blue Tucson sky. Smooth as marzipan, creamy-colored stucco glazed its exterior walls. Smack dab in the middle of the house, a turret separated the original structure from the addition. On either side, gleaming new casement windows welcomed the Arizona sun, and brought the outside in. The house's soul shimmered with golden-hued walls, cherry wood cabinets, panoramic windows, and shiny oak floors.

I received numerous accolades for my efforts—from the neighbors, workers, friends, relatives—but David remained silent, aloof. I wondered if he resented the time I spent on the house, time spent building a home for our family, time spent away from him.

A few days before our seventh wedding anniversary, we moved in. I pictured our lives back on track, anticipating a celebration and tingled with delight. I imagined an embrace, a kiss, a brush of a hand yearning with seduction.

"We're finally here," David said from his side of the bed.

At last, I thought, David would say something positive about the house.

"I never thought you would do it," he said and rolled over into silence.

In the darkness, I realized the years of sweet-talking, prodding, begging, shoving our dream into reality left me with an empty marriage. David's decision to remain in bed the day before construction began, when I desperately needed his help, was a harbinger of the future. Somewhere along the journey we took different paths. I thought I was investing in our marriage with all my remodeling conversations, but in reality I had invested in real estate. I wondered how much of a profit I would realize if I sold my dream house and if it would pay for a divorce attorney.