


NORTHWEST REVIEW



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OUR PRISM

But our contractor says, "Jerry, please."

And of course I say yes, because I don't know why.

Maybe I've gotten soft. When my child says to me, "Daddy, come on, come on," I say "Yes," because it's like revenge. Plus, my daughter's happy. Great.

But not with our contractor. Our contractor's no baby. He's six foot two, redoing our new apartment at lightning speed. And he's talking to me as if I were a child. "Jerry?"

And I say O.K., because it doesn't matter. He wants me to come over and see him bash through the walls of the apartment. He thinks this may ease my mind a little bit. Why will this help me? I can't possibly imagine. I think maybe my contractor thinks I have a commitment problem. That I'm not so sure I want to bust the walls open. That I want him to do it and not tell me about it if it goes wrong. That I don't really trust him in such a crucial job.

I try to scare our contractor a little, just in case. I tell him, "Maybe I don't want to be there if you mess something up, all right. This is my life savings."

He doesn't care. He wants to see me cringe. Or something like that. Or maybe he wants me to be the one to take the first swing.

I have to wonder what this means. Why does he want me to break my walls down? There's something, I don't know, weird about this. But I let it go. Because what, is he a psychiatrist? No, he's a contractor. To tell you the truth, I'm kind of curious to see what happens. So I tell him I'll be there. But not today. Today, I have to go to work.

Or I have to go to Macy's, where my wife sends me. To buy a shower curtain, for the apartment we're still in. My wife says the

one we have is unbearable and if she has to wait, she wants to be happy while she's getting clean.

So, I go. Why? She's pregnant and Macy's is near my office so it's easy for me. Plus, I'm trying to participate. But all I can think about is money. Lofting bills like newspapers on the wind. I don't see cribs, rooms, curtains. I don't want to nest. Nesting's for men like sex is for women. I know I'll be happy when it's done but I don't want to spend all of my time doing it.

I come in on the ground floor and consult a security guard who tells me vaguely that shower curtains are on six. His answer seems suspiciously disinterested, but I think, Why would he lie?

I wait while a group of men marches staunchly into the undergarment section and then I step onto the escalator. Second floor: Fancy shoes for people with too much money. Third: Sportswear for people who never exercise. Four: Casual clothes for people who can't stop working. On five, sheets of plastic covered in a thin white dust—repairs of some sort, maybe asbestos removal? When I think about dying, I think of drowning and choking on dust. Pleasant, I know. I sometimes worry that a propensity to think about a certain kind of death means a likelihood of dying from it. Also, I sometimes think humans come back as animals in their next lives and that the planets themselves are just atoms in the hands of a colossus.

I arrive on six and pass through a women's undergarments department the size of a football field. I'm beginning to doubt the directions when I just miss banging into a sign that reads, "Domestics." I find vinyl, clear and heavy, and pay. The woman at the cash register looks at me knowingly and suggests I buy a fragrant candle.

I waver. I consider buying the candle and taking it to a church and lighting it for my soon-to-be former apartment and our soon-to-be-former life with one child, but since I'm without religion I know this would be meaningless, maybe worse. Then I think of my daughter, who has recently begun to refer to her baby-sister-to-be as, "The Baby Cheezus" and demands to know why this is not to be her name. "It's a boy's name," I tell her, desperately.

I get into the elevator with a group of Italian tourists. Just as the door is about to close, a tall man with an earring and a tuft of blond hair on the top of his otherwise shaven head pushes into the elevator's entrance and stands there, cursing under his

breath at our failure to depart. Where is he going that he is so busy he doesn't notice he's blocking the doors? Behind me, one of the tourists says something gently in her native tongue about how it's the man holding us up and he—coincidentally, it seems—notices and moves back from the doors. The doors close and we begin to descend.

My wife and I have lived all of our joint lives together in our current apartment. Our past is marked in stains, bumps, furniture marks – reverberating echoes of our once separate selves. Having pledged our earthly possessions, our child, our child-to-be and ourselves to an unlikely, slightly larger space we've purchased in the building across the way, we peer wantonly through the building's windows, wondering if we'll fit in. Meanwhile, we're deaf to the silent shrugs and muffled sobs of our former home.

At work, I try to concentrate and can't. I need to think about some public pronouncements on a client's European expansion and I need to think about them clearly. Instead, I go to Chinatown to a lighting store. It's a family operation—not Chinese (Jewish?). It looks like something out of a fairy tale: magic lanterns, chandeliers.

There's an argument going on at the register.

"If they call, you take a message. If I don't have the customer's number, how am I going to make the sale?"

"Looking at your track record, I think you will need more than the phone number, which anyway I gave you."

I'm drawn to a lantern suited for the entrance to a large estate. Somehow I think this would do well in our new front hall. "Do you have sconces?"

"We got sconces," says the manager. He peers at me as if maybe I don't understand him. "Nice ones. Made in America."

Pewter? Brass? Designer? Plain? I feel faint. I wish our second child were already born and we were already moved in. I don't want to make choices, plans; consider consequences, liability. It seems as if everything certain will be in that apartment when it's finished but is not here now. Now is the torturous middle: doubts, diversions, decisions. A friend told me recently that the daredevil he admires most is the man who tightroped from one World Trade Center tower to the other. Now, I understand why.

At home, I collapse on the couch. My child implores me to

play Leggos with her and I smile genially and ask her to bring the Leggos to the couch. I make languid flying motions with a small amalgamation of pointy pieces I hope she'll take to be a plane. She giggles good-naturedly. I turn on the news.

That night I sleep and dream of our two-bedroom-to-be, its second bathroom complete, its perfect sconces chosen and installed. I wander from room to room trying to find the source of an oppressive banging sound. I prepare to swing at a closed door with a sledgehammer that has suddenly appeared in my hands. I slam a hole two feet wide. Inside the room are documents and papers I'd been missing for years, old friends' phone numbers, a pair of sneakers I'd once owned. I reach for them and wake up to the sound of someone banging on our front door with a heavy hand.

"Jerry! Jerry!" It was our contractor.

"So," he says, as we walk over. "You just swing like a slugger. Bam and then bam again. And your new bathroom will be ready for construction."

He smiles at me. Around us the apartment is dowdy, mid-renovation. He stands in the center of what is still now a hall and hefts the hammer. Then he turns like a discus thrower, slowly gathering momentum.

"Nice job," I say, backing away.

"It's great for stress," he yells, as I wander out into the afternoon.

I pause, looking back.

I can't imagine how he knows. I'm not too good with change. Every time we do something new, I have to revisit my past mistakes, bad relationships. With Julie, for example. It ended years ago – she dumped me – but the way she dumped me has reverberated in my life for years. I was minding my own business when she came up to me and smacked me, hard, across the mouth. She didn't just dump me; she punched me out.

"I've had it," she said. "I've had it with two-bit losers. I've had it with three bits. I've had it with bits and pieces of people like you. I'm better than you are. I'm better than this. Don't call me again. Don't talk to me. Don't ever remind me that we were together. No Christmas cards, nothing."

Frankly, I understood. Some people just like to put their twenties behind them and get on with life. Not dawdle. I sympathize

now. But at the time, I took it hard. I felt inconsequential, stuck. "But you are stuck," my wife told me, when we met, soon after. "You need to grow up."

She was right then and our contractor is right now. I'm like a rescued man on a lifeboat still holding on to the sinking ship. Am I stuck or am I sinking? This was too serious a question to consider. Especially standing in my doorway-to-be at the crack of dawn, or whatever it is.

"Keep me posted," I say again. But he has disappeared.

Nothing prepares you for the birth of a child. Not even the birth of your first one. It's still shocking to see the child slide out, covered in gray ooze, silent, lifelike. The doctor siphons out her tiny breathing passages and the baby cries in a small voice, as if not quite sure she wants to. The doctor brings her up to my wife's chest and her eyes widen. I feel as if my heart has already expanded to include my new daughter. I have exactly as many children as hands. Two.

Suddenly the number two is everywhere. There are the two of us. We have two children. We have two apartments. We have two lives.

I go over. Outside the door are lines of trash cans filled to the brim with the destruction's detritus. The apartment looks clean, gutted. In the space where our bathroom is to be, there is now nothing but rubble. There is earth beneath the floors. I shudder, fascinated. Somehow the idea that there is earth under the floors of a New York City apartment building makes me even more concerned for the intelligence of this endeavour. I feel sure that I am the one who will somehow cause water to fall upon the dirt, and mud to cake between the walls, bloating our apartment to twice its appropriate size. Yet, it also cheers me. It speaks of unexpected depth, unspoken memories. On a lonely piece of remaining wall there's a yellowing sliver of ancient wallpaper: one imagines it as part of a room in which a tiny, earth-bound, turn-of-the-century person once knitted, while outside the city and the country grew. I hear water running. There's a leak in the pipe that is to lead to our new faucet. I call my contractor. He tells me to call the super, which I do, and the super quickly appears and turns it off. But I cannot shake the panic. "Calm down," my contractor tells me.

Macy's is beginning to don its Christmas lights. Thin strips of

wire have been suspended over the perfume aisles and shoppers are bustling about. Outside a thin cold rain is falling through a dark, dull afternoon. I make my way along, looking for something, I'm not sure what. Comfort? There is a time in the middle of some experiences, when all the effort you possess is put towards trying to imagine how that experience will end. I'm looking at the decorations and thinking any day now we will have a lovely holiday party. A lovely home. We have a move-in date, but it seems impractical, hopeful. Golden garlands are tightly wrapped around the huge stanchions holding up Macy's ceiling as if the stanchions were the trunks of Christmas trees rising through floors two and above. Decorators with white masks over their mouths arrange gold packages on two raised platforms. One pauses in his work, lifts his mask, and looks out with a grim grin like a gryphon's. From somewhere, there's the smell of onion soup. People are running every which way.

Walking down the ramp between the store sections, I imagine I hear someone speak my name into a payphone. I keep walking quickly. I nod at the security guard at the door as I leave and think that I'm probably on a list of possible shoplifters: people who pass through the store too many times a day. If I go again, they may grab me and detain me permanently in men's casual pants. Outside it's cold and wet and depressing. I look back over my shoulder. There's community there. I want to return and stay.

I don't, but I think of Julie, of looking at her from the ground after she clocked me and realize that there is nothing, nothing at all, worse than the failure to move forward. That life is determined by how well you take the directions that are offered to you and that the best thing to do is what you can.

I begin collecting epigrams. Our lives are half-finished drawings and we're working on the measurements. Take some time for yourself today, you'll be surprised how well you feel. It's not the burden that gets us down; it's how we carry it. If you want to make a task seem difficult, just keep putting it off. If a man has done a good job in one room, he will not disappoint in another.

Taking a cab home one night, up Tenth Avenue, we hit every single green light for eighty blocks and it seems as if it were always this easy.

"Why'd the chicken cross the road?" my daughter asks, as we

sail northward. "To grow all over again."

We buy another shower curtain. This time my wife chooses it, it's white, with chrome rings. It's surprising how hard it is to attach a shower curtain. You must hold your arms over your head until they ache for as long as it takes. Our new apartment smells sweetly of paint. A sea of windows glints at us through our four new ones. We never want to move out.