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## Remodeling

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# Remodeling

Adam's dad thought we made a mistake by buying the house. Too much work, he said, it will never get finished. He never did have too much faith in Adam, or in his taste in wives. It never bothered Adam—I guess he was used to it. After a while, I got used to it too.

I don't think we ever would have bought the house, except for two things: the rain, and Adam's dad. The first time we saw the house, it was sunny out, and the split wood, the peeling paint, and the rotting porch were all too obvious. But something made us come back to see it again, and that day there was a terrible rainstorm. The flaws were not as easy to see, and the run-down two-story took on a certain charm in the downpour.

The other reason was Adam's dad. When he told us that we'd never make anything out of the house, it really made up Adam's mind for good. He never did like his dad butting in, and I used to think Adam did things just to make his dad mad.

We closed the deal, and started planning and working on the house right away. All our evenings and weekends were spent stripping wallpaper and paint and refinishing floors. The first thing Adam did was put in a new porch floor. We finished most of our summer evenings out there—sipping wine, appreciating what we had done, and talking about things like color schemes, and carpet.

We worked right into the fall. In November, though everything came to a screaming halt when Adam's dad died of a heart attack. It was almost a year ago—sometimes it seems like it happened a century ago, and other times it feels like it was only yesterday. I don't really remember much, except for the first time I started noticing Adam's mother. She was just this presence that had always been with Adam's dad. But she really handled the funeral and everything well.

After the funeral, a few of us went out for dinner. Adam was unusually quiet, but I figured he was tired. It had been a long week. His mother sat across from us, and she had the same plastic smile on her face that had been there all week. It was probably nerves I guessed, but sometimes she really bothered me. I always felt like she didn't approve of us. It wasn't anything she had ever done—she seemed to like me, and she said she loved Adam. But he was her son, and mothers are supposed to love their sons, and I always felt like anything she did for us was out of a sense of duty, responsibility.

Between sips of coffee and bites of apple pie, she broke the news. "I'm selling the house. It's way too big for me now—I just don't feel right living there." Adam didn't respond, he just kept picking at his pie, so I thought maybe I should say something. "Oh, really? Where will you go?" She looked at me, with an even stranger smile than before. Quietly, she said, "Well, you two have plenty of room. I thought I'd stay with you, until I found somewhere else. It would be temporary, of course. See, I've kind of found a buyer already, and the papers were signed yesterday. But if you don't want me..." Adam sat there dumbly. I waited for him to say that it wouldn't be a good idea, because of the remodeling, and all the mess. But he just sat there. I opened my mouth to say no, but instead, "Well, we don't mind I guess, right Adam? I mean, if it's just for a while." Adam managed to nod, and I choked down my coffee and pie in silence.

At first I thought it was just a phase with Adam—I didn't want to see that things weren't the same. When I did admit it, I told myself it would pass. I blamed myself for not understanding, and then I started to blame Adam.

But it was when his mother moved in that I noticed things really went out of kilter. I remember the day she moved in, because I burned the meatloaf. I had the feeling she thought I did it on purpose, even though Adam said it was just coincidence. Oh, she pretended not to mind, but I could tell she thought I was a lousy wife, by the way she nudged in and took over.

I could never forget the moment I opened the oven to a mess of smoke, and pulled out the charred remnants of what should have been meatloaf. I had probably made meatloaf around a hundred times since I met Adam, and it had never burned before. I remember staring at his mother, as if her presence had jinxed me. I was too embarrassed to really say anything. Adam said, "I'm hungry—how long will it take you to fix something else?" A glare at him. A few weeks ago, he would have laughed about this and taken me out for dinner. "Why don't we go out—I'll clean up the mess when we get back." I said. He started to say something, but his mother jumped in. "There's no need for you two to be spending money on eating out when I'm around. As long as I'm here, I might as well make myself useful. Now Adam, you can go get some work done, and leave us two women to ourselves. Jane, I'll whip something up, and you can start cleaning, OK?"

What could I do? She had been there less than a day, and our routine was shattered. She cheerfully whipped dinner up, while I took out my vengeance on the meatloaf pan. From that point on, things really went to hell.

When his dad died, Adam was really hurting, and I couldn't say or do anything to make him feel better. So after a while I just quit trying, and left him alone. By the time his mother moved in, our talking had already slowed way down. Suppers were pretty quiet, not what they used to be at all. No more sitting on the porch, sipping wine, talking about color schemes and carpet. We were in two different worlds, and we couldn't read each other anymore. And his mother got herself right in the thick of things.

A few weeks after the meatloaf incident, I was talking to a friend about Adam and I. She didn't really know what to say, except to tell me to give Adam more time and space. I hung up the phone, feeling very alone in the world. "You know, ever since he's been a boy, Adam has been like this when he's hurt. He's like an animal, going away to lick his wounds until he's better. He'll come back when he's ready." She was by the stove, fixing coffee. What do you know about it, I wanted to scream. He was never like this with me before. "I don't know what to think about anything anymore," I said, rather sharply, "I just know I don't want to talk about it." The look of hurt I wanted to see on her face never appeared. She just sat down at the table and said, "I understand." What scared me the most, was that she looked like she belonged there. It just didn't feel like my kitchen anymore.

I need to be needed, that's one reason why I married Adam—because he needed me. I graduated from secretarial school, and got a good job in an office, but Adam was just drifting. I gave him the stability he needed, and when we bought the house, he finally had a purpose in life, and I thought things would only get better. But since his dad died, Adam didn't want to need anyone, not even me. Even though I could see how much he was hurting, I forced myself to keep my distance. I threw myself into my job, working a lot of overtime, and when I came home, I started right in with the remodeling. I didn't have to cook anymore, since Adam's mother had assumed that duty, and so a lot of nights, I didn't even eat. I pretended that everything was the same, but I never asked Adam's advice on color schemes anymore. He should have gotten the hint, especially since he hated the shade of blue I picked out for the bathroom. He never asked me why I hadn't asked him about it—I don't think he cared enough to try and figure it all out.

Since his mother came, things were getting worse, like the meatloaf was an omen or something. I really did want

the first meal between the two of us to be a good one. Maybe if it had turned out, things would have been better, who knows? I guess Adam's mom did try to stay out of the way most of the time, and she even helped me with the house, but I couldn't help the way I felt. I was mad at Adam most of the time, and was tired of tip-toeing around him—and his dad. He was never really there for us when he was alive, but he was sure with us now. There were four of us living in the house, Adam, his dad, his mom, and me.

I was tired of myself too. I was looking in from the outside of everything—my job, my marriage, even my home. Nothing seemed like mine anymore. I felt like nobody could understand, so I didn't talk to anyone about how I was feeling. I had always been cheerful and spontaneous, but by summer, even that had worn off. I found myself forcing what had always come naturally. Things used to just happen to us, and they were usually good. But since nothing—good or bad—had happened to us since Adam's dad had died, I decided in late summer that it was time to do something.

It was a Friday, about six months after the death. Adam's mom had been with us since early spring. She and I were finishing the laundry room, and it was so hot down there that we decided to take a break and make some iced tea. We were sitting at the kitchen table, talking about the heat. "You know, you and Adam haven't gotten out in ages. Why don't you two go out tonight?" she asked. I thought about it, but I was so tired. "I don't feel like getting dressed up or anything, and Adam—well you know how he's been lately." All the same, I was thinking how nice it would be to get away. An idea was dawning on me, and I guess on her too. "How about a picnic! That way you could get out of the house for a while, and just relax. I could whip up some food, what do you say?" I liked the idea, since it was along the same lines as mine, but I wanted to do the cooking myself. So she went down to finish the laundry room, and I planned this romantic picnic, with wicker, wine, cheese, fruit, the whole picture. In the old days, I thought as I packed the basket, Adam and I would have suddenly looked at each other and said, let's go on a picnic, but now it was just me, planning and hoping.

Somehow I forgot that it would have been their 29th anniversary, if his dad were still alive. I was mad at his mom for not warning me, although I knew things were hard for her more than she let on.

When I showed Adam the basket, he just stood there, and my hopes for a new start were dead on the spot. Then he rolled his eyes and just looked at me. "How could you forget?" he asked quietly, shaking his head. Then he mumbled something about going to work on the basement. Before I could stop them, the words came out. "You never loved him when he was alive! Why start now? You don't believe in heaven, you don't go to church—do you really believe he's up there listening? He never even listened when he was alive, and you know that better than anyone! Can't we just go on without him for one day?" The door to the basement slammed, and then there was dead silence.

The worst part was his mom heard everything, and I was appalled—not at what I said, because it was the truth, though I could have said it in a nicer way. I was appalled because I didn't want her to know how bad things had gotten. Looking back, she must have known—she was caught in the middle. But she didn't say too much, she just took the basket out of my hands and said, "Well, I'm hungry, how about you? We might as well not let this good food go to waste—let's eat." I followed her into the kitchen, and the two of us ate in silence.

The day after the picnic incident is when I started really wondering where the blame should go. Was it my fault, Adam's, both of ours, or his mom's? I wanted to blame his dad, but it didn't make sense to blame a dead man. If

it was Adam's and my problem together, maybe it would give us a common goal to work for, a reason to talk again. But first I had to get Adam to realize that there was a problem.

My friend Sue had gone to see a marriage counselor a couple of years ago, so I called her, and she gave me the name of the man they had gone to. My hands were shaking as I dialed the number, and I almost hung up, but I managed to make an appointment. When I turned to write it on my calendar, I saw his mom out of the corner of my eye. "I'm sorry," was all she said, and I wasn't sure if she meant about her being there, or Adam and I.

It ended up that I went alone to the counselor the first time. I wanted to check things out, and I was always more open-minded than Adam about new experiences. The other reason I went alone was because I was afraid to tell Adam—I thought he would call me ridiculous, or get mad. It turned out that the counselor was a really nice man, and easy to talk to.

When I got home that night, Adam's mom was in the living room watching television. She pretended not to notice that I was home, but I knew she wanted to hear about how things went, so I sat down on the couch. "It wasn't so bad—I think this guy can help us, if Adam will go." "I'm glad," she said, and went back to watching the TV. "Oh, Jane?" I turned around. "Adam's waiting for you upstairs."

Adam wasn't really waiting. He was asleep. I woke him up anyway and we had a long talk, like we used to. At first I thought things were going to be easy and turn right around, but I really had to knock myself out to sell Adam on the idea of going to see the counselor with me. In the end, he didn't want to at all, but he didn't know what else to do either. But at least he wasn't mad, and before we fell asleep, he told me how nice the laundry room looked, and asked me what I thought of paneling the basement.

In our first session together, Adam mostly listened, and I talked. I needed to. I felt selfish at first, but as I explained how I had been feeling the past few months, I felt Adam really listening. Just at certain times, and usually not for long, but at least he seemed to finally understand that I hurt too. And I tried to explain about the day of the picnic, and he seemed to hear me this time. He didn't say much, and answered the counselor's questions with one word mumbles. But I saw the old Adam, no matter what he was feeling. I knew how I felt, and he knew how I felt, and the rest could come later. I cried a lot that night, and Adam was probably glad, because at least I wasn't yelling.

I don't remember much of what happened between the sessions, only that Adam's mom moved out somewhere between the second and seventh ones. She said she was ready to be out on her own again. I thought she might feel guilty about what had happened to Adam and me, but I didn't say anything. I'm glad, I told myself, I can have my kitchen back. In the end, I was surprised that the house seemed empty. We helped her move into a small apartment on the other side of town, and I realized that although I had resented her, at least she had been somebody to talk to, and to blame. Now it would be just Adam and me, alone again.

After she left, I realized that I needed to sort out my feelings before it was too late. If Adam had been more aware of his feelings for his dad, we might not have been seeing the counselor. Not that it's Adam's fault or anyone else's, not even his dad's. Some things are never the way we want them.

On Labor Day, Adam, his mom, and I all went to visit the grave. None of us had felt much like it on Memorial Day, and in our last session, our counselor had said that he thought we were ready now. So I called and asked his mom to go. I don't remember too much about that day, but on the way home we stopped for pizza and beer, and we had a real good time. None of use were depressed or angry or withdrawn—just hungry.

It is Thanksgiving. About two weeks ago, I found out I was pregnant, and we are going to tell mom the news at dinner. We also invited another couple that live down the street. It is good to see Adam's mom in the kitchen again; she, Cathy, and I cook and chitchat while the guys set the table.

I break the news after dinner, while we are waiting for the pumpkin pie to cool. Adam and I talked about how they would take it. We expected that somebody would say, "Are you sure it's not too much, with everything you've been through?" or "Jane, what about work?" or something along those lines.

But nobody says anything at all. Then mom jumps up. "I better check on the pie." We can hear her crying in the kitchen. Adam looks at me, and at first I think he is mad, because the baby had been my idea, and now his mom is crying. But he smiles at me, and goes in to talk to her. When they come back, he is crying too. For no apparent reason we all start in, even Cathy and Bill.

After the crying stops, things get pretty quiet. Everyone seems content to concentrate on their pie. I look around the dining room as if seeing it for the first time. I remember how much work it was to refinish the floor and strip the paint so we could wallpaper. Adam's mom helped me pick the paper and paint, and the three of us worked three weekends in a row to finish the room. The wallpaper stuck out at first because it was the only new thing in the house. But now, most of the rooms are finished, and suddenly, things seem to blend. The quiet in the room is long, but comfortable, and I feel at home, something I haven't felt in months. Things are finally right, I think and so I speak. "Mom, what color do you think we should do the baby's room?" Bill and Cathy look at each other, Mom and Adam look at me, and we finish our pie with silent smiles.

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