

Perfection of the Life, Or of the Work

Rachel Unkefer

In the beginning, the three-story townhouse was a mess of chipped paint, loose molding, cracked ceilings, and warped doors. The young woman bought it anyway, with the inheritance from the grandparents who had raised her; it was the ideal first project for the interior design business she had dreamed about through her teens and early twenties.

For days she glided through the void, measuring each wall and window, assessing the light and the shadows, and waiting for the architecture to speak to her. The bones of the house were good, and now her mission was to construct a paradise around them. Beginning on the main floor and working her way up to the third, she would learn everything she needed to know before she sought paying clients.

First, she hired a carefully vetted crew to strip and sand the living and dining room floors until every flaw was removed from the wood. When she was satisfied, she selected a stain the color of the night so that when the floors were finished, the rich, dark sheen of a reflecting pool lay at her feet. Next, she hired carpenters for the wood trim repairs and plasterers to fill in the cracks.

When they had finished, the walls and ceilings were perfectly smooth, ready for artisans to adorn them with an azure scumble glaze and tiny stencils of birds around the edge of the crown molding.

In showrooms and catalogs, she stalked the perfect rugs and window coverings. When the stage was set for the furniture, she spent hours selecting the ideal spot for each item, in harmonious relation to every other piece. The cherry wood legs of a love seat grew like saplings from a rug the color of wheat and grass. Indigo draperies flowed like rivers down the edges of the windows.

Once a week her best friend from college came to dinner and occasionally stayed overnight. She would ask if he had noticed the light from the new sconces on either side of the fireplace or the Persian runner in the hallway. He would say yes, but she doubted it.

When the main floor was completed, she spent the next day moving from chair, to sofa, to love seat, to window, to doorway, testing her creation from every angle. She saw that it was good.

The remodeling moved upward to the second floor, where there were three bedrooms and two baths. Her friend wondered out loud whether children would someday occupy the extra bedrooms. She squirmed, thinking about her childhood, being shuttled from relative to relative after her father killed her mother and then turned the gun on himself. She told her friend that creating more humans in her own image would only add to the overpopulation and despoliation of the earth. Two cats from the animal shelter came to live with her.

The third floor featured a slanted ceiling and dormer windows. She added a skylight so she could lie on the floor at night and gaze at the stars. In the daytime it was an art studio and sewing room where she painted canvases for her walls and crafted silk and wool fabrics into upholstery.

A landscape architect built an outdoor living room on the back patio and a slate pond where shimmering goldfish frolicked in the waterfall. She imagined lighting fires in the round stone barbecue pit when summer came around again.

By the time she had transformed all three floors, ten years had passed, and the house no longer pleased her. The kitchen cupboards were dingy, and the appliances no longer state of the art. Sunlight had faded the upholstery. Her taste had evolved, and chaos had begun to nibble around the edges of order. It was time to begin again.

Her friend from college stopped coming to dinner. He married and moved to the suburbs.

It was difficult accomplishing everything she wanted to do on her own, so she found Ralph, a general contractor. They began on the first floor again, and again, every ten years.

The house was on the annual home decorating showcase tour to raise funds for orphans, and this would bring her inquiries from potential clients, but she declined them all. She couldn't possibly take on another project until her own home was exactly the way she wanted it. Fortunately, her investments produced a comfortable annual income.

At the end of each decade she would open a bottle of champagne and celebrate with Ralph. He was the only person who truly appreciated her vision. Together they challenged entropy and organized matter into beauty.

Midway through the fifth remodeling cycle, Ralph retired. She was bereft. Nobody understood her the way he did. She could wave her hand in the direction of a wall and he would know she wanted it moved three feet to the left. She could say "Three hundred and fifty-two," and he would recognize it, not as a number, but as a paint color: "Almond Paste." When even the tiniest mistake happened, he fixed it without a word. She couldn't imagine going on without him, and yet, she must, even though she was beginning to tire easily.

By the end of the sixth cycle she had to rest. She canceled the home tour and retreated to the third floor, where her tubes of paint were squeezed flat. Her head on a silk pillow whose threads were unraveling, she lay on the floor and gazed at the expanse of the Milky Way through the tangle of cobwebs stretched across the skylight.