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## End Game

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First, the remodeling seemed to go on forever. Then, she wished that it would.

By Jeanne Marie Laskas  
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After five long months of banging and buzzing and pounding and ventilating fumes of polyurethane and paint, the home remodeling project is finished. Presto. A shiny new living room and dining room with hickory floors, a stone fireplace and tall windows opening to the pin oaks.

"I almost can't believe it," I'm saying to Dan, the contractor. "You gave us a house!" We talk about this once-rickety old farmhouse, about how none of the skeptics *believed*. And now look.

Dan is pleased, if distracted. He's marked all the paint cans, organized them in the basement. He picks up his Shop-Vac, asks me to open the door. Back and forth he goes to his van, gathering every last tool. Finally, he comes in for his red lunch pail. "Okay," he says with a sigh, "That's everything."

"That's it?" I say.

"That's everything," he repeats.

"You're just going to *leave*?" I say.

"I have to go."

"Shouldn't we have, like, a ceremony or something?" I ask.

"You know I have to leave," he says. "I'm two weeks late on my next job."

"You make it sound like it's just a job," I say.

"Oh, stop."

He's standing by the front door, wearing his trademark khaki cargo shorts; even in winter, Dan wears shorts. He has on his gold, long-sleeved T-shirt and his tan plaid jacket. It occurs to me that, over these past five months, I have gotten to know most of his wardrobe.

"You never dress warm enough," I say.

"I'm just getting in the truck," he says.

How does one end a relationship with a contractor? How do you wipe out a person who has been in your house six days a week for five months? Here is a man who has regularly seen me in my bathrobe, who knows my shower and breakfast habits, who has seen me scream at my children for smearing shaving cream on the cat, who has intervened when the choosing of hinges and door trim and whether-to-paint-or-whether-to-stain got testy between my husband and me.

And I know his wardrobe. And I know he eats raw broccoli, which he does not like, every day for lunch, but he thinks cooking it will kill the vitamins. He's big on vitamins and picky about water -- he drinks only distilled. He is a man I know well enough that I can say to him, "That is just *weird*."

And now, poof. He's going to just walk out. "Maybe we should be giving each other presents," I say, "a little something to remember each other by?"

He's giving me a kind of sneer. He looks at me. "You need your nap," he says. "Did you get your nap today?"

Please. I hate that he knows my napping habits. And I don't nap unless I have a night of insomnia, which I did not have last night, which he already knows. Are we too close? "Don't go all fifth grade on me," he says. "Look, I have to go."

"Well, thanks for everything," I say. "Don't mind me if I cry."

"Oh, my God -- "

"I'm just saying there should be a *ritual* or something. You contracting people need to better address the emotional side of the home remodeling business."

"Look," he says, "goodbye is part of the deal." He says he's had to learn to leave a lot of nice families. Entering and exiting, entering and exiting: This is just the way it is.

"That's a design flaw in your industry," I tell him.

"I'll take that up with the executive branch," he says, smiling, while opening the door. "Bye, now," he says.

I tell him goodbye and thank you. The end. This is ridiculous. He heads down the driveway with his lunchbox. "You need new tires!" I call out. "Remember, you said you would take care of that after you almost ended up in a ditch?"

"Will do!" he calls, into the dusk. I shut the door and stand in my shiny new living room, feeling genuinely thrilled on top of a weird, stinging sense that I just sent my little brother off to college. I don't have a little brother. Well, not anymore.

The next day, the dogs bark, as they used to each morning whenever Dan pulled up. I look out. It's Dan. I ask him what the heck he's doing here.

"I just wanted to make sure the hauler came for the Dumpster," he says. "I just wanted to make sure."

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