

home edition



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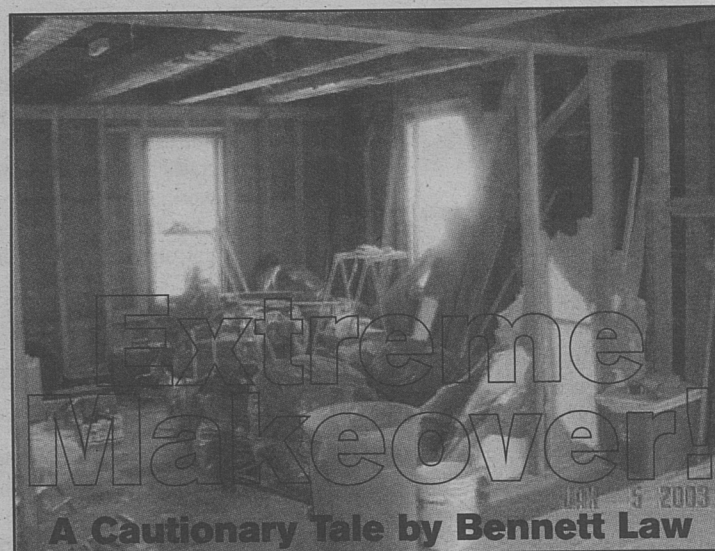
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If you think of life as a succession of reality television shows, Tom and I have moved well past *Manhunt* and *Boy Meets Boy* and find ourselves mired in the muck and humiliation of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

Many years ago (and I'm not kidding) I decided that I wanted to renovate our dining room. The floors were uneven and many of the floor boards had split, the windows wouldn't open, none of the electrical outlets worked, and there was only one lonely wall sconce providing light. The wallpaper (the portions that one cat or another hadn't clawed off the walls) had long since been painted and re-painted, and the wood trim was discolored and damaged. This room – and I – were crying out for help.

Tom and I hired an architect without interviewing others. He's wildly talented, wildly sexy, and wildly expensive. What's not to like? He is a doting father, and brings his towheaded young son with him to client meetings. Honestly, the only man-magnet our architect is missing is a puppy.

We were more methodical in hiring our builder. Our architect secured bids from five contractors, and we chose three for me to interview. Tom was still working in Southern Vermont then (this was years ago, remember), so – out of expediency – I was deemed sufficiently competent to hire a builder on my own.

My criterion was actually very simple: I was determined not to hire anyone that I might be tempted to sleep with, or that I

guessed Tom might be tempted by. It had already come up that I fail to keep my hands off the architect (did I mention wildly sexy?), and I figured life would be like a '70s porn video if I was panting after our builder all day long.

One of the finalists was eliminated for exactly this reason. He had flawless skin, eyelashes like butterfly wings, honey-colored hair, and a soft, quiet voice that forced you to lean ever closer to him as he spoke. I was seated beside him reviewing the portfolio he had brought, rapturously listening to each project, and all at once I stopped listening and simply watched his beautiful mouth form words.

As I sat mesmerized by his lips and the intermittent sweeping of his lush lashes over his deep brown eyes, I became obsessed with the notion that I was close enough to simply turn my head and lick him. I wanted to know what he tasted like. I was guessing it would be good.

He didn't get hired. The man I did hire was passionate about our project, came highly recommended by our architect, and had established the level of his craft as a violinmaker. And I was absolutely sure I could keep my hands off him.

Our builder got started on December 15th of 2002. And here's the cautionary part of this tale: he's still here. Yes, our dining room has been torn up – though it feels more accurate to say our house has been torn up – for three Christmases in a

row. And we don't even have floors yet (or a heating system – the builder ripped it out – or electricity in half the house).

What we do have are a new foundation, new sills, and all new beams supporting the east side of our house. The front of the house no longer bows slightly, and the room is square (which involved both lowering the floors and cheating into the ceiling).

We have invested more than two full years of our lives in improvements to our house that no one will ever see. And to top this all off, Tom and I must qualify for some kind of award (federal disaster relief?) for spending more on the renovation of a single room – nowhere near complete – than I spent to purchase the entire property in the first place. This builder has brought us pain and aggravation that seems unimaginable from a man neither of us is sleeping with!

In the years our builder has dallied around perfecting the subsystems of a single room, four people on our street have built complete houses – start to finish. Tom and I have tried to sustain a sense of humor through all this. We have found that the secret to avoiding the damage to a relationship that often accompanies financial disaster is to focus on your common enemy. And in this we have good company: our builder has become public enemy number one in our neighborhood. Tom and I sometimes worry that we'll have to protect him from a horde of our caring neighbors arriving with pitchforks to run him off the property for good!

Perhaps life is that succession of reality shows. Our architect and builder have been locked in a fierce game of "Survivor" – each one determined that the other be voted off this island. Refereeing their battles left us feeling like "Nanny 911." So in mid-January Tom and I finally went all Donald Trump on the guy and told the builder, "You're fired!" He may be out of a job but, in the end, Tom and I are clearly *The Biggest Losers*. ▼

Bennett Law and Tom Bivens camp out in the shell of their home in Bethel.