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## THE FLOWER POT

It rained for another week. That's when the leak started. It started in their bedroom, right above the dresser. The leak pooled and the ceiling started to sag and yellow, the water dripping out from one spot onto the blue carpeting underneath. The sound awoke him and he could hear it but couldn't find it at first. Finally, in her bedroom, he stepped in wet carpeting and saw it when he turned on the overhead light.

What is it? Michelle asked from the bed.

We have a leak.

Where?

Right here, he replied, pointing to the ceiling.

I don't see it, she said.

Right here. He put his finger to the spot on the ceiling where the water was dripping down.

Let me put on my glasses.

She groped around her nightstand and found her wire-rim glasses and put them on. She got out of bed, a little off-balance and groggy, wearing a long tan nightgown.

She came over, stood next to Dennis and looked at the leak.

What should we do? she asked.

Help me move the dresser.

They walked the dresser to the other wall, out of the leak. The top of the dresser had water stains already on it and its purplish veneer had discolored, ruining the dresser.

It got wet, he said.

Michelle looked at it, disappointed, That's okay.

Dennis put a bucket down on the floor to catch the water. Up in the ceiling they could hear the water leaking in from the roof and dripping down onto the wood beams in the attic and onto the plasterboard of the ceiling.

Maybe I should go in the attic, he said.

It might be too late for that, she said. I don't think we can get to that part the way the attic's built.

Let's keep the bucket here then, he said.

Outside it was still raining. Dennis looked out the window but couldn't see much.

Do you know if it's supposed to keep raining? he asked.

I'm not the weather girl, she said, slipping back into bed and taking off her glasses.

He got into bed and sat there looking at his hands.

We should move, he said.

I'm so sick of talking about moving every time we have a problem, she replied, turning away. This would also be happening at our house except we'd be paying for it.

The dripping in the bucket kept Dennis awake and eventually he went downstairs and slept on the couch with ESPN on.

Michelle slept right through it.

They'd been married about seven months and had been renting a house, but he wasn't happy with the house. It had too many problems that he didn't want to spend the money on since it wasn't their house; they weren't expensive problems but he was being cheap.

They had moved six times over the last six years they'd been engaged.

She liked the rented house. It was large and roomy, probably over 3000 square feet, he guessed. The landlord did not want to be bothered so he kept the rent low and the couple didn't complain about many of the problems.

There was a serious termite problem which was eating away at the house. Dennis called the landlord's management office to tell them how bad the termites were but was transferred to the landlord, Mr. Letter.

What do you want? he asked.

It's about termites, Dennis said.

Who is this?

We live at 901 S. Dunsmuir, Dennis said.

Is that one of my properties? Mr. Letter asked.

Yes, Dennis said. You have a terrible termite problem.

Uh huh.

They're eating through the mantelpiece in the living room, Dennis said.

Let me call you back, Mr. Letter said and hung up his phone.

I don't know why he's letting this happen to our house, Michelle said.

It's not our house, Dennis replied.

Their rented house was a Cape Cod painted white with blue trim. They had rented it while it was being fixed up and while the workmen were there painting and fixing holes in the walls, Dennis and Michelle would walk through the house, locating where they would put their furniture.

It's like you own the house, one of the painters said and laughed.

It's our first house, Michelle answered, smiling.

Her father, for Christmas, purchased for them three koi fish that they kept in the 30 gallon blue terracotta urn, or the flower pot as he called it, on the brick porch in the backyard underneath the jasmine that entwined around the white pergola. She named them Larry, Moe, and Curly. One of the koi, the yellow one, Curly, died after a couple of weeks, not eating enough was their guess, but the

black and the orange ones were getting larger and Dennis read that they grew to the size of their tank if they were fed too much.

The flower pot had a hole in the bottom of it and they used a cork to fill the hole so the flower pot wouldn't leak. Dennis didn't understand why his father-in-law would buy a container with a hole in it to store fish but it was a gift. Every morning Dennis would have to refill the flower pot since a third of the water had leaked out overnight.

When the electricity went out in two of the rooms in the rented house, he couldn't take it anymore. It was the back of the house, overlooking the brick porch. One of the rooms was the den and the other room was used as an office. They checked the circuit breakers but that didn't seem to be the problem. Dennis called Mr. Letter's management office and reported it to a woman who sounded bored and said she'd get back to them.

We don't have electricity to part of the house, Dennis said.

Okay, replied the woman.

This could be dangerous, Dennis emphasized.

Okay, replied the woman in the same tone of voice. We'll get back to you.

She hung up.

After Dennis called every day for three days, the office finally sent a man to fix the electricity.

In January the rains started and it poured heavily two weeks in a row. Dennis would get up in the middle of the night, during the rain, and go from room to room looking at the ceilings. From the bedroom to the hallway to the other bedroom to the bathroom and even into the closets. Michelle would tell him that it would be all right, but Dennis was waiting for the leaks to start, to start pooling on the ceilings above them. He thought he could hear a dripping sound in the attic but he couldn't find the right place.

Go back to bed, she said, weary.

In a minute, he replied, going back into the rooms all over again.

I think we should buy our own place, he said. They were in the kitchen. She was frying chicken and vegetables in a skillet and he was cleaning up a few of the dishes in the sink.

I don't know, she replied.

I'm tired of living this way.

But this is our first house, she said. We had our wedding reception here.

Can we just look? he asked.

She smiled and nodded and kissed him on the cheek. I love you, she said.

I love you too, he replied, putting away a dish.

The roofers from Mr. Letter's company were out the next day to fix the roof since the rain had stopped. Dennis could hear them climbing around on the roof and they spread a blue tarp over the portion where the master bedroom was.

Will this fix the problem? he asked them.

One of the roofers shrugged and carried his ladder to his truck.

I told you they'd fix it, Michelle said.

Dennis looked at the roof with the blue tarp over it. He wasn't convinced.

I hope it doesn't rain so we don't have to find out, he said.

The next day the rain started and the ceiling began leaking again. Dennis called the office number but got an answering machine. He left his name and number and put a larger bucket on the floor in the bedroom.

Because of the rain, Dennis didn't have to fill up the flower pot for Moe and Larry who were getting larger. Soon they would be too big for the flower pot and Dennis would have to figure out where to

put them next. He wasn't even sure he could find a bigger pot for them. Michelle had taken over the job of feeding them every morning and he could hear her say to them, Hello, Moe. Hello, Larry.

They started looking for houses but had trouble finding one that pleased both of them and that they could afford. Michelle didn't like any of the houses. She said they were small and expensive for how small they were. He couldn't disagree with her but they had to be realistic.

You're being stubborn, he said.

Did you call me stupid? she asked, turning away from the sink.

No, he said, I said stubborn. Stubborn.

Are you sure it wasn't stupid?

Stubborn, he said.

I don't want to move.

Why not?

Because here we don't have to take care of anything. It's not our responsibility. We don't have to waste our weekends doing chores and pouring money into the house. And we'll never find a house nice as this one that we could buy.

It may look nice from the outside, Dennis said. But it's falling apart on the inside.

She went into the living room and said something Dennis couldn't hear.

What? he asked but she didn't reply.

Two weeks later they found a house to buy. The neighborhood wasn't as nice as their old one.

Their real estate agent was surprised when they said they wanted to make an offer.

Really? he said, sounding excited. Do you really mean it?

We mean it, Michelle said, smiling. We love the house.

Dennis nodded.

Their real-estate agent hurried outside to his car to get the paperwork.

Dennis looked at his wife who was still smiling.

Are you okay? he asked.

Sure, she said. I'm just trying to get along.

That night in bed he asked her if she really wanted to go through with it. Even though they had already written the offer, he was sure that they could blow it over an inspection or something like that because he didn't want to buy a house that she didn't really want to live in, because he wanted to buy a house that she wanted because he wanted her to be happy, yes, he knew that the house they had an offer in on was only half the size of their current house and it didn't have the beautiful pergola in the back where she liked to sit with company, her sister and her sister's boyfriend or other friends of theirs, and have wine and a nice time, and it didn't have all the rooms so they each could have their space even though the upstairs tended to heat up during the warmer days and the place didn't have air conditioning.

It's already too late, she said and went back to reading her book.

She turned off her light and rolled away to go to sleep.

He went to the other bedroom.

They hired movers to help them into the new house. After a few days, even though they still had boxes around, they were settling in.

He caught her looking off.

What's wrong? he asked.

Nothing, she said. We're going to have to get rid of stuff. We don't have enough space here.

He didn't say anything but the new house gave them new things to talk about. What colors to paint the rooms. Whether to put in shutters or not. Stripping paint and re-tiling the bathrooms. And

since the house was smaller, they seemed to be spending more time in the same room together; in the old house, they would only see each other at dinner and then drift off to their own areas. Here, they were planning what to do with their own house.

Moe and Larry were put in their blue flower pot right outside the back door on the cement steps. Dennis and Michelle talked about building a pond for them out near the garage. Their flower pot still leaked, even worse since the move, and the replacement corks they tried didn't help staunch the leak. But Michelle started filling up the flower pot in the mornings when she fed them. Moe and Larry were huge and while they still fit in the flower pot, Dennis knew he had to do something, either buy them a larger container or move them somewhere else.

One morning at their new house, a couple weeks after they had just moved in, Dennis went downstairs and opened the back door to see that the pump was only pumping air and that there was only a couple of inches of water left in the flower pot.

Oh shit, he said, moving to the pot, expecting to see the koi either dead or dying in the bottom.

But the flower pot was empty. No fish.

Dennis looked around the yard, to see if maybe the fish had flopped their way out of the pot but he couldn't find the fish anywhere. He looked in the flower pot again and ran his hands down in the bottom to see if somehow the fish were down there in the bottom with the three black rocks but it was empty.

Michelle, in her blue silk pajamas, came to the door and noticed him bent over the pot, his head inside it.

What're you doing? she asked.

He sat up.

I think someone stole our fish.

What? she said, getting upset. Not Moe and Larry.

I think they also stole the water, he said.

They stared at the empty flower pot and looked around the yard again, hoping that somehow the water had leaked out and the koi were still struggling but they found nothing.

This never happened at the old house, she said. Never.

He looked at her, not knowing what to say.

She looked around the yard to see what else was wrong.

Dennis started washing out the blue flower pot. He took the cork out of it. She came over and helped him but didn't say anything.

Maybe you can use this to plant flowers, he said.

She didn't respond, cleaning up the pump and washing the algae off it.

Or put it anywhere you want, he said.

She disassembled the pump and put it on the ground.

It's our home now, he said.

We're far from home, she replied, going inside.

He turned the flower pot over to let it dry in the hot sun and then followed her in.