

Monday

J. C. was staring out the front window at nothing, holding an empty coffee mug and thinking, “This fucking guy better have been in a terrible accident.” This early morning thought was significant, as it was a rare example, slowly emerging evidence, that after a prolonged absence, her sense of humor was returning.

After asking around for recommendations and searching the toxic Montclair Neighbors Facebook group, she’d called a dozen tile contractors. Of the nine who returned her messages, only seven showed up for their appointments. Five managed to follow through with an estimate, one of which was inexplicably twice the price of the next-highest one. The lowest estimate was courtesy of a jittery individual who had no iPad with design software, no measuring tape, not even a pencil. He had just looked at the bare bathrooms, nodding, then reeled off an impossibly small number from the top of his head. That left three reasonable possibilities, and in the end, J. C. chose AAA Best Tile.

The house, built during the Depression, was small but filled with architectural details created by craftsmen, and the idea was to build an addition that would match the house’s original 1930s design. This philosophy was met mostly with stony looks by the contractors of Northern New Jersey, who were used to turning old houses into McMansions, and who J. C. assumed were thinking, “It’s your house, lady, ruin it if you want to.” But Anthony from AAA seemed to get it. If she didn’t mind waiting a few weeks, he said he was going to do the work himself. “And believe me, I usually don’t get involved with the jobs.”

No, she didn’t mind waiting. Any idea of a schedule had been abandoned long ago. At this point, she was simply trying to get through every day without falling to pieces. Though she was eager to sell the house and move on, and these bathrooms were some of the last pieces of the puzzle, what were a few more weeks to get it done right? J. C. knew that Anthony’s patter about “Old Italian craftsmanship” and “Nobody in Northern Jersey can do what we do” was nonsense. But she’d also learned that when you picked a bunch of guys to climb up on your roof or use acid to remove a hundred years of paint from your porch railings, there was always a degree of faith involved. You could try to size them up, but you never really knew until they showed up and did the work. But she had gotten a good vibe from Anthony. Organized, neat, detail oriented.

She sat on the porch steps and texted him, “Have I got this wrong? I was expecting you at 8 this morning.” She wondered if choosing Anthony was another mistake to add to the pile.

She had married her grad-school sweetheart, and with the idea of starting a family, they moved from Brooklyn excited about collaborating on renovating the old house. But nothing about their plan happened without complications. Months of surprises ground them down and turned into marriage-testing years. Mold, broken pipes, asbestos, and endless contractors who misunderstood or lied. It was maddening, but nothing compared to trying to conceive a child. Sex became a chore. After two unsuccessful rounds of in vitro J. C. discovered she needed a set of emotions from her husband that she had never needed before, and it turned out he didn’t have them to give. That’s when J. C.’s sense of humor began to fade. The world was crazy, and making fun of it came naturally to J. C., but when you felt part of the crazy, it wasn’t so funny anymore. They zombied on, putting their energy into the house, with J. C. particularly relishing any task that needed sledgehammering.

Then the biggest surprise of all: J. C. got pregnant during a weekend away at a wedding. The pregnancy caused havoc. They fought, they went to therapy, but none of that mattered because they lost the baby, and he couldn’t understand the depth of her sadness, or her fixation on constantly imagining, every day, every hour, what she and the child might be doing had they not lost her. The last straw was him offering her the advice, “Snap out of it.”

He walked away, giving her the house and enough cash to finish the work.

For a while, she slept mostly. In the isolation she wasn’t sure if her brain’s constant parsing of every wrong decision she’d made in her life was her way of self-healing or a sign that she was becoming unraveled. Eventually, motivated by visions of a new happier version of herself living somewhere far away, she got out of bed and went back to work.

J. C.’s reverie was broken by her phone buzzing, Anthony texting back: “My bad,” then “Emergency,” then “Tomorrow 8AM,” “100%.”

Tuesday

At 7 a.m., J. C. was sound asleep when the doorbell rang. She threw on an old Vassar sweatshirt and looked out her bedroom window. There was no sign of Anthony’s gleaming AAA Best truck, only a beat-up Dodge Aries. This was not a good sign. The bell rang again, and she went down and opened the door. There was a man standing there wearing a Meadowlands Racetrack T-shirt and well-worn khaki work pants. He was disturbingly thin with raccoon eyes, and J. C. wondered if he wasn’t some kind of modern hobo who’d come begging for an old hunk of cornbread. He said, “Hey, I’m Ray.”

J. C. said, “Okay . . . how can I help you?”