

HOME REPAIR, a novel
By Rose Ann Cleveland

SUMMER 2003

The last time Rainey drove to Danville, she came to fetch Aunt Indie back to Maryland. “Since Michael’s left, his empty home office can be your bedroom,” Rainey had coaxed in advance. “With the surgery, chemo and all, this isn’t the time to be by yourself.”

That drizzly spring day, before they pulled away from the Virginia home, she watched her aunt surrender her car keys to fellow teacher and long-time buddy Jane. “Keep the Pontiac running for me,” Aunt Indie tactfully requested. At the cemetery tomorrow, Rainey will see Jane, along with other local friends.

Today, she parks in the empty drive of her aunt’s brick ranch with its forest green shutters and white trim. For the moment, she leaves her suitcase in the trunk. A perky “For Sale” sign ornaments the recently mowed lawn. But the perennials in the bedraggled flower beds droop from lack of water, while dandelions, althea shoots, and horse nettle dance with lopsided joie de vivre. She wants the house to look cared for and wonders where Aunt Indie stored her gardening gloves and tools. Maybe tomorrow, after the graveside service, Rainey will have time to neaten the front beds. From the welcome mat, she picks up a stray penny, dropped perhaps by a prospective buyer.

Her duplicate key hesitates, then the heavy door opens, rattling the realtor’s metal lock box hanging from the knob. The place is so warm and stuffy—the thermostat must be set at eighty degrees or higher, she guesses. On the other hand, how wasteful to fully air-condition a vacant house. She peers into the living room, still an homage to 1950s decor. Through off-white

drapes, dusty light suffuses across the requisite gold sofa, studded with ivory and purple throw pillows. Opposite, Aunt Indie's Baldwin piano anchors the long wall. The hymnal on the music rack has been left open.

Rainey approaches the instrument and hits a chord in the upper register. Out of tune. Her aunt had been too sick to deal with such matters, as much as she loved her piano. One of the few valuable possessions she had owned. Now the sleek spinet will belong to Rainey. Maybe she'll start music lessons again. She sits on the bench. On the left page of the hymnal, "This Is My Father's World"—one of Aunt Indie's favorites.

Oh gosh, three flats. It's been so long since she played. She tries sight-reading with just the right hand but keeps forgetting to put in the A-flat. The sour notes and the missed accidentals soon discourage her. Well, no sense tuning if the instrument has to be moved. Rainey touches the cherry finish. Maybe having the piano in her home will be a little like having her aunt around. Standing, she regards the spinet. How naked the wall will look if she takes the piano now. Probably not so good for selling the place. She feels sweat tickle her hairline.

She locates the thermostat in the hall and lowers the temperature. She can run to the grocery store for a few supplies while the house cools. But first to check the kitchen. She walks through the dining room—spider webs, like lacy strings unraveling from the wide hem of a party dress, link the prisms of the chandelier. The real estate agent, recommended by Jane, was supposed to arrange for someone to clean and dust. Rainey frowns, remembering she'd just paid a bill.

In the quiet kitchen, the buzz of the fluorescent fixture and the refrigerator's hum compete for attention, as the air conditioner in the basement heaves into action. The fridge is empty, save for the odd jars of jelly and mustard. She slams the door, unable to stomach the

yellow light spilling over the bare metal racks and the cracked plastic top of the empty vegetable bin.

As she stands in the middle of the green and white linoleum, her face knots. She needs Aunt Indie. Rainey's life has been usurped by the stranger in the mirror, who looks just like her and answers to the same name. But this twin is a newly divorced woman, raising two kids practically alone while their selfish dad lavishes attention on his girlfriend. And now, adding a tidal wave to that emotional earthquake, her favorite aunt is dead, and Rainey carries the burden of selling this house, located five hours away in another state.

She squeezes her eyes to squelch her tears, ashamed of her self-pity.

Back in Aunt Indie's kitchen, Rainey unloads the few groceries for the weekend that she picked up at the nearby supermarket, including tonight's dinner from the Piggly-Wiggly salad bar. While she was out, the house has cooled somewhat—thank goodness. She slips the Styrofoam salad container into the fridge for later.

Time to check out the entire house, assess what she must do to get the place in saleable condition. She expects the worst clutter is hiding in her aunt's basement and manages a wry grimace—after all, if this were a horror film, the monster would be lurking below. She treads down the stairs, one step at a time.

The inevitable stockpile of stuff awaits but it's roughly organized. Aunt Indie's small laundry room is neat, though the pile of mending has languished beside the sewing basket for months or longer. Along the walls of the utility room, shelves are crowded with large cardboard boxes, many unmarked and others labelled "Robert's files" and "Taxes 1990-2000." Glass jars and coffee cans—of nails, screws, washers, old curtain hooks, pennies—parade along narrower

shelves. Opposite the furnace, clay flowerpots, gardening tools, and bags of potting soil collect atop an old painted table that she remembers once being in Aunt Indie's kitchen. Okay, Rainey concludes, clearing up the basement will take several trips, but at least she hasn't inherited a full-blown hoarding jumble. Time to check out the closets upstairs.

She plods up the basement risers and, as she enters the kitchen, switches off the downstairs light. A slim shadow flashes into the dining room. Or maybe she imagined the fleeing movement. Her eyes must have been adjusting to the change in light.

In the den, she discovers a closet full of her aunt's old teaching notes, high school and college yearbooks, and photos and scrapbooks from trips taken with Uncle Robert. Rainey sits on the well-worn La-Z Boy recliner, opens an album, and catches Aunt Indie in mid-laugh. Sporting close-cropped hair and a sun visor, her aunt pauses near a sailboat. Her arms are tanned, her hands in an energetic gesture, as though she's telling a story.

Rainey smiles at the animated pose, so characteristic. But another flicker in the hall startles her. She slips the photo album onto the chair seat and slides toward the door. She hears no sound, but another small motion darts into the guest bedroom.

She tiptoes down the hall, peers in, and—on the ledge of the window—spots a small bird cocking its head, as though puzzled that Rainey would intrude on its privacy. The bird appears to size her up before diving at her head and disappearing into Aunt Indie's bedroom.

Did it sneak inside when I brought in my suitcase and groceries? she wonders. Creepy—Mom always said a bird in the house means death.

The bird—a swallow—bumps against the windows in Aunt Indie's room. At Rainey's approach, it flutters more frantically, as if to press itself through the panes.

She walks back down the hallway, closing all the interior doors. To let in more light, she

draws open the living room curtains, then props wide the front door. Returning to Aunt Indie's bedroom, Rainey tiptoes past the bird and pulls the blinds to darken the room. The swallow grips the top of a valance. She flips on the hall light, and the bird zooms towards the fixture. She hurries after as it turns the corner, swoops towards the living room and out the open front door.

Rainey stands in the doorframe. The bird has disappeared. She closes the door and sinks onto the living room couch. She needs no omens to remind her Aunt Indy is gone, but at least she figured out how to coax the sparrow outside.

For the next trip to Danville, in early August, Rainey borrows Alison Kraus CDs from good friend Lydia. "I'm so tired of listening to the same music," she had complained. This visit is for mega de-cluttering, as Debra, the real estate agent, calls it. Rainey has brought along an electric shredder and a mammoth box of trash bags.

She opens Aunt Indie's bedroom closet. A mahogany chest—littered with scarves, church bulletins, and old mayonnaise jars filled with pennies—stands along one wall of the walk-in that her aunt and uncle added years ago when they put in a second bath. On the back rod sag the heavier winter garments, bunched together as though for warmth. On her right, Rainey fingers the lighter clothes, with their airy fabrics and more cheerful pastels.

As she slides out the nearer top drawer, the faded scent of lavender seeps from sachets abandoned inside. Pantyhose, wadded knee-high stockings, and assorted tummy-control garments constrict together in a beige knot. Rainey lets out a weary breath and recalls her earlier phone conversation with the real estate agent.

"You could take the house off the market for a few months," Debra had advised. "After Labor Day is usually slow. Take time to de-clutter. We find this really makes the house more

sellable. Then we can go back on the market after the holidays.”

Wordless, Rainey had exhaled a tired breath into the phone receiver.

“I can recommend people in Danville who do this professionally. I mean, who will go through the papers and effects for you.”

“How will they know what’s important?” She had felt agitated, affronted at the thought of strangers rifling through the contents of Aunt Indie’s house. She pictured grim women in tailored pantsuits mounding photos, letters, and family heirlooms into wheelbarrows, to be hauled mercilessly away.

“They are professionals,” Debra noted, with a tone Rainey perceived as both soothing and condescending.

“I mean, how will they know what’s of sentimental value?”

“They’re experts at spotting that kind of thing. Really, ninety percent of what we keep around the house is useless trash.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, but first I’d like to check things out myself.”

Debra wasn’t giving up, “At the least, you might want someone to go through the clothes.”

Rainey had been firm. “Let me see how much I can manage on my own.” As executrix, she is determined to carry out her responsibilities the way Aunt Indie would have wished.

Standing now inside her aunt’s closet, Rainey unfurls a large plastic trash bag. Her shoulders slump. Between raising two teens and working full-time, settling the estate will take forever. Not to mention getting her own life back in order.

She turns back to the mahogany chest. Goodwill isn’t likely to want old pantyhose, she decides, and empties the drawer. Maybe this is like when she swims for exercise. She can only

proceed one lap at a time.

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Tonight, Rainey leaves her workplace at five p.m. on the dot. She cannot bear to stay one moment past official closing time. Although the association office suite is 1400, the numbering inside the elevator skips from twelve to fourteen. Reminded she actually works on the thirteenth story, she grimaces and jabs the button for the lobby. On the way down, the balky doors jerk open at every floor. The elevator car fills with pairs of chatting colleagues, women winding knitted scarves about their necks, and younger workers whose agitated thumbs punch text messages into their cell phones. To John, at the front desk, Rainey calls good evening as she escapes through the building's double-doored entrance.

Outside, darkness holds full sway. She resents the shorter days—a warning that winter is advancing. In the gloom, she treads concrete walks tinted orange by streetlights. Well-dressed professionals in dark coats chafe at the corners, sometimes waiting for the walk signal, more often edging out between the turning cars and speeding taxis. At the intersection of L and 18th Streets, watching for the oncoming headlights to stop, she rolls her muscles towards her ears, then back. Her neck is as stiff as a lamppost.

With her tongue, she probes the jagged molar that broke earlier today. This morning, her boss Tom had changed his mind again about the colors and messages for the e-newsletter, and he wanted the invitations to the membership event revised to correspond. Because of the changes, Rainey worried the invitations would go out late, but—true to form—he brushed aside her concerns. She replays his dismissive words and how he ruined her day.

“You can manage. This is important. It’s about branding,” he had insisted, attacking a

stack of papers with a red pen to show the conversation was over.

No, Rainey seethed silently as she left his office, it's about you being a jerk.

After ten minutes of venting to friend and work buddy Lydia, Rainey had plunged into the revisions—deranging her list of intended tasks and deadlines. She spent hours on the phone and the internet with her designers, explaining, arguing, then checking and re-checking that every necessary little change had been made.

He's like Michael—she had fumed at her desk, comparing her supervisor to her ex-husband—so indifferent to how his actions affect others. Tom never apologizes for throwing my schedule into turmoil. So much for her goal, this week, to finish mapping out all the annual conference materials. In her mind's eye, Rainey watched her plans dim to a wish-for star on the horizon.

Her irritation had swelled until she caught herself, mid-afternoon, chewing a bleeding hangnail. Resolved to calm down, she paced into the office kitchen and thrust a bag of popcorn into the microwave. A little break is healthy, she told herself, innocent of any future irony. She chomped her snack with considerable vigor, until her teeth met with sudden rock-like obstacles. She spit out a few unpopped kernels. Be more careful, she had thought, only to find her tongue puzzling over a rough edge on her first molar. She carried the popcorn bag to her desk and dug a small mirror from her purse. She directed the light from her desk lamp into her mouth. No! a chunk of tooth was missing. The old filling sprawled across the remaining enamel, and a crevice—ragged as though carved by a departing glacier—marred the molar.

Now escaped from the office, Rainey waits outside for the traffic light and again runs her tongue over her tooth, almost hoping it might have changed its mind and become whole. The dentist can't see her until next Wednesday. At least the molar doesn't hurt—for the time being.

But it could become infected. All because of an “old maid.” And, by the way, whoever coined that insulting nickname for stubborn kernels should be punished with a root canal.

On the sidewalk beside her, a young woman chats on the tiny pink phone cradled in the palm of her expensive leather glove. “So, why don’t we meet at Zaytinya’s? I’m close to the Metro. Will probably take ten minutes.” She pauses. “Okay. Love ya—bye!”

Rainey cannot help but daydream: wouldn’t that be nice—to meet your spouse or date for a drink after work? Though what she’d really prefer at this moment is a back rub. She recalls their student days—after long hours hunched over her books, how Michael would knead her shoulders to loosen the knots, then stoop to kiss her neck.

The pedestrian signal flashes encouragingly at her. She steps into the crosswalk. That little kindness disappeared after they’d been married a few years, especially after Sarah was born. “I don’t want to get all involved in giving you a back rub,” Michael had said. Touching her like that would arouse him, he explained, but she would only want to sleep. After a while, she stopped asking. Yes, it would be wonderful, she imagines, to bring romance back in her life, to find someone who enjoyed being affectionate, who’d give a bit of comfort when she was tired or stressed.

Today was a complete bummer. Tom had been Tom. She pictures his chunky fingers clutching the red pen. Maybe he was right about the messaging, but he could be less abrupt, less dictatorial. Even before work she’d been out of sorts, though she’d tried to forget how Taylor upset her. As usual, Rainey had stood by the front door to see her kids off to the bus stop. Sarah brushed her long hair out of the way to place the customary peck on her mother’s cheek, then held the storm door for Taylor. But when Rainey angled up to kiss her son, he blocked her—his arm, in its stiff coat sleeve, held in an awkward wave. “Bye, Mom,” he said, without looking at

her.

She prides herself on being a loving and reliable parent, one who upholds rules as necessary but with flexibility, compassion, insight. Taylor may simply have advanced to the next level of teenage embarrassment. As if her affection proved some immaturity on his part. She knew not to hug him after his soccer games. But this had been an unobserved morning goodbye.

She pictures his figure striding away from the house. Below the plump blue parka, his skinny legs in thin jeans. No hat on his head. The cowlick in his dark hair, like Michael's, unruly despite Taylor's attempts to tame it with water and a brush. I'm a good parent, she reassures herself, I just need stamina. "Patience and fortitude"—maybe her mother's annoying mantra sprang from experience.

Rainey steps onto the first escalator at the Farragut North station. Descending the second one, she notes with foreboding that people are standing six to seven deep along the Metro platform. The red letters of the message board promise the next train in eight minutes. But something is wrong. The trains are delayed, and the next one to arrive will be crammed with riders from farther up the line. After a day like today, she can't bear to squeeze elbow to elbow against impatient passengers in heavy wool coats, with their bulky purses, briefcases, and bags. Might as well wait here for a while.

She finds her usual spot on the platform, leans against the pillar listing all the Red Line stops, and pulls out her *Washington Post*. Most of the would-be riders gather close to the platform edge, prepared to ram themselves onto the incoming train. A few like Rainey stand back, holding out for a less congested ride.

At this time of day, most are dressed for office work. But the waiting crowd includes students sporting athletic shoes and backpacks, a bedraggled mother with a brittle child in a

stroller (how long before the kid starts screaming?), a heavyset guy in scrubs, and a couple of clean-cut young men in fatigues. Kind of a cross-section of metropolitan Washington, Rainey decides. In fact, there must be fifty men standing at the Metro station right now. Some of these guys are married or involved with someone and others would never be interested in me. But what if one of them is the right person? What if that guy waiting beside the escalator is the love of my life?

She pictures herself climbing on a bench to address all the guys: the skinny twenty-some- things, older men with metal glasses and shifting hairlines, short men with high-cheekbones and warm-colored skin, tall guys with curved shoulders, white-haired business types with soft paunches and golf tans.

“Excuse me,” she would call out. “Is one of you my soulmate?”

In her fantasy, three or four attractive men, ranging in age from their early forties to late fifties, walk over. “Interesting question,” the first one comments, “I’d like to talk with you about that.” “When I first saw you,” says the second, “I had a hunch you would ask.” The third just looks at her adoringly.

She shakes her head. If only finding love were easy. Meanwhile, her shoulders still ache. Her broken molar probably needs a crown—hundreds of dollars, no doubt, even with dental insurance. Just when she’d paid off her divorce lawyer and vowed to build back some savings. Even with child support from Michael, she has a new set of expenses that are no longer shared: her own health insurance, regular outlays for her car and the house. To keep up with routine maintenance, she should have the leaf-stuffed gutters unclogged and take the car in for an overdue oil change—plus, the furnace hasn’t been serviced in two years. But these expenses will have to wait. She needs to find out first how much her car insurance will increase when Sarah

gets her driver's license.

Embarrassed that her life has taken a dive, she has too much pride to borrow money from her distant, self-involved father or brother. These are middle-class problems, she admits. In the long run, she'll be okay but needs to scrimp now. She resents how Michael treats Sarah and Taylor to a smorgasbord of electronic gadgets and other luxuries, as though to show up her deficiencies. Sorry, kids—she grimaces—but this year at my house, we'll eat most meals at home, have no flashy new gaming system, no MTV or other extra channels.

The house needs attention. The car is neglected. Her love life is nonexistent. Now, even her teeth are falling apart. She needs to fix her crumbling life—but, without her fairy godmother Aunt Indie to advise her, she can't guess how.

Rainey exhales, regards her trimly folded *Washington Post*, and flips the page.

The kids are going to Michael's for the weekend. She should make herself swim laps after work tomorrow. It's not much, but her aunt would have approved.