

Biddies, Bug-Bites, and Boo-Boos

Kids on the Job Site

by Lisa K. Harris

“Mom...
...what are you staring at?”

Lyda, my 12-year-old daughter, asked.

We stood in our future home’s backyard, where the addition met the original house. The construction drawings lay on the ground. Two-year-old Ava ran around behind me while my husband, Ronald, inspected inside the house.

I stared at the point just above ground level, comparing the old house and the addition with the plans. Something was missing.

“They’re not here,” I said, thumping the paper.

“What’s not here?” Lyda asked.

“The vents. See the vents in the subbasement of the older section?” Two pair of eyes followed my finger. I pointed to neatly spaced holes in the foundation. There were no holes in the addition or on the plans. Without ventilation, I told my daughters, mold would accumulate and cause health problems. The architect developed the plans without vents, and the city permit review had not caught his mistake. A city inspector, on a routine site visit, alerted me to their absence. Seventy-two holes would be drilled into the foundation to create air circulation.

“The house has a boo-boo,” Lyda summarized.

“House has a boo-boo. House has a boo-boo,” Ava chanted, running in circles as only two-year-olds can.

“More like a boey-owey,” I said, referring to a severe boo-boo, since the cost would come from our pocket, given that the contractor had followed the approved plans.

“House has a boo-boo. House has a boo-boo,” Ava continued. Her sing-song voice made me smile.

Home renovation is akin to playing with fire. It’s stressful and demanding to begin with, but when you add children, it becomes a situation destined to explode into an inferno.

Both Ronald and I had children from our first marriages—he had two grown children and I had my daughter Lyda. The size of our new family necessitated a move from my two-bedroom, one-bath home. We fell in love with a down-on-its-heels historic house, with thick plaster walls, oak floors, and a red terra-cotta tile roof. It was uninhabitable, riddled with termite damage, its plaster cracked. It was also occupied by a vine growing in the enclosed porch that I christened Audrey after the monster plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*. But love was blind. We decided to restore the original structure and build an addition with a kitchen, living room, and master bedroom.

Our renovation journey spanned another three years. I won’t lie and say the project was easy or admit we stayed within our budget. It wasn’t, and we didn’t. In many instances my children transformed remodeling meltdowns into roman candles—bringing levity to painful situations, and sometimes learning life’s lessons.

Towards the end, we were all desperate to live in our dream house. But the painter’s frequent disappearances slid our move-in date across the



calendar. I would have replaced Lenny earlier, but his talent with tricky faux finishes guaranteed job security. One hot June day, when temperatures soared past the century mark, Lenny's battered pick-up truck pulled into the driveway.

"Lenny's here," Lyda said, anticipating five shades of fuchsia splashed across her walls.

Lenny, his arm muscles bulging from carrying paint cans and supplies, walked towards us. He wore white shorts and a tank top, the first time I'd seen him in anything other than long-sleeved white shirts and matching pants.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, hanging his head. "It won't happen again." The exposed skin on his arms and legs was covered with red welts. "Bug bites," he said in response to my concerned look.

"Wow. What did you walk into?" Lyda, now a teenager, asked. "A hornet's nest?"

Lenny glanced at me with blood-shot eyes and pinpoint pupils. "Something like that," he said.

I ordered him to leave—I had been so naive.

"Why did you do that?" Lyda asked, watching her pink walls drive off in the bedraggled truck. "My room will never get finished now."

There was no way around the situation. "Lenny's a drug addict," I said, explaining his red marks and wild eyes, his disappearances and lack of funds, and the reason that she wouldn't sleep in a fuchsia-walled room until I found a new painter. I think her witnessing the effects of addiction first hand carried more weight than any "let's-sit-on-the-

couch-and-have-a-heart-to-heart-discussion" I could have mustered.

Ava wasn't left out of these life lessons. On a visit to a bathroom showroom, with each cubicle dressed in spotless fixtures and blemish-free cabinets, she learned about proper hygiene.

"Mom, look, I fell into the toilet," she giggled, sitting in a bidet, her frame too small for the seat.

"That's not a toilet," Lyda responded. "It's for washing your feet."

"Actually, it's neither," I said, and explained a bidet's proper use.

Lyda looked around to make sure no one had overheard me. "You're kidding? Right?"

"I want a bididi," Ava said when we left the showroom. "Please Mom. Can I have a bididi?"

A few weeks later the plumber installed a bidet in the master bathroom, and we found another faux painter. Five different shades of pink transformed Lyda's room into a teenager's haven. The endeavor empowered her—the looks on the faces of her high-school friends said it all, as in "Way cool—how did you manage to talk your mom into this?"

Looking back, I wish I could have shortened the renovation time, removed a boey-owey or two (or three), taken one fewer contractor to court, never met Lenny, and spent less money. I do not, however, regret any of the hours I spent discussing paint hues, floor tiles, light fixtures, bug bites, or "bididis" with my daughters. *Mr*