

ROBERT HOGAN

RENOVATIONS

Warren courted Julie in a whirlwind of presents and promises, married her in a cloud of lace and congratulations, installed her in a house filled with cardboard boxes and potential, made her pregnant, then went overseas.

He was to be trained in the installation of new software that was being developed in California, and would be away for several months. He told her he didn't want to go, but he couldn't refuse so important a career move. She saw him off at the airport, cried the regulation tears and drove back to the house alone.

It wasn't much of a house, in a run-down neighbourhood, but it was all they could afford. He had great plans for its renovation, and had bought all the material. Now she had to do it alone. She didn't mind. It would take time, but she had plenty of that. By the time he got back it'd be their house, stamped with their personality, and he'd be proud of her.

It was rather romantic, actually. She saw herself, barefoot and swollen, her hair tied back, in a great tent of a smock, covered in paint, standing amongst the tins and roller trays, making a home for the baby, for the three of them. And doing it alone. She was strong, and she was capable. She didn't need anyone else.

The house wasn't empty when she returned. Warren's younger brother Vince was sitting in the kitchen drinking a beer and reading the paper. Vince was apprenticed to a builder, and Warren had asked him to move into the spare room, to help with the renovations and keep an eye on her. It wasn't safe her living alone.

She didn't need any help! She didn't want anyone moving in, taking over. It was her house. She was too angry to speak to him. She thumped about, gathering washing, opening and closing doors with much energy. He sat and watched, too shy, or too intimidated, to speak. At last she could stand it no more.

"This is ridiculous!" she said, too loudly in the silence. He jumped. "Do you want your tea?"

His voice caught in his throat, it was used so little. He nodded instead.

All through the preparation and the eating she talked to fill the silence, the void which Warren's going had created. She wasn't used to talking so much either, Warren usually talked enough for both of them, and she wasn't sure she was saying things right, but he listened to her plans for the renovations and nodded.

The next night she came home from work to find him measuring in the kitchen. He showed her some drawings and they were exactly what she had in mind. On the weekend they started work.

There were five coats of paint, three layers of wallpaper and a coat of crumbling plaster to be stripped off the old brick of the kitchen walls. They did it together, in a cloud of plaster dust. He re-mortared the brickwork and carefully drilled holes for the shelves.

"You're in luck," he said at last, "the bricks are still good." They were the first words either of them had spoken in a long time. They'd been communicating in grunts and hand-signals, and not missing words at all. It was so different from the ever-talking Warren.

Vince seemed to use words only as a last resort, probably from growing up in Warren's shadow. But it didn't seem to matter — with Vince it was enough to grunt and point. And smile.

Warren's letters arrived, and Julie read them aloud as she and Vince sat in the kitchen with their afternoon beers. The letters were long and very funny, and she laughed, hearing Warren's voice in the words. Vince smiled absently and stared out the window.

After a few more letters she grew less enthusiastic about them. They all seemed the same, as though he had nothing real to say to her, nothing personal. He was just too far away from her.

Vince was here, and without doing anything he took up most of her attention. He cared about the house the way she did, and they worked well together, anticipating each other without talking. She would hurry home of an afternoon just to sit with him and share the silence. She felt calm, serene, at peace while the baby grew inside her, the house took shape around her and Vince worked silently beside her.

They were in the front room one night, sanding back the picture rails, when the baby kicked. She called out in surprise, then grinned with delight. She grabbed Vince's hand and put it on her belly. He pulled away, startled and flustered. She grabbed his hand back and held it against her. They stood there, waiting for another kick. Eventually she let him go, but they didn't move apart.

"I did feel it, you know," she said.

He grunted. Didn't he believe her?

"Put your arm around me?"

He looked around, embarrassed. His arms hung by his sides.

"That was the first time I felt it. I just want to share it. I should be sharing it with Warren, but . . ."

They both fell silent at the mention of Warren's name. She started to cry. That *was* being silly. He lifted his arm and she snuggled against him. It was the first human contact she'd had in months. He was warm and comforting, soft around the edges, the opposite of his brother. Warren kept himself fit and hard, his embraces were always intense and passionate, and he always smelled of aftershave and mouthwash. Vince smelled of beer and onions, but she didn't mind that at all. Her ear, pressed against his chest, could hear his heart beating. She could have stayed like this forever. After a while he sighed. Obviously he felt the same.

"What are you thinking?" she said softly.

He shrugged, loosening the embrace. "I'm going to have to take out that whole window frame. That sill is really warped."

She pushed away and went into the kitchen, full of conflicting emotions. She felt let-down, rejected, but what was she expecting? Vince was just a kid, a nice, shy kid, but a kid all the same. Warren was a man, and there was a real difference. And Warren was ten thousand miles away.

His letters still arrived, but they were shorter now and had lost their novelty. She read them quickly and discarded them, wanting to get on with the house, to get it finished, to get it over.

She had gained ten kilos by the time they had finished the living room and were ready to start on the master bedroom. Vince moved onto the couch in the living room and Julie moved into his bed.

"We could always share the bed," she offered, expecting him to laugh. She was only half-joking.

"Pass me that paint rag," he said. She waddled out to the kitchen and stood at the sink, drinking a glass of water. Damn him! Warren always knew when she was joking. The baby kicked. It was doing it all the time now, it had lost its novelty as well. The sooner it was out the better. The sooner Vince was out the better. No, she didn't mean that.

One weekend he went off on a camping trip with a friend. Julie was miserable. The baby kicked all Friday night and kept her awake. On Saturday she shopped and slept. All Sunday she stayed in bed, trying to read, but too bored even for television. The house was so cold and empty, filled with a melancholy silence. By the end of the day she felt drugged with inertia, exhausted and grubby. The sheets were stale and clammy, and in the end she could bear them no longer. She forced herself to get up and have a shower, and when she came out, there was Vince, sitting at the table, drinking beer. The house seemed warmer, lighter. It was good to have him back.

He wouldn't meet her eye. "I'm moving out," he said after a while. She didn't know what to say, where to look. "When?" she managed after a while.

"A few days. There's one more coat to go in the bedroom. I'll do that before I go."

She considered hiding the paint. "Where?"

"Mate of mine has a place at the beach."

They were both silent after this, worn out from the excess of conversation. Suddenly she said, too loudly, "you hungry?"

He nodded and sipped his beer. She put some chops under the grill.

He left. They had a last meal, steak and mushrooms and a bottle of wine. He scraped the mushrooms off and ate the meat, drank half a glass of wine and switched back to beer. She ate his mushrooms and finished off the bottle by herself. She didn't say all the things she wanted to say, but she did say thank you. He had done a great job. He shrugged. No worries.

The next morning her head and the baby kicked in rhythm, and she lingered in bed as long as possible, until Vince had gone. There wasn't a trace of him anywhere. He had folded his blankets and put them away, packed all his things and cleaned up. The garbage had been put out, his breakfast things washed and put away. She walked around the house bereft, looking at the new paint, the skirting boards that had given them so much trouble, the beautiful shine on the polished hardwood floors. It was exactly how she had wanted it, and now she didn't want it. It seemed so impersonal. Anyone could live here. Anyone was welcome to it.

Under the lounge she found a white sock. It was Vince's. It had a blue band around the cuff, and a grey footprint, the exact outline of his foot, on the sole. She stuffed it into a pocket of her dressing gown.

Warren came home in a flurry of presents and stories, and talked non-stop for three days and nights, filling the house with noise and laughter, so that it seemed full of people. He bounced from room to room, always on the move. The phone rang, the stereo blared with the new records he'd brought back from L.A. Friends dropped in, people laughed, joked, had conversations.

Warren loved the house, and couldn't wait to sell it. His promotion meant they could upgrade to the Hills right away, as soon as the baby was born, maybe even get a brand new house in one of the estates. A house without traces of previous occupants. Including, she thought, Vince.

They had Vince over for dinner one night, to thank him for the renovations. In the same room with Warren he seemed such a baby. He

brought a girlfriend, just a child also, and they sat together on the lounge watching a video of Warren in Hollywood, then left early, going to a party with kids their own age.

The baby came, only three days late. It was a girl and looked just like Warren. He was delighted, and brought Julie three dozen roses. Vince sent a card.

The roses died.

Julie still has the card.

JEAN THORNTON

EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, OVER THE BRIDGE

Nothing to pay now, no toll
on the Westgate Bridge. Sentry
boxes have been set aside, ramps
smashed to take-away pieces;
traffic lanes merge into one
giving license to accelerate.

My car cuts through the shroud
of mist as of its own volition.
I am preoccupied with death.
Men died building this bridge:
thirty-five plummeted from the
snapped steel span. What did they
feel during that unexpected fall?
Free-flyers say that falling
moments stretch timelessly.

In the South-east suburbs the morning
shift has just begun. Nurses clatter
through wards of the living, slip