

**I** First you will fall in love with a place, a large house in the country, and you will hang all of your hopes on this home: dreams of a wild adventure different from the life you currently have, dreams of opening up a writers' retreat in the space, surrounded by deer frolicking and cardinals fluttering about.

2. Although you like the house as is, your husband has dreams too: of knocking out walls, of a different floorplan that includes a new footprint for the stairwells in the split-level home, dreams of demoing, gutting, and rebuilding. He plans to strip the wood planks used throughout the interior and drywall every surface. You love the rustic wood, commenting on its incredible texture, running your fingers across its surface. It's kind of like shiplap, you say. It's nothing like shiplap, he retorts, adding that even Joanna Gaines wouldn't shiplap an entire house.

3. Your husband won't consider making an offer on the house unless you agree to these terms. And blinded by love of the house, love of the man, you will say yes. You realize if he's going to help you realize your dreams, first you're going to have to help him realize his.

4. You suppose that's the whole definition of marriage, and indeed, it will put yours to the test.

5. In time you will find that if you are both detail oriented, if you are both passionate about the project, if you are both confident in your own aesthetic, you can argue over an inch.

6. You can argue about the depth of a shelf.

7. You can argue about the best way to wash out a paintbrush.

8. You can argue over a doorknob.

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9. You can have an argument about a guardrail on a deck and how much the materials—wooden spindles that your husband agreed to and the builder bought without consulting you—will or will not block the view that will evolve into a nasty fight reaching such a condescending crescendo that you will jump in the car and drive too fast around curves and over hills in the dark toward I-40 where you will fly down the highway headed west to nowhere.

10. You will end up using unobtrusive goat wire, and it will all be worth it.

11. But you're getting ahead of yourself. In the beginning you are amazed that you own a big house on five acres in the middle of thick woods in Ashland City, Tennessee. You can't fathom that you own a sliver of a small river, one sloped side of a mountain, and thousands of trees swaying in the breeze.

12. After the closing, but before moving in, you will fantasize about your new home from the comfort of your sofa in Manhattan—before being restrained by budget and structural considerations—and your plans will grow wings.

13. Once your husband reimagines the stairwells—floor-to-ceiling vertical openings that will extend through all three levels—you will design the semi-floating stairs; and you both devise waterfall windows: huge custom skylight strips in line with the openings, plates of glass that will cut through the roof and continue down the back wall. Sunlight will spill through the house, literally splicing through to divide the lofty main living space into thirds, that optimal composition in nature and in art. At this point you are visualizing your place as a sanctuary—a temple!—a shrine that will stimulate the soul, a masterpiece in itself that would contain art and artists within.

14. Yet you will oscillate between excitement, fantasizing about your future life, and pure panic.

15. After residing in apartments in New York City for twenty years, you know nothing of country living or homeownership. Until the age of forty-six you'd never had a freestanding mailbox, you'd never had a driveway, you'd never owned a lawnmower or a washing machine. You are afraid you will be scared at night without hordes of people nearby, stacked above and below you. Terrified of how you will survive without the corner deli downstairs.

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16. When you and your husband visit your house over the holidays in the cold heart of winter, six weeks before you're able to move in for good, it will feel surreal, like you are visitors hiding out in someone else's home with that adrenaline high of trespassing. You'll snoop through cupboards and closets—look, an old battery, a box of light bulbs, a seashell! You will sleep on an air mattress in an empty bedroom, then sit around the fireplace in two folding chairs from the local Walmart. Since you have only a flashlight, a French press, two coffee cups, and a duffle bag of clothes, it will feel like camping, especially surrounded by the deep dark forest in the black of night.

17. Mesmerized by the flames, with no internet or phone service, you will feel like early settlers, and you will be aware this is indeed an historic moment: that perfect divine moment of having the adventure ahead before lifting a finger.

18. You will be blissfully unaware of what's to come.

19. The next evening, on New Year's Eve, out of the corner of your eye, you will watch your husband rear back with a sledgehammer aimed at the wall that divides the living room and the dark kitchen. You do want the wall gone, but you wonder silently if this is the right time, since you won't be able to rebuild for many months, as he swings and rips a large gash in the drywall, putting his hands in the wound and pulling down huge pieces of wall, large chunks falling heavily to the floor, releasing a chalky powder, dust, and debris that floats down like confetti.

20. He will offer you the sledgehammer as a symbolic gesture, and as you rear back like he did, the weight of the tool will nearly dislocate your shoulder. You will swing forward with all your might—resulting in a six-inch dent, not even breaking through the sheet-rock. You will bash it again and again, pounding out all of the tension of the move into this wall, and while the motion is therapeutic, the actual results are not as dramatic as you wish. It's much more difficult than it looks on the home renovation reality shows you've been watching obsessively. It takes you ten hard swings to remove a small section of wall, the slow progress replenishing the stress you are releasing. So you rest by the fire, watching, reading, and cheering your husband on as he decimates the wall fiercely and effectively. Yet even with his strength it takes a couple of hours of hard labor.

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21. You will help him in the last moments, clawing at the remainder of the drywall with a crowbar until only the frame is left. Dangerous dangling electrical boxes will swing free at eye level. When the area is swept clean, you'll stand looking at each other through the skeletal frame with ear-to-ear smiles and clasp hands through the open space.

22. You will sit on the cold hard floor in the center of the room and emote about how you have already drastically improved the place. After physically destroying it, you verbally bash the awful *before* kitchen: the brown-on-brown color scheme, the claustrophobic upper cabinets, the horrible eighties snaking light fixture you ripped down and smashed up beyond recognition. You will rave about how open the space looks, how huge it is.

23. Feeling downright euphoric, you will sense that it's these satisfying moments that will get you through.

24. When you move in for good, your husband will pry off the interior planks he detests one by one, and it will become your job to clean up all that spills out of these walls—bent nails and dust, rubble and dead mice, moldy tufts of pink insulation—and you will sweep and sweep as a virus sweeps through the nation.

25. You will stack the planks higher and higher in an empty, unused room, and you will do this for days as the death toll rises higher.

26. Weeks later you'll rent an industrial dumpster and fill it with demo, tossing pieces of your wall and chunks of your demolished kitchen off the deck, piling debris into a giant mound, as bodies are piled into makeshift mobile morgues throughout Brooklyn and Manhattan.

27. To ground yourself in the midst of a deadly pandemic, sheltering in place in a shelter transforming around you, you will get lost in the details, the minutiae: studying a door hinge, spackling over a nail hole until the wall is smooth to the touch, molding the perfect line of grout with your finger, making things align, making things right. You will pore over tile samples, search paint chips for the brightest shade of white, study wood samples for your flooring, choosing the lightest shade of light.

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28. You will study nature just as closely: admiring the color and patterns of beetle shells, watching the wings of a huge flying grasshopper unfold from its body like origami, spotting walking sticks, oversized centipedes, giant ants upholstered in red velvet. You study birds, google them, learn all their names.

29. Your husband studies YouTube videos—on self-leveling floor products, on grouting glass brick—and researches power tools. You own a table saw and a circular saw, but he will insist you also need a miter saw for the custom stairwell.

30. Your only outings are trips to Home Depot, luckily considered essential when the city is still in lockdown, an exciting chance to get out of the house, but always a trying event nonetheless.

31. Your house and shed are filling up with tools and necessities: a riding lawnmower, string trimmer, power washer, industrial vacuum cleaner, power drills, and more artillery—nail gun, finishing gun, staple gun. You will worry about money, always, always, and on one particular trip, when on top of the miter saw you've added to the budget and to the overflowing cart, he will call you over to look at a ginormous air compressor. Your chest constricts. You will gasp aloud at the size of the air compressor he needs and comment that he always chooses the biggest, heaviest, most expensive model of everything. After a fifteen-minute argument in the aisle, where your eyes well up with tears, he will say, Fine, we'll get none of it, and walk out of the store like a child. In the parking lot he will explain that these tools will last a lifetime, that each performs a different task, and he will promise they will all get used. (They will.) You give in, rationalizing that you are investing in a dream. He removes nothing from the cart.

32. You will make endless trips to Home Depot, and you will always feel dizzy from the sticker shock, from the heat as you load the truck, from strapping down mountains of lumber, from the exhaustion of unloading it when you get home.

33. You will often feel more pack mule than wife.

34. You will come to despise the screaming sound of any kind of saw ripping and tearing violently through wood. Yet you will help feed massive sheets of wood through the table saw, fingers un-

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comfortably close to the blade, as you maneuver heavy plywood and heavier slabs of butcher block to make the stair slats.

35. Yes, you have bought safety gear, including ear protection, but you will rarely use it. You will find that bulky gloves get in the way of dexterity. You buy protective eyewear that you will not wear because it will constantly fog up and get filthy. You buy face masks, which unbeknownst to you everyone in the country will start wearing in a week. Your husband will buy two sets of noise-canceling headgear that look like seventies-style headphones, but when you wear them you hear a breathing like Darth Vader's between your ears, and beyond that they block out all-important commands your husband shouts over the blood-curdling screams of the table saw to *keep the plywood level* as you slide through a sheet that costs \$60 in the time of Covid. Toward the end you won't have the physical energy to walk into another room to get your safety gear, and besides, your spouse will not give you ample warning each time he makes a cut, even when you are bending down to pick something up with your head only inches from the blade.

36. Still, you will help him.

37. You note he has become more foreman than husband.

38. You observe that when you're deep in a thing you just do it.

39. You will personally sand each slat down with loving care and meticulously finish them with a dull-satin sealant.

40. You will both work tirelessly day in and day out, only halting for deer spottings, which mandate that you call the other over quietly to the best vantage point; you will pause to watch them in silence until they disappear, calmed in that moment.

41. Seventy sheets of drywall will be delivered, or rather plopped on palettes in your driveway, and you have to lift all the sheets—each weighing fifty pounds—by hand to move inside your home. The both of you will carry each sheet upright, one on either end, then lay it flat in a smooth motion, a tedious task that will challenge your strength and communication skills.

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42. Once this is mastered, you will learn to carry the sheets up ladders, losing and regaining balance one rung at a time, then maneuvering the boards above your heads to hang them on angled ceilings up to fourteen-feet high, both teetering, trying to get just the right alignment.

43. There will be sharp commands coming from a man bearing most of the weight while he twists his arm at odd angles to position his electric screwdriver straight up, his other hand and his head propping the drywall in place, while you will struggle to manage your end, using both of your hands and your own bruised head. You will find it strenuous and tortuous, both physically and emotionally.

44. You will do this for weeks: ceiling and walls, ceiling and walls, ceiling and walls.

45. Just because you watch three YouTube videos on *mudding*—spackling and smoothing the seams between the drywall—does not mean you will become an expert.

46. Just because you consider yourself an artist and took one sculpture class in college does not mean you are capable of sculpting a smooth surface with spackle and a trowel.

47. Just because you want it to look perfect does not mean that it will, though with enough layers you will decide that it looks good enough.

48. Mudding is even messier than it sounds, goopy and blobby when wet and even worse when dried and sanded, a fine white powdery volcanic ash covering every surface in the house and on your bodies: your hair, your faces, your eyebrows, making you look and feel elderly, as does the building process itself.

49. You will defy your husband and speak to contractors—whom he refuses to meet with—to finish the mudding when you are overwhelmed by the difficult process, and upon receiving the fair quote, you both gladly also allow them to finish hanging the last third of the drywall in the main house. The contractor and his son handle drywall like it's cardboard, bringing in an industrial sander, and in five days do what would have taken you and your husband five weeks.

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50. Your husband will thank you many times over for going against his wishes.

51. You will paint and paint and paint, covering every surface in Ultra-Pure White™. You will like the repetitive motion and the immediate result, leaving everything fresh and bright, as untouched as a blank canvas, as pure as the driven snow.

52. You will hand paint miles and miles of trim.

53. You will realize that hanging drywall and mudding is truly a skill—one you admire and half-mastered, but one that you hope to never use again.

54. Yet you will be forced to, as you move into the next phase: building your husband's music studio. You can't breathe in the spring when your husband describes his idea for soundproofing his studio, scheduled for the summer: two layers of drywall with rubber underlayment sandwiched in between, and a room inside the room for the back area. If you are hearing him correctly, that will be four layers of drywall, and your heart stops.

55. While you have agreed to hire out the drywall and mudding in the downstairs retreat area, you don't have the budget for the studio, and you will do it all again: ceiling, walls, ceiling, walls, ceiling, walls, ceiling, walls.

56. But first you will have to gut it. Your husband will do all the framing himself, and you will cut and hang insulation to fill his framework.

57. During the next three months, you will be filled with dread every day as soon as your eyes pop open in the morning, and while in some cases the dread can be worse than the project itself, that is not the case with drywall.

58. During this phase, you will listen to Kraftwerk with the volume pumped up, energized by the electronic rhythms, moving to the robotic beats with robotic movements, at times working together like a well-oiled machine. In fact, you will build most of the house to Kraftwerk, with some Pink Floyd thrown in when you need to tap into deeper emotion, or Fleetwood Mac when you need something lighter.



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59. However, toward the end, music will no longer do its job no matter how loud the volume.

60. Besides, you can no longer agree on what to listen to. You simply have different tastes, you think to yourself, on so many things. At this point, you both prefer the sound of silence, now relying on sheer willpower and grit to finish the job.

61. Then you will build two kitchens, one upstairs and one downstairs.

62. When tiling, you will be responsible for mixing the thin set. On the back of the bag, you will find what looks like a cartoon strip of rudimentary pictograms with instructions in grammatically incorrect sentence fragments, with science equations in bold in the top right corner of each square, listing water-to-powder ratios in the metric system, using decimals, which gets trickier when you are using half a bag, which is necessary so the thin set won't get too thick and harden as you lay the tile. Your other job will be to prep tiles, spreading thin set on the back of each tile, while goop that starts out the consistency of diarrhea dries all over your hands until it's as hard as a concrete glove. The assembly line will always feel claustrophobic, like you and your partner are working on top of one another as you hand each other things at odd angles, and the heavy bucket of thin set will always be directly in the way no matter where you put it, whether tiling the wraparound porch, the kitchen backsplashes, or the laundry-room floor.

63. All in all you will hang 160 sheets of drywall, lay 4,500 square feet of flooring, and set 1,200 square feet of tile.

64. From beginning to end, there will be thousands of decisions to be made, and there will be some things you have to fight for, due to your husband's stubborn nature. At times he will yell and you will yell back just to be heard. At times he'll speak in deep, sharp tones and you'll scream back.

65. Still, at the end of every day, you will both sit in the Adirondack chairs out back, drinking cups of coffee, watching the dogs play, staring into the trees and into the sky, too tired to lift a finger, but satisfied with the day's hard work.

66. These discussions, these debates, and even these fights, you'll both agree, lead to incredible results. Two-and-a-half years later, you will stand in awe of what you have built, admiring the light,

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inspired by the unique space you've created, an amalgam of both of you.

67. Yes, your body will be shot. Your four knees might be permanently damaged from laying the floors. Your eardrums will alternately itch and ache, and conversations will sound tinny, distant. Your husband will suffer three broken ribs from the table saw catching on a board and throwing it into his torso, and you will have a jammed thumb and a twisted ankle the entire time that refused to heal from constant use. And still it will all be worth it.

68. It will be worth it because at times it produced the most powerful high, the ultimate stimulant to the soul: a sense of accomplishment, creating something three dimensional that did not exist before.

69. It will be worth it because you will love the aesthetic. The space will be airy and open, well-balanced and well-composed.

70. It will be worth it because your marriage will survive; it will bring you closer.

71. Or will it? You have learned enough to know you would never attempt a project of this magnitude again. You value your relationship too much to dare.

72. Sure, you know more about what makes him tick, what makes him frustrated and what frustrates you about him. You'll realize he becomes angry when he doesn't know the solution. He will learn that you're a complainer; you verbalize your pain while he does not. You will do things differently. Ultimately, you are two different people living in the same house, trying to make a home. This is another definition of marriage.

73. You will put a lot into it and it will take a lot out of you.

74. Will it be perfect? No. Will it be easy? Not at all. Will the house be totally finished? Never.

75. Before and afters: isn't that what life is all about? Markers of time and achievements and overcoming challenges that propel us forward. There is always a before, a painful and exhausting during, and an after.

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76. And an after-after, when the work is reduced to flashes of memory, some painful, some sweet and satisfying. You'll look back and wonder how on earth you did it, remembering that when you're deep in a thing you just get it done.

77. But you are still in the thing, and even though you are now running the writers' retreat you dreamed of, dreams quickly dissolve into harsh realities: there are smudges on those bright white walls that must be wiped off, toilets to clean, cracks in the drywall, mold in the soundproofed studio, wasps on the porch, a broken lawnmower collecting rust in the yard.

78. You will be forced to buy a new too expensive lawnmower that your husband will drive too fast on wet grass and slide down the hill, over a steep bluff, and into the full-flowing creek. You will rush down to find your husband dripping wet from head to toe, and help him up the slippery bank, thankful he didn't hit his head on a rock. You are abruptly reminded that he is your everything.

79. You will help him change into dry clothes, and you will sit with your beloved in the living room to catch your breath, immediately soothed by the aesthetic that surrounds you: by the calming shades of the mottled gray concrete fireplace that you adore, by the patterns of bright white tile in the open kitchen, rhythmic and ordered.

80. The structure you molded and shaped by your hands now holds you: it contains you, protects you, comforts you. The house has become a living, breathing thing, and you will feel a sense of peace within its walls. After all, you three have a shared history. You know each other intimately, inside and out, down to the bones. There is a part of both of you in each line of grout, each stroke of paint, each plank of hardwood, including the one your feet are resting on now as you study the intricate swirls in the grain.

81. You will look up at your husband and give him a knowing, exhausted, half-smile, and he will return it. And you will rest easier knowing that the foundation and the framework will hold, regardless of what comes next. ♦