

Non-Fiction
Adult – 1st Place

THE WRITING'S ON THE CEILING
By Fran Benavidez

While twirling around in my desk chair recently, I studied the widening cracks in my very old ceiling. What's worse, they miserably stared back, leading me to contemplate the unevenness of the weary wood floor beneath my feet and how as a fine, upstanding homeowner, I should look into repairing both.

I could learn to use the saw that sits tolerantly in the garage, waiting for its next big break; a rusting testament to remodeling plans never started or finished. With the same giddy excitement of buying a shiny new car, I brought the fully loaded model home and couldn't wait to take it for a spin. The excitement was overwhelming as the thrill of DIY possibilities swam through my head! Then it ran out of gas. And so did I.

Staring harder, I thought about the prehistoric medicine cabinet looming over my one and only bathroom sink, a garish French provincial nightmare and indeed all the rage in 1946, the year the house was built. Since World War II, there have been a gazillion advancements in the pharmaceutical world, and Costco-sized bottles of Tylenol just don't fit where the Bromo-Seltzer used to go.

Last year, I watched with seasonal merriment as my next door neighbors spooked up their yard for Halloween. Frightening Kleenex ghosts dangled from a slender tree as the Smiths hung bright yellow CAUTION tape around their chain link fence, and for a moment I wondered if they might spare a roll or two for my house, and not for tricks or treats.

That same evening, a brief, intense earthquake rolled through town, and I secretly hoped the seismic activity had jostled our mutinous front door, whose feeble Pi-shaped frame resembles a chiropractor's worst nightmare. Door dissonance is the worst, and what used to be a harmonious relationship between door and frame, now moves at warp speed into closed-door divorce proceedings, with both sides refusing to budge.

For disclosure's sake when I bought the home, the real estate agent muffled a chuckle as he hastily mentioned the grounds beneath the property might shift occasionally. Twenty-five years later, I get the joke. While anxiously waiting for Schwarzenegger to stop by unannounced for a round or two of tug o' war, we've perfected a highly complex exit technique: tightly grip the doorknob with two hands, place one foot firmly below, twist, and then YANK. When the door finally gives way, be prepared to stumble backward, so bring backup. Repeat as needed.

Who knew the phrase "I'll catch you when you fall" would open up so many doors for our family?

In the family room, I've made plans to remove the peeling "WHAT WAS I THINKING?!" pink and blue paisley wallpaper, a grating reminder of my 1980's decorating days. In the mean time, a few strategically placed pictures mask the flaking patches, while the uneven floor creaks in agony. Covered in wall-to-wall turquoise indoor-outdoor carpet, the pitiful pile should be warbling its swan song from the bottom of the nearest dumpster. Except at the moment, the only melody I hear is the crescendo of foamy, crashing waves slapping the balmy shores of Catalina Island as they call out to me from a one-way ticket. Playing the final jute jingle will have to wait another day or three.

What's more, the kitchen cabinets could use some updating. Countless times I've painted and nailed dog-tired drawers back into submission, even as Home Depot waits for me right around the corner! But so does In N Out Burger, and #1 wins every time. Besides, next week I'm hopping on a plane to visit my young grandson, who lives far away in a pretty house. So what's a good grandma to do?

For a moment I glance away from the ceiling, and my thoughts turn to spending yet another delicious weekend with my husband. We'll choose a nameless direction, discover new roads, and take pleasure in two uninterrupted days together. Spackling the cracks is not part of the itinerary, unless it's slang for another activity.

For ten years and counting, Isaac and I have been passionate and devoted partners; thanks to the road less traveled we took to be together. It was in this simple house situated on a well-worn street, that we glided across uneven floors to exchange wedding vows. Over the years, we've rushed to the flamboyant medicine cabinet to mend our blended family's scrapes and calamities. Our gracious friends seem blind to building blemishes and the

bumpy floors we've all danced upon. The tiny kitchen continues to dish out memorable family meals and merriment, while Home Depot has yet to be invited.

The vintage bathroom cabinet, cantankerous front door, distinctive wood floors, and retro turquoise carpet are all just white noise keeping company with the saw in the garage. All I hear are myriad unexpected, stolen moments Isaac and I have shared, when the world could dissolve into tile grout, and I'm content simply to be with him.

On the other hand, our renovation plans have not been for lack of effort. "Rather than take off for the weekend, we could fix up the house," my straight-faced husband suggests. For a split second I consider taking him up on the offer as I picture the old saw raise a hopeful toothy smirk. Invariably, we share a sideways look, book our reservation, and race each other for the suitcases.

Recently, I was chatting with my daughter Catherine about the weakening condition of our home, when she earnestly replied, "Your home is beautiful, Mom." She now resides in a dazzling fault-free abode with a very firm foundation and a front door that opens perfectly every time. Thankfully the old house and I did something right.

Why all the reflection? Isaac and I are standing on the doorstep of Empty Nesthood.

Angela, our striking 20 year-old, often keeps one stylish leg out the door while she breezes in and out; her biceps well toned from the effort. Joe, thoughtful and artistic at 16, is discovering his own way in the world, albeit taking the dark alleys to get there. Nevertheless, one brick at a time, he's building a path of his own.

Before long, our graying headcount will drop to two. So rather than give in to sinking sentiment as our children leave the nest, we're celebrating precious time together and the spontaneous opportunities that lay ahead.

The family sedan will be replaced with The Perfect Convertible: a two-seater free from gum under the seat, with just enough room to toss a case of the good life and a getaway bag. And since the city recently designated our home as floating on prime not-so-terra-firma, the coupé should come equipped with a mast and propeller.

Need directions to our house? Turn starboard at the Beacon, sail a half knot due north, third buoy on the left, and drop anchor. In a couple of years, an airy landlocked condo will take the place of our exhausted home, and I'll be sure to check out the medicine cabinet before we buy. Plus, if the new floor's a little unbalanced, I'll look the other way. Lopsidedness has kept me surprisingly level for the last ten years.

Having lived in this creaky house for the greater part of a quarter century, I've watched neighbors marry, raise kids, divorce, move away, and pass on. There's a bittersweet stability to the inevitable shifting that surrounds us, and one in which a dwindling number of homeowners share, even as our humble neighborhood increasingly gives way to foreclosures, flood zones, and new owners who rarely show their faces past the driveway.

It's extraordinary to watch our lives shift and change, just like the front door which always opens smoothly for friends and family. Perhaps everyone needs a little crack in their ceiling now and then, along with a dash of Bromo-Seltzer and a dinghy to deal with it.

Stepping around the saw, I reach past a can of spackle to find candles and a corkscrew. As I twist open a bottle of wine, Isaac smiles, "Cracks? I don't see any cracks!"

Bless his heart. He always looks past the flaws.