

Recycled Glass Part One

If you have ever remodeled a kitchen, you know that a time comes when you will do anything just to have it over. Despite all your planning and preparation, cabinets or tile or painters don't show up, water geysers out of pipes, and truckers go on strike three states away delaying critical shipments for weeks. Two months past our scheduled completion date, Joyce and I were ready to quit. Like an open heart operation that has lasted six months, the project was draining the life out of the patient without any sign of ever being finished. We had not had a hot meal at home since late fall. That is why Joyce reacted so strongly when Butch Siegel, our contractor, stopped by to say the recycled glass countertop would take another six weeks.

“That countertop was supposed to be here a month ago,” she screamed at him. “We’re not paying you until it’s installed.”

Siegel, who had “Danang 1968” tattooed on his left forearm and “Mother” over a heart on his bicep, looked at me. Hilary, our decorator, had recommended him, “Because *everybody* uses him.” Like most contractors, however, he practically disappeared as soon as the contract was signed.

Whenever Joyce complained about the lack of progress, he would wink and say, “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

Despite the implied familiarity, which probably worked well enough with Hillary, he never reciprocated if we let him slide past a deadline or accepted his excuses for not having ordered the necessary supplies. Instead of doing anything extra for us, Butch kept demanding more for himself, like an alcoholic enabled by sympathetic family.

“The manufacturer doesn’t work well under pressure,” he said, after his usual evasions failed.

As someone who has often been the subject of Joyce’s wrath, I almost felt sorry for him. Now I wish I had done something more than just shrug.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said, retreating to his truck.

Joyce had seen recycled glass countertops in a green living catalogue and was instantly hooked. Brilliant on the surface, they had a depth that

implied that they went on forever, like the universe itself. Recycled glass countertops were as much the impetus for our remodeling project as my recent inheritance from Mother.

Joyce had argued for weeks with Hillary over that countertop. Like most decorators, Hillary's taste was the exact opposite of her client's. Hillary preferred Corian® or granite; Joyce demanded recycled glass. At Hillary's \$350 an hour consulting fee, it was very expensive to argue with her. Joyce "finally put my foot down" as she huffed to her breathless friends and "simply insisted" on recycled glass.

So the argument switched to selecting just the right color. More weeks followed designing the entire kitchen around it. When it was finally installed, the island countertop would attract the envy and admiration of Joyce's friends much as the icons in Santa Sophia had attracted generations of pilgrims. Telling her it would take another six weeks was like telling a city that had built a cathedral to enshrine the relics of its patron saint to wait another generation until they could be recovered from the Saracens.

A day after Joyce screamed at Butch Siegel, someone banged on the door.

"I'll get it," Joyce called.

I heard her talking to men with accents so heavy I could not understand them. I went to the door.

“It’s here,” she said breathlessly.

A minute later, two big men in knee length black leather coats crowded past us carrying a huge crate on its side. They smelled so bad I had to step onto the porch for air.

“I’m so excited I can’t stand it,” Joyce said, following them to the kitchen.

They set the crate on its side and started ripping it apart with their bare hands. With each rip, strips of the dull underside of the countertop appeared. It was nearly four feet long on each side and four inches thick, with an inch-wide rim on the underside to hold it in place. Grunting, they lifted the countertop out of the crate and set it onto the island. It fit perfectly. One of the men wiped the splinters off the surface with his coat sleeve and stepped back.

“Oh!” Joyce exclaimed.

I had to pick my way through pieces of the crate to see it.

“My God,” I whispered.

Like the diadem of an eastern emperor, it dazzled and terrified. Deep blue like the cosmos at creation, the surface was flecked with crystals so

brilliant that they would entice angels from their prayers. When Joyce turned on the triangle of halogen lights hanging above it, the crystals seemed to swirl into coils and unwind again like intersecting galaxies. I hardly dared touch it. That countertop was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

“You pay now,” one of the men said.

“Of course,” I said.

He handed me an invoice that said “Vlascev Glass,” an address near the railroad marshalling yards, a phone number, and writing that looked like Cyrillic script. All I could make out was “\$8500,” \$5,000 more than we had agreed to pay.

“The bill isn’t right,” I said.

“You pay,” he repeated.

Something in his tone made my stomach freeze.

“Pay him,” Joyce said. “It’s perfect.”

“I’ll get my checkbook,” I said.

“No. Cash.”

“I don’t keep \$8500 around the house.”

“Just do it, Walter,” Joyce said.

So I got my checkbook and rode between the two men to my bank, where I withdrew \$8500 in cash.

“Is something the matter?” the teller asked as I handed the money to my companions.

“They’re working with our contractor,” I explained.

The ride home was difficult because both of them smoked cigars, and they kept the windows closed. If they had not dropped me off at the head of the street, I don’t think I would have survived. Joyce had all the kitchen windows opened to air out the house when I arrived.

“Hillary’s on the way over,” she said.

When Hillary arrived, glorious in a pink moo moo and oversize white paste jewelry, she was stunned into temporary silence by the glistening glass. Decorators, however, don’t like to be shown up. Recovering herself, she placed one hand on the countertop and walked slowly around it, searching for flaws.

“Well, look at this,” she said in that tone of voice decorators use when the job is going to cost another \$10,000.

She had found a rough spot on the side toward the stove and was leaning over to look at it. With a look of triumph, she straightened up and stepped back. Joyce peered at the glass.

“Oh!” she exclaimed.

I had never seen her so surprised.

“Walter, look,” she said.

Whenever something happens, I have to fix it. So I walked around the countertop and bent over. There was a rough spot, as if the workmen had forgotten to polish it.

“This should be easy to fix,” I said, relieved.

“Walter, look!” she repeated in a tone I knew all too well.

I bent over and squinted at the glass. It was like an opening into the great wall of galaxies that stretched eons of light years across a far corner of the universe. In the center was a gray smear, rising like the gas clouds of the Horsehead Nebula to darken the stars of Orion. No, it wasn't the Horsehead Nebula. It was a human arm with “Danang 1968” tattooed on the forearm and “Mother” over a heart on the bicep.

“That's what happens when you use the wrong people,” Hillary said triumphantly.

Joyce was abashed. As soon as Hillary was outside, she slammed the door and turned on me.

“This is unacceptable, Walter,” she said, as if everything were my fault. “Call the contractor.”

So I called Siegel and left a message on his cell. Nothing happened. I called his cell again the next day. I called his office. Nobody knew where he

was. When you get to a certain stage of a project, the contractor always thinks another client is more important.

“Then call the glass company,” Joyce said.

No one answered the phone. They didn’t have a recorder for a voice mail.

“Just give me the bill,” Joyce snapped. “I’m going there myself.”

“But, dear,” I began.

“If only there were something I could trust you with, Walter.”

So I don’t blame myself for anything that happened. She returned late in the afternoon with a terrible headache and surgical tape wrapped around her left hand from the middle to the little finger. She asked me for some of the pain killers for my back and went to bed.

“Did you hurt your hand?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said in the same voice as when she broke an acrylic nail or discovered a run in her hose after she had taken them off.

When Joyce is in a mood like that, it’s best not to push her. So for dinner I opened a can of lentil soup and made myself a martini, much as I do on other nights when she is indisposed. I had just sat down at the table and was looking for something in the newspaper I hadn’t read yet, when there

was a terrific banging on the door. I turned on the light and looked out the side window. The two men in leather coats were back, carrying something wrapped in a tarpaulin. Apparently things had gone better for Joyce that afternoon than she had thought.

I opened the door. Again they shoved past me with their delivery. Grunting, they unwrapped a new recycled glass countertop and replaced the one on the island. Without speaking, they picked up the first countertop, threw the tarp over it, and carried it out. As soon as I heard their truck start, I closed and locked the door and turned on the halogen lights over the island.

This time the blue was deeper, like the blue-black miles beneath the sea. Yellow lights flickered toward the surface, like fish with chemical lamps swaying before their jaws attracted by the spotlight on a submarine. I was nearly afraid to touch it. When I did, it was as smooth and cool as a solidified nightmare. Gently I ran my fingers around the edge. On three sides it was perfect. Then, just as I was about to turn the corner away from the stove, I felt something rough, like a tiny blemish on a beautiful woman's face that her makeup could not cover. Trembling, I bent over and peered into the island.

Who unless God has ever seen into a sea like that? Long trails of seaweed drifting in the depths, fish no marine biologist has ever imagined,

even a giant squid or a crushed submarine lying twisted in the depths. No, it was not a submarine. Something on it was glowing, as if all the light and energy in the sea were concentrated in it. Yes, I recognized it now. It was a diamond, Mother's diamond that I had had reset for Joyce on our thirty-fifth anniversary. And the thing on which it rested was her ring finger.

Of course I couldn't waken Joyce with something as disturbing as this, so I spent a very bad night. The second martini did not help. Both of us were tossing and muttering to ourselves, until I thought I would never get any sleep. So I waited a few minutes after she got back into bed after her 3 AM dose of Demerol® and even took some myself.

Ah, to slip into that silent sea again, where marvelous creatures bumped against the window pane of my submarine, and all my visions were of blinking yellow lights like fireflies hovering around backyard bushes on a summer evening. I did not awaken until Joyce came into the bedroom at 10 AM complaining about how hard it was to get an appointment with our doctor even if it might be something serious.

"They told me to come in and wait until he has an opening," she said.

I suspected that Dr. Mexta's staff was exaggerating to create the impression of a thriving practice. When they still let me practice law, I had used him as an expert witness until a series of spectacular malpractice

verdicts drove him from orthopedic surgery to geriatrics. We had something else in common: Hillary, our decorator. She had imposed her signature look on his new office in a strip mall by installing granite countertops at the nurse's station and on the sinks in the examining rooms. In today's competitive medical environment, it can be more important for a physician to have the right decorator than to have the right credentials.

“Did you lose your ring, dear?” I asked, daring to broach a touchy subject.

Most women don't like to be questioned about the whereabouts of their wedding ring.

She looked at the bandage on her left hand.

“Maybe I just put it down somewhere.”

She had never been that fond of Mother. Perhaps she would enjoy a morning catching up on *People* magazine while waiting for the doctor to arrive.