

Elizabeth Zappa

Painting the Kitchen

Every night we have our usual winding-down activities in bed before curling up and falling asleep. This night was no exception. I had a novel in my lap and Sam, my husband, was glued to his iPhone. I was not reading, though. I was plotting my first move. Debating with Sam was both fun and challenging and I needed to bring my A-game for this one.

“I want to paint the kitchen.”

It was an innocent request, most would think, and maybe even welcomed in many households, but this was an exception.

“I told you, the kitchen doesn’t need to be painted.” Sam didn’t even bother looking up from his phone as he said this.

“Well, yes, actually, it does.” I put my hand over the screen so that he could no longer read the Tweets in front of him. “All of the walls in this house are the exact same shade as they were when you bought the place; ugly, boring, off-white.”

“What’s wrong with that? I like it the way it is.” He pushed my hand away.

“What’s wrong with it is that *you’re* gone all day. I’m the one who has to live here all day long, staring at these white walls. I need color!”

“We had this talk before we even got married. I like simple.”

This was true, but at that time I had shrugged it off. We weren’t married then and it didn’t seem worth the battle. Now, though, three months after tying the knot, I was determined to be victorious.

“I’ll pay for the paint and do it all myself. Honestly, what are you really going to suffer if a couple of the walls in the house actually look nice?”

“They look nice now.”

“They look like an institution. This is supposed to be a home, not a hospital.” I snatched the phone from his hands and put it on the nightstand on my side of the bed.

“Erica...”

“Sam...”

“It’s my house. I bought it. I pay the bills. I decide what happens with it.”

“I live here, too, remember? I clean the house, I make the meals, I do the laundry. What does that count for?”

“We’re not going to argue about this. You knew long before this that I didn’t want the walls painted. It hasn’t changed just because we got married.”

“I guess I didn’t realize how obnoxious white walls could be. Now I know. Now I want to change it.”

“And what else are you going to want changed in the future?”

“You know, Sam, I gave up a lot of things when I decided to marry you: no pets in the house, having to go to a different church—“

“You knew going into this that those things would happen. I never hid them from you all the years we’ve been together.”

“All I want is to paint the kitchen!”

“Give me my phone back, Erica. *Please.*”

I grabbed the phone and chucked it across the room into the laundry basket.

“That’s mature,” he mumbled, rolling out of bed to pick it up.

I slid under the covers and tried to sleep. The battle was not lost. On the contrary, it had only just begun.

Thankfully, as a freelance writer working from home I had a lot of time on my hands. Perfect for my next plan of attack.

When Sam got home from work that night he went upstairs to take a shower. That’s when he first noticed things were amiss. In the bedroom he was confused even further. He showed up in the kitchen looking like he had just lost half his marbles.

“Where’s your stuff?” He almost looked scared, and I kind of enjoyed that moment.

“What stuff?” I stirred the spaghetti sauce for supper.

“Your stuff! Your makeup and shampoo and clothes and-and-and your dresser! Where is it?!”

“Ooooh! That stuff!” I slurped some sauce to check its temp.

Sam moved so that he was standing next to me by the stove. “Erica?”

“I moved it.” I could barely hold back the small grin cracking on my face.

“Where?”

“To the guest bedroom. Supper’s ready.”

“Wha-Erica, what are you trying to play here?”

I explained as I grabbed a plate and cup from the cupboard and silverware from a drawer. “You said so yourself that this was *your* house. *You* make all of the decisions for it. That basically makes me a guest here; or a tenant, rather.”

“Erica-“

“And, since you know, it’s kind of unethical to sleep with your landlord, I moved my stuff to the guest room.”

“Erica, this is ridiculous-”

“No it’s not. Oh, and I have something for you.” I pulled a check from my back pocket and presented it to him.

“What’s this for?”

“First month’s rent. I calculated about how much I spend on water and electricity and gas and then subtracted about how much you would owe me to keep being your housekeeper. This check covers what’s left.”

“Really? Can we talk about this for a second?”

“Maybe later. I’m kind of tired from moving stuff all day. I’m going to shower and go to bed. Supper’s all ready for you.”

I turned to walk away only to hear him shout, “Fine. You can paint the kitchen.”

“Oh no, good sir. I wouldn’t fathom messing with *your* walls. Good night!”

The next morning I got a call from the neighbor who just so happened to also be my mother-in-law.

“Sam called me this morning on his way to work and told me what you did. Don’t you think you’re overreacting a little, Erica?”

“Nope. I can be just as stubborn as your son, Helen. Besides, it’s no longer just about the kitchen; it’s the principle of the matter. I can’t pull off these elaborate schemes every time he shuts me down. Someday he has to get over his thick-headedness and realize that compromise is necessary in a healthy marriage.”

“Good luck, doll. I couldn’t get that to work with his father and Sam is *definitely* his father’s son.”

“Yah, but see, I’m much more stubborn than you are, Helen.”

“That is very true. I was never much of a fighter. Must have been the flower child still in me. Just don’t let it hurt your marriage too much, doll.”

“It can’t hurt our marriage any more than not being able to compromise can. Honestly, Helen, I know you and Sam’s dad had 23 long, happy years together, but wouldn’t they have been easier if you could have had things your way every once in a while?”

“Maybe... Good luck.”

The next day I woke up to noise in the kitchen. Sam should have been at work already. We hadn’t spoken a word to each since the other night. Last night I had finally knocked down a writer’s block and had spent the whole evening and late into the night on my laptop. If Sam had taken a day off from work or was sick, I had no knowledge.

I tip-toed out of the room and stood at the top of the stairs, listening. Recognizing the voices, I laughed and bounded down the stairs into a crowded kitchen.

“What are you ladies doing here?”

A startled, guilty look on Helen’s face quickly turned to a mischievous grin. Helen’s mom, Agnes, stood at the counter cracking open a can of paint while laughing to herself.

“Well, I was telling mom about your situation and she pointed out that Sam said *you* couldn’t paint the kitchen. He never said *we* couldn’t paint it. Besides, Sam bought this house with help from us, so technically we have a say in how it looks, too.”

Agnes laughed again. For an old lady she sure knew how to cause trouble.

“You two are...” But I was at a loss for words.

“Amazing? Resourceful? Clever?” Suggested Helen.

“I think she’s looking more for “devious.” Agnes winked at me.

“I realize this won’t solve the underlying issue of compromising, but you have to admit, it’ll be hilarious when he comes home later. I mean, what’s he really going to do? Yell at two old ladies?”

I laughed and then reached for a brush.

“Oh no you don’t!” Helen threatened me with a paint-soaked brush. “We won’t let you get in trouble for this. Go upstairs, work on your writing. I’ll bring you some breakfast in a bit.”

So I obediently returned to my room.

When Sam got home from work that night I listened from my door for his reaction. Faintly I heard, “What the hell... Erica!”

I tried to tone down the smile on my lips as I casually made my way to the kitchen.

“Yes, dear?”

“The kitchen. What the hell happened in the kitchen?” His face was a shade of red I had only ever seen on ripening tomatoes.

“Oh, your mom and grandma stopped by. They decided the kitchen needed some brightening up. Isn’t it a nice color?”

His face turned from a ripening tomato to a fully-ripened one ready to burst. “My mom. My grandma. Did this?”

“Uh huh. You really should call them and thank them. They paid for everything themselves. Never asked for any help, either.”

The explosion. If Sam had been a tomato there would have been tomato guts everywhere. “This is your way of getting around me, huh? Make my life difficult and then bring in my family as reinforcement?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“That’s mature.”

“You know, I tried to be mature the other night and talk about stuff. You made things difficult for yourself.”

“Really?”

“Really. You could have had a choice in things-”

“-because it’s my house-“

“Because marriage is a partnership where you discuss things and work things out. If you don’t start to accept that then...”

“Then my mother’s going to keep coming into my house and messing with stuff?”

“Well, yah, if it comes to that.”

“Erica...”

“Sam...”

He sighed and took another long look around the kitchen. “I guess it doesn’t look *that* bad...”

I smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Does this mean you’ll finally move out of the guest room?” He asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. It was kind of nice being able to sleep without you snoring next to me.”

“Erica...”