

"SALVATION" - REMODELING GUIDELINES INCLUDED!

**How the Unpredictable Demons of
Remodeling and Construction Taught
Expensive, Hellish Lessons to a Trusting Guy**



REMODELING

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My Deal with the Devil

I’d finally selected the right house.

After nearly six months of searching, having walked through and compared somewhere between 80 and 100 houses for sale, valued at between one and three million dollars each, I was reasonably satisfied this one would work. It wasn’t perfect, and my very nice real estate agent wasn’t pressing me to bring my search to an end, but we could both see that the real estate market was just beginning a boom. It was time to commit before I found myself left behind. And it seemed as if I could make this house into my dream.

Yes, I decided, this is going to be the one.

That’s when I spotted my architect, Matyas, called Mat [yes, just one T], standing bent-kneed in the front yard, transfixed, or perhaps suffering from a sudden gastric attack, gazing at the rather plain house immediately across the street. As I approached he said with passion, “Now that’s the house!! That’s the house!! You’ve gotta buy it!!”

About 60 years old, Mat worked locally as an architect, home designer and renovator. A Hungarian emigrant, he’d fled the Soviet invasion of his homeland in 1956 while a teenager, then made his way to the United States. Proud of his American citizenship, he’d been both a conservative and a liberal, Democrat and Republican, and now seemed to be essentially an anarchist with a chip on his shoulder. Or maybe I’m describing most anarchists. A relentless foe of Communism, he found a way to introduce his politics, religion and life story into every conversation, which is how I quickly came to know his history, or so I thought.

Mat was a short man, though powerfully built, given to tight T-shirts, a flashy

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watch and large gold chains clustered about his thick neck. Balding, he shaved his head and in compensation grew an enormous mustache I suspected he dyed black every ten days or so. His bright teeth resembled piano keys, and I found it hard to not stare at them whenever he spoke, or on those rare occasions when he stood silent, his mouth slightly agape. They were also oddly shaped and had a tendency to capture bits of his meals, which was very distracting in conversation, especially since he stood close to you when he talked.

Disturbingly, Mat never really met your eye, and the more passionate he became when talking the more his eyes darted about, touching, it seemed, almost everything in a certain wild abandon. In look and demeanor he was very nearly the stereotypical “mad” Hungarian.

“Just look at it, Chucky!!” Mat now shouted, squatting down even lower over the bright green winter grass as if to secure a better angle of view or to compensate for lower back pain. He raised his voice when excited and, I was coming to learn, he was excited a lot, about almost anything. “See how it sits? Look at the natural light, the earth tones in the backdrop, the lovely natural shading. And look at the view, will you!! Just look at it!! Now I can make that a masterpiece! That’s the house!! That’s the house!! See the ‘For Sale’ sign? How much is that one?”

This last question was directed at my real estate agent, Florence. I’d met Florence at a wedding and been favorably impressed then, as I was now, these many months later. Florence was in her late 50s, a bit short, blond, and for a real estate agent, remarkably quiet. Originally from the Midwest, she was a transplant, a Christian, the wife of a marriage counselor, a hard worker and a very, very nice lady. I’d been impressed by the fact that she did what she said she’d do, a trait less common in business than you might think. She never missed an appointment to see a house, and followed up whenever she said she would.

Florence glanced at Mat with an incomprehensible look, then walked across the quiet street with the quick click of her shoes. She confirmed there was a lock box on the door, then placed a call on her cellphone.

This was taking place on a lovely, and very quiet, desert Sunday in February.

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Mat was now on the ground, yes indeed, in the grass, extolling the virtues of his discovery. “Sublime!” “Magnificent!” “Transcendent!” These exclamations all emanated from him with equal energy and considerable force. If he kept up his shouting neighbors were bound to come outdoors to see what was up.

What I saw across the street was nothing to generate all his excitement. It was a rather bland, slightly aging house set against the base of the gentle slope of the desert mountain preserve to its immediate west. From where I stood, the place appeared clean and functional, but nothing more. It was certainly nothing to instill awe in anyone.

I’d known there were two houses for sale on this street at about the same price of just over one million dollars, but the one where I stood looked doable, so I’d given the other no thought. Once I’d decided this first house might do I’d simply given Mat a call to be certain he could make it work. In all he’d seen three or four of the houses I’d considered buying, and each time had pointed out deficiencies that made them too problematic for me and what I wanted. But today he’d never really looked at the house I’d all but decided on, never even left the driveway before he began worshipping the house across the street.

I approached Mat, looked down at him, and said quietly, hoping my voice volume might be catching, “You really think so?”

I didn’t know Mat all that well, and was still feeling my way when it came to his judgment. I had no doubt that he was an enormously talented man – I’d seen houses he’d constructed and remodeled – but still was uncertain he was a good fit for what I wanted to accomplish.

“Absolutely, Chucky,” Mat answered with messianic certainty. He suddenly sat up from the verdant grass like in those movies where the corpse bounds upright in the coffin. “Look at the virgin land behind it! The earth tones which will convert so easily to modern neutrals! The lack of a neighbor to one side! The vast yard!!” His arms swept back and forth as if he were conducting an orchestra. “That house uses the land very poorly, trust me. I can do what you want there!! The location is ideal!! That’s the house!!! Buy it!!”

As Florence waited patiently, gazing skeptically at my Hungarian, Mat babbled on nonstop while still seated on the grass. Finally, he rose, his rump

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stained green, took my sleeve, led me across the street, then pulled me to the side to show the spread of yard beside the house as well as the expansive space behind it. All the while he explained his vision [that was what he called it] of how he would transform this house into my masterpiece.

“Only easy permits!” he assured me. “There will be no problems. Approval will be simple, and you’ll end up with a two-story, 7,000-square-foot house. This is not difficult. Trust me!”

Ah yes, those two little words. Trust me.

I’d met Mat the previous summer at about the time I was considering creating my dream house. I’d made a charitable contribution to a local golf tournament, and was standing in an increasingly drunken crowd under a tent drinking a 10-ounce paper cup of beer I estimated had cost me just under one thousand dollars when I heard this voice drifting aggressively over the heads of the gathered local glitterati. The words had this Zsa Zsa Gabor accent thing going so I decided to see what was up.

There was animated Mat, hands waving about like a windmill in a brisk Dutch breeze, words steaming out from behind those piano keys like bullets from a machine gun, the target of his attention the director of the charity event. As I understood it, Mat was explaining the scheme behind the design of the interlocking tents set up for the entertainment area. I’d noticed them as my wife, Rose, and I arrived. Very stylish, I’d thought.

The director, clearly in some kind of anguish, was nodding his head in agreement as he cast his eyes about for a means of escape. Spotting us, he eagerly gestured for me to come over, and when I did he made the introductions, quickly adding, “Chuck’s thinking about building a house. You two should talk. Excuse me.” With that the director fled, as Mat fixed his eyes on me.

“You plan to build a house?” he asked pointedly, his mouth agape when he fell silent. Something dull yellow was stuck in between his two front teeth.

When I’d met with the director some months earlier to deliver my contribution and pick up my tickets, I’d mentioned I was thinking about building a house, but since then had decided I’d prefer to buy an existing house and remodel it to suit my needs. It would be less expensive, and a project more easily managed,

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if I went ahead and did this myself.

“Not anymore. I’m going to buy something and remodel.”

Mat lit up like a searchlight. “I remodel houses,” he said. “In fact, I am an expert at remodeling! You should let me show you my work. I can create a masterpiece for you.”

Rose gave us both an odd expression and drifted off. Over the next hour Mat explained to me that he had the license to remodel existing homes and was an architect, as well. He also described for me how he’d taken the three unrelated tents and given them a sort of Sydney-opera-house effect, one that provided shade and a place for convivial gathering, “If the wind doesn’t kick up,” he added darkly.

I’d pretty much made up my mind not to use a general contractor for my remodeling project, what with all the expense and other problems that went with them. I was thinking at the least I should take advantage of this meeting and pick Mat’s brain about what I should do if I really did go it alone.

In all, I was impressed with Mat, I want to say that up front. For all the bad I’m going to say about him, I want it understood that I never questioned his talent or his creativity. Those areas were never the source of our troubles, and played a key role in his lasting as long as he did. The lovely home we live in today has a great deal to do with his initial vision.

I’m attracted to genius the way others might be attracted to beauty or fame, or as Rose would put it, the way a moth is drawn to the flame. Genius, I’ve always found, either in business or your private life, is in very short supply in this world, but almost all the great things we value are accomplished by it. Without genius, you have mediocrity. With genius, you have grace, beauty and innovation. You also have eccentricity.

My point is that I immediately saw Mat for the strange person he was, but that only served to convince me that he was as good as he claimed. I was a successful businessman with previous experience with the mentally and intellectually unchallenged. I was certain I could handle that part of our relationship.

I’d worked with some financial geniuses and survived the experience. In many ways, they’d made me work very hard for the money they helped me earn, often

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to the point where I wondered if it was really worth it. But if you can stand the ride, my experience had been that the payoff is well worth it.

Mat mentioned several houses he'd worked on and I was familiar with one, having attended a dinner party there. I recalled telling Rose how much I'd liked the place. We exchanged cards, I asked if he'd take a look at any house I was considering buying, and he agreed.

"We can work out the details later," he said casually, too casually, as I left. It was a phrase he used a lot, I came to learn. There is a saying: "The devil is in the details." More on that later.

As we drove off, the always-prescient Rose said, "You aren't going to do business with that man, are you?"

That was a tone of voice I recognized. "Probably not. I'd like to pick his brain, though. I liked that house we saw, remember?"

"I suppose. He's not a good person, you know."

"In business you often have to deal with people who are not nice. It's not about 'nice' but getting what you want from those in a position to deliver."

"I didn't say 'nice,' I said 'good.' You should stay away from him. I feel bad things when I'm near him."

Now, Rose is from the Philippines, and if I'd learned anything in our years together it was that she had these moments. On trips she might refuse to enter a grotto all the other tourists rushed to see, just standing to the side and saying the place "felt bad." Or she might see shadows somewhere and tell me the place had a ghost. Or she'd listen to someone, like Mat for example, and decide he was trouble.

"Don't worry," I said reassuringly. "I'm just going to talk to the guy. He might have some good ideas." Rose didn't say anything more at the time. She just gave me one of her dark looks.

It wasn't until that fall that I had started the search in earnest. I'd met Florence in the meanwhile and negotiated her commission. I had a real estate license myself, though I'd stopped brokering properties a few years before and was now primarily managing my own investments, while buying and selling as opportunities developed to my advantage. I'd built my worth in various aspects

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of real estate, so was no novice when it came to funding and commissions. But high-end residential houses were not my area of expertise, and I needed someone who did it every day in the area where I wanted to live, hence Florence.

There were some needs Florence had to keep in mind that admittedly made her job demanding. I wanted to stay in this same part of the valley, as Rose and I loved it here. It was out of the city proper, near the desert, with plenty of pristine mountains to provide a view. The air was good, relatively, the weather nearly perfect. I was looking to spend \$1 to \$3 million for an existing house and figured to put around \$550,000 into the remodel. But what I wanted in the end made this a tough search.

First, I required a separate office. I'd worked from different residences for years, but was tired of working out of a spare bedroom with a tiny window and no real view. For the first time, I wanted a room designed from start to finish to accommodate how I worked. That meant an area for my part-time secretary, close enough for us to talk without difficulty. It also meant a place where I could comfortably meet with business partners.

I also wanted a good workspace for myself since I spend most of my workday at a desk, on the telephone and on the computer. I wanted a bathroom at hand and a wet bar, primarily for my soda. I also had an autograph and sports memorabilia collection I'd acquired over the years, and wanted to be able to properly display a portion of it.

And I wanted a view. The office was to have oversized windows, even its own terrace and private entrance. Either from my desk or the terrace I could sit and enjoy an expanse beyond of something great to look at.

Second, Rose and I, but mostly Rose, needed a large walk-in closet. That was perhaps the biggest single failing in our existing house and I planned to remedy it with the new one. Every million-dollar house requires an enormous walk-in closet off the master bedroom.

Third and fourth, we needed two kitchens plus maid's quarters. This will take some explaining. Though I come from what I would call common stock, that is, a working-class background, Rose does not. I'd worked hard over my career, been lucky and, I like to think, smart often enough to do very well

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indeed. But Rose had been born to money in the Philippines, where she spent her formative years. She'd always had maids. She owns a house in Manila, and on my first visit there I was surprised at how much they were a part of her life. At least one lived on the premises. She'd never pressed me for an in-house maid, but I'd decided we'd reached the point in life where we could afford the indulgence. This meant separate quarters.

Then there was the matter of two kitchens. Rose's Manila house had a pair, an arrangement I'd never previously seen. One was large, expensive and lovely; the other was quite a bit smaller and more functional. It was just outside the maid's quarters and it was where the coffee was brewed, toast toasted, sandwiches prepared. In short, it was the functioning kitchen. The other was for show, for parties and the like.

This struck me as a great idea and I'd decided to incorporate it into our new house. Florence routinely worked with the rich, but confessed this was the first time anyone had told her they planned to put a second kitchen in a house and required a physical arrangement that allowed for it.

While Rose and her experience had first taken me down this road, the more I considered it the more I was persuaded that both the live-in maid's quarters and second working kitchen would add considerably to the selling price when it came time for that, especially the second kitchen. If for no other reason than as a conversation piece.

As I'd looked at all of those high-end houses over these past months I'd made the most of the opportunity. I'd taken careful note of what I observed, not just the obvious touches that hit you over the head, but all of the little things that spoke of thought and creativity. I had compiled a long list of these, which I wanted in my new house. That meant the structure I finally selected had to possess the potential to include a great number of them.

All of my needs made Florence's job tough, that and the fact that I'm picky. So over those first months, then through the holidays, she and I had walked through close to 100 houses. I knew she was becoming weary, though she never said so. I was getting tired of looking myself.

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Hellish Lesson #1 – Hire a patient, experienced real estate expert for your area and price range, someone you can use as reference and as a guide in your search. Put in writing what you want and need before you start looking, as this will keep you focused. Pay attention to, and trust your instincts about, those with whom you are about to get into bed. *Listen to your spouse!!*



Charles G. Irion is the author and founder of Irion Books www.irionbooks.com which includes *Remodeling Hell*, *Autograph Hell*, *Car Dealer Hell* and soon to be released *Divorce Hell*. In addition, Charles is co-authoring eight novels that quench his thirst to write murder mysteries, coupled with his experiences of climbing Mount Everest. The first three Summit Murders series novels include *Murder on Everest*, *Abandoned on Everest* and *Murder on Elbrus*. As an explorer, Irion has visited more than 60 countries and is an accomplished SCUBA diver. He participated in a 1987 expedition to Mount Everest from the China side. Irion holds a Masters of Business Administration in International Marketing and Finance from The American Graduate School of International Management, and Bachelor of Arts degrees in both Biology and Economics from the University of California, Santa Barbara. A successful investor and businessman, Irion is founder of U. S. Park Investments, a company that owns and brokers manufactured home and RV communities. In addition, Charles has just released *Roadkill Cooking for Campers - The Best Dang Wild Game Cookbook in the World*. He is also the founder of a children's dictionary charity, a founding member of Phoenix Social Venture Partners, and past president of a local Lions Club.