

DAIEN GUO

A Bathroom Renovation

Her favorite blogger lived in Silver Lake. An ash blonde who donned an infinite rotation of chambray shirts and bowler hats, with two kids, three cats, and a husband resigned to his fate as a scruffy and photogenic prop. She felt closer to Emma than to any of her friends from high school or college. Her old friends didn't blog every day, sharing post-partum insecurities, shopping lists, and near constant pornographic images of mid-century credenzas.

She sometimes fantasized about traveling from Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles and running into Emma. She played out the movie reel images in her mind, set to the soundtrack of a mid-nineties romantic comedy. She would gush to Emma that she was a fan, in a genuine, nonchalant, and non-creepy way, of course. Perhaps they would grab a coffee together and become friends.

Her favorite posts on Emma's blog were the "behind the scenes" photographs. Usually Emma had been able to negotiate a fee for displaying her freshly redesigned rooms for the features spread of an upscale print magazine and posted scenes from the photo shoot. These exclusive peeks showed how the sausage was made—the crumpled boxes, rejected furniture, extra lamps, and accessories piled high, with camera gear and studio staff all crammed into one sliver of the room, all lenses and eyeballs focused on the other three-quarters of the room that had been cleaned, furnished, and styled for the magazine shoot.

Until she started reading Emma's blog, she did not understand what it means to "style" a room. Basically, it means everything is fake. An ivory cashmere throw pillow would be placed just so, leaning jauntily against the arm of a buttery leather club chair, with a subtle dent in it—as if Jane Birkin in her prime had just been curled up in that chair like a little cat and nonchalantly leaned against the pillow with the sharp tip of her left elbow to create that dent.

These vignettes were just as artificial and unattainable for actual women as the fashion editorials in *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. If anything, they were more harmful and insidious. A middle-aged woman of ordinary prudence will not try to obtain the body of a seventeen-year-old model and buy Balenciaga couture. Yet many of the most sensible, pragmatic, and accomplished women in the world have, on occasion, temporarily lost their heads and decided to renovate.

She finally renovated her bathroom.

Emma's blog gave her a lot of ideas. There were weekly round-ups of all the things one might need in a home. Fifty-seven bathroom faucets, for example, with links. They all had surprisingly long yet un-descriptive names: Hapilife Bathroom Sink Faucet, One-Handle Single Hole Mixer Vanity Basin, Chrome Modern Oval Spout; Oil-Rubbed Bronze Waterfall Bathroom Sink Faucet; Premier Wellington Lead-Free Center-Set, Two-Handle Lavatory Faucet. After much agonizing, she settled on the Metropolitan Onyx Widespread Double Handle.

The bathroom was not large. When the renovation was over, every surface gleamed. Chrome knobs in the shower were sculptural pieces one might encounter at a shoebox modern-art gallery and were equally enigmatic; hot and cold were not clearly marked. She adjusted the knobs to the right temperature and instructed her husband not to mess with them.

When she sat in her renovated bathroom, she liked to read—an actual physical object like a book or a magazine. To read in the bathroom, with the door open (if she was home alone) was almost a meditative experience. One of the greatest indulgences of life, she thought.

In the first home of her memory, there was no bathroom. The home was on Lian Hua Po (which can be loosely translated as Flower Hill). The entire family peed into a rectangular grate the dimensions of a shoe box in the supply room, which was also where the family cooked. For poops, they went to the public bathroom down the street—a low cement structure with narrow and deep ditches they squatted over, a treacherous endeavor, especially at night. The floors were always slippery. Of course the whole experience was moist, rank, and filthy. There was no way to describe the odor except to acknowledge that it was not a passive atmospheric fume that existed for her to breathe in. No, it was alive and kicking, aggressive, stinging her eyeballs, trying to invade every pore of her skin and claw into the core of her body, even as she was trying to expel waste. Yet it was all she knew. She learned to breathe in shallow puffs through her mouth. When she had to go at night, she woke up her grandmother, who carried a flashlight for her. Her uncle could never go because he was a cripple. He used a cistern, and they dumped it out for him.

She didn't know what to do with these memories. She didn't want to forget them, because she sensed, murkily, their value. She felt an irrational tinge of melancholy that she would never visit a public bathroom that barbaric ever again, even if she wanted to, just as she would never see her grandmother again. Probably not her uncle either, though he was still alive, barely, somewhere. She regretted the renovation. Yet why should she feel shame for wanting a bathroom that was sleek and modern? It was a good investment and improved

the value of the house. Should she have made her bathroom shabbier? Added a cement ditch? Taken out the modern electricity? Absurd.

She thought about Lian Hua Po when she went into the bathroom and forgot her reading material. Suddenly, she had nothing to do except sit there, feel the functions of her body, and gaze blankly at the expanse of white tiles before her, shimmering and rippling in the light like a small ocean contained in this finite cube of a space just for her aesthetic pleasure. If she closed her eyes, she could conjure up Lian Hua Po and imagine that outside angry savage odor trying to attack her body, and it made her feel scared and alive.