

## Renovator's Heaven

by Cate Kennedy

Colin's up, he's been up for hours. Lay in bed at dawn thinking about preparing the woodwork, now he's got the colour sample cards and he's thinking it over. He's considering. Bayleaf? Firtree? Eucalypt Forest?

The three greens swim together. When he blinks he sees rectangles of pink ghosting before his eyelids. He blinks rapidly, tucks the samples away. He'll think about it later. Plenty of time to get it exactly right.

It's still a pleasure to stand out on the verandah, running his hand occasionally over the handcut eaves. Christ! How much timber had he discarded before he got that perfect? And the fitting! The chiselling and clamping! The slow wiping away of the bead of glue, the ache in his neck as he sanded with the finest grade paper. Some other craftsman in the future, Colin thinks absently, is going to pull a stepladder under these eaves and do a double take when they realise how they're made. He's invited friends round, pointed stuff out to them. *It's a labour of love*, he's told them, following their eyes around the ornate cornices and hand-stripped dado. *Sure it takes time and effort, but, well...* and here he's made himself trail off with a wry, resigned smile, a poet's helpless gesture of perfection.

*Look at this*, he'd said, pulling open kitchen-cupboard doors lined in baltic tongue-and-groove. *Had to strip all that down*. He couldn't help himself. *You can't use a machine for detail like that - you've got to do it all by hand*. Taking the drawer out entirely and showing them the dovetailing he'd repaired.

It had been the For-Sale sign that had hooked him, the Sunday he'd come round for the auction, a year ago.

"Renovator's Heaven!" it had said. "Needs the Touch of a Skilled Craftsman to Restore to its Former Glory."

And Colin was the man. Not everyone had it in them, but he did. When he raised his hand to bid, he did so gravely, like a man earnest with the responsibility bestowed upon him. Now he goes inside and snaps on the kettle for his fifth coffee of the day. He's tending towards Eucalypt Forest now, but there's plenty of time to decide.

There's a clearing sale of building materials on, he's seen in the paper, on the other side of the city, but they'd listed Edwardian windows, and Colin's pretty confident he'd find some usable glass panels in them if he went. He's got a few stacked in the garage; more than he can use at present, truth be known, but they just didn't make glass like that any more and it never hurts to have proper materials in reserve for new projects. That makes sense to a craftsman but try telling that to his bitch of an ex-wife. Colin's got brackets running up the walls in the garage, stacked with tongue-and-groove Baltic pine boards, the wides and the narrows, and sometimes he just goes in there and does an inventory of how much he has and how much floor he could replace if needed. It's a good feeling, being prepared for anything. So there's the decision on the paint, and there's the clearing sale option, and perhaps he could swing past the Restorer's Warehouse on his way home. He's confident that if he just strolls around the garden, he'll come across something that needs doing, something that will pull the day into an ordered and useful shape. He'd lain in bed last night and listened to the wind gust across the roof, and felt the pleasurable anticipation of checking the roofing iron the next day. Just that worrisome spot he's had his eye on, where he's replaced a piece on the diagonal.

*Don't overdo it*, his doctor had advised early on, frowning and examining the rash Colin had got up his arms after heat-stripping off layers of lead-based paint in the bathroom. *You're no spring chicken*. He'd loosened the blood-pressure cuff and rubbed his chin at the result. *Just take it slowly, you've got all your retirement for renovating, right?* Idiot. Like he was some kind of amateur do-it-yourselfer.

Colin sniffs and picks up the claw-hammer and goes up the ladder onto the roof. It's windy up there; best not to stand upright. Best to crawl carefully pushing your boots against the washers of the roofing screws. All perfectly aligned. He inserts the tip of the claw hammer under the suspect flap.

Rust. He's not imagining it. Three red marks of rust.

It's not that he's scared of heights. It's just sensible to back down crabwise to the last sheet of iron and feel the guttering with your boot, make sure it's solid as a rock before you put any weight on it. No, it's not heights; the wind chill would make anyone's heart work overtime up here. That's good, useful adrenaline. Eighteen rungs and then the ground. Then into the laundry for the new silicone-gun, then back to seal these spots, and he won't have to climb the ladder again till Autumn. The thought of the rust irritating him like prickly heat, hard to keep your mind on anything else once you knew it was there, eating away your roof.

Five steps down, he has one of his giddy turns. A stab of pain rises and recedes, the roofline skews, and Colin's vision drenches red for a few seconds. The world tears grey and papery around the edges. Then it clears: a familiar rising horizon of galvanised iron, ladder set firm against the eave, the coppery aftertaste in his mouth. When he opens his eyes, the light is dazzling. He climbs down, shaking, his legs turned cottony and weak, like he suddenly weighs nothing.

As he collects his mail he happened to glance down the road. Strange. He can't remember that old Edwardian place six doors up being renovated, but there's the blue garbage skip out the front, piled full.

He strolls down to investigate. The house is finished but deserted, glittering with fresh paint. Colin's heart jumps and squirms. Inside the skip there's a pair of French doors. Perfect condition, not even the glass broken. Thrown out! That hardly seems possible, but here they are, tipped sideways into the mouth of the bin, some snapped framing timbers stacked on top.

Colin swallows, fingers his tape measure. He's already modifying what he feels he's entitled to expect here, already readying himself for disappointment with a small knowing smile, because stuff like this, that you just happened across, never turns out to be really exactly what you wanted. Like as not, in Colin's experience, the work you had to put in getting them right ends up costing you as much as getting them custom-made anyway, like these doors for example, there was no way they would be 1.85 metres, which was the odd size he's planning on getting custom-built for his sunroom. But even as he's talking himself out of it, he's pulling out the tape, hands trembling a bit, and measuring them.

1.85 metres.

Colin glances around. He could get these home right now and have them in by the end of the day. Even the hinges are perfect. He tries to lift one, and fails with a grunt. Weigh a ton, of course - quality old wood. His mind's starting to race, wondering who could he call on to give him a hand. He knows almost nobody in the street, hadn't had the time to socialise. Too busy with the house and getting his affairs in order and one thing and another. The place seems deserted, anyway. Like the

builders have finished the job and just left, and cut their losses and left these valuable doors....

Colin's squinting down the street when he notices the other blue skip at the corner.

He has to blink a few times to focus on what's filling it, because the light this morning seems headache-bright somehow, all glancing dazzle and flash like the surface of water, but he clears his vision as he hurries down there, seeing timber stacked and upended inside. He's smiling again, preparing himself, as he jogs down. Probably rotten floorboards.

But he gets there and puts his hand on it, and he can't believe it but it's kiln-dried cypress, looking brand-new. No nailholes, no nothing.

Colin feels beads of sweat collecting, slippery, under his hat. Worth a fortune, worth several dollars a metre, he knows that for a fact, and his for the taking. Enough for the doorframes and the yawning hole in the laundry wall where he'd impulsively taken out the old copper. Enough to take home right now and get started. It's Renovator's Heaven out here today, Holy God.

He wipes his mouth, trying to think if there's anybody with a truck he could borrow. Or just a flat-bed ute, and someone to help him out. *Wonder if I could take up half an hour of your time*, Colin would say, extending his hand. *Just couldn't help noticing up the road....*

Couldn't help noticing another skip.

Colin's mouth is rank from all that coffee. It tastes as if he's had nails clamped between his lips, or coins. His arms and legs, though, feel like he's been hanging on to something huge and jolting and percussive, like a jackhammer. He hurries to this one. It's a house he doesn't think he's noticed before, double-fronted Victorian, weedy front garden. The verandah's been left, sagging, in the process of being pulled off. Thrown carelessly into the skip, unbelievably, is more wrought-iron than he's ever seen. His hands scrabble at it. He needs help. By Christ, he needs to race back home for his trailer and try to haul this stuff home before the owners wake up to themselves. He can pull it out himself, one piece at a time, he's sure of it. And maybe if he gets some ropes he can pull the doors out too, slide them to the ground somehow, pay someone to come...

Colin sucks on the metallic sharpness in his mouth, trying to swallow dryness, blinking again to clear his blurred vision in the bright glare, because he can't help but shade his eyes and look further down the road. He can't believe the road's so long, now he comes to think about it; it's always seemed like a smallish suburban street to him, but here it is, stretching away, all the way to the intersection, and when he squints he can see them lined up, bang, bang, bang, in cubes of unmistakable aqua blue. Skip after skip.

Colin stumbles along at a half-jog, his breath rasping. How can he begin to catalogue what's in those skips, how can he even start to plan?

He sees windows, stacked against another skip, genuine rolled-glass six-pane windows, the kind with brass snibs you can't buy anymore. Boxes of deco tiles. A pedestal sink with original old taps, even the porcelain heads; he's only ever seen pictures of those. And they're in skips, these treasures. Without him, they're all headed for the tip. To be dropped by machines onto mountains of garbage, splintering and warping and shattering. It's criminal. Unthinkable. Colin runs back towards his place, his nerves jangling, and inside his chest anxiety and desire twist and flex together into one unbearable clenching torment. He's winded with it, aching. Maybe that's it, maybe he's feverish, horrified by the thought of losing, the prospect of

missing any of it. And here's his own house, every inch of it his, but suddenly so bitterly unfinished, so needful of everything he's seen waiting for him. Jerked to a halt there, he hears something which soaks him in a fresh flush of sweat, although he's staring with such blank horror at what lies crumpled on the grass at the base of his ladder that his mind can't attend to it at first. One horror at a time, says his brain, just take in one thing. That noise. That could only be the worst possible thing, the skip-company's truck, coming to collect. He hears it pull up at the first distant skip with a kind of delirious panic, hears the hydraulic hoist grab it and the faint, delicate sound of glass tinkling, timber frames bursting under impact. Not delirious, his brain registers, sorting. And not the worst possible thing, either. That would be what he can't drag his eyes from. The thing that lies sprawling at the foot of the ladder, still resting against the eave. The thing in his shirt. Not delirious, because it's still clutching the claw-hammer, and Colin for the life of him can't remember what he'd done with it when he'd got down. He swallows back the whimper in his throat, gazes wildly round.

It occurs to him again, the horrible bright silent strangeness of it.  
There's not another soul in sight.



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