

TAKING IT

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I had been in awe for years of the clever mind behind the septic company's motto: "You make it, we take it," printed on a sign outside a low-slung building near a small, rural Virginia village. And so when it came time to inspect the septic system and pump the septic tank at our remote country cabin at the foot of a mountain—never done in the whole 40-year history of the place—I knew immediately who I'd call.

We had arranged the date and time weeks before over the phone, and I drove out there, a few hours from home, where split-rail fence zigzags modern art over rolling wheat-colored foothills. I made special arrangements to take off work and spend the night so I'd be there on a Monday morning. The cabin landline didn't work when I got there—it went out every once in a while due to rain or wind—but everything had been made clear in advance, even how payment would work, as I mentioned to the guy that my husband Neil and I were the caretakers of the cabin, not the owners. Rick had made some assumptions about the owner by saying, "Rich people never pay on time." I had put that statement away and moved on.

I was standing on the stoop outside the screen door in greeting when the truck arrived, right on time as far as I was

concerned—8:30 a.m. So when Rick jumped out of the vehicle and started yelling at me immediately—about how he'd been driving around for more than an hour, how he had called me eight times and had gotten a busy signal, how he even stopped into a county building looking for any record of my residence, how I had given him the wrong address, and basically informed me that I was a common asshole—I received the onslaught straight on. He was a fat-fingered, stocky fellow, maybe early 50s, with two much-younger workers, and he had his hissy fit on the trampled front lawn in full view of a glorious long-distance Appalachian mountain landscape and then turned his back to me without even a single Southern-gentleman hello.

He'd only found us at all because Neil had just left for work and had seen the truck driving up and down our dirt road and had directed the guy up our half-mile driveway. My heart was racing, and I swore I would never, ever, ever have a contractor (usually men) come to this place without Neil around again. I turned my back to him as well and tore into the house where I paced for half an hour, sweating, trying to pull myself together, knowing full well I had told him "two twenty" not "two ten" and that after two and a half years of being a full-time renter (in an experiment in slower-paced rural living) before becoming the caretaker under a different owner, I knew my own goddamned address.

Let me step back a minute off my country-living high horse, to explain that this Northern-city-girl-who-grew-up-in-a-high-rise-apartment-building turned metropolitan-Mid-Atlantic-suburbanite didn't even know what a septic tank or septic system was most of my life; waste just "went away." In

college, I learned that in metropolitan areas waste is piped from residences and processed chemically in a treatment plant, and then, once cleaned, released into a river. I'd actually taken tours of this type of municipal sewage treatment plant as part of an environmental policy course and had visited plants in various cities around the country in which I was interviewing mayors for a job in environmental communications.

Neil had introduced me to this new world of more primitive disposal for less-developed areas because the nature center he operates in a rural location uses a septic system as well, and he's the de facto manager of it. There, waste is piped out of buildings to an underground tank to begin breaking down and then distributed into a drain field with perforated pipes to be absorbed and filtered into the soil. I had been around for the period of time when the nature center was transitioning from wooden outhouses (where waste goes straight from the cut-out hole of a toilet seat you're sitting on to the deep cavity in the ground into which it falls) to real bathrooms and this more refined and civilized process of handling these natural functions. I had been aware of the siting of the septic field higher up on a mountain than the drinking-water well below it, which never seemed right. And I had always scoffed at naming the septic field after the founder of the nature center, who had scouted out more than two hundred acres of undeveloped country wilderness for suburban schoolchildren to enjoy, because that "honor" always seemed misplaced: *We named a field full of shit after you, thank you very much.*

But back to the country cabin: I knew the mistake was on his end, though since I was about to endure an hour or more

with three strong, strange men (although the two young men were very polite, calling me "ma'am" and all), I eventually swallowed my righteous angst and went back out there and put on my smiley face and sweetest tongue and apologized for any "miscommunication." He accepted my apology and simply told me it was "frustrating." Then he went on to poke around the ground with a metal rod trying to find the septic tank and all its components—the septic line, the distribution box, and the septic field, as no one knew where they were.

As Murphy's Law would have it, the place where I had decided to park my new, shiny red, mid-life-crisis sporty car—in the farthest back place of the gravel parking area away from the house, to allow the truck the most room to maneuver and turn around at the awkward top of our winding driveway—was the site of the septic tank. Not in the open area at the bottom of the cabin's front steps, where I was so convinced the tank was located that I stopped parking my car there for fear the tank might be rusted out and my car would sink into the ground. So now, after moving my car slightly out of the way upon his command, my new baby was wedged between the giant truck that sucks out the poop and all the machinery and equipment the boys had hauled up there to find the tank, dig out its top, and pry it open to look inside. Rick told me, "You're lucky your car didn't fall in."

The septic line, as it turned out, was sagging and located under standing water, whereas it was supposed to be straight and flat and above the water level underground. Because fixing that would cost thousands of dollars, and the place was now owned by a nonprofit organization, I asked what the risk was

of doing nothing.

The line could back up, he said, and shit would start coming out the outlet pipe in the front lawn. The situation would not be a problem if it were just Neil and me living there, but the fact that the place was rented out to various strangers from the Washington, DC area each weekend of the year made it risky. “You never know what city people might put in there,” he said with a sneer, referring to baby wipes and other inappropriate matter that people flush down.

I tried to recover from this affront to my native people by asking what had happened to his clever sign and motto, as I had driven past his place the day before and it was gone. He thanked me very much for my compliment and explained how the sign was larger than county rules allowed, and so he had to take it down. And then we talked about the size of the septic tank and how he might write out his inspection report in such a way as to make clear how the owner could rectify the problem and he could get the business. And then I brought out my Tupperware of homemade browned-butter brownies I had baked recently and was hoping to foist off on someone else so I wouldn't be tempted, and the two boys put their sewage-water-covered hands in there and took one while Rick, who maybe wondered about losing a few pounds himself, abstained and laughed at my reason for giving them away.

And by the end I think we had a meeting of the minds and a cordial engagement. He didn't know where I was from or what kind of person I was.

As he drove away, I felt pretty proud of myself for diffusing

a fraught situation on my own, on the eve of the first night I would spend by myself at the cabin—the only person on 40 acres and no other neighbors in sight or earshot. Sometime that holy night of Milky Way sky dew and mooing cows echoing throughout the hollows, it finally dawned on me that it could have been my lingering Philadelphia accent that had caused him to mishear me on the address: “two twunny” or “two twenny” could have come out sounding like “two ten,” possibly, if I swallowed my last syllable. But maybe I am trying too hard to cross a divide larger than linguistic, between the two worlds I inhabit and embrace but that may be too far away from one another ever to bridge.