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In 2022 in rural Platte County, I decided to downsize from the home for which I had picked out the design. In the seven years I lived in it, I used the downstairs for short-term tenants working as welders at the power plant. From the income I thus derived, I improved the downstairs, which started out with curtains as doors. Now I was thinking of moving into a condo in Saratoga. My son and daughter-in-law, on visit from Texas, helped me in my search. Unfortunately, the only condos in my price range were poorly built and cramped. The better ones went for about twice the price, which I couldn't afford.

Eventually I moved into an older home that needed upgrading; however, since my sale provided me with some surplus, I thought I'd be able to manage. Little did I know how expensive things were getting. Contractors had a hard time finding the labor they needed. Some turned opportunistic or downright predatory. It was my misfortune to deal with one such.

Last year's winter alerted me that my heating system—a gas-guzzling boiler—needed upgrading, as did the water heater. I chose a combo boiler with "on demand" water heater, which eliminated the old hot water tank, then went in search of a plumber to install the system. I secured two recommendations. The first one I called sounded grumpy and inebriated. He told me he had retired.

The plumber I hired began as a friendly businessman and sole proprietor. He represented that the combo unit cost \$7,500, which he needed upfront; the total would come to 15,000. My next-door neighbors had replaced their (larger, conventional) boiler for that much, so I resigned myself to the outrageous price and tendered the required check which, I noted, was immediately deposited.

Two months went by and the only thing the plumber did was answer my texts with reasons why he needed to postpone the installation. When I'd had enough, I located his home address and went there on August 10, 2023, at 4:30 PM. It happened, he was pulling out of the garage with his teen son in his truck as I arrived. "We need to talk," I told him.

"Who are you?"

He didn't remember me. Well, it had been two months. I identified myself and reminded him of the texts I sent. Now that he saw I was prepared to confront him in his home, he scheduled the work for the following week.

The day he installed the unit, he used the air-pressure tank from my old system. He also did not have the filter I had asked him to add. I complained until he said he'd order the filter and exchange the old tank for a new one. We agreed he would finish the work the following week, on Tuesday.

Over the weekend I used the Users' Manual he had tucked behind the unit to look up the company—Navien—and the model he installed, “NBC240/110H Combi Boiler” on the internet. It cost less than \$2,500. Then I found the air tank company's website and discovered that a new tank cost around \$50. Further queries revealed, these tanks have a life span of 12 to 15 years. Mine was more than 20 years old. I couldn't understand why the plumber failed to order a new tank and the filter when he had a surplus of \$5,000 from my deposit. It occurred to me, had I not confronted him at his house, he would never have bothered with the installation.

I sent the plumber a text that we needed to talk, and he stopped by Monday morning. I told him that the unit was advertised by the manufacturer as costing less than \$2,500. He said he had paid \$3,800 which was half of its price.

The next day he returned to finish the installation, saying he was prepared to give me \$1,000 off his total price of 15,000.

“Let me think about it,” I said.

He was flustered. “What's there to think about.”

“I need to eat breakfast.”

He went off to another job but said he'd be back in the PM with an electrician to do the wiring. While he was gone, I downloaded and printed the Navien Combi picture with its price. When it came time to pay him, I showed him what I downloaded, whereupon he changed his tune. He said he paid \$3,000 for it but had to send his high-school son to pick up the unit in Casper. “I don't trust buying supplies off the internet,” he said.

Then he explained that the \$15 grand covered the unit, his labor, and whatever materials he supplied—copper couplings, etc.

I had composed a letter and gave it to him to read it in my presence. It said I would not pay him the \$5,000 price differential. Since he never submitted a contract, not even a business card, all he could do was bellyache about being cheated out of his hard-earned fees.

I had added \$500 for extra work we had agreed on, but when he left, I found he had dismantled the work and taken the pipes with him.

Later on, a neighbor down the street looked over the installation work and commented on the sloppy work. He also said, the reason these units are sold inexpensively is that they require additional components, which my installation lacked.

By then I'd heard from two customers of the plumber, family men, that he did sloppy work at their homes or left a project unfinished. I filed a complaint with the Better Business Bureau that came to no more than the plumber receiving a copy of it. I emailed the Chamber of Commerce to inquire about the plumber's qualifications; the reply said that Wyoming does not require a

plumber's license. I remember the plumber telling me, he had been doing business here for three years, having relocated from Michigan. Did he lose his license in that state and relocate where he could do without one, namely Wyoming?

His using the old air tank and trying to skip the filter alerted me to his yen for cutting corners. In the end, it was worse than that. On recommendation of the neighbor down the road, I called someone who was versant in heating and cooling systems and worked at Sinclair Refineries. The expert examined the installation, showed me how the unit was wrongly installed and what needed to be fixed. "It looks like this project was over his head," he said. He also skimmed on the material, using half-inch piping when one-inch was called for. Further, he failed to install a feedback loop for the water that heats the baseboard heaters. Currently, when the hot water enters after a cold night, the resident water has nowhere to go. It makes the heating impossibly cumbersome—and expensive.

When the expert compiled the list of supplies he would need to correct the faulty installment; it came to over \$2,000—plus his labor. He has ordered the supplies. I can only hope the corrections are in place before the really cold weather sets in. Notwithstanding its famous mineral hot springs, Saratoga winters are colder than anywhere else I have lived.

The plumber experience brought to mind the time when, as a young woman in California, a disturbing incident came my way. I was returning home on Highway 101, which did not then carry the traffic it now does, when someone—a youngish male, I ascertained as I glanced at the driver—pulled up to my left and would not pass. When I slowed down to force him to drive ahead, he fell back and tailgated me. If I sped up, he'd cling to my side once again.

What was his intention? To harass a female he deemed vulnerable? Dusk was falling; did he intend to run me off the road in the dark so I'd wreck my car? The thought scared me. Another five miles of freeway lay ahead. This was before cell phones and GPS.

The exit coming up led to the small town of Coalinga. "Take the turnoff and use a roundabout way to get home," I told myself. "Consult a map in Coalinga; it's difficult in the dark but not impossible."

I sped up, noting the pursuer was aligning himself to my left once again. Driving as fast as I dared, at the last possible moment I swerved sharply onto the exit ramp. Luckily I retained control of the vehicle, while the other car shot right past mine.

I got home late but did not dare disclose the reason to my husband, who would have thrown a fit and forbidden any further such excursions. My silence added another secret to our already wobbly union. At the time I thought nothing of it; since then have learned that keeping secrets is like telling lies—and just as damaging. You hide yourself behind a mask without ever intending to do so.

Since the plumber also cheated family men, I can't equate him with my sexist freeway harasser; still, the encounter, like the long-ago California incident, left a bad taste in my mouth. I can see why, rather than marry, some females prefer the company of other women. I have cast my lot

with the single life in Saratoga but may yet live to regret it. The cold is hard on arthritic finger joints, and soaking in the hot pools will only do so much.