



A Silly

Millimeter

Steve Bellinger



A Silly Millimeter by Steve Bellinger

There is a very small problem with Hank and Mindy's house. And if they don't fix it in a week, they'll pay a hefty fine and the house will be leveled! Yes, you can fight City Hall, you just can't win.

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Hank was livid. “A thousand dollars? A thousand goddamned dollars?”

“Hank, please don’t swear in front of the computer—you know how it likes to mimic you,” Mindy cried as she tried to calm her husband. “Besides, he did say that we wouldn’t have to pay the fine if we made corrections within the next ten days.”

“But, Mindy, a thousand dollars! It takes me a whole day and a half to make that kind of money! And who knows what it’s going to cost to fix it!” Hank growled as he ripped the violation notice to shreds.

“No, Hank! Don’t destroy the notice! It’s recyclable! That’s a five hundred dollar fine!”

Hank sighed and dropped the pieces on the kitchen table. He pressed the “outside” key on a nearby config control and a window appeared on the wall. He looked out at all the rectangular homes on the street, all featureless and virtually identical. Some were white, others pastel pink, blue or gray. All identical in design and identical in size to a very small tolerance. Which is why his home had been cited.

“Who did the measurements?” Hank turned to his wife who squinted as she tried to reassemble the notice and read the fine print.

“Uh—Bemis.”

“Asshole,” Hank murmured. Bemis was Chief Inspector. No chance that any of his measuring equipment would have been malfunctioning. Even if it was, Bemis carried so much clout that there was no way to fight him and win.

“Where’s my laser rule?”

“In the garage.”

Hank closed the window, which vanished completely, and ordered up a door. A thin, vertical, luminescent line grew outward from the center of the wall and expanded to a rectangle. Within the rectangle, the wall shimmered and became an opening to the outside. He stepped into the hot December sun and walked around to the back of the house. It was an uninteresting block, just like all the others, except for the color. As he approached the rear of the house, another doorway appeared and he entered the garage.

The manual had said that the hand-held laser rule was guaranteed to be accurate to plus or minus 350 angstroms. He carefully measured all the outer walls, width and height, as he bounced the invisible laser beam off the comers. He keyed in the standard homeowners' parameters and had the unit compute a comparison.

"Damn!" he said as he looked at the results. He stomped back into the house, nearly bumping into the wall that almost did not become a door quickly enough.

"The son-of-a-bitch is right, Mindy!"

"If he's right then he's not a son-of-a-bitch," Mindy said calmly.

"Mindy!" Hank glared at her, "Not in front of the computer, dammit!"

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Hank dialed the Dwellformers on the vidphone. The house was barely five years old. Perhaps the problem was still covered under the warranty. A cute young lady appeared on the screen. She seemed to be doing something with her fingernails.

"Dwellformers," she said without looking up.

Hank tried to be polite, "Customer service, please."

She lifted her head and glared blankly into the screen, "Customer service? Oh, you mean complaints! Just a moment, sir."

The screen went blank, and after a few seconds, a man in a white jumpsuit appeared. "This is Bell of customer service, how may I help you?"

"My name is Henry 07 Banks. I own unit 445TR6. I think I have a problem."

"Just a moment," Bell looked away as he pecked some keys on a computer console. "That home is just over 5 years old. There can't possibly be a problem."

"Well, there is, dammit!"

"What's wrong?"

Hank drew in a deep breath. “My house is a millimeter too big. The city is going to fine me a thousand dollars a day until it’s fixed!”

Bell looked down at the console. “No, we measured that structure after we formed it. It was well within specs. In fact, it was a couple of micrometers less than ideal—but, like I said, well within specs.”

“I don’t give a goddamn about your specs. My house is too big—”

“Sir,” Bell interrupted, “our records show that your home is equipped with a mnemonic replicating system computer.”

“Yes, but what has that got to do with this?”

“You really shouldn’t swear in front of it. It will mimic you.”

“Listen, asshole,” Hank steamed. “My house is too damn big. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

“What do you want us to do?”

“I want you to fix it!”

“It must have expanded,” Bell shook his head. “Expansion is not covered in your warranty.”

“And why the hell not?”

“Your house is made of Dwellform multi-polymer. It does not expand. City codes, you know?”

“But it did expand—look, what would a re-form cost?”

“Well,” Bell paused to think, “we could come out with a macro mold and re-form your house, but, if it really is too large, that won’t help because the mass will still be the same. If we squeeze the millimeter from the sides, the house would exceed height limits.”

“So do a complete re-form, including the roof.”

“Can’t. It would make the interior walls bulge and the inside area would then be less than city codes allow. That carries an even bigger fine, I think”

“So what the hell do I do?”

Bell scratched his chin. “Well, back before multi-polymer, we used to have this problem all the time. We could come out, re-form the sides, peel the roof back and shave the difference off the top of the walls. Now, that would fix things!”

Hank smiled for the first time, “That’s it! How much?”

Bell looked down at the console, “A million five.”

“A million five?” Hank screamed as he slammed his fist on top of the console, breaking the connection, and the vidphone.

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The door chime rang.

“Computer,” Hank called from his chair, “who’s at the door?”

“The son-of-a-bitch,” the computer responded.

“What?”

“Apologies,” the computer said. “It is Mr. Bemis of Code Enforcement.”

“Let the son-of-a-bitch in.”

Bemis, a portly little man with almost no hair, entered through a door that appeared in a wall in the living room. “I wish you wouldn’t swear in front of your computer. I really don’t like being addressed that way.”

“Thanks for dropping by,” Hank said flatly.

“Your fine is up to five thousand dollars, Mr. Banks. Of course it will be voided if you fix the problem.”

“A goddamned millimeter! You clowns are just mad because the color is different.”

“You may have to apply for a variance on the color next year. They’re amending the ordinance to allow only certain parts of the spectrum—with no grandfathering. Chances are they’ll make you change it.”

Hank stood so he could look down on Bemis. “When was the last time you had your measuring equipment checked?”

“Insulting a city official is punishable by a fine of no less than—”

“Okay, okay. How much time do I have?”

“Five days,” Bemis looked at his wrist computer. “When the fine reaches ten thousand it becomes due.”

“And if I don’t pay?”

“Oh, you’ll pay all right. You’ll pay!”

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Bemis was ecstatic. Going after violators was fun, but cracking down on scofflaws like Banks was almost as good as sex. As his two-wheeler sputtered around the corner and approached 445TR6, his smile faded. The house was no longer pastel green. Banks must have believed that crap about the color ordinance, Bemis thought. No matter. Bemis had checked with the Dwellformers. No work had been done at this address. The house was still out of spec. He would issue the citation and collect the money. Cash or credit—made no difference. He’d still get his commission in a week. He hopped out of the bicar and walked up to the front wall. He could hear the computer

announce his presence—in a more cordial manner this time—and the wall opened.

“Well, Mr. Banks,” Bemis tried to hide his elation. Will that be cash, check or credit card?”

Hank feigned surprise. “For what, may I ask?”

“Your fine. Ten thousand dollars, due immediately,” Bemis held up the citation. “And, the code violation must still be corrected within five more days or we will condemn and level this house—at your expense.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Bemis was getting impatient. Probably going to fight this in the courts, he thought. The city will win, of course, but it will be months before his commission would be released. “Look, I do not have time for games. Your home is in violation of city code 22342.57809. That is, it exceeds the maximum dimensional limits by one millimeter. Now, I’ll just give you your citation, you give me the money, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Not so fast! You do have your laser rule with you, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, but—”

“I believe I have the right to a re-inspection,” Hank said.

Bemis sighed. What a waste of time. Without the Dwellformers, nothing could have been done to change the configuration of the house. Only they are licensed to work with multi-polymers.

Hank stood in the open doorway as Bemis switched on his laser rule and took the measurements. He entered the parameters and scowled. He took the measurements again. “Dammit!” he said to himself.

“Want to try mine?” Hank smirked.

Ignoring the insult, Bemis ran the laser rule through all of its diagnostic routines and measured yet again. It displayed the same results. There could be no mistake. He sighed.

“Is there something wrong?” Hank grinned.

“It seems that the one millimeter error no longer exists.” Bemis glared at Hank with narrowed eyes. “You are no longer in violation.”

Hank smiled. “Thank God for paint remover!” He stepped back inside and ordered the computer to close the door. “Good-bye, you son-of-a bitch!”

As the opening closed up, Bemis could faintly hear laughing through the wall. He was furious. Not only would he lose a sizable commission, but, in his

zeal, he had done all of the paperwork in advance. He was going to have to pay for the wasted forms.

“You enjoy yourself while you can, Mr. Banks,” he said to himself. In their infinite wisdom, the founding fathers had made sure that the municipal codes were so convoluted and tedious that almost everyone was bound to slip up somehow. “And you, sir, are no exception!”

He strolled around the house, taking measurements of the driveway, lawn area and garden. Everything appeared to be within code. Even the curb height was correct. He checked the distance from the mailbox to the street and then to the house. Then he looked at the vertical deviation of the mailbox post. No violation there. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Hank’s grinning face in the window. He walked over to the garden and took more measurements. The area was indeed correct. The species of flower was acceptable, even the moisture content of the soil was within limits. Still, something was wrong—something had to be wrong. He knelt at the edge of the garden, counted the total number of petals on the flowers, and smiled.

The End