

Cleaning House

"I'LL BE LEAVING SOON, do you want to come with me?" I ask as the erratic purring resonates across my lap. With spread fingers, my hand slowly strokes Frazier's thick fur, forming long rows along his back.

"Melanie, I already said no. I need to work around the house."

The trickling of the newly installed waterfall outside our bedroom window is overpowered by the high-pitched whine of the electric pump that drones on, never allowed to shut down. I watch Dean stop dusting. The silk leaves on the ficus tree have been meticulously cleaned, permitting him to take on a new mission.

"I'm going to start on the kitchen," he says and marches across the bedroom. Stopping in mid-stride, he picks a piece of thread off the carpet, then disappears into the hallway.

Staying awake all night writing down this month's goals, he's planned another heavy schedule to sustain the constant remodeling and cleaning. After seeing the condition of the new pillows this morning, an additional assignment was added to my list.

The afternoon sun shines through the window and onto the fine orange hairs of Ali, enveloping the cat in a soft halo. Rolling over and stretching his long thin body across the corner of the bed, his paws extend outward as if trying to grasp an unreachable strand of yarn. When he and Frazier were kittens, Jimmy used to dangle his St. Christopher's medal between the two of them, and like punch-happy boxers, they would swat at the swinging chain. I thought Jimmy would never stop laughing.

I stand up and carefully set the cat on the rocking chair where he sinks into the soft cushion with only a slight interruption of his semi-lucid consciousness. The pungent smell of fresh paint permeates the air as I walk into the hallway. Stark white walls are a harsh contrast to the scattered patchwork of family photos that previously hung on warm earth-tone surfaces. I enter the bright florescent lighting in the kitchen where Dean is bent over, his head tucked inside the cabinet underneath the kitchen sink.

"That's the beauty of having *Pergo*," he exclaims upon hearing me enter the kitchen, "you only have to damp mop."

"You just cleaned the floor two days ago."

"No I didn't. It was some time last week."

"The windows look good," I comment and peer out at the lush green maple standing strong and tall, the last remaining sentinel of the barren backyard. Drying vegetation is piled high against the corner of the fence, ready to be hauled away. Low-maintenance rock and gravel will arrive next week.

"Yeah, not a smudge or streak on 'em. That new cleaner really works."

He grunts softly as he stands up. I can feel his eyes on me, but I continue to survey the stripped landscape.

"I called the tree company yesterday," he says. "They'll be here on Monday. I won't have to worry about raking up leaves this Fall."

“That’s good,” I say while memories of planting the young Maple bombard my head in huge waves. “You remember when Jimmy–“

“I’ve gotta’ get a bucket,” Dean says then turns and goes for the garage door.

“Dean...” I start, but he is already out the door. I tell myself that the tree really has gotten too big.

I walk out of the kitchen and into the recently remodeled living room. He told me that the latest color palette of mauve and teal would probably maintain its contemporary feel for a couple of years, the same amount of time needed to finish the rest of the remodel.

The imitation wood baseboard that wraps around the room matches the new whitewashed oak bookcase. On the bottom two shelves, bestsellers are neatly organized according to height and width, their geometries carefully calculated. The old and frequently read classics, with edges worn and frayed, were carted off to the second-hand store last weekend along with three boxes of *National Geographics*.

Jimmy had read the September issue right before he left home. While we ate breakfast one morning, he told me about one of the stories he had read. A crew of journalists had traveled down to South America to study a tribe that lived deep within the dense jungle, but the tribesman wouldn’t allow photographs to be taken, believing that capturing their image would steal away pieces of their soul. The journalists ended up taking pictures with long telephoto lenses while hiding behind bushes or trees so that the villagers wouldn’t see what they were doing. Jimmy had said that maybe it’s best to not see what’s happening all the time.

The row of contemporary sculptures that sit on the top shelf of the bookcase are lined up like soldiers at attention; nondescript artwork that can be found in any gift or card shop. They shine brightly under the small halogen lights that are positioned directly above each one, as if the intense beams are holding them in a metamorphic state. Black wire racks of CD’s are on the middle shelves. A collection of mid-stream music starting with John Tesh is followed by a long but narrow spectrum of mood music. Carefully selected DVD’s are on the bottom shelf.

Dean says that the new gas fireplace in the corner of the room will provide good heat for the upcoming winter. When I saw the demo model in the showroom, the flames wrapped around the ceramic logs like rows of long thin fingers grappling over each other. Above the fireplace, the mantel holds the only photos that Dean and I decided to keep. He had remounted and framed each one by himself.

On the left side, Dean’s mother and father sit next to mine. On the right are two group photos taken at the family reunion. In the middle is Jimmy. The American flag, crisp and neatly folded into a large triangle, rests behind the photo.

Hearing Dean reenter the kitchen, I turn and walk out of the living room.

“I’m going to start mopping,” he says.

“I’m just going out to the garage,” I reply as I walk past him, lightly brushing against his arm.

“Use the back door when you come back in. The floor will be wet.”

I leave the controlled climate of the air-conditioned house, and it is as though I have entered a desert world, the thick heat assaulting my skin, the stagnant air penetrating my pores.

Two large pillows sit in the corner of the garage with thin claw marks stretched across their surfaces. Boxes of Jimmy's clothes are next to them, ready to be taken away.

I turn to the workbench where two plastic cages with small wire-covered windows sit. Each of the small handles cuts into my hands as I carry them to the back of the house and through the sliding glass door. Entering the bedroom, Frazier is still napping in the rocking chair, slightly twitching as he chases imaginary mice or other small prey.

Gently lifting him into one of the cages, I wipe the circle of hair off the cushion and feel the body warmth still radiating from the fabric. I look over my shoulder, then unsnap the worn collar around Frazier's neck and place it deep within the bottom of my pocket. I'll find a place to hide it later.

"You too Ali," I say and lift the cat off the corner of the bed. Putting him into the cage and taking off his collar, I then close and shut the small door while he looks at me through the metal gridwork.

"It's better that you go together, trust me."

Picking up the two cages, the weight of each cat balances my body as I walk down the hall and into the front entryway.

"Be back in a while," I yell to Dean. I can see him through the kitchen doorway, scrubbing a corner of the floor with a toothbrush.

"No matter how hard I try to keep the corners of this floor clean," he shouts, "there always seems to be a build-up of dirt."

"Do you..."

"What's that?" he says.

"Never mind, I'll be back," I say and walk out the front door.

Authors Note:

When buying furnishings for our house, my wife and I always make an effort to buy things that are made from natural earth materials – wood, rock, iron, etc. I'm always amazed at the amount of 'faux' finish items that are sold in all the stores. Mass produced and fabricated from manmade materials, they appear cold and lifeless.

In a minimalist style, the story describes the lives of two people who have experienced a great loss. Eliminating anything natural or alive in their surroundings, the couple strives to desensitize their environment to help cope with the pain. As they continue their 'clean-up,' the woman struggles to hold on to memories of happier times. Quietly buckling under the pressure of grief, she succumbs to the antiseptic life that her husband has obsessively created.