

Cleaning Up the House

by Tony Burton

“Alice! Bring me a damn beer, willya?” Preston called, scratching his crotch under the covers. He heard a clatter in the other room, then the opening and closing of the refrigerator. Alice, sweaty hair hanging across her brow from under a scarf wrapped around her head, walked in with a still-foaming can of Budweiser.



He took it from her and swigged it, then let loose a ripping fart under the sheets. Alice closed her eyes, but said nothing. “What’re you doin’ in there, anyway?” he asked her, annoyance in his voice. “You’re makin’ a lot of noise, and you look like hell!”

“I’ve been cleaning out the cabinets and the refrigerator. I’ve been working that second job so I hardly ever have time to do it. Since today’s a holiday I figured I’d try to get it done,” she replied, swiping her arm across her forehead and leaving a muddy trail.

“Well, when you get through with that, this room needs some work, too,” he said, waving vaguely at the ceiling. “Enough cobwebs up there to start our own silk factory!”

“Preston, I’ll be busy for at least two more hours! Then I’ve got to go pick up the kids, and I promised them I’d take them to a movie tonight. You promised, too,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, yeah... I know. I’ll be up.” He belched. “Listen, I’m gonna try to catch some more sleep. Try to work a little quieter, OK?” He chugged the last of the beer, dribbling half down his chin, then dragged the covers up over himself and closed his eyes.

Alice left the room and continued working. She finished the kitchen, putting the final touches on cleaning the burners on the gas stove. She got dressed without disturbing Preston, and stood contemplating him for about ten minutes, her eyes vacant as she remembered what life was like before... before what? Before Preston lost his job? Before he quit caring about anything? Before he became a permanently hibernating human? Her eyes were dull, full of sadness at what her husband had become.

She sighed and turned for the door, then looked at Preston once more. His cigarettes and lighter were on the nightstand. A tiny flame of hope grew in her. She went to the kitchen and made a final adjustment or two, then left the house with her purse and keys.

She picked up their two boys, Dustin and Thad, took them to a double-feature at the theater, and then to Sir Eat-a-Lot. She didn't hurry.

It was dark when Preston woke up. He rolled over, then grunted at the pressure in his bladder. *Man, I gotta piss like a racehorse!* He grabbed a cigarette and his lighter, and stumbled toward the bathroom. *It always takes a smoke to get me going,* he thought, as he lit up for the last time. The gas explosion was deafening, but he only heard the first half-second of it.

The fire department was putting out the last of the flames when Alice and the boys arrived, and her tears were genuine. She had worked very hard to make that house a home.

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