

ROB MORRIS

Arrangement

After they moved the fold-out sofa into the den and the old bed into the guest room, the men from the furniture store carried two new beds into the bedroom and arranged them side by side, leaving a corridor the width of the night table between them. She tipped the men and sent them away, and now it seemed to her that their heavy steps had stirred up a layer of dust. She was sure the house needed cleaning, and she set to work with a rag and a can of furniture polish.

She felt industrious, the way she felt on the first mild day in April. In fact it was January. Snow had drifted in their driveway. Window panes made tiny cracking noises. She bent over the dining room table, wiping firmly in small circles. Even from a low angle, even with the sallow afternoon light illuminating the table's surface, she had to admit that the table—and every other surface in the room—was remarkably clean.

And yet this fact made her work seem all the more necessary. The silver picture frame on the side table cried out to be held and buffed and set down at a jaunty angle. Her hands begged to wipe the candlesticks. The weight of the sugar bowl, the crust around its rim; the curve of the rocking chair's legs—the house gathered

itself up and called to her, and she responded, moving with a sure step from room to room.

In the den she discovered that her husband's files were poorly kept, and she applied herself to the task of straightening them. But as she opened first one folder and then another, their contents seemed alien and brittle. There were ancient carbons the color of bad teeth, knickknacks and gifts from students and secretaries. A frog made from green felt dropped from a folder and into her lap. The frog had bubble eyes with black discs for pupils, and they made a weak rattle.

The weight of his life at the school pressed down on her shoulders. She had pulled out a file drawer, and now she saw it stretch before her like tracks laid across a prairie—all that distance covered with files, all those files filled with material that she could not improve. She tried to shut the door as she stood, and in her hurry she caught the tip of a finger in the drawer's path.

She considered the benefit of yelling. It might release the hot thumping pulse in her finger, which she now held to her side.

She yelled. It was an orderly yell, and it offered no relief. Her finger still pulsed. She convinced herself that any swelling or injury

would be less important than finishing the project she had started, so she picked up her rag and began again.

Now evening hung outside—the drifts were the color of light from television—and she went upstairs to start in on their bedroom. She dusted the rocking chair, the bureau, the small desk that they couldn't quite find a use for, and the night table. She imagined a traveler passing the house on foot and noticing the square of yellow light—their bedroom window—set against the dusk. She pictured the man as a vagabond with a sack of goods tied in a bandanna at the end of a stick, the stick balanced on his shoulder. His feet were bare and his cuffs were frayed. He would gaze at her industry as if it were a fire.

She stood and squared herself to look at the beds. She gave them the face she would give an errant child. The mattresses had the sheen and smell of satin. Stripped like this, they made her think of a rest home in the morning, when the nurses come to change the sheets. She thought of the pity the nurses must feel when they ball up the wet cloth. Perhaps after a few weeks on the job, they felt nothing at all.

The beds needed sheets, so she went to the hall linen closet to find them.

The closet needed straightening too, and she set it to rights while looking for single sheets. She re-folded towels and stacked them neatly on one shelf. Washcloths were folded into squares and set on top of pillow cases, which looked as

smooth and fine as party gloves. Sheets were held out and examined, then folded and set in separate stacks—one for top sheets, one for bottom sheets. All of the sheets were made for king-size beds.

“Well,” she said, shutting the closet door and holding two sets of sheets against her chest, “I guess we’ll just have to look a little baggy.”

As she readied herself to spread out the first bottom sheet, a door clicked shut downstairs. She set the sheets down on one bed, still folded.

Her husband wore soft-soled shoes, so she could hardly hear him come up the stairs. But she knew his pace well enough to count it off; she knew the exact moment when his head would poke around the corner of the stairwell. And there it was. And there, too, was the sigh he let out as he pulled himself to the top step, exaggerating the effort.

“Oh, the banker’s wife, the banker’s wife,” he said. “You could have been the banker’s wife.” He said this facing the bathroom door, so she saw him in profile, like a president on a coin. Now he turned to her and said, “Instead, you got me. How does it feel? How does it feel to be the principal’s wife?”

She cocked her head like a finch, not sure how to answer; she had never been sure how to answer. She clasped her hands in front of her. Her pose suggested that she was welcoming him to coffee hour at church: *And would you like something hot to drink?*

She forgot to move from the threshold of the

door, so he stopped in front of her and held her eye. "Do you suppose I could get into our room?" he said. She remembered the smell of his mouth—an odor like steamed wool. A few white crystals lay on the square tweed of his shoulder.

He looked into the room. "Ah hah," he said. He pressed past her and slid into the room. "Now this is something new. These look like, ah—like beds at camp, at summer camp. I never thought I'd sleep on them again, but . . ." He tossed his briefcase on one, and she winced. "You sure this is what you want?"

It seemed to her that they had agreed on this—that it shouldn't have come as a surprise to him. But of course they had not spoken of it. "You seem," she said in one voice, then changed to another, "you seemed to like the fold-out, but it's so ragged and filthy . . ." She wrung her hands, then realized she was rubbing her swollen finger as well. Rather than look down at it, she held her eyes up to his. "I don't know what you want. I honestly don't. If you don't want these, throw them out the window. The beds at my summer camp weren't half as nice as these, and this . . . this is what people do, I think. This is what I do."

"This is what you do! Well all right then. This is what we do."

He leaned in to peck her cheek, but she took his face in her hands and kissed his mouth. It was a flat kiss; they had forgotten to tense their lips. His shoulder moved as if he were

shrugging off his blazer, and before she could stop him he had pulled away, jiggling his arms free and walking off-balance down the stairs.

After dinner she went upstairs and threw sheets over the two beds. She had to tuck in the fitted bottom sheet; otherwise it hung from the bed like a collapsed tent. She called down to him that she would stay upstairs and read. In the guest room she propped herself against the headboard of their old bed and arranged her body in a pose that would encourage concentration. She left the door open to receive light from the hallway, and to suggest that this wasn't her final resting place for the night. Small noises drifted up from the kitchen, where he sat working at papers or reading magazines or rubbing his feet.

The bed was still layered with sheets and blankets, and because there was a chilly draft from the hallway, she settled herself under them. Then she admitted that she was not able to concentrate on her book, and she turned off the light at the bedside table. The hallway light would keep her awake. The bulb was muted by a cover made of frosted glass, and its tepid color filtered into the room. She heard the squeak of the fold-out sofa downstairs, and she saw dust passing through shafts of light, as if a new box of tissues had been torn open and shaken, and it seemed to her that her work was not yet done.