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Bill Miller

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## “Lazy Susan” by Trudy Lewis

*Spring 2008, Volume 32, Number 1*

If you want to get to know a woman, put on her fat clothes and kneel down to scrub her floor tiles or crane your neck to dust up inside the light fixture in her dining room. That’s what we decided in our Sunday group. There were four of us: Margot of the high ceilings, crumbled crayons, and spackled butter cream thighs; Natural look Sally, who hailed from a childless A-frame deep in a tick-infested forest; Catherine the Cold, frosty blonde wife to an overheated furniture mogul in a modern ranch house full to bursting with stock and teenagers on the prosperous side of Boonslick; and me, Della Sue, salt-and-pepper duchess of all the taxidermy and wood paneling I survey. For years, our husbands had been carousing together Fridays, claiming that they’d be happy to stay home with the kids, dogs, laundry, telemarketers, PC, if there were really anything we wanted to go out for. “I can’t even remember what I used to do for fun,” I told Gerry, one night after he came in and made a sandwich out of the leftover casserole that had hardened into cheese crust at the sides of the baking dish.

“Chase beef cake, I believe. Now you got enough to stock a freezer, what else do you need?” His jaw worked over the tail end of the sandwich as he stripped off the ShowMe State Games T-shirt I’d washed special for the evening’s festivities and put his familiar muscles on parade. There’s one with a stretch mark, one with a birthmark, one with a tasteful tiger tattoo. I’d had the benefit of them all, it was true, and with two school-age boys to boot, male attention was hardly a pressing need.

Besides, what are our options, four women attached like bubbling mushrooms to the wrong side of forty? No one wants to see a middle-aged woman enjoying herself—dancing, drinking, laughing so hard she pees.

So we settled for Sunday afternoons in rotating kitchens. By three o’clock on the day of rest, we’d completed the weekend to-do list and were ready to take a few hours’ breather before commencing on the long unforgiving play book of the week. But how to entertain ourselves in the few precious hours between the final mow-through of the family room carpet and the ceremonial cleansing of our husbands’ attempts at cooking dinner on the grill? Bridge was too complicated. Aerobics were too taxing. Charity work was redundant, after what we’d done for our kids, spouses, students, customers, parents, clients, and bosses recently. Besides, everything else we could think of involved calories, cholesterol, and cancer-inducing properties.

“Even coffee causes fibroids, it seems,” Sally offered, tipping a cup skeptically and stretching out her long legs in their spartan khakis. We’d started out in my kitchen, with its checked yellow curtains, its nature scene wood plaques, its sixties fixtures and the unfortunate mineral stains in the sink, because my boys happened to be out fishing with their father for the day.

I nodded and Catherine, Sally’s bleached to the bone sister-in-law, took a sip in sympathy, then sat up straighter, fingering the gold add-a-pearl poised strategically in the pit of her long and over-tanned neck. “I know. We should gamble. That’s what the guys do. Trev was bragging how he won \$20 at darts last week. And I mean to tell you, he wasn’t that excited when his first store rolled over into the black.”

Margot lifted her teaspoon, dribbling coffee onto the saucer, and pointed the bowl at me. “No sports. I’ve had enough sports to tan a pigskin and bust a hoop.”

“Well then, what? Politics?”

“Too predictable.”

“Weather?”

“Too moody.”

“Sex?”

She firmed up her chin and barely blinked. “Too unremarkable, overall.”

“I know,” I said. “Let’s bet on the housework.”

There was a fizzy electric silence into which every woman dropped her private sound: Sally’s crackling elbow, Catherine’s brisk fingernails on the tabletop, the measured click of Margot’s sharp tongue.

“It’s not like there hasn’t been a precedent. You know, these Mormon ladies over there in Winthrop used to get a group together and do the white glove test on each others’ houses. They gave demerits and everything.”

“How would we verify something like that?” Catherine asked.

Margot pushed around the produce Sally had brought for us to divvy up and take home, examining the green veins in the zucchini and the rich yellow crooks of the butternut squash. “I don’t know about anyone else, but it doesn’t sound very neighborly to me.”

“Oh, but I’m thinking we could modify the system,” I said. “Make it a friendlier game. We could do each other’s houses. At least that would break up the monotony. And it takes care of verification too. The home-owner gets to evaluate the work herself. Five points for each task completed and an additional ten bonus points for any grace notes or improvements. Then the gal with the most points wins.”

“Wins what?” Catherine asked.

“Night on the town? Day at the spa?” Sally suggested. “Small household appliance of her choice?”

Margot slit her silk pie brown eyes at me. Her face still had a few extra curves from her last pregnancy fifteen months previous, but even so, she was one formidable woman. “You didn’t just think of this, did you? You’ve been hatching this plan for a while.”

I rested my fingers lightly on the Lazy Susan I’d inherited from my grandmother, an ancient revolving serving dish from the first generation of labor-saving household devices, back when a woman was considered shiftless for not getting up and passing the plate herself. Come to think of it, maybe the concept wasn’t so antique after all. I gave a push and set the Susan spinning so fast it gave off a shriek. “Ladies,” I said. “Welcome to the gaming table. Place your wagers now.”

And so we began our experiments in domestic roulette. The first challenge was to actually determine what we did in a week, then condense it into a list for our fellow players. Did we count laundry? Garbage detail? The odd request to sew on a button or fix a hem? And what about the nudging, nagging, and plain old-fashioned wheedling that had to be done to convince a spouse or teenager to de-clutter a room so the actual cleaning could begin? We debated disparities in our living situations:

teenagers vs. toddlers, modern dwellings vs. fanciful playhouses and Victorian monstrosities, maid service vs. personal elbow grease, human inhabitants vs. dogs. But there were too many variables to allow for a systematic grid, so in the end we had to go on approximation and good faith. Besides, every one of us was convinced that her load was the heaviest, and so, whatever happened, she'd be getting a deal. Once we'd completed the lists, we copied them out in longhand on identical Home Sweet Home recipe note cards and placed each one face downward in its own compartment of the Lazy Susan.

“O.K., honey, rock my world,” Margot said, as she placed her hands on the Susan and sent it off on its maiden cruise.

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When I showed up in my paint-spattered cleaning shorts at Catherine's the next Sunday, I ran into her teenage daughter Reenie sitting on a bow-backed chair in the foyer and strapping on her roller blades. Her hair was braided into skinny cornrows and her spare tankini shirt revealed a butterfly in her cleavage and a sapphire dewdrop navel stud. Her MP3 player nestled in the hollow where her stomach ought to be.

“Hey, Miz Della. Mom said you were coming over. Hey, I like the idea, really, reality entertainment for the recreation impaired. You have your fun now. And try to stay out of Daddy's way. He's still drinking his coffee in there.”

I looked at the list in my hand. “I hope you picked up your room already.”

She stood up, holding onto the back of the chair for balance as she pulled a paisley backpack off the coat rack. “I thought that's what you were here for. No, just kidding, I got it covered, but you better check up on Kelly and Sam. They're the lead-butt slackers around here.”

“Hey Reenie,” I called to her as she took off down the bare sidewalk of the Quantrill Heights subdivision. “Maybe you ought to pay attention. You could be doing this yourself before long.”

But she didn't bother to answer, and I thought, it's just as well I don't have a daughter because, before I let her run off on me like that, I'd have to strangle her with her own hair.

Actually, I was lucky to wind up at Catherine's house for my virgin work session, since she had a weekly maid service and all I really needed to do was a preliminary sweep. On the other hand, her ranch house represented considerably more footage than what I was used to, and this particular roll of the dice also meant that I had to give up my Sunday morning Bible service, since Catherine insisted that any work done as early as Saturday would be completely destroyed by the time the maid showed up Monday morning at ten. So I cut a deal with the Lord, who didn't appear to mind a private prayer over the mop bucket now and then. In fact, one of the Sunday school teachers from my church insisted that he actually preferred it, on the theory that he's a bridegroom like the rest of them and so gets all expansive watching a woman work.

The front section of the house was one big scenic lookout, the spaces opening onto one another, each more lavish than the last, like a Home and Garden wet dream. A fireplace and window seat in the living room, an open alcove to the dining room, a huge kitchen with a breakfast bar, an island, a restaurant style oven, hanging cabinets, and a sliding glass door that led to a garden and a pool. In my imagination, it was always spotless. I'd have to clean off a counter or two and empty the dishwasher at most. Then I'd be able to concentrate on my search. But when I turned the corner out of the foyer I almost lost my bran nuggets. The living room was wall-to-wall furniture, and every available surface was covered with junk: Mail, magazines, wet swimsuits and towels, CDs left out of their cases, a computer draped in architectural blueprints, soda cans, candy wrappers, ipods, golf clubs, knee pads, newspapers, a digital camera, a pair of binoculars with one lens popped out, a turquoise hand weight rolling around the floor without its mate, DVDs, stopwatches, and incidental loose change. And that was just on first glance. When I moved in closer, I discovered the real gems: a rotting Cuban cigar, wet at one end, stuffed into an overcrowded magazine rack, a wasp drowning in a half-empty bottle of lime sports drink, an open pot of lip gloss with a toe ring embedded in its depths. How would I ever find what I was looking for in this? From out of the debris, I saw something move, a figure encrusted in gear. It was Catherine's husband, wearing a black bicycle helmet and a climbing harness over a silk robe with a bright pattern of racing cars.

“That's my family,” Trev said, removing his helmet and shaking out his short graying hair as if he'd just finished a sword fight. “You can't say I don't provide for them.” Then he reached down and took a handful of my ample backside, like he was doing me a favor by laying his hands on me.

“We're having a Labor Day special down at the store. I notice you and Gerry could use a good sofa so I tell you what I'll do, I'll shave off another 30% if you give me the upend treatment today.”

“Well, I hate to disappoint you, Trev,” I said, brushing his hand away to reach for my back pocket. “But that doesn’t seem to be on my list. No, nothing about polishing your faucet here. Better luck next week.”

“Calm down, I’m not propositioning you, honey. Just asking for a couple perks the maid won’t do: you know, clean out my closet, polish my cufflinks, give me a massage and pedicure, trim my beard.”

“And you’ll give me 30%? On a new refrigerator too?”

“New sofa, new refrigerator, anything you want.”

I had to skimp on Catherine’s list to do it, but the furniture was worth more to me than the Dutch oven we’d settled on for the first week’s prize. So I lunched on my pride and did the deed—or multiple deeds, rather, all in a kind of eerie pantomime to a remastered Led Zeppelin CD, at Trev’s request, though I had enough dignity left to decline his costume suggestions for the occasion. After all, Christ himself wasn’t above washing a sinner’s feet, I thought, as I pushed back a poor torn cuticle and trimmed a yellow toenail that smelled of all the sulphur in the devil’s backyard.

I went home to find that Sally had put Tang in my toilet and baking soda on my grill.

“The dog’s been tripping,” my son Aaron said. “He hasn’t even used his water bowl all day. But other than that, everything’s cool.”

“She even played Space Captives with me,” Adam, my pre-teen idol said. “Not bad, for an older-type lady. Why’d you say she never had any kids?”

“I didn’t ask, and I hope you didn’t either.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. I was totally civilized. I even made her some iced tea. Well, the mix kind. But still.” He looked up at me, maybe this was the last year I’d be able to say that, with those lazy hazel eyes I used to love his father for, his curly brown hair stained red in the late summer sunshine streaming from the open picture window which showed no fingerprints for the first time in weeks. Right then, I decided to pad Sally’s points and make sure she wound up with that Dutch oven for herself.

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As it happened, I got Catherine’s name again the second week, and even though this turn of events delayed my plans somewhat, it did give me the opportunity to work toward a china hutch I’d had my eye on. This time, we did fingernails, eyebrows, and ear hair to Pink Floyd and patchouli incense. I went home desperate for a shower, only to discover the sunflower shower curtain drying on the back deck and a fruity net of homemade sachet hanging from the nozzle over the spotless tub.

“Where’s my body gel?” I asked Gerald, who looked cleaned out as well.

“That Catherine’s quite the pip, isn’t she?”

“Gal enjoys slumming, I guess.”

“She made me clear out the garage so she could mop it up.”

“And how’d she do that?”

“She bribed me with chocolate doughnuts,” he said. “Plus she admired my elk and moose. She even dusted them with some special spray.”

That week, Margot won a bread maker for her work on Sally’s A-frame, and I didn’t even mind; she’d hit payback eventually. Besides, Margot was the only one among us game enough to make good use of this particular item. And that husband of hers, three years younger and still self-satisfied at his bread-winning capacities, would definitely get his thrills. Because according to Margot, at least, he hadn’t hadn’t seen much kneading and pulling within recent memory.

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At this point, we had to deal with a little dissent in the ranks. Catherine, who, let’s face it, had everything she needed in terms of household appliances, wanted to branch out: hotel reservations in the city, theater and dance tickets, weekends at a B&B in a historic river town. Besides, she wasn’t particularly happy with what she’d been getting out of the deal. Last week the maid had refused to even enter the master bathroom, saying that there was too much bad smoke in there for her. Maybe, Catherine

suggested, adjusting her diamond-studded watch on her tanned and freckled arm, our little game had gone far enough. Sally, though happy enough with her Dutch oven, wasn't much on domestic aids either, since she spent most of her time outdoors. But Margot and I, who weren't played out quite yet, insisted carrying through.

"Let's give it at least one more week," I told Catherine. "Maybe you'll get lucky."

"Right," said Margot, "I'm still waiting to get a crack at Della's elk horns."

"And just to up the ante, we'll make it a fun prize this time. Two nights at the Crowne Plaza. With the husband of your choice."

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Of course, Lady Luck would have to take a potty break sooner or later, and so I wasn't surprised when the next spin of the Susan brought me to Sally's A-frame. I had to drive about ten miles out on 63 to get there, and as I did, I calculated my chances. I had been studying a new iron bedstead, and now I didn't know whether the arrangement would last long enough to bring it into my sights. Not to mention the delay in my long term project to test the loyalties of all my friends. The surroundings out here—the car lots and warehouses, the auto parts factory, the pawn and body shops, the Oriental massage parlors operating out of mobile homes and old bunkers, Teaser's Gentleman's Club with a silhouette of a woman whose boobs were bigger than her head—made it that much more depressing. I'd never escape, I thought, I'd never go beyond the three-bedroom brick bungalow that Margot still referred to as a "starter home" and which seemed to shrink as the children grew and Gerry collected more prey and trophies to display. Up to age thirty or so, I thought I was going somewhere. I got my associate's degree, I landed a good job as a receptionist in a law office, I married and added Gerry's income from the plant to mine. But somewhere after the first kid, the bank account just stopped gathering moss. And after awhile, I realized, the only thing I was accumulating was dirt and gray hair. Every time I cleaned, I'd think how I was wasting my life just erasing our traces—our toenails and table scraps, our hair in the shower drain, flakes of dead skin on the carpet, the yellow sweat on Gerry's undershirts, the soaked and shredded tampons the dog scattered across the floor or deposited under the bed, the kids' multicolored personal products in the diaper pail. Sometimes, I'd start scrubbing down the baseboards or attacking the grime around the tub and realize I was scraping the paint off as I worked, scarring the enamel, tearing off the rubber seals. At least at work I was producing: memos and conferences, letters and contracts, home closings and adoptions. At home, I was on an endless demented mission to search and destroy.

"I try not to look at it that way," Margot, who was in the midst of the worst of it, would say. "I like to think I'm some kind of Zen master trying to find the right balance of life, fluid, rot, and decay."

I took a turn and passed Karst Park, the state forest where Sally and Mason both worked, and where they had courted too, eating their sack lunches under the natural bridge and discussing their favorite ecosystems. That was the reason we all got together in the first place. When Sally let on that she was finally getting married, her brother Trev was so relieved he offered to throw a bachelor party for the guy, who, though missing some basic elements in his hard drive, did have a steady hand at darts, an iron stomach and a wooden leg, and who would certainly save his sister from a life of arriving late and alone at every family gathering covered with dog hair. Trev's head had been planted like a stick of furniture in the sand since high school; running two businesses simultaneous, he didn't have time for a social life. So it was a challenge for him, scaring people up for the bachelor party. He finally settled on Gerry, the wildest boy from his high school class, and Margot's husband Kyle, a likely fellow he'd met at a breakfast for Boonslick businessmen and who had beaten him in a half dozen games of racquetball over the past year. They were joined for the evening's festivities by a blond bearded worker from Trev's delivery crew, the only actual bachelor in the group, an avid soccer fan and a committed spelunker, who later got married to a florist in a bare bones ceremony behind the health food store and left town on a whim. I don't know what all occurred out there at Teaser's that night, but Gerry came home at two a.m. with a ripe smell of lime cologne, borrowed cigarettes, and peach schnapps, and a stupid grin I hadn't seen on him since he pinned me in my parents' car top camper the night of our third date. After a cold nuzzle up my neck and a long noisy pee, he proceeded to eat the cottage cheese lasagna I'd been saving for our Sunday dinner. And he'd been restless over since, staying out in the garage until all hours with his CD player and his tool kit, rearranging his trophy heads, using my eye cream and cover stick in the bathroom, trying to get me to go out with my friends, when all he'd ever done was clip my wings and budget my gasoline for the last ten years. I wasn't jealous, exactly, but the truth was I began to feel like a fool for not stepping in.

Just thinking about it, I missed Sally's turnoff. Then I reversed direction at a grain silo, backtracked, and drove a quarter mile up the long gravel drive before I finally spied the chocolate and gingerbread structure, its front wall a single window topped by a narrow porthole sporting a stained glass yin and yang. It's all roof, I said to myself, imagine trying to tile the thing, it's all top and no sides. It's like a life without children, I guess, and that's why it seems so appropriate for the two of them, who didn't

marry until after they were forty, though Mason was rumored to have offspring living with relatives up in Washington State.

When I arrived, Mason was in the yard, stripped to the waist and tying some grape vines back onto their trellises. He had longish silver hair, with natural waves, a tanned and wiry upper body, sturdy work boots, a faded red T-shirt hanging from the pocket of his cutoff denim shorts. “Go on in and help yourself,” he said. “I’m familiar with the routine.”

Inside, the two immense Labs, Diana and Orion, were lying on the flagstones by the wood-burning stove. When they saw me, they ran up and pawed at my chest, pushing me back onto a sad sack of a sofa covered with so many shawls and pillows that it was impossible to tell what kind of upholstery lay at the bottom of it all. I thought that should be greeting enough, but they insisted on following me to the kitchen as I wiped off the hand-stained oak cabinets, swept the Spanish tile, dragged a mop and bucket out of the pantry and started in on the floor. Were they expecting a treat? I wondered, searching through the hummus and olive paste in the refrigerator until I found some turkey pastrami in a deli bag. They both ate their slices in a single gulp and stood waiting for more. Unlike children, they couldn’t be distracted by a video. Unlike men, they couldn’t be bought off with a promise of late-night sex or the first pick of the doughnuts for the kids’ sleep-over. So I started looking through the house for a humane place to shut them up. But here’s the thing, there just weren’t many doors. Instead, the spiral staircase split the house into sections: livingroom, sun room, dining room, kitchen. I’d never been upstairs, and so I decided to try my luck there. In one quadrant of the space, Sally had a computer desk decorated with vases of dried flowers and a wicker chair that wouldn’t survive a month with my boys; in another, Mason had mounted two immense speakers on the wall on either side of a velvet chaise lounge. Nearby, a T.V. tray stood covered with a half-finished jigsaw puzzle, a gallon jug sat on the floor filled with colored marbles, a few origami dragons dangled from the ceiling on colored strings. Amazing, the fragile things that can hold their shape in a childless marriage. Even the bedroom, with its fake fur-covered futon, its collage of fun-related photos from bars and softball games and whitewater rafting, was open to view. Not much of a challenge here. On the nightstand, within reach of the bed, were the marital aids which Sally, with her forthright ways, hadn’t bothered to hide: strawberry body oil, a wooden roller for massages, a hostess basket lined with a cloth napkin and filled with a variety of sex toys in bright-colored plastic. But there was one door at the back of the house—it must be over the garage—I figured, which looked like a place where a dog might reasonably find some rest.

I opened the handle and got blindsided by the glare. It was a sun room, a greenhouse, and if the full force of the Missouri sun didn’t make for enough illumination, there was also a strip of fluorescent floodlights along the inner wall.

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“Uh-oh, contraband here. Wouldn’t want to compromise you without your consent.” Mason sat on a high stool, the type you see at a diner or a bar; he’d put on his T-shirt, and now, with the addition of sunshade, bifocals, and rubber gardening gloves, he looked like a doctor about to operate. In front of him was a long worktable covered with four window boxes of green leafy plants that shot up almost two feet.

“On the other hand, if you’re having trouble motivating, I don’t know any better way to stop and smell the roses while you mop the floor.”

“You have much experience with that?”

“Mopping or stopping, do you mean?” he said, fingering his mustache, then moving his fingers rapidly over a red lacquer tray with a dragon design.

“How’d you get up here anyway?”

“Back stairs. Thought I’d give you some privacy, just in case you like to sing while scrubbing the shower or do your housework in the nude.” He pinched up some of the weed from the tray and stuffed it into the bowl of a bong as if he were patching a ceiling or mending a wall.

“Nice. Are you offering me some of that or what?”

I hadn’t been exposed since I was nineteen or twenty, and it was odd, seeing this grey-haired gentleman sitting in front of me with a psychedelic purple bong. He was no kid, though, sneaking a furtive inhale like a burp in the conversation; he breathed in deliberately, sucking skin to bone while his face got more and more comfortable, as if he was listening to the progression of a familiar tune.

“Well, that would be depending on whether you’re willing to take it out in trade.”

“That’s the way we like to do, out here.”

He cleaned the airway, refueled, and passed me the bong. Well, after what I'd done at Catherine's, it was hardly a moral quandary for me. I was a bit rusty on my technique, however, and had to cough it back a time or two before I managed to get the proper amount of smoke into my passages. Then what overwhelmed me was the smell—a clean smell of spice bushes and mown grass, a dirty smell of stale basements, sickly sweet liqueurs, sour cream onion dip, and all-night sex.

“You needed this, Della, didn't you?”

“Excuse me?”

“The rat race. The suburbs. Get and spend. Get and spend. I know it well, my friend. I was an unrepentant consumer for many years.”

“Were a consumer? What are you now?”

“Well, then I consumed. Now I partake. You've eaten my tomatoes. You've eaten my squash. And now you have the opportunity to sample my cannabis. I invite; you partake. It's a mindful relationship, not a forced feeding frenzy on the pale corpse of Albion.”

I snorted through my toke. “Are you telling me that you actually think you're off the grid?”

“Look around. Do you see any satellite dishes? Do you see any television? Do you spy any cell phones or hot tubs or microwaves?”

“No, but I'm totally capable of sniffing out bullshit when there's a big fresh cake of it on some slumming yuppie's hundred dollar running shoes.”

He laughed, the wrinkles coming on strong in half moons around his eyes. “Dog shit, maybe. Bullshit, no.”

I felt a warm trickle in my chest. “So what are you looking for, Mason?”

“Did I ever tell you how I lost my first wife? She was just past seventeen when we got together at a concert in upstate Washington. She was the one in the moonbeam bikini and the psychedelic hot pants. After we slept together for the first time, that was it, we never slept apart. Whether it was in a car or under the stars or on a friend's living-room floor. Well, we did eventually get our own apartment, though that may have been the beginning of the end. She stopped taking the Pill, we had a little girl, and Lindy went through the postpartum depression and started asking me what I married her for, if I was just going to lock her up in a box. “Box,” that's what she always called that place that I worked so hard to pay the rent on. “Welcome back to the box.” Want to evacuate the box now? If you're so bored, why don't you help me clean the damn box?” She'd quit taking drugs when she was pregnant, but then she started again. First antidepressants, then marijuana, then cocaine and finally heroin—who knows where she got the stuff—or what she did to get it. Besides, I wasn't exactly anti-narcotic myself, and I was at the stage, you know, where the worst thing you can call anyone is a hypocrite. Eventually, I just hired a neighbor lady to stay with the baby all day. At least, I thought, I could protect my little girl, even if I couldn't protect my wife. One night Lindy didn't come home, and I'll, admit, there was some kind of relief, maybe she'd finally got to where she wanted to go, beyond the box, beyond the lake, beyond the mountains, in that sweet heroin hunting-ground they talk about where you can finally get all your fish swimming in the same stream. But come to find out, it was no such thing. A john slit her throat before she could even get the needle in her arm, that's what she got for her trouble.”

My arm had fallen asleep, and I lost my balance, and had to grab onto the edge of the table to prop myself up. It wasn't just the marijuana swelling the capillaries in my head, or the synapses popping and fizzling with new connections (that was why he came out here to Missouri, that was why none of his family attended the wedding, that was why he lost the kid). It was being that close to someone else's sorrow, how it trapped you in its layers of retelling and its ancient dusty folds.

“And so,” he said, “No more boxes, no more apartments, no more babies, no more grid.”

“No more drugs?”

He looked at me through the tops of his bifocals. “Drugs aren't the problem. It's an issue of exploitation, same as everything else. I've got a closed system here, a clear pool. Tell you what, you can help me out. You can take a bag to my friend in the V.A. Hospital. They never suspect a lady with a mini van.”

I leaned my head to one side, as if I hadn't heard right.



“It would be a mission of mercy. He’s got an aggravated case of arthritis. Besides, I’ll throw in a half an ounce for your personal use. Pure as homegrown basil. Give you a little escape when the Box Manufacturers get you down.”

I heard an engine, and through the window I saw Sally’s truck pull into the carport behind the house. As she got out and lifted a bag of kibble from the back, I saw her arm muscles rise to the occasion, I glimpsed the honest gray roots of her silver-blonde hair.

“Well, why not? I guess I could stand to partake a little every now and then.”

It was a beautiful package that Mason put together for me, a selection of squash and gourds in a handwoven basket, a baggie of banana peppers in the center, and underneath that, two neat airtight packs of herb. Mason’s friend, a bald fellow with a limited vocabulary and a loud voice full of spit, was barely civil. I felt I’d earned my pay just by spending ten minutes with him pretending to discuss stem cell research while he sliced into his jello with the sharp edges of a creamer packet then flooded the bowl with a half carton of milk. Not to mention, I had to deal with a pair of over-zealous Shriner types who chased me down in a golf cart for parking in the wrong spot.

“Respect your country’s heroes, lady. Park across the street and use your feet. Think they had curb service over there in Nam?”

At home, the whole house smelled of gasoline. Margot had been here with her roller and actually painted Gerry’s den for him. The animals were stockpiled in the livingroom, leaning together in a mass grave behind the new sofa with its silky ribbed stripes of Christmas candy green.

“This is getting ridiculous,” I said. “It looks like a massacre in here.”

“Margot said it was time. Think I’m going to disagree?”

He was sitting there with his bare feet on the sofa arm, two pillows and a folded sleeping bag under his head, reading a hunting and fishing catalogue as he watched a golf tournament on T.V. I looked at his jagged yellow toenails covered with cracks and moons, and thought, at least she hasn’t gotten that far yet.

“Della Sue,” he said. “What’s with you? I believe you’re transported. Let me take a look at you. He dragged me down on top of him and I smelled the animal decay, the sweat and salt and sweet of him, traces of pickled pig’s feet and buffalo wings.

“Your pupils are black as a mystic 8-ball. Have you been smoking weed? My God, you have. What’s next? You gonna put on the old G-string and do Amateur’s Night out at Teaser’s?” He poked and tickled me, tried to feel where the drug had left me vulnerable. All over, as it turned out. I wound up mounting my own husband on the new sofa, not even asking where the kids were first, or caring what dripped from who onto where. In the midst of the worst of it, I gritted my teeth and tried to stop the orgasms he was pulling out of me, like intestines out of a carcass. But even that wasn’t enough, and so I flexed my toes too, produced a cramp in my leg, and started to hit him. Flat, loud slaps on his cheeks, a box on the ears, a good slam up top of the head.

“Hey, cut it out. That’s a little rough for me.”

And then he rolled me over and held my wrists down while he finished me off.

Lying there, I slipped my hand under a cushion and came out with Margot’s watch, a round diamond-dimpled face on a slim leather band of blue. Five minutes fast, I noticed. I couldn’t say I was surprised.

But Gerry was already watching T.V. again, stroking his half-erect penis and thumbing his balls. “Got to get that last elk remounted. Got to put new paneling up,” he said. “You know, when I was out with the guys Friday, they seemed to think you all have a good thing going. It’s great to see you gals grabbing your own gusto for a change.”

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Of course, I couldn’t deny Margot her due, and so she nailed another victory, five points ahead of Catherine, ten points ahead of Sally, twenty points ahead of me. When I arrived at her place Saturday morning she and Kyle were still at the Crowne Plaza in Kansas City, munching on those over-buttered croissants that arrive sweating on their paper doilies, while her mother, back in Boonslick, peeled an orange, changed a diaper, and slipped in another video for the kids.

At least that’s what I figured when, stoned and demoralized, I walked into the big ramshackle Victorian fix-up on the cusp

between the respectable and the questionable sides of town. The place smelled of vanilla and baking soda, it was true, but I could still sniff out what lurked underneath, the secret rhubarb scent of breast milk, the hamper full of stale work-out gear, the rotten cantaloupe of a bad diaper, the garlic ghost of a good meal. I started out in the living room with its spackled white walls and exposed beams. Most of the clutter was confined to a coffee table, an overflowing toy box, and a playpen filled with stuffed animals and balls. But on closer inspection, I saw that there were tiny fingerprints on the windows and the china hutch, crumbs and raisins in the carpet, crayon smudges on the walls. Even the coffee table had been savaged with tooth marks all around its borders, and the slats of the mauve-tinted blinds were bent and twisted every which way, a few of them completely torn out like missing teeth.

I went right to the cupboard over the kitchen sink, and, as if by instinct, pulled out the spare key to my own front door on its rawhide string. Gerry hadn't even bothered to get a new one made. And of course, it was sitting right there in the cleaning cabinet where no one else would ever think to let a hand or eye wander. All the proof I'd ever need. Then I grabbed the Windex and started to clean. The movement of the cloth was hypnotic. I heard each fiber shriek against the glass. I smelled the alcohol exchanging spit with the ammonia. I felt the ache begin in my elbow as if I'd been polished to the bone. I could clean all day, I thought, and I'd almost rather, than have to do what came next.

Halfway through, there was a racket of keys and deadbolts at the front door. It was Kyle, duffle bag in hand, his thick dark hair standing straight up on his head, as if he'd been fingering it all the way home. He slammed his luggage down on the parquet; he kicked a quacking pull-toy across the floor, reached up to the lintel and started doing pull ups on the doorframe. Two, four, six, eight, ten. I stepped into the kitchen to give him a minute. He was breathing heavy, he was muttering something, he let out a scream that turned over on its back and asked to be scratched. When I came back in, his shirt was off and he was stripping down to his red and white boxers.

“Look at that,” he said, tossing off his pants, and standing there with his thumbs in the elastic waistband. “Does that look like a guy who's been double-boned? Never happened before. Never. Look at those biceps. Look at those abs. In college, I could satisfy two, three girlfriends at a time and no one even thought about going over to get some from the other side.”

He was a handsome man, definitely, with some of the arrogance of boyhood still clinging to his blue-black stubble and his slanted cheekbones. Trumped by my husband. Gerry with his tattoo and his toenails and his gut. There was a kind of shame in it, and a kind of pride.

“I guess that means you got my message.”

Kyle flexed the waistband of his boxers, turned around, and stepped out of those too. The curling black hairs of his upper thighs met the glaring white globes of his glutes.

“Yeah, Home Sweet Home yourself, babe,” he said. “Would you be at all interested in coming over here and ironing out my pants?”

After all those weeks of moral decline, I didn't even wait to hear what this one would offer me. Not that I felt anything much at first, when I took the cold damp penis into my hands and tried to warm it, like a child's frostbitten nose. But the energy eventually overtook me and I put my muscle into the job, kneading him until my palms tingled, until my nose opened and my lungs expanded with the labor, until he was hard as a doorknob and I was dirty as a house.

“Eight and a quarter inches, a hundred grand plus bonuses, state swimming championship,” he muttered. “Her dream house, a shitload of bank loans on fertility treatments, a couple of babies, a honeymoon in France.”

“Let it all out, let it go,” I said, as I opened my legs and imagined the Susan spinning out of control, spewing cannabis and carpet cleanser, baby booties and sales receipts, bristly moose hairs and rotten squash. I might be lazy, honey, but I'm not dead. God's green earth is stuck together with dirt. Take a mop to it at your own risk.

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*Trudy Lewis is the author of the short story collection *The Bones of Garbo*, winner of the Sandstone Prize in Short Fiction (Ohio State University Press, 2003). Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Best American Short Stories*, *Fence*, *Meridian*, *New England Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Southwest Review*, *Third Coast*, and others. Her first novel, *Private Correspondences*, won the William Goyen Prize (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press). Trudy is a Professor of English-Creative Writing at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She is currently at work on a historical novel about 19th century factory operatives in Lowell, Massachusetts.*

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