

Home Repairs

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SUZANNE STARED OUT THE KITCHEN WINDOW, watching rain water splash onto the patio and then sluice over the long grass all the way down to the creek at the end of the yard. A field belonging to Mr. Sam Hendricks, a farmer, stretched beyond. She and Alan knew no more about the farmer because he'd never needed a favor Alan could supply. Suzanne compressed her lips and breathed heavily out her nose. Through the wavy cords of rain on the glass, she glared at the drowned, neglected lawn and the rectangular sea of mud that *still* was not a garden. *When?* she asked herself. *When?*

Her hands in the sudsy water in the sink were quiet, had been quiet for minutes measured by the clock on the wall. Faintly Suzanne heard its electric whisper, incessant and undeviating. She sighed and groped for another salad bowl under water and found it, edges free of scallops or embossed designs. For the five years they'd been in their "fixer-upper" of a country home, she'd waited for Alan to install a dishwasher. He kept promising, kept pointing out how much money they'd save if he did all the work himself. Which meant, she supposed, that she never would have a dishwasher. Surely she had more to do in the softening light of a summer's evening than run her fingers over boring shapes in lukewarm water.

But then, perhaps not, not during a rainstorm, not in a house too run down to decorate or dream over, and not when Alan was gone yet again. Suzanne was tired of television, tired of reading. She hated to talk on the telephone unless it was to be rude to a telemarketer on one of her really grumpy days. She finished the dishes and let the water out of the sink.

In a while she settled at the

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table with a cup of tea and the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. Ho-siery shade. T-A-N. *Dawn goddess.* E-O-S. She consulted the clock. 8:15. *Nameless.* U-N-K-N-O-W-N. The rain on the roof sounded less assertive. *Masonry tool.* T-R-O-W-E-L. *Altar affirmative.* I-D-O. *I do what? Sit and wait?* The clock told her that only five minutes had passed. But in those five minutes the sky, though darkening, had become clear. The rain over, she could get out of the house, at least.

A concrete walk ran from the patio to the cellar door, and Suzanne went slowly along it, peering up at the gutter. Judging by her beaten-down petunias, she was willing to bet that the gutter was clogged with elm leaves and who knew what else. She wanted to be aggravated but felt too exhausted to care. What did it all matter, really? And what could she do, other than cut the grass herself when it needed mowing, spend money she and Alan didn't have to buy a dishwasher and have it installed, plant the garden and clean the gutters herself too and gauge her growing resentment until she decided she'd had enough and left her marriage?

She didn't want to leave. Alan was a good man, appreciative over his pork chops and home fries, appreciative also, sometimes, of her body when he wasn't tired or preoccupied with someone else's needs. He was *too* nice, a known handyman who couldn't say no. *Except to me.* Oh, Lord, I am so bored!

Suzanne whipped around and stared down the hill at the creek. It charged by, riled up by the recent rain. In the twilight its beige foam glimmered. Here and there spray danced in the air.

She went back into the house

and drifted into the front hall. She flicked on the porch light and watched the road for a time through the screen door. "Come home, Alan," she whispered.

He'd taken the truck after dinner because it could carry the mower and the weed whacker. Mrs. Barstow, 78 and widowed, had needed his help. And Alan did the work for her free of charge.

"Come on, Alan. You should have been able to finish mowing before the storm. Now it's getting dark. What can you do in the dark?" She knew what *she* could do in the dark. She lay her head against the screen door. Crickets sang.

Back in her kitchen she listened to the clock softly whirring. 8:42. She stood in the middle of the floor and waited.

At 8:45 she heard what she'd wanted to hear: the hiss of tires on a still wet road, the rumble of the truck's engine and the way it coughed once or twice after Alan shut it off. His feet sounded on the porch boards. The screen door squealed and then shut with a muted thump because Alan caught it before it could bang. Suzanne sat at the table.

Alan offered the same pleasant smile he'd given her over supper when he said he had to go cut Mrs. Barstow's lawn, a smile neither anxious nor eager, expecting or explaining nothing, even though he now carried a vacuum sweeper she'd never seen before.

"What's this?" she asked, her voice low. "It's not for us, is it? We don't need one." *Why couldn't you have come in pushing a dishwasher in front of you, or with your hands full of hardware needed to repair our home, or with your arms empty, ready to hold me?* she thought. Her heart pounded. It

seemed huge, thudding so hard she felt it right under her jawbone.

"Mrs. Barstow's old sweeper. She just bought herself a brand new one—you should see it! But she said if this one was fixed, she could use it as a backup. I thought I'd bring it home to look at. Can I have that newspaper there to spread under it?"

"My newspaper? This one?" Her mind repeated *just bought herself a brand new one—you should see it...a backup, a backup*. "No, Alan. You can't have my paper. And," she gulped in air, her emotions tumbling free and her blood charging through her in a furious stream, "how dare you bring that stupid thing home!" She spat the words at him.

"What?" The sweeper hung at the end of his arm as he stared at her. His mouth was open. He looked idiotic, she decided. *Boob. The world could drive right over you, and that is the face it'd see if it cared to check if you were alive or dead.*

Aloud, she said, "Give me that." With both hands she pulled the sweeper away from him and hurried with it into the back yard. She slipped once or twice on the wet grass but did not fall, nor did she stop until the mud oozing over the tops of her shoes told her she'd come to what should have been their garden. Suzanne slammed the sweeper into the mud hard enough for the stuff to splash high. It hit her blouse, her arms, face, hair. Laughing, she stomped on through the mud and jumped into the creek. The water slapped against her thighs. Suzanne gasped at its coldness, but, still laughing, she first sat down and then lay back. When she resurfaced, she heard Alan swearing. She couldn't remember his ever even raising his voice before. She struggled to her feet and

grinned at him.

"Are you crazy?!" He was holding the vacuum sweeper out before him.

"Yes!" she called back. "It's great!"

"Christ!" He stalked to the creek bank. "What am I supposed to do with *this*?" He shook the sweeper at her.

"Throw it in here! The creek will clean it!" She laughed wildly.

"It's ruined!"

"So? She can *buy* a backup. She can afford a backup for her backup with the money she never pays you. Or, I got it, Alan! Listen. Put the sweeper back in the mud. Maybe it'll grow. Then at least we can have a sweeper garden, since we'll never have vegetables unless I plant them all by myself." Suzanne had stopped laughing, but her voice still hitched, breaking in unexpected places. She discovered that she was shivering. She watched Alan. In the moonlight she could see his face working. Again, he held his mouth open, looking both angry and confused, but not idiotic.

"Dammit!" he roared, sending his voice across Hendricks's field. Then he dropped the sweeper into the creek. Suzanne laughed again. "Here," he said, reaching toward her. "Give me your hand. Let me help get you out of there."

Suzanne let him pull her up on the bank. He kept her hand in his.

"I'd better go and change," she said. "I'm soaked."

"I know. You *are* crazy." He shook his head and smiled. "Come on, Suzanne. Let's go in and take care of those wet clothes."

Together they waded uphill through the damp grass. It sent a thrill up her legs. ■