

Dark Laundry · *John Weser*

MY WIFE'S PATH to our house begins with a wood staircase riddled with fungus. Fine white strands have mapped its surface and infiltrated its interior, breaking down the fibers to a crumbly pulp my knife can easily penetrate.

I pull my knife out and go into the house.

Sheila is in the laundry room. I feel the washing machine shake the house like an earthquake as it goes into its rinse cycle. Sheila startles me when she enters the family room, approaching me from behind.

"Please fix my steps," she says.

"You scared me," I tell her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't intend to. I was thinking of the rotten steps. They're dangerous and I'd like you to fix them."

"OK," I tell her. "I'll put them on the top of my list."

I reach for a pad of paper and make a note to myself. Then I put it where I won't forget it, on the table near the hobbyhorse my mother gave us in the event we someday had a child.

"You're a dear," Sheila tells me, and leaves the room.

The house is still shaking, and I think that there are even more important things to do such as bracing the shear strength of our house to prevent it from vibrating when the washing machine is on. But I do not have the inclination to do the work myself and right now there is little money to hire an outsider to do it. We used to have a handyman, Jeffery, come by every once in a while, but recently I told him we'd have to let him go.

I am getting dressed for work and notice I do not have any underwear.

"Sheila? Did you do the wash this week?"

"Of course," she says. "Why?"

"I don't have any clean underwear."

"Oh," she says. "I did your underwear. I just didn't get a chance to fold things yet. I'll get you a fresh set right now."

When she brings me the clean underwear, I frown.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful," I tell her, "but my new tee-shirt is a tan color. Yesterday it was white."

"It's that new brown shirt of yours," she says. "It must have bled some dye into the wash cycle."

“Is there anything we can do to make it white again?”

“No,” she tells me. “I’m sorry. That stain’s permanent now.”

I am silent and then she says:

“I’m serious about my steps. I catch my heels in those rotten places. I could really hurt myself.”

“I know,” I tell her. “On the weekend. I’ll fix them on Saturday or Sunday, OK?”

“Thanks,” she says.

I survey the work I need to do on the steps. It was I who initially installed them, so that there was a way to step down from street level to an old path through the woods and the garden that led to our front door. We already had one path and both of us used it. But after I completed the second path, Sheila began to use that one and has continued to do so to this day. I had been so anxious to see the steps completed that I failed to construct them properly. Each tread was placed on a wobbly pier stabilized with pebbles. I covered open spaces with redwood boards. The entire structure settled down solid into the forest floor and lasted for a good seven years. Then the piers began to shift and fungus as sudden as fire swept through the treads and stringers creating a hazard.

It is apparent that I need to disassemble the steps and begin again from scratch.

The weekend arrives and I putter around the house.

Finally Sheila says:

“You promised to do the steps.”

“I know,” I tell her. “I’m working up to it.”

“It’s already 11:00 AM,” she says. “The day’s almost over.”

“There’s plenty of time,” I tell her. “Let me finish my coffee.”

Sheila doesn’t say anything. Tears are rolling down her cheeks and her lips are trembling. Then she presses her lips together so hard the skin around them whitens.

“You’re not doing your share,” she says, raising her voice. “I cook the food and do the laundry and hold a job down too. All I’m asking you to do is fix the steps.”

“You’re right,” I tell her. “I’ll do the steps.”

I go upstairs and put on my work clothes. Then I go outside and look at the job. For some time I stare at the steps. The surrounding forest is beautiful. It is rich and thick and I can tell that it is encroaching on the path.

Fallen redwood needles cover almost everything including portions of the steps where moisture has collected. The earth has settled around the stringers and is actually touching the wood. I poke around. Fungus is eating the wood everywhere. I lift one of the treads and it comes up with a sucking noise, soggy and heavy with moisture. A portion of the board crumbles in my hand. It is a miracle that one of Sheila's heels hasn't already punctured a board. Underneath is even more rot. I pull up the second tread and it too comes up easily like some rotten carcass. It smells dank and thickly rich with sweet decay. Rust-colored centipedes scurry over the disturbed soil. Grey sow bugs run out of nooks and crannies. Tendrils of fungus span everything like a web, seemingly the only thing still holding the steps together.

I remove the third tread, the fourth, then the fifth. In each case the tread is terminal. Even the ground is colored white from fungus, and the odors are rich, of humus and things returning to the earth. I know that I should have built these steps of stone, but the labor to do so would have been formidable. No. No, I'll simply rebuild them from wood, mount them securely into the hillside with concrete and finish them with a heavy coat of black creosote.

On the way up my cobblestone path I see the jungle gym that came with our property when we bought it, overgrown with ceanothus and monkey flowers. Those portions of it that show, their galvanized surfaces corroded to rust long ago, are abstracted by branches and shadows some distance back from everything in what was supposed to be a play yard. For years I have planned to dismantle it and take it to the dump. For some reason it is less painful to simply leave it alone.

At the lumber yard, I remember the wood required to cross brace my house. Suppose there is an earthquake. Tremors could weaken joints, shattering windows from the stress of diagonal forces. It seems that the money would be better spent on bracing rather than on a path that is expendable. After all, Sheila can use my path to approach the house.

"I'll take twenty ten-foot lengths of 2 x 6."

"Coming right up," says the clerk. A yardman in a yellow forklift soon arrives with the lumber. He loads it onto my pickup and I drive to the local bar to have a beer.

On the way home the weather closes up and the day darkens. Drizzle falls on my windshield and I turn the wipers on. I am relieved. There is no

way I will work in this rain. It is cold and damp outside. Sheila will just have to understand. I can work better anyway when there is no pressure. I have all of next weekend open. Next weekend sounds just fine for fixing her steps.

The fog has thickened and I routinely feel my way through it as if I am a blind man, guided along this route by a knowledge of its adherence to a familiar topography. Inevitably I am drawn through single lanes where stands of ancient redwood trees have crimped the road. Deftly I maneuver the car, barely missing tufts of protruding bark. I cruise into a thick drift of fog and suddenly emerge in a clearing of glistening asphalt. There, directly before me, huddled it seems, squat down and shivering against the wet black slickness is a white bird, a baby bird, an owl, I think, unblinking as I bear down on it. I have time to put on my brakes but I rarely do for birds. They always know when to take off, sometimes just in time to avoid my windshield. But this whiteness puzzles me. Is it stubborn? Frightened? (I am not slowing down.) Frozen? (I could but I know that at any moment it will lift up off the tarmack, just in the nick of time, just barely, just barely missing . . .) Paralyzed? (I am almost upon it and it is not moving.) And then I am over it, thinking that I can feel the thump of the wheels over its tiny body, past it, enfolded again by the thick cotton fog that bears down on me like a compress. My heart is beating rapidly. When I return to where the baby bird was sitting, it is gone, only a snowfall of downy pink feathers floating still, blending with the hushed white drifts that hide the forest.

"You've been drinking," Sheila says when I come in.

"I bought the wood for the steps," I tell her. "If you don't believe me, come out to the truck and look."

"You wasted time drinking somewhere," she says.

I want to leave the room. The air is too warm in here. It is stuffy and hot and for some time both of us are silent.

"Surely this must be getting to you by now," she says. "How can you stand me nagging you all the time? Doesn't it make you furious?"

"No. Not that I know of," I tell her. "You have a right to have your steps fixed. If I had built them right in the first place, there wouldn't be a problem now."

"You didn't build them right?"

"Well, I thought at the time that I built them OK. Now I know differ-

ent. Anyway, wood breaks down sooner or later. The fungus just finally got to the wood.”

“You’ll treat the wood this time, won’t you?” she asks me.

“Sure I’ll treat it,” I tell her. “I’ll make it so no fungus will ever grow there. I’m going to creosote the hell out of it.”

Sheila is silent for a moment and then she says:

“It’s OK if you want to have a beer with your friends. Just don’t do it on my time, OK?”

“OK,” I tell her.

Another week goes by. Some of the time I feel feverish. At other times I am excited about the prospect of rebuilding the steps. On Saturday I dress in my work clothes and go outside to tackle the job. I make forms to support the new steps and over the rest of the afternoon, I mix up the concrete and pour it into these forms. The day clouds over, but this time I continue to work, covering the filled forms with plastic sheeting. The rain is icy and penetrates my clothing quickly. I speed up my pace until I have filled all the forms and covered them with plastic. I am so cold I am shivering. Inside the house, I take off my work clothes. My pants are saturated with cement and mud and rust from some of the tools. I place them in the laundry basket, then take a long hot bath in the upstairs bathroom.

“Do you have my underwear in the laundry room again?” I ask Sheila. “There doesn’t seem to be any in my drawer.”

“Isn’t that careless of me,” Sheila giggles. “Can’t have a man without his underwear.” She stares down at me, sizing me up, grinning with approval. “We need to protect the family jewels, don’t we, sweetie?” and she turns and heads for the stairs.

“You don’t have to fold them,” I shout after her. “I’m going to wear them outside now while I finish your steps.”

But she does not hear me, I think, and continues on her way.

I go into the bathroom again and when I return to the bedroom, the underwear is stacked on top of my chest of drawers. I take a tee-shirt out of the pile. It too is one of my new white tee-shirts, but now it is the color of cement.

“Sheila,” I shout.

She runs up the stairs and enters the bedroom.

“What is it?”

“What’s this with my underwear?” I ask her.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asks.

“Well look at it. It’s all a grey color,” I tell her. “It’s all ruined.”

“It’s not ruined,” she tells me. “It’s just a little off color, is all. You can still wear it.”

“I know I can still wear it. But it’s not the color I bought.”

“Look,” she says. “I don’t know how it happened. I usually have a dark laundry and a light laundry. Light things like your underwear would not go in with dark things that might change their color. I put your underwear in with the light things. So how the hell do I know what happened? Maybe the machine’s rusting inside and some residue is leaking into each wash. I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

This last line of hers makes me back off. Her apology is accepted. It’s as if she has admitted some complicity in ruining my underwear, making it easier for me to forgive her.

“You’re forgiven,” I tell her, kissing her on the forehead.

“I didn’t say I DID it,” she says. “I said MAYBE it was the machine.”

I put the grey underwear on beneath my work clothes. And then I go outside.

Fog drifts up from the coast. It hovers like thickly layered smoke all around our house and penetrates the forest. I walk up Sheila’s path. Since she has not been using it for a while, it is covered with redwood needles. Weeds are growing up between the bricks I laid there some years back. One of these bricks, one that is on the edge of the path, has been dislodged and rests on its side, away from the others. When I get to the steps, I remove the plastic from over the forms. The concrete has begun to cure and is nice and hard. I drill holes with a masonry bit into the concrete, but then run into some barrier that will not allow the bit to run on through. I press down on the electric drill, but the bit will only go so far, no further. Smoke begins to rise from the hole in which the bit spins. If I push too hard the point will dull and the shaft will lose its temper, so I ease up on the pressure and retract the bit from the hole. I blow away the dust and attempt another hole in another place, but the bit is dull by now and will not drill a hole. I have to go to the hardware store, but I know the local hardware does not carry masonry bits. I’ll have to drive into the neighboring city, some hour’s drive away. Two and a half hours in all to make this trip. The fog swirls around me and I am damp and chilled and this entire job seems ridiculous. What does she need a separate path for? I’m the one

who started the whole thing. I built this path and that gives me power over how it is to be used. I can simply shut it down and she can walk on my path.

When I bring up this idea to Sheila, she is furious.

“Your path is made of cobblestones,” she says. “I’d catch my heels in the gaps between those stones. I’d trip for sure. The joints between the bricks on my path are flush and tight. We’ve been through this before. Remember? I told you how to lay the bricks for me years ago so that my heels would not catch.”

“You can wear flats to the car and back,” I tell her. “You can carry your heels.”

“That’s crazy,” she says. “I’m not about to do that. Just fix my path. OK?”

“I have to go into town to buy a masonry bit,” I tell her.

“Masonry bit?” she says. “What do you need a masonry bit for? This isn’t a skyscraper you’re building.”

“It isn’t a skyscraper,” I tell her. “You’re right. But I want the steps to hold together this time. I don’t want to have to do any more work on them for a long, long time.”

“Masonry bits,” she says. “That’s too elaborate, masonry bits. I just want steps. Why can’t you use nails? You have millions of nails in the tool room.”

“Because, I need to fasten the steps to concrete piers,” I tell her. “I need to make it so those steps will last forever.”

“Fine,” she says. “No more excuses. I’m serious. Just do it now.”

I drive to town and purchase the masonry bit. When I get home, the afternoon has darkened and a light rain is falling. I go into the house and initially it seems Sheila is not there. I shout to her several times but I receive no response. I go into the family room, turn on the TV and watch a program. When I feel her hands on my shoulders, I jump.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi,” I say. “Where were you?”

“Doing the laundry,” she tells me.

“You’re doing the laundry?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel the house shaking.”

“The house doesn’t shake every time the washing machine runs.”

“Sure it does,” I tell her.

“No it doesn’t,” she says. “If it’s too full and the load is off center, then the machine vibrates and shakes the house. But that hardly ever happens. I’m very meticulous when I load the washing machine. I balance everything inside all around the rim. I never wash carpets, for example, with a lot of lighter fabrics.”

“I understand,” I tell her. “Still, the house has been shaking an awful lot recently.”

“Whatever,” she says. “I can’t deal with that right now. What about the steps?”

“The steps?”

“The steps. Are you finished with them?”

“It’s raining again, Sheila. I did go to town. I found a masonry bit.”

“Well. Good for you,” she says. “Exactly what is our time frame now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean within what period of time can I expect my steps to be completed?”

“Sheila! I’m working on it, OK? All the concrete work’s been done. I just have to fasten new boards to the piers I poured.”

“You purchased the boards already,” Sheila says. “I found the invoice in your shirt pocket. Why don’t you go outside and finish it up now. Put on your raincoat and do it, please.”

“The wood I purchased is for under the house.”

“Under the house?”

“To brace the house from shaking when the washing machine is running.”

“Brace?”

“To shore it up, you know, in the event there is an earthquake or something.”

“Goddamn it,” Sheila shouts. “Just forget it, OK. Just forget the whole goddamn thing!”

“Sheila . . . ,” but she has left the room, slamming the door behind her. When she does this, the house shakes ever so slightly. It shakes.

I leave work early on Monday to finish the steps. I enter the house, put on my work clothes and walk up her path. I look at the partially completed project and am proud about the solidity of what I have accom-

plished. I'll take the pickup and drive to the lumber yard now to purchase the wood. As I am backing out, another pickup pulls up. A man in a carpenter's outfit gets out and walks over to the gate that is the entryway to Sheila's path. I roll my window down. It is Jeffery, our old handyman.

"Can I help you?" I shout.

"No. I don't think so," Jeffery says. "Your wife called me to do a job for her."

"The steps?"

"Yeh, that's right. The steps," he says.

I want to tell him that it is my job and that I will finish it, but I don't want him to know that I am fighting with Sheila. Jeffery leans aggressively against the redwood fence, his young face serious and unmoving, his right hand laying claim to a post.

"Maybe I can go over a few of the details with you," I say.

"If you'd like. But your wife, Sheila, says that I should go ahead and do what needs to be done."

"Well I agree with that," I say smiling. "You SHOULD do what needs to be done. What exactly is that?"

"A few treads have to be fastened to some concrete piers. Is that how you see it too?"

"That's how I see it," I tell him. "But it seems a waste, doesn't it? We already have one path. Two of them are just too much time and money to maintain."

"I only have one path to my house," Jeffery offers.

"There. You see," I say. "Listen. Let's take a look at this job. I know you'd like the money. Maybe there's another way we can approach this thing."

"Fine by me," Jeffery says.

We are standing at the site, staring at the concrete piers.

"Whoever poured these did it wrong," says Jeffery.

"How so?" I say.

"Well, they failed to put wood blocks into the piers so you could attach the steps to the concrete. Here it looks like you need to fasten the board directly to the concrete with expansion bolts. I don't have a masonry bit, do you?"

"No," I lie to him. "I don't have one."

"Well then, there's not much I can do here this evening."

“Maybe we don’t really need this path,” I tell him.

“You could cover it up,” Jeffery suggests.

“We could do that,” I tell him.

“Wouldn’t take much,” he says.

“Well, you’d need to take up the bricks.”

“Sure. There’s the bricks.”

“And covering up these piers.”

“Yeh. There’s a good bit of work here all in all.”

“Enough to make it worth your while staying?”

“More’n enough I’d say.”

“Well then, do whatever’s necessary. But don’t let me hear another thing about it. That path’s meant too much to me over all these years. I’ll be sorry to see it go.”

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

It is after dark when Sheila arrives home. She uses my path just as she has been doing all along while I have been making repairs. She has little to say. Neither of us mentions Jeffery.

On Tuesday afternoon, I come home early again. As I drive down our street I see something near the median strip. I pull the car over and get out. The object on the road is a white sock, a small white sock, the sock of a child. It is a soft cotton sock and it is very white except for the three tiny pink rings decoratively woven just above the ankle. How the sock got here is a mystery. Why would anyone leave a child’s sock in the middle of the road? But then I remember. It is really a very common occurrence. I have seen single socks on roads before, single boots and lone shoes too. Once I even found the sleeve of a shirt. I carry the sock to the side of the road and lay it gently among some scotch broom and California lupine blossoming there. And then I go to inspect Jeffery’s work.

There is no path. A light coating of redwood needles and forest debris covers the place where once there was a path. I scrape at the covering. It looks like it has been there for some time.

Jeffery has been thorough. There is only a mound of earth where the steps used to be. It is gently sloped, naturally, toward the garden, camouflaged with forest mulch. And the gate? The gate is gone and in its place the fence has been continued on through, using weather-worn redwood boards. I walk around to the other side of the fence, and this side too is weather-worn gray and looks like it has been there for years. It blends in

perfectly with the other fence boards and is fastened securely to the stringers.

I go into the family room and wait for Sheila. I have this crazy premonition that I will find all of my white laundry turned black, that all of my light colored clothes will have become black. I'll go upstairs for a clean this or a clean that, and there they'll be, spread out on the bedspread, not folded, open, exposed, black. And I'll hold them. I'll hold them and know that whether I like it or not, from that moment forward, I'll have to wear those clothes, I'll have to wear those black clothes for the rest of my life.

I go out onto the front porch. And there is Sheila, walking down the place where her path used to be. She is wearing her heels and is walking as if the earth is very solid beneath her. If I did not know better I would say that she is walking on her path.

She walks past me and goes into the house. She does not say anything. I can hear water running as she washes up. Then she comes back downstairs again. She goes into the laundry room. I hear the machinery gear up. Some time passes. I feel the house as the washing machine goes into its rinse cycle. Then she comes out. She begins to make supper. I am not hungry and I go to bed early.

When I get up, I go to my drawer to get fresh underwear. But the drawer is empty. I open a second drawer and it too is empty. I open up the remaining drawers, the ones that contain the rest of my underwear and some of my white shirts. But all of the drawers are empty.

"She's done it again." I think. "She's left my things in the laundry room again."

It is still dark outside. I want to wake her up, to ruin her sleep and ask her where my clothes are. But at the same time I don't really want to know. I don't want to go downstairs, like a child might on a Christmas morning and find instead of presents all of his clothes turned black. But I need fresh underwear.

It is cold in the house. There is a chill in the air and I can feel it all over my skin. I walk toward the laundry room. But before I get there I spot the clothes. They are on the bed in the guest room I pass each day, the room we both had planned to be a nursery once, something which never materialized.

All of my underwear, turned inside out, is scattered on the bed. And, of course, each piece is off color, each of them the color of the concrete I have

been using to fill my forms. That's OK. That's better than what I was expecting. In fact it's a relief, a relief that everything isn't all laid out on the guest bed colored black. I sift through the scattered laundry searching for matched tops and bottoms. And then I stop because I see it. I lift it up and hold it towards the light. It is a sock. It is a soft cotton sock, a child's sock like the one I had put among the flowers alongside the road. I look at it for a while, feeling the gooseflesh all over my back and thighs, all over my upper arms and calves. It is a small white cotton sock with three tiny pink rings just above the ankle.

I hear someone at the doorway.

It is Sheila and she is crying. She is standing there in her nightie. She is standing there holding a second sock, a small cotton child's sock in her right hand.

It is the sock that matches mine.