

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Robert Joe Stout
The Movers

JASON AWAKENED JEANINE AS GENTLY AS HE COULD, his hand on her shoulder as he repeated her name and told her, "Jeanine, Jeanine, the furniture's here."

She turned away groaning and shook her head. "What—what time is it?"

"Just past nine-thirty."

She grunted an acknowledgment and massaged her forehead, then turned to squint at him. "Do we have to?"

"The movers say they had problems coming over the summit. A multi-car accident closed I-80. And they had a delay leaving Springfield. They're running over a day late."

"It's Sunday."

"I don't think that matters to them."

"It does to me," she grumbled, pulling the sheet up to her chin. For a few moments, her eyes closed, she lay breathing deeply as Jason watched, an awkward uncertainty intruding on his usual poised demeanor.

"They're backing the van up over the curb to get as close to the front door as possible," he told her, trying to keep his voice firm.

"All right, I'll get up," she flung the sheet aside and swung off the bed.

He hesitated, watching her stretch her tall, strong athlete's body, then went to check on the movers. They had the ramp down and were sliding crates onto the tiny Spanish-style porch.

"This is going to be a bitch," the shorter of the two grumbled. He was an older man, probably close to sixty, with grizzled five o'clock shadow and rimless glasses. "This the only door?"

"There's one in back."

Jason led him along the narrow driveway that separated his and Jeanine's house from the ivy-draped fence of the house next door.

"A bitch," the mover repeated, squinting at the four steep steps and the two concrete planters that obstructed crossing the patio. "We'll have to go in the front."

As Jason followed him around the corner of the house he heard Jeanine's husky, "No, no, the highboy first! Be careful!"

She was standing just inside the porch, her hands on her hips, staring down at the older mover's assistant, a man half his age, dark complexioned, with deep-set brooding eyes. His lips parted, momentarily showing glisteningly white teeth, then he shrugged and flicked his fingers towards the inside of the van.

"That, you mean?"

"Yes, that!"

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"C'mon, Josh," the older mover plucked the younger man's shirtsleeve and hopped into the van with surprising agility. The assistant scowled over his shoulder at Jeanine, then hoisted himself up beside his workmate. Aware that the two men were speaking to each other but unable to hear what they were saying Jason climbed the steps to the porch and put his arm around Jeanine.

"Sixty-four isn't that old. She was just learning what it was to be happy. After years of a miserable marri-...no!" She pushed past Jason to shout at the movers. "Not there. Can't you..?"

"Where? Up the stairs?"

Jason detected mockery in the older mover's voice as he tilted his head towards the narrow staircase with its high wooden banister and tight, right-angle turn at the landing.

"It won't fit, honey. It will have to stay down here."

Despairingly she glanced around the little livingroom, already overcrowded with sofa, chairs, end tables, TV and knickknacks. "We'll have to put..." Her voice trailed off and again Jason placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I can make room for it in my office..."

"It's not office furniture!"

"I know," he tried to placate, "but there's no way we can get it upstairs to the bedrooms. There's no room in your studio. It's too valuable to put in the garage. They still have to bring in the buffet, the big cabinet, the oak table. I can move my office to the guest bedroom upstairs."

"No!"

"Honey, listen. We can convert my office into a, a parlor, an old-fashioned parlor..."

"It would be a mortuary! I want her! I don't a Goddamned parlor!"

"I know, I understand." He disconnected the TV and pulled it and the small console away from the wall to make room for the highboy.

"Jason, it looks shitty there."

"For now it's okay," he cautioned, out of the corner of his eyes catching the younger mover's smirk at Jeanine's use of language. "We can put it somewhere else later."

She continued to complain as Jason wedged an armchair through the narrow archway that separated the livingroom from the hallway and carried it into his office. Years before, when the house had been built, the office had been a diningroom with windows overlooking a small side garden. He placed the chair in front of the wide bookcase he'd filled with computer and finance manuals, investment reports and hardback travel guides and hurried back to the livingroom to intercept any further confrontations between Jeanine and the movers.

He was too late.

"You can't bring that in now! It's too big! Stop!"

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The movers didn't stop. They shoved the monstrous glass-fronted oak China cabinet onto the porch and, ignoring Jeanine, pushed it towards the door. "Fuck," the older one cursed, "we'll have to put it on its side to get it through."

"Take it back!" Jeanine squealed.

"To Illinois?"

"No! To the truck! Take it back—"

"Sir, tell your wife to get out of our way,"

"Jeni—"

"No! Jason! We can't just cram it into..!" As she whirled around to face Jason he caught her in his arms. Despite her anger she was crying and he felt tears splatter against his face.

"Honey, listen," he tried to force his voice to be authoritative as well as calm, "The couple who bought your mother's house needed to move in right away. It would cost us a fortune to store the furniture in Springfield and sooner or later we'd have to move it anyway. For a little while we can put up with the inconven—"

"Watch out! Wait..!" she wrenched herself out of his grasp. The movers had turned the China cabinet on its side and re-strapped it on the dolly. The older of the two grimaced and glared towards Jeanine as the younger guided in towards the front door.

"Be careful! The step..!" Jeanine lunged forward, intending to help but her slippered foot caught on the corner of one of the crates. She flung both hands out to try to catch herself but struck the dollied China cabinet with such force it pinned Josh against the doorway. He screamed in pain as the older mover yanked the dolly backwards. Jason grabbed the cabinet and tried to pull it and the dolly upright as Josh sagged onto the porch, cursing.

"Shit!" the older mover shouted as the cabinet slipped out of Jason's grasp and crashed against the doorway, barely missing pinning Josh again.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Jeanine whimpered as she hurried up behind Jason. "Is he..? Is he, I mean..?"

"I think his hand's broken," the older mover grumbled. "I got to get him to Emergency." He grimaced as he peered at the half-unloaded truck.

"You can take my car," Jason offered.

The older mover nodded and knelt to take a closer look at his workmate's hand.

"It hurts! It fucking hurts!"

As Jason stepped closer he felt Jeanine's fingers clench his shoulder. He half-turned to put his arm around her waist, stepping aside as the older mover told his workmate, "Come on, I'm taking you to Emergency."

"I—I, if you want, I can drive him..?" Jeanine offered timidly.

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"Bitch!"

Jeanine stiffened. "I, I didn't --"

"Fucking bitch!" Josh's lips formed a tight hard line over glistening teeth. The older mover lifted one gloved hand as if to signal *It's okay, don't make a scene* but Josh, pushing himself erect with his good hand, snarled, "Why the fuck did you have to mess with us? Look what you fucking did! My hand, it hurts, goddammit! I can't use it! How am I going to work? Who the fuck's going to pay for it?"

"I—I really didn't mean..." She twisted out of Jason's hold and, though trembling, confronted Josh. "I told you not to—"

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck yourself!" Jeanine cut him off. Tears splattered her wide, high cheek-boned face. "You didn't listen! Nobody listens! My dad didn't listen! All he did was bitch! You come in here, you don't give a damn about her things!" She stumbled backwards, catching herself against the China cabinet still tilted on its dolly. "Well I don't care either! I'll pay your hospital bill, I don't care!" Swiping at her face she whirled away from the three of them and, cursing, "Dammit! Dammit! Why did she have to die?" she hesitated, then spun and kicked the cabinet as hard as she could. The glass front shattered and she whirled back towards them, "There! It's ruined, too! Just like everything else!"

Again swiping her face and straightening her broad shoulders she glared at Jason.

"And I don't want any damned old-fashioned parlor!"