The Sweeping Up The Heart

Marian Junker*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1971 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The Sweeping Up The Heart

Marian Junker

Abstract

It is very early in the morning. The stars have gone down, and the sun has not yet risen. New snow has fallen during the night, but it has stopped now, and it is bitter cold...
The
Sweeping
Up The
Heart

by Marian Junker

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth—

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.
—Emily Dickinson

It is very early in the morning. The stars have gone down, and the sun has not yet risen. New snow has fallen during the night, but it has stopped now, and it is bitter cold.

[17]
In the upstairs sitting room several men are talking to the woman. Their sentences begin strongly and with purpose, but their voices dwindle away before the purpose becomes clear. They end each attempt by touching the woman on the shoulder or by taking her hand.

The room is very small. It holds a couch and a wing chair. On an old cherry table that has been in the family forever is a burner, a copper tea kettle, a teapot painted with pink roses, two matching cups, a tall green cannister of Imperial Gunpowder Tea, a strainer, and two teaspoons.

The men shift awkwardly in the small space to make room for Dr. Morrisey. He turns from the couch and says, "Tell me in your own words just what happened."

She looks at the men with a puzzled, waiting expression. She begins to speak slowly, with a peculiar concentration. "He came home late. He was tired. He said he thought he was getting the flu—"

"Does she need to sign something now?"

"Let's go downstairs."

Dr. Morrisey takes her arm and together they move into the hall. At the door of the children’s room she pauses and looks in. The room is empty. Bed clothes still hold the shape of small warm bodies, and pajama tops and bottoms trail across the floor to closets and dressers.

They continue on down the stairs. Here they are met by the wives of the men, who talk to their husbands with their eyes.

In the hall Martha is getting the children into their coats. "Jimmy, where are your shoes? I'll look in your room again." As she starts for the stairs she notices the woman. "I hate to bother you now, but we can’t find his shoes any place."

"Look in his boots. He can’t pull his boots off, so he just leaves his shoes in them. We go through this every morning. I hope they aren’t wet."

The children are bundled up and herded through the door. Jimmy’s voice carries high and excited in the cold air. "Look, the ambulance is right up to the steps—"
Martha interrupts and promises hot chocolate and cinnamon rolls when they get to her house.

The door closes and everyone begins to talk at once. They talk to each other and to the woman. They say, “I’m so sorry. Such a shock. It’s hard to believe.”

One of the men from upstairs comes hurriedly down and says, “Get her out of here. They are going to bring him down.”

They rush into the kitchen and begin to make coffee. They start the eight-cup coffee maker, and then after a conference get the thirty-two cup pot out of the pantry. The woman sits quietly at the breakfast table, and turns the bowl of fruit around and around.

The sun comes up, and makes prisms on the new snow. Children go past the window laughing and shouting, on their way to school. Upstairs the women are busy. They are making beds, and putting clothes away.

In the dining room they have put away the easel that stood in the corner, and the paint box. The table is completely cleared of the cribbage board, library books, and other items the family kept handy. The geraniums, in full bloom in the deep bay of the window, have been watered.

They are just finishing the living room. The record player has been closed, and the records stacked where they belonged. Magazines have been lined up in order on the coffee table, and the cup rings have been polished away. Even the pillows on the davenport march in single file across the cushions instead of being pushed down in a corner to support an arm or a rib. Bright balls of yarn have been tucked into the wicker basket and the lid clamped down.

Not a room in the house has escaped their touch. Everything is clean, and shining, and bare.

In the kitchen, Kay turns from the telephone. “Well, I got a hold of her brothers, and his sister, but they can’t possibly get here till this afternoon. The roads are terrible. Where did she go?”

“We thought she should put on a dress. It seemed more suitable than slacks. Then she had to decide which suit, and
tie, and things."

"Dear God, I forgot all about that."

The back door bell rings, and Kay answers it. "Hello, Joe. Can I help you?"

"No, I got to see her. They didn't even have a plot picked out. Awful the way people let these important details slip by. I looked at my book before I come over here, and I decided the best place was up here on the knoll." He unrolls the map he carries, and points to the carefully marked plots, but Kay is not watching. "We just closed that old road that used to run through here, and made new plots out of it. Real nice place, too, good drainage. It won't be far from the rest of the family either. See, right here." He walks over to Kay and shows her exactly the plot he has decided on. "Hope she decides right away, because with the weather and all, I want to get the men started. Too bad we don't do like they do in Minnesota. Up there they put 'em in cold storage till spring. Then the ground ain't so hard. The weather forecast says more snow on the way too."

"She's in the living room, Joe. Why don't you just come with me and get this over with."

She sits in the rocker that has been her grandmother's. She has turned it, facing the window that looks out on the little garden. Tulips, lilies of the valley, and violets followed by day lilies, and marigolds, and finally mums in bronze and gold grew in the garden. Now, snow covers the tangled growth of summer, and lies deeply purple under the blue spruce, and along the bridal wreath. In the center of the garden is a bird feeder.

She watches the birds crowd around the feeder. They are busy pecking, and listening, and darting away only to return. A blue jay engages in a brief skirmish that drives the others away. He parades in solitary splendor up and down. He leaves in a blur of blue. The other birds return, regroup, and peck and listen as before.

People come in and hold her hand and say, "I came as soon as I heard. He was so young." Then they go into another part of the house to drink coffee and have a cookie.
Evening comes early. The heavy clouds in the west roll up and blot out the sun. Snow is beginning to fall.

In the kitchen the women count pies, and cakes, and jellos. They check lists and make more coffee.

"Wish her brothers would get here."

"Here they are now. Just pulling in the drive."

The women hold open the door, and the brothers come in with a push of cold air.

"Let me take your coat. We thought you'd never get here. I bet the roads are slick."

"They are. We drove on ice most of the way. Where is she?"

"In the living room."

"And the children, where are they?"

"They went over to Martha's first thing. So much to do, you know. We got everything—"

"How is she?"

"She's just fine. I don't know how she does it. She has been so calm all day. She's so brave."

The women begin to bustle around the kitchen. They pour coffee for the brothers, and make sandwiches. They are busy putting things away, and sweeping up the floor.

Poem

by Michael Firth

Science Special, 5

Small buds drip green dew
That soft winds lay down;
Rain touches gently the earth
And I see spring.