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Interior Design

MARY MARSH

SARA AND DAVID'S LIVING ROOM NEEDED PAINTING, but you paint one room, and then the rest of the apartment looks not quite up to it, so you decide it's time to paint another, and so on, until floors are being scraped, furniture reupholstered. It's as if a bomb has fallen and so you move to a hotel until everything is put back together again.

Actually it was Sara who moved to the hotel. David took the opportunity to mince down to Florida to visit his mother, eager to add to his list of grievances about her. Sara felt relief when he left. She had her own list of complaints. One being his refusal to let her take the TV dinners he favored out of their plastic containers and permitting her to serve them to him on one of her pretty china plates. But how intriguing these quirks had been, everything about him blessed with mystery and discovery. Even the withdrawn silences lasting sometimes for days added to the fascination. She had thought him a modern Heathcliff.

How difficult he was to circulate with. There was her closest friends' garden wedding when he wandered off behind the shrubberies, appearing an hour later to find her in a panic as to his whereabouts, with his only excuse being "But I don't know any of these people." To appease him they had left before the reception "because of David's sensitive stomach," Sara had apologized later.

What do you see in him? Sara's friends were too supportive to voice this, but she knew what they must be thinking. If only they could know how knockout fantastic he became when the sun went down and as lovers they met in the secret dark. A frog prince? Yes — why not? And that made up for everything. Almost.

It had taken time to adjust to his inability to sleep through the night in their bed. No chance of reaching and finding a warm foot in the night or waking at dawn in each other's arms. "Never been able to fall asleep with anyone next to me," his very words. And that was that. Then the random sloppiness of clothes in piles on the floor for the housekeeper to forage through, sort out, launder and put back on shelves in the closet Sara had organized to hold his things. As for her

things, they irritated him, and, one by one over the months, they had been stored in boxes and put away.

With David out of sight, both adrift temporarily, Sara — ensconced in the anonymity of a hotel, alone through the white nights — became obsessed with the redecorating. Dare she risk some changes in David's home office? The Black Hole with its morass of papers, books, mail inundating his desk, his iMac in an avalanche of debris. Tabloid pictures of those unfortunate Collier brothers buried in the aftermath of a tornado of the mess they had created around themselves kept intruding into the beauty she was planning. Unobservant, David might not even notice if the murky cement gray walls of his home office were whisked over with a light wash of soothing cafe au lait. Then on to tidy the room, just a smidge, clear his mind, steer him toward connecting more efficiently with the network of enterprises with which he occupied himself, horsing around behind the closed door. Sara seesawed unnecessarily about the advisability of this, finally deciding to "leave it where Jesus flings it" as her grandmother would say.

The decision to leave it where it had already been flung freed her to concentrate on the task at hand. By day she made the contractor's life a living hell supervising the work in progress. Color changes to reevaluate, changes about crucial details such as which doorknobs, light switches and so on. By night she lay in the dark of the hotel energized, minutely going over each room, arranging and rearranging the furniture, recovering upholstery, taking remembered treasures out of the stored boxes and placing them on the polished gleam of surfaces. The pictures in silver frames, the basket of golden fish, the burl collection of apples and pears lined with silver tea paper, her grandmother's dressing table set of pink enamel brush, comb, the powder boxes finding pride of place in the new life. No more David eating TV dinners out of plastic dishes — not in that dining room. But what about nightly forays back and forth to the kitchen for junk food? The Hostess Twinkies, the M&Ms, the Fritos? The discards of half-eaten candy bars, awaiting every morning when she went to make coffee? Sara doubted David would give those up. Back and forth, forth and back, the sound of him going down the hall night after night after they made love, stoned from the pot he enjoyed before lovemaking, falling into a snoring sleep, waking suddenly, staggering past her bedroom door on down the hall into the kitchen. She brooded as to why he required pot when they made love and she didn't? But this too slipped by, fading until now, when images kept coming back like short clips on a movie screen.

The day arrived when David called and Sara could no longer put off telling him the painters were out, furniture back several weeks ago in fact.

Sara was waiting in the hall when the key turned in the lock and there he was. He looked different, was it the hat? Some sort of local souvenir cap he'd picked up in the airport in Orlando? Without saying anything, he walked past her on down the hall to the door of his office. Finding it exactly as he had left it, he walked around, taking in each room with its creamy calm beauty, everything in order, everything in place, with Sara following behind silently screaming — Don't you know decorating is autobiography and you just won't *do*.

But instead when he turned toward her, she smiled and said, "Welcome home."

A month later David moved out and in time she met someone at a dinner party who suited her, and soon after he moved in. With great dispatch the Black Hole was transformed by her new lover into a den straight out of a Sculley & Sculley mail order catalogue; not a trace of David remained.

But you know how it is once you start missing someone you haven't seen in a long time. Sara started wondering what David was up to and tried to reach him, but found he had moved without a forwarding address. Passing through the hall of her apartment, she paused as she passed the reflection of the girl in the oval mirror. Who could it be? — so goes magic.