

MAKING THE BED

I am kneeling on the oak floor, hammering pine. My twin sons' twin beds have been delivered to the house by a humming man with braces. The beds are in many pieces. My wife and daughter and I must piece the beds together tonight, so that the boys, already poured into their pajamas, can hit their respective sacks.

My sons are nearly three years old and the time has come for Big Boy Beds. The Boys are poking each other with screwdrivers, losing the dowels for the beds, tearing the plastic covers off the mattresses, etc. My daughter, six years old, capable with tools and proud of it, is cheerfully screwing the wrong screw in the wrong hole in the wrong plank; but she does so with such diligence, with such concentrated chewing of tongue and cold-eyed appraisal of screw-depth in screw-hole, with such thoughtful arrangement of large muscles upon small tool, such large joy in small task, that for once I hold my own tongue, and do not scold, or correct, or instruct, or lecture, or seek to edit her activities, but lean back on my haunches and watch.

My wife, a subtle woman, also watches in silence.

My daughter, absorbed, doesn't notice us watching.

She pauses in her labors, considers the tool in hand, lays it down, chooses another, sets to work.

I stare at her face. She's lean and long now, her baby fat long gone, her face brown from the summer.

It's been a tough summer – she's been rebellious, angry, quick to tattoo her brothers with her fists and feet, quick to bark and snap at her mother, to snarl at her father. Perhaps she is nervous about looming kindergarten; but perhaps too she is twisting the wrong way, growing not toward light but toward darkness. I worry about this daily. The rituals of her early years have slipped away, but nothing yet has replaced them; sometimes we read together sweetly and she folds into me like a new rib but mostly now we don't, and often now we are sharp with each other, our voices have cutting edges, doors slam. Often I sit on the edge of the jail chair and try to explain my reasoning and she turns away, she says *I don't care*, she says *I hate you*, she says *are you finished yet?*

And often I sit there when she has stomped off and think *what have I done wrong?*

I think maybe people of grace and courage and honesty are made like Big Boy Beds – piece by piece, slowly, with a lot of kneeling. I think maybe parents, despite appearances, haven't the slightest idea how to bring up their children, but simply keep at it with as much kindness as they can summon to the work. I think maybe we are making our childrens' beds all day long, year after year, until suddenly the child in the bed is a woman kneeling on another floor in another city making a bed for her child, and even then you don't stop making her bed, but lend a hand with the new bed too. So there is no end to the making of beds, including your own.

My daughter finishes her work and smiles broadly. We smile broadly. The boys, smiling broadly, hit each other with hammers. Some minutes later, in my appointed paternal editing rounds, I come upon the wrong screw in the wrong hole, but for once I do not seek to correct a flaw, because it seems to me now that it is actually the right screw in the right hole, and we all build the rest of the bed, and although in the weeks to come my sons will continue to sleep curled on the floor as they always have, that particular bed seems like a wonderfully well-made bed to me.

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Brian Doyle, Editor

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