

first appeared in Weber Studies 17:3 (Spring 2000), pages 97-100

Nestled in Chaos

by Judy Fort Brenneman

The baby I've volunteered to care for today is nestled deep under one white blanket and one sea green blanket, lips pursed slightly open, eyes shuttered behind pale lids, secure and safe and I find myself wishing that I could curl up under a blanket and sleep too, not worry about the stacks of old bills and records staggered out across the basement floor waiting to be filed, not fret about the tax bill that will be due soon or the invoice payment that's already due, or the stack of correspondence that is waiting, has been waiting for months and months, or about the fabric that's cut out and waiting to be sewn into colorful outfits that won't fit until I lose the weight I gained this summer, so even though I need the clothes, I don't want to sew these. But I can't cut out more fabric for my larger size until I get the desk cleared off, which means doing the correspondence and the filing so I can move my desk, which is really a dining room table, into the middle of the floor and expand it to full size so I can cover it with the cardboard cutting board and then the lengths of fabric and pattern pieces, and besides that, I've made it a rule to never start a new sewing project until I've finished the old one, so I really need to do some serious dieting and exercise so I lose the weight, but my right foot has developed an ache. I rested it almost completely for a month, like the doctor on call said and then I remembered to make a follow-up appointment with my regular doctor because it still hurts during hiking and karate. I've been substituting bike riding for hiking, but when I ride my bike my feet and sometimes part of my thighs fall asleep, though maybe that wouldn't happen so much if I lost weight.

The earliest they could schedule my follow-up appointment was four weeks from Wednesday, and I've gained and lost the same three-and-a-half pounds every two days since I called. So maybe I'll lose the weight after seeing my doctor and then I can finish the sewing projects and the correspondence and the filing, but somewhere in there, I've got to get Kyle's stuff ready for school and print out copies of stories to submit and of course track the stuff I'm doing for half a dozen volunteer projects, but before I do that, I need to read the pile of magazines next to my desk, and talk to the finance person and then start writing my new business plan. But before that, I have to learn more about the topic and about industry standards and guidelines, which means interviews and library work, which is fine because I have a stack of overdue books to return. I've kept them this long because I've been trying to get to them, but they're on the shelf next to four mystery novels I had to read because I went to the southside bookstore to meet the authors. So I read the mysteries instead of the library books, which are on coyotes and on animal courting and mating behavior, things I'm researching for two other stories, and I don't want to make two trips across town, so I need to finish reading these books before I go to the library to do the research. Plus it really doesn't make sense to go unless I can spend at least a couple of hours there, which means waiting until I've got Kyle settled into his fall schedule, especially if I can set up tutoring that goes for maybe three hours in a row at

least once a week, and I meant to tell the school that's what I wanted but the request form is in the correspondence pile on my desk, which I haven't gotten to.

Maybe if I got a really big box I could dump the filing and the correspondence and the fabric and the school forms and the library books and maybe even the extra weight into it. I could tape up the box and put it in the storage shed, and not even look at the box, let alone the contents. I could sit in my basement office and look around at everything neat and clean and so uncluttered that I would know I was all done. I would know I had done a good job because everything was so open that not even the spiders would stick webs to windows or sills, even the dust in the corners would be put away, the bookshelves might be empty or at least all the books would be read and remembered and organized alphabetically by author within each category and there would only be one row of books on each shelf, and all the spines would be vertical and one inch back from the edges of the dusted shelves, and there would only be books on the shelves, not papers and boxes and back issues of random magazines and stuff long past identifying.

All the papers that are already filed would fit neatly in their folders and the file cabinet drawers would close with quiet clicks, keeping safe green hanging files with neatly typed labels.

The phone would have only one line.

The furnace room would have a door, not a painted piece of paneling that leans against the gap between wall studs. There would be no tissues, used or otherwise, piled up in the corner because I wouldn't need any and Kyle would place his neatly someplace else.

The computer would hum quietly in the center of the desk, keyboard free of dust and fingerprints, desktop smooth and inviting. Weekly backup disks would be organized along a small shelf on the wall and the printer would always have the right kind of paper in it.

The carpet would be freshly cleaned and always vacuumed. Quiet music would drift from hidden speakers.

Everything would be where it is supposed to be and I could relax, and I could begin, and once I began, I would stay caught up, it would stay clean, everything would be organized and orderly this time.

The baby nuzzles deeper into his blankets. I move two of the stacks out of the way, piling them criss-cross on top of the correspondence pile, and open a fresh notebook. Its pages are an uncluttered island, a safe place secure in the center of stacks that blanket the desk.

My pen nestles close to the white surface, and I begin.