

The Wife

A sheet of sweat erupted on her forehead as she gripped the edge of the counter for balance. It crept towards her neck and spread to her face. She was cutting onions, just a few for the chili that she would be freezing when the heat started prickling the skin of her chest. She edged her way to the freezer, swinging open the door to be doused in chilly air. She pushed her head farther in, taking deep breaths, and as her eyes opened she saw the gallon bucket of vanilla ice cream pushed against one side, alone amidst the sea of Tupperware containers stocked with tuna casseroles and goulashes and vegetable soups and chicken enchiladas and meatloaves and lasagnas and maidrite meats and cherry cobblers and peach cobblers and double fudge pecan brownies and cheesecakes and pumpkin pies and instructions on the lids and ready to go in the microwave. As her skin cooled she peered at the ice cream bucket, carefully gauging its remaining contents. Bill hadn't faltered a night in his consumption of two scoops in the white rimmed blue bowl with the chip on the side, three if there was chocolate syrup. Two more nights and the ice cream would be gone. She quickly slammed the door shut and returned to her onions. Shopping. She needed to go shopping.

Not until she got into the parking lot of the supermarket did she realize she'd left the chili fixings out on the counter. *This just must have been one of those mood swings the doctor was talking about*, she thought as she pushed a cart with a wobbly wheel down the aisle. *What was it I was going to get? Oh, that's right, care packages for the kids, midterms are coming up.* Soon her cart was piled high with chips and crackers and Easy Cheese, chicken noodle soup and diet Tab for Sara, bean and bacon and RC for Jon, microwave popcorn, and pudding packs. She'd better get some Hershey's to help that ice cream go down a little easier; a little faster. *What was it Bill needed on Saturday? The game, the game, the guys from the office are coming over.* Brats and sauerkraut, nachos and salsa, salted peanuts

and Pabst Blue Ribbon Lite. On her way to the in-store pharmacy to pick up Bill's hemorrhoid prescription the hazy glow of blue from an aisle of shelves upon shelves of boxes and packages caught her eye, stopping her and her squeaky wheeled cart. The blue reminded her of all the blue sleepers and little shirts and blankets and bibs she'd bought for Jon when she'd found out she was having a boy. She eyed the plethora of heavies and lights and mediums and plastics and cottons and wings and thins and tampons and pads, remembering that the last time she hadn't had to buy these was when she had been pregnant with Sara. With a sigh she moved on, making a note to herself as she went to renew Bill's subscription to *Reader's Digest*.

Her next stop was the post office, two books of stamps and a box of envelopes and some stationery to fill up the envelopes as well as her afternoon. "Hello, how are classes? How are grades? Are you eating well? Are you sleeping well? When are you coming home for a visit? Do you need any cash? Why haven't you called, collect is okay...". Letter after letter, until the envelopes and the stationery and the stamps and the ink in her pen were gone. Carefully addressed and stamped and filed in the box in the drawer in the desk in the den, each with their own little post-it note with the date to be mailed and the date of its arrival so they could be sent at proper intervals.

As she was shutting the desk drawer with satisfied fatigue, she spied the Britannica set she had bought when the kids were in high school from the salesman who'd come to the door with a swagger and a deal for \$599.95. She picked up the "M" volume and turned to the entry for "menopause" which came somewhere before "menstruation" and read about breast tissue atrophy and vaginal dryness and headaches and memory loss and depression and mood swings and crying spells and irritability and night sweats and hot flashes and sleeplessness and hair loss and feeling unwanted. She turned to the "A" volume and looked up arteries and looked at the drawing with hands splayed and feet spread apart and thought about that drawing never having bled and saw that the arteries in the forearm were called radial and ulnar, just like the bones and then she

closed the book and went to the kitchen to finish the green salad and to prepare the pork chops that were lying in the pan, as cold and lifeless and bloodless as she felt, she poked at the flesh-it felt firm, yet yielded under the pressure of her finger.

While the pork chops were broiling for Bill's supper, she went to her closet and pulled out her nice suit, not having been worn since Sara's graduation, and hung it in the shower and ran hot water to steam out the wrinkles and hung it back in the closet away from Bill's suits so as not to wrinkle again and waited for Bill to come home and watched him eat his dinner and watched him watch his TV and watched for him to want his ice cream and Hershey's chocolate during the ten o'clock news. And while she was watching him, she picked up the phone and called the kids one at a time.

She sat stiff and straight on a chair in the dining room, keeping an eye on Bill and his nod for ice cream, methodically wrapping and unwrapping the phone cord around her wrist as she listened to the kids, Sara needed concert tickets ordered and Jon needed his scholarship application filled out and both needed money and although they didn't really need her, only the things she did and they didn't remember a time when they did, she assured them that she wanted to take care of everything, as she had always done and the care package and letters were on their way and they said fine, that they had to go, and she said *I love you and have fun and be careful*. With the good-bye's, a tingle crawled over the bridge of her nose and tears swarmed in her eyes. She tilted her head back, blinking in rapid succession to avoid the overflow and made it to the bathroom before she bothered Bill in his easy chair. When she reached into the cabinet, to get a washcloth to wet and put over her eyes, she saw the blue box, like the ones at the store, half-empty, gathering dust for more than a year and a half. She took it and pulled them out one by one and unwrapped and shredded each one and let them fall onto the counter. As she attempted to sweep the tattered cotton into the trash with one arm, some fell into the sink and quickly bloated with the water sucked up from the sink. She stood staring down at it, the material full and

bursting with water. She snatched it up, wringing the water from it and flung it into trashcan, where it rested, drained and limp. And then she spied the box and stripped it into tiny pieces because it symbolized everything she'd lost and she couldn't bear to look at it anymore. In fact she couldn't bear anything at all. And she lay upon the tile, with her arms by her sides and her palms facing outwards and her legs slightly spread like the picture in the encyclopedia, as cold and unmoving and barren.

An hour later, she lay in her bed in the same position with Bill's hips rocking between her thighs and her nightgown pushed up around her neck and her breasts slightly sagging and lolling off to the side and she turned her head and fingered the edge of the sheet and listened and waited and slowed her breathing so as not to keep the same rhythm as his. In and out, in and out. After listening to Bill snore and checking the alarm setting on the clock, the moisture set in. It collected on her forehead and gathered on her chest and pooled in the shallow hollow between her neck and shoulders and the damp, sticky union of her buttocks and the sheets was not helping much and as beads of sweat kept multiplying and reproducing she all but leapt out of bed and into the kitchen where she again stuck her head in the freezer and sucked in the frosty air and was reassured by the bare remnants in the ice cream container and it would only be one more night. With that thought she panicked and rushed to the cabinet beneath the sink to reassure herself that the empty bucket that she'd so painstakingly saved was still there, and it was, ready and waiting. Unwilling to face the wall of sleeplessness she sat at the kitchen table and wrote out her list of things to do tomorrow like pick up Bill's shirts from the cleaners and make a tax appointment with the accountant for Bill and schedule Bill and the kids' yearly teeth cleanings and mail this months bills and balance the check book and scrub the bathroom and wash the sheets and get the beer in the fridge so it could start chilling for the game on Saturday. And with the items of the list rolling over each other in her head she laid once again in the still-damp spot on the bed and stared at the ceiling and thought of Bill bringing each spoonful of ice cream to his

mouth, bite by bite emptying the bowl that had emptied the bucket that had been the last step in the process.

The morning came and it was her birthday and although she didn't want to be reminded she got a card in the mail from Jon, picked out by Jon's girlfriend and a headache like no other she'd ever had before but was exactly like the one explained in the encyclopedia and a reminder in the mail about her annual gynecologist appointment, women over 40 should have mammograms every year the card said and then she got daisies from Bill's secretary from Bill and his secretary must have been rushed because the card in the envelope read "To Our Grandson on his 4th Birthday" and had a little picture of a puppy. That was okay because she didn't really care about anything at all right then not even the chicken breasts marinating for supper whose flesh could bleed just lying there in the pan or the spray'n'soak cleaner she'd just doused the bathtub with or the ripple of heat she felt begin to burn in her chest and crawl towards her neck and face or the hunks of soggy hair that clung to her nape and temples from the sweat pouring from her scalp.

She went on fixing supper, there was nothing else she could do and nothing else she wanted to do. And when the ten o'clock news came around and Bill had waved an arm indicating the weather report was too important for him to speak to her, that she should just know that he wanted his ice cream and he wanted it right then. She went into the kitchen and carefully dipped out the last bits of ice cream which equaled 2½ scoops and drizzled the syrup over it and served it in the blue bowl with the white rim with the chip on the side and sat on the sofa and watched him eat and listened to the sounds of the spoon as it scraped on the sides of the bowl and clanked on his teeth, just as she had for 24 years.

As she lay in bed this night, after he had started snoring and after she had double-checked the alarm clock setting, she didn't wait for the heat and the sweat to come to her. She went to the kitchen to the sink where the bucket that she had emptied for Bill sat waiting. She ran hot water into the sink and washed it thoroughly inside and out and rinsed it and set it in the drainer to dry. With this

done, exhaustion hit her and for the first time in over a year she laid on her half of the bed, carefully not hogging the covers and slept through the night.

In the morning after Bill had gone to work she took the two ice cream buckets and 3 plastic trash bags into the bathroom and got her suit out of the closet and neatly laid it across the bed and dressed herself in slacks and a short sleeved blouse, an outfit like the one she'd worn everyday since she could remember, even when she'd been doing housework and taking care of the kids, sick or healthy. She sat down at the desk in the den and looked up a number and put it down on a pad of paper along with a list of the food in the freezer that could be microwaved and wrote where the box of letters for the kids was and how to know when to send them and laid it beside her suit that was laying on the bed that she had laid in for 24 years.

She then walked into the bathroom and took one trash bag and wrapped it around her waist and her lap and stepped into the claw-footed bathtub that stood out from the wall and sat and placed the two ice cream buckets on either side of the tub, each with it's own garbage bag folded underneath it and thought of the picture in the encyclopedia and took a straight razor blade and grasped it awkwardly in her left hand and pushed the corner in, made a slice from her wrist three quarters of the way up to her elbow and the same on her left arm. After she had dropped the blade into one of the buckets, and rested her forearms on the sides of the tub, she looked at the blood beading along the incision, faster and faster, then rolling from the cut around to the other side of her arm, and seeing the blood calmed her and satisfied her and with a quiet pling the first drop fell into the bucket.