

Regarding Wanda

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Eye

“Hey, look at this!” I slide the Careers page of *The Ottawa Star* across the kitchen table to Ron. “They’re looking for a reporter. A junior position, but still...”

Ron neatly cuts his toast in half diagonally, wipes his fingers on his cloth napkin, then picks up the newspaper. He glances at the ad and hands it back to me.

“Can you pass the chili sauce please?” he says.

I pass him a quart Mason jar half-filled with bright red sauce while scanning the ad a second time.

“It’s perfect for me. A reporter. At a daily! I’ve always wanted to work at *The Star*.”

He pierces his egg yolk with his fork; the look of it makes my stomach turn. I look at his face instead. Even after four years of marriage I still thrill to his craggy good looks, large angular nose — larger even than my own — broad forehead and shock of thick dark hair.

“So you’ll commute to Ottawa every day?” he asks.

“I guess. There’d be a lot of weekend work and evenings.”

I pause. I should have thought this through, presented it as a package, a case to defend. He is a lawyer after all.

“Maybe we could find a place halfway between Madawan and Ottawa,” I say. “This house is too big anyway. There’s only the two of us — plus Bonnie on the weekends.”

He unscrews the lid of the chili sauce that I made last summer according to his mother’s recipe and spoons a dollop on to his plate.

“I’m not selling, Wanda,” he says in that flat definitive lawyer’s voice I know so well.

“We could rent it out to a friend or someone you know. Come on Ron, we could make this work. You didn’t think I’d be content being a reporter at *The Madawan Post* the rest of my life, did you?”

“Yes, I did.”

He’s staring at me, his eyes have that appraising critical look, like I’m a demanding stranger, or worse, an adversary in court. I hate it when he looks at me that way. His eyes can be beautiful, filled with empathy and love.

He looks down and takes a bite of his egg, his jaw clicking as he chews. I watch the bone jut in and out. I hold my breath, try to be patient — it’s not one of my talents. He swallows.

“This was my grandparent’s house, it has history. We’re not nomads like you military families.”

“What do you mean? Do you think we had a choice?” My voice fills the kitchen. Damn him, he knows I hated all that moving. Hell, this house is one of the reasons I hooked up with him in the first place.

“I’m just saying, it’s different for me,” he says.

“You won’t have to sell it,” I repeat. “We could come back later, or Bonnie could live here when she gets older.”

“That’s only part of it,” he says. “There’s also the clients. How would it look if I moved thirty kilometres away? I need to be part of the community, on the board at the Chamber of Commerce, playing gentleman’s hockey, networking, getting new clients. That’s how business works in a small town, Wanda. You know that.”

“But we don’t live in town now, we’re fifteen minutes away. If we moved to Arnprior we’d be thirty minutes away. How much of a difference would that make?”

He pushes his plate aside. He can’t eat when he’s upset. No wonder he’s so thin.

He changes tactics. “It’s important to me that Bonnie grows up here. Look,” he says, pointing to the door jam where heights, initials and dates have been duly carved in over the years. “I want her on there, with all of us. It’s hard enough for her with her mom moving every year. I want to take her for walks through our woods, gather apples in the fall.”

I shift my argument too. “But if we moved to say Arnprior, we would be closer to Ottawa. It would be easy for you to pick Bonnie up and you could even take her out during the week. You could see her more often.”

“I’m not moving, Wanda, it’s as simple as that.”

He’s dug in his heels, but I’m just as stubborn. This is the pattern in our four years of marriage. Nothing ever gets resolved.

“Well, there’s no way I can commute an hour and twenty minutes each day, everyday. Especially in the winter.”

He shrugs. “I thought you liked reporting at *The Post*.”

“I do, but that’s not forever,” I say. I feel tears clogging my throat like a five-o’clock Friday traffic jam. “Look, Ron, I’ve been a reporter seven years now, covering the same annual events: Lumberfest week, Women’s Institute teas, the same beats. I need a change, new challenges. There’s no chance of promotion; Anita will be editor all her life. I certainly never thought I’d be stuck at some backwater weekly my entire career.”

Damn! I’ve done it now, crossed the line.

“You should have thought of that before.” His voice rises as he stands. “You should have said something before you married me, Wanda.” He tosses his napkin on the table. “I have to get ready for work. I have a case to prepare for court this afternoon.”

“We’ll talk tonight?” I ask.

“I have nothing more to say,” he replies.

He walks upstairs in his usual light-footed, measured pace, as though nothing has happened. I dump his breakfast into the garbage can, scraping the congealed yellow as best I can, then put the plate in the sink. Let him wash it himself. Damn him. Dickweed. What did he think? I was going to give up everything for him? Damn, damn, damn, that couldn’t have gone worse. I should have waited. Pitched it better. Why can’t I be more patient?

I hear the shower running. I don’t want to see him when he comes back downstairs. I will only say something to make things even worse. I’ll wait till tonight, when we’ve both cooled down. I’ll go for a cross-country ski, like I usually do on Wednesday mornings. I was going to skip it — it’s been pissing rain for three days, in January for Chris sake, and now it’s minus five and everything’s frozen — but I have to get out of this house.

I dash upstairs and pull on my long johns and turtleneck. I glance in the mirror: my over-permed hair is sticking out in all directions, and without my usual eyeliner my eyes have nearly disappeared behind my glasses. A mess. I rummage through the closet for my lined pants. I can’t find a darn thing with all his suits. He doesn’t wear half of them, but he refuses to get rid of any. It’s one of our litany of arguments, always the same half-dozen subjects. I have a list in the empty X, Y and Z pages at the back of my address book: parenting (his inability to provide discipline), chores (his refusal to do any), sex (my refusal), going out (his refusal). Each time we have a round I put a check mark under the appropriate category. Parenting is a distant second. Sex (my refusal) (✓✓✓✓✓) is winning hands down these days.

Sometimes Ron leaves articles about sex on my dresser, articles he’s clipped out of newspapers. We never talk about them. One documented how many times a week most couples have sex (2.1). I can imagine the survey:

“So sir, how many times a week do you boink your wife?”

“Oh, at least five times.”

“Ma’am, how often do you and your husband make love?”

“Oh, once, twice a month.”

The battle of the sexes, fought between the sheets. I’d like to know how these figures change over the years of marriage. Most couples probably start out at the two-point-one average and then... well, who knows.

Last week I read a survey in one of Anita’s trashy magazines that asked women why they refused to have sex with their partner. The most prevalent answer (58%) was too tired. Number two (21%) was boredom. Third (8%) was their partner’s lack of expertise. Then there were a bunch of other reasons: fear of pregnancy, being overweight, anxious that they might wake the children, etcetera, etcetera. I would be hard pressed to pick any one reason. Maybe all of the above. Plus something else. The squabbling, of course. The endless domestic disputes. How can you make love when you’ve been crabbing at each other all day? And then there’s the availability. The constant availability. It’s comforting to sleep with Ron, to know there is someone beside me in the dark, to hold me. But I hate being at his sexual beck-and-call, the wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am humiliation of it. I want intimacy. Passion. Mutual passion.

Maybe I expect too much. Maybe this domestic purgatory is the inevitability of marriage, a package deal to be endured along with the positive: security, someone to share my life with, to love. Family.

After we do make love, far less often than the alleged two-point-one times-per-week norm, Ron is affectionate, generous, accommodating. For a day or so anyway. Until the next bout of his arousal, his cold hands on my thighs, my automatic refusal, our late-night argument ending with me giving him a hand-job — joyless for both of us, but less effort, less personal than a blow job. I scrub my hands afterward, jaw clenched. Furious at myself for giving in, furious at him for groveling and bullying. He thinks foreplay is thirty minutes of cajoling.

If only I could give in, our life would be so much easier. If we’d had sex last night he would have at least listened to me this morning.

Maybe I should ask Dr. MacMillan whether he would help us. I don’t know. Therapy was good for me but I don’t want to go back. Besides, in a relationship it seems so definitive, such an admission of failure. We should be able to fix it ourselves, if we only try a bit harder. We love each other, but then shit happens — like today — and we set each other off, tag-team fire alarms, shrill and unthinking.

The shower water stops running. I race downstairs, pull on my jacket and toque, grab my mittens. I gently close the door as I leave and walk tentatively, avoiding the glaring icy patches on the path to the woodshed. As I grab my cross-country skis, I make a mental note for the millionth time to clear out the generations worth of junk in there. Ron’s attitude is that if there’s room, leave it. There’s always so much to do around here; never ending detritus. Dust rains down from the attic, is tracked up from the dirt basement. I used to love this house, but now it’s a never-ending burden.

I shuffle across the icy yard, down the slope toward the snowmobile trail our neighbour makes when he sets his trap-line. I walk on the side of the path where the snow is still crunchy, the tread more firm. I could go to work early, but it’s Wednesday, my half-day off for covering Monday night town council. There are few enough perks as a small-town reporter. I deserve this morning, even if I am miserable.

Ice pellets sting my cheeks. I place my skis on the path, slip my boots into the bindings and close them. It’s so beautiful out here; the valley circles me like a white china bowl. I remember a picnic we took our first summer together. I remember him talking about how his great-great grandparents’ settled on these hundred acres after the road was blazed a hundred and fifty years ago. A lone pasture is all that remains of the once-fertile farm; junipers and cedars have reclaimed the rest. We hiked up a hill, across the pasture to the abandoned apple orchard. Tangled branches shaded us from the glaring sun. Ron tramped down the waist-high grass and pulled an old Hudson’s Bay blanket from his pack, spreading it out on the ground. He had a bar of Toblerone chocolate, two eating oranges and a plastic bottle filled with well water. We settled cross-legged on the blanket, hidden in the deep grass. He took out his Swiss

knife and peeled me an orange, fed me each segment. Juice dribbled down my chin onto my ankles. A bobolink dipped down between us, hesitated, then disappeared into the branches above. And Ron kissed me, his tongue touched mine, cool citrus. He slipped his hand under my tank top, caressing my bare breast. My nipples hardened; I arched my back, pushed into his hand. He pulled the top over my head.

“Rembrandt lighting,” he said, tracing the dappled sunlight over one of my small breasts, the other was shaded. I unbuttoned his shirt. His shoulders were warm, gently freckled. I traced a pattern on his skin with my finger. We held each other, lying on the rough blanket. His chest warm, hairs tickling. I heard a blue jay screech through the cedar hedge, settle in the maple next to the house. I kissed him quickly at an awkward angle and our teeth clinked together. It brought to mind a song, a little country ditty I hadn’t thought of in years. I whispered the words into his ear as we held each other:

“Kiss me quick, I’m double parked, in the tow away zone of your heart.”

He laughed and kissed me again.

I lean against the big oak, and watch the ice pellets bump and badger each other through the frigid morning air. It was so simple then, or so it seemed. We were in love and that’s all that mattered to us. Leaves rustle in the wind like crumpled paper. I look up. Snowflakes dangling from dead leaves come under a siege of pellets and plunge to the icy ground, concealing its treachery.

The sun blinks through the clouds, illuminating the iced trail, a satin ribbon winding its way down the valley. I step into the tracks I made last weekend, now frozen solid, and sort my poles. Hand through the loop, over top. My right ski suddenly slides forward — I can’t stop it — metal pole tips rattle against the ice, one foot slips, then the other and I’m falling, falling. I fall... ice... bum... back... head.

I lie still on the frozen snow, wheezing, struggling to regain my breath. Pain stabs under my ribs, though my lungs, my breath comes in short, white puffs. I concentrate on breathing: in, pause, out. Ice pellets melt on my warm cheeks, smudge my glasses. I breathe — in, pause, out — until the pain subsides. The back of my head feels tender, bruised. I turn my head away from the sleet and blink at the stalks of dead grass sticking out of the ice.

The grass is flickering, like a television with poor reception.

I shut my eyes tight, reopen. It’s the same. I take my glasses off. Light flashes at the edge of my left eye. Oh God. I close that eye and peer out of my right eye. The light is gone. Just the normal blur of myopia. I close my right; the flickering, the flashing continues.

Oh God oh my god, what’s wrong? What have I done now?

I snap off my bindings, leave my skis and poles in a heap and step gingerly back across the yard, yelling: “Ron! Ron!”

He opens the back door. “What’s wrong?” he calls.

I cling to the handrail on my way up the porch steps.

“My eye,” I say. “I fell and there’s something wrong with my eye.”

“What do you mean, honey?”

He comes out to meet me, wearing his plaid old-man slippers on the icy porch. He grasps my arm, helping me into the house. I start crying.

“Calm down, calm down, Wanda. It’s going to be okay. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“There’s this flickering in my left eye. And a light. Something’s wrong, Ron.”

“Is it still there, now?”

“Yes. Oh, Ron, why do I have such bad luck?”

He holds out a chair and I sit. He kneels beside me, hands me a Kleenex.

“Shall we go to the emergency or Schwab?”

“Schwab, the hospital’s useless. He’s at least a good optometrist.”

“Sure. He’ll know what to do, Wanda. It’s going to be okay.” He puts his arms around me. I lean into his chest.

Ron drives too fast down the slick back roads to my optometrist in Madawan; he’s a good driver, knows how to pull out of the icy spins.

He finds a parking spot in front of Schwab’s office.

“It’s probably nothing,” I say. I don’t want any fuss. I don’t want him to worry. I don’t want to worry. “You go ahead to work. I’ll walk down to my office afterward.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. “Don’t be a martyr, Wanda.”

I smile. He knows me so well.

“Yeah.” I kiss him on the cheek. “I’ll call if I need you.”

Schwab says I’ll have to see a retina specialist in the city. He won’t tell me anything else, says he doesn’t have the equipment to give me an accurate diagnosis. His receptionist haggles on the phone until she gets me an appointment for the next morning. So soon. It must be urgent. But Schwab didn’t seem too concerned; he didn’t say anything about not working.

I walk down O’Brien Street to *The Madawan Post*. I’m early, but there are always tons of things to do.

“Couldn’t stay away, I see,” says Anita. “Can you re-do John’s column? You should see it. Holy liftin’ what a dog’s breakfast.”

“Purina Chow?” I say, smiling.

She grins, picks up the telephone receiver and begins dialing. I hesitate.

“I need tomorrow morning off,” I say. “Doctor’s appointment.”

“Pas de problem,” she says, replacing the receiver. “Nothing serious I hope?” She cocks her head to one side.

So nosy, but I can’t help smiling. “Don’t worry, Anita, all will be revealed tomorrow.”

I could tell her, she’d be understanding, would probably give me the whole day off, but I don’t want to. Not yet. I need more information. And until then, I need to be busy. I phone the historical society about the demolition of a 135-year-old church, edit Rose’s column and then peruse the paper for my stories and photos. The flickering isn’t so obvious indoors, but it’s still there, especially when I think about it. That’s key: don’t think about it. I’m pretty good at pushing things out of mind. It’s an essential survival skill for air force brats. When you move every three or four years, you have to forget your old life quickly and move on. Ottawa. Trenton. Greenwood, Nova Scotia. Edmonton. Ottawa: you lose yourself in the whirl of moving, a new address and phone number to learn, kid hierarchies to chip away at, bedroom to settle. Different toys, and later, levels of coolness and drug usage. My brother Ward never got the hang of it. He’d spend hours in his bedroom, writing letters to his old friends, reading, avoiding, and just as he finally found a new pal, we’d move. But I learned to be outgoing, easy to please. I made friends quickly. I survived. I pushed the old friends, the old place out of mind. Later, I did the same with boyfriends. Gone. Whited-out of my address book. And now, I manage to push unpleasant events out of mind: interviews gone bad, factual errors in the paper that required a printed correction. They happen, I move on, and never give them a second thought.

But this is different. This is unresolved. There’s no correction notice, no walking away. Not when I see the light flashes. My stomach begins to growl and churn. At noon, I buy some Pepto Bismal. I haven’t chugged the stuff in years. The familiar chalky taste brings back teen memories of midnight forays to the kitchen, drinking it straight out of the bottle, trying to quell my anxiety after another nasty confrontation with Dad. Him, yelling at me for something — being late, wanting to sleep over at a friend’s house — or for nothing at all. Wagging his index finger in my face and barking at me: “Irresponsible.” “Lazy.” “Liar.” It’s a good thing I left when I was seventeen or I’d be even more messed up than I am.

Ron picks me up at four-thirty but he doesn't ask about my appointment with Schwab. He's probably forgotten, and some misguided stubbornness makes me refuse to tell him. But then, as we head out of town, he asks how it went.

"There's no use worrying," Ron says tersely.

Maybe he lost in court. I say nothing.

At home he relents, mixes me a rum and coke and tells me to relax while he makes dinner. As the pasta sauce simmers he sits down at the round oak kitchen table with me.

"I'm in court tomorrow morning — that drunk driving case — so I can't drive you, but Patsy's going in to the city to pick up some documents at the courthouse. Do you mind if she drives you instead?"

I want him to do it, but I don't want to be unreasonable. Besides, it's probably nothing.

"That'd be fine," I say, sipping my rum.

He goes off to phone her. Good old dependable Patsy, 50-something — a spinster as they'd say around here — and slavishly devoted to him, to his firm. She does all the usual correspondence and filing and whatnot, but she also fetches his dry-cleaning, and delivers his coffee and lunch from Jack's Snaks, she brushes his jacket before court and arranges the day's files, in order of priority, on his desk. Of course she won't refuse this favour.

I could bring up the ad now, when he's feeling guilty, but what if this eye thing is serious? I'll wait until tomorrow, until after the appointment. The application deadline is a week from Friday. Lots of time.

That night in bed I reach out to stroke Ron's arm, hoping for a hug, but he rolls over before my fingers reach him and promptly falls asleep. I lie on my back in the dark, staring at the shadows of branches closing in on me from the ceiling. It's a full moon tonight. Ron and I used to smoke a big joint and go for walks on moon-shadow nights. We'd go up the hill behind the house, through the orchard, to where the moonlight seemed strongest. Then we'd stand beside each other, moving so our shadows touched. We'd pretend to be animals, we'd box, make love.

Ron's wrong. I should be worried about my eyes. I close the left one. The branches are still. Now the right. The branches wiggle, waver. I close both tightly, vow to push it out of my mind and sleep.

I drift to a day in seventh grade in Edmonton when my teacher, Mr. Sullivan, made us pretend to be disabled — handicapped we called it in those days. The idea was to penetrate our adolescent self-absorption and instill some appreciation for the physical obstacles faced by others. Some of my classmates stuffed cotton in their ears, others were confined to wheelchairs. I was supposed to be blind for the day. The worst assignment. I always get the short stick. Bad luck Wanda Stewart. Mr. Sullivan put cotton pads over my eyes and tied a scarf around my head. I still remember the smell of him, his chest pressed against my back and arm, warm and heavy. "No peeking until final bell," he whispered in my ear. He gave me a white stick, his hand brushing mine, emitting sparks in my id, then he was gone. Suddenly, in my dream it is lunch, and Janet, who is playing at being deaf — though of course she can hear fine with only some cotton batting stuffed in her ears — guides me out of the school, toward home.

I'm crossing 118th Avenue, it's one of those impossibly wide prairie streets that you have to sprint across to make the light. Janet is gone. My stick is gone. I tug at the scarf but it won't come off. A horn honks. Someone yells: "Ya idiot! Get off the road!" I put my hands out in front of me, looking for something solid to cling to and feel a car's breeze as it passes by, a long horn...

I open my eyes and stare at the familiar dark shapes in the bedroom. Dresser, Chair, Bureau. I hear Ron's regular breathing and my heart pounding.