Dirty Dishes

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TIRED, she was so tired. She opened her eyes, closed them and rolled over again. She buried her head in her pillow, as if to shut off the vision of stacks of dirty dishes piled high in the sink from the day before. It seemed as if something heavy were keeping her from even lifting her head from the pillow. Could it be that seminar that had to be prepared and the German test tomorrow?

She stretched her limbs, pressing her toes toward the footboard and her shoulders up to her ears in a mammoth effort to rouse her fatigued muscles. One of her hands brushed Hank’s chest as they stretched outward. His great body always seemed to take up so much of the bed. He slept silently on. She wondered what time he had finally been able to crawl into bed after his night over textbooks. She almost felt guilty getting him up for morning classes, as if she were personally responsible for his sleepless nights and waning robustness.

With a final effort she strained, sat up and crossed the barrier of semi-consciousness into the reality of dirty dishes, studies, and a tired husband that must be awakened. She leaned over, kissed him and shook him gently.
“Hank, come on, dear. It’s seven o’clock.” He groaned, rolled over, and with a great shudder sank back into his sleeping world.

“Hank! Hank!” She pushed harder on his shoulder. He woke and wrinkled his face. His eyes were puffy red slits. He was so comical when he woke up that she had to laugh in spite of the day’s dismal outlook. He groaned again.

“Are you sure?” He rolled the full width of the bed and lifted the shade at the window. “Oh God, it’s still dark out!” Sinking back into a heap, he rumpled the pillow with his strong hands.

She flicked on the lamp. It always seemed harder to get up on wintry mornings when the nights were so long and the days so short. The light hit Hank’s half-hidden face. He winced and squinted and finally gave up sleep as a lost cause.

She slipped into her robe and slippers. She hated the thought of going into the small kitchen with little counter-space and fewer cupboards. It always seemed to take extra work to keep it tidy. She sighed as she cleared a small place from dishes to make breakfast. Would there ever be an end to the constant chain of dirty dishes and meals and more dirty dishes? As she looked out the tiny window of their basement apartment her mind wandered, to figuring out just how many dishes a woman washes over the course of a lifetime. She thought of the girl in the flat above. Ruth was always so easy going and so organized. She probably liked to wash dishes.

Shoulders drooping, Hank came plodding into the kitchen, destroying her train of computations. She sighed again.

“Well, what do you want for breakfast?”

“Coffee will do. I’m not too hungry. I’m in a hurry to get to the lab.” His voice trailed absent-mindedly off. She would be glad when his orals were over. She hadn’t talked to him in so long. Her loneliness was beginning to tell in her eyes and in the dip in the corners of her mouth. Hank hadn’t noticed. He didn’t notice much at all, lately. Most of the time he looked and talked as if he weren’t really with her.
but had his mind on something much more important. It made her shrink inside. It made her wonder whether she was a person or only a dishwashing machine. She slapped the sponge into the pan of greasy water in the sink as her thoughts rose in a crescendo of anger.

The perking noise of the coffee subsided and she got a cup, filled it and took it to Hank in the other room of the flat. The room served as a study, living and dining room. It had that cluttered look that comes from too many things in too small an area. She found Hank in his usual position, hunched over one of the many books that consumed the already too little wall-space.

She placed the coffee beside him. Not looking up, he grunted his thanks. She turned and slowly walked back to the kitchen. Such drive and fortitude. Goodness knows that was one of the things she so dearly loved in him. But sometimes, just sometimes, she wished that he could come alive and laugh and joke the way he used to.

She poured herself a steaming cup of coffee and drank it in the solitude of her littered kitchen. Leaning against the counter, she still felt that heavy tiredness in her body. She hadn’t been feeling well lately. It would go away, she hoped. She must get some more rest. That was it, all she needed was a little sleep. Her thoughts meandered on and her spirits sagged more deeply, as she thought of the futility of everything. Tests, dishes... all she must do... her eyes blurred and a big watery drop rolled down her cheek and plunked into the cold halfcup of coffee. What was the use? What was the use of even trying? How could one person take care of a house, take care of a husband that didn’t know that you existed, go to school on a fellowship, pay the bills? She wondered who she was. Which one of her was she? She looked at the dishes and placed her cup with the rest of them.

She thought of getting dressed, then thought better of it and slowly stepped into the room where Hank was studying.

"Dear?" Her voice questioned. "I hate to bother you but why don’t you go on to the lab without me today? I don’t think I’l go to class this morning."
He turned and stared at her. It was the first time he had looked at her in a long time and she felt glad even though it was an angry look.

"There is just so much to get caught up with here that I... besides I haven't been feeling very well lately."

He rose from his chair, put his hands on her shoulders and stared down into her eyes. He knew her little excuses. Procrastination, he called it.

"Look, we're both busy. We knew it would be rough. This is no time to break down. We just have to stick it out. Stop being weak. Sit down and grind things out. You can't escape your responsibilities by staying home."

She burst into sobs. She was weak. She needed someone to understand and there was no one. She needed Hank and he didn't need her. He was always so strong, and all she seemed to do was hang on him like a leech draining him. She wrenched free from his grip and fled to the bedroom. She lay across the bed sobbing and waiting for him to come to comfort her. She heard the door slam, silence, and her stomach felt sick and heavy and alone inside of her.

The dishes were not in the sink and the little flat was beginning to assume a state of pseudo-tidiness. With great effort she pulled herself around the flat trying to resist the tide of faintness that besieged her body. Ruth found her collapsed on the old sofa when she came in to pick her up for their afternoon statistics class.

"Ruth, I'm just too tired to go to stat today. Could you take notes for me?" It was even hard to form words anymore.

"Why Honey, what's the matter? You look as white as a China doll." Her big, congenial features darkened into a look of concern. She was always brightening things up with her down-to-earth wholesomeness.

"Come on now. Tell Ruth all about it. How much sleep have you been getting?" Ruth moved to the sofa and put a hand on her shoulder.

She smiled weakly. It was good to have someone concerned, and her lurking suspicion came out in a flood of tears.

"Oh Ruth, I'm worried. I've been getting sick and I just
can't dare to think that. . .” Ruth hugged her gently. She knew that fear. Strange how one of the most wonderful events in nature can be so disastrous.

“Maybe you’re just under the weather a bit. You can’t take this and build a whole fear around it.” Ruth’s mind rolled on to all the symptoms of colds, flu.

“Now what you need is to start eating regular meals and getting more sleep. Tired people can’t do all the work we’ve got to do.” Ruth paused. “I’ve been worried about you lately. Your eyes don’t sparkle anymore. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, no Ruth. I guess I have to work this all out myself.” Ruth looked at the little figure with its large hazel eyes and unruly brown hair.

“I think you should go to the clinic anyway. It won’t hurt. You can’t go on like this. I’ll take you.”

“Ruth, what about stat class?”

“That can wait.”

The darkened kitchen window revealed the early winter evening. Her heart was thumping as the time approached for Hank’s arrival. The doctor had given her some pills and she felt strengthened already. Smiling, she thought how lucky she was to have a friend like Ruth. She busied herself preparing the scanty meal all the time wondering how they could ever manage. It was peculiar how she felt at peace within herself even though this might be the end of everything. She felt guilty. She had no right to be happy. All it would bring was misery and unfulfilled dreams. Why? Why?

Her thoughts went back to the morning in an effort to drown her joy. The slamming door, her sobs, her sobs. . . No, Hank wouldn’t understand. She would be like two leeches, dragging him down and down. “Oh God, what shall I do?” Silent sobs racked her frame. Fantastic alternatives raced through her mind. Leave Hank. Let him get his degree. Let him be famous someday. Leave him. It would be better that way. Her feet stuck fast to the floor. No, she was too weak to do that. She needed him, needed him too much. In despair she started praying. It seemed so strange. It had been so long.

The door opened and heavy footsteps creaked onto the
old wooden floor. Her heart stopped beating and her prayer
degenerated into one word repeated. "Help, God, help, help,
help."

Hank came into the kitchen, and pecked her on the
cheek in the usual manner. Looking into the pot he said,
"Well, how are you feeling now?"

"Much better, thank you. I plan to start work right away
for that German test tomorrow." Why did she lie like that?
Why couldn't she tell him? As he walked out of the kitchen
she followed.

"Hank, I went to the clinic today. Ruth took me."

"What did you do that for? You know that costs money.
Why didn't you tell me you were sick?" His face was
wrinkled into a frown as he looked intently at her. It always
disconcerted her when he did that. It felt as if he could see
into her very soul. Yet she knew that he couldn't understand.
He wouldn't understand this. He'd resent her, maybe he
would hate her for it. Leeches, two leeches. She turned her
back to him. She couldn't look at him now. That expression,
she didn't want to see it.

"I'm going to have a baby." She mumbled the words,
half hoping that he wouldn't hear them. She stood straight
and tall and tense as if she were in front of a firing squad.
Her whitened knuckles and closed eyes betrayed her prepa-
ration for an oral blow. She waited. The waiting was like
hell. "Do something, anything!" she thought to herself.

React! Oh please, God, don't let him ignore me now.

Then gently, so gently, a large hand touched her and
turned her around. He looked into her eyes and his eyes
were filled and glassy. He held her close and she felt the
security of his great arms.

Dirty dishes were stacked neatly in the sink, a test awaited
the morrow, orals approached. As they lay in bed next to
each other, the night closed around them.