

Barbara J. Sibbald / SEEING

Soft flakes of snow chase one another through the air. Some dangle tenuously from branches, cling to dead, dry leaves, then drift to the icy ground. Snow, finally. Three days' rain has eaten away the snow banks, made the lane-way slick and treacherous.

Anita knows she should wait until more snow has fallen before she goes for a ski. She should wait until the ice is covered. She should wait, but she has to get out of the house, away from him.

"Stubborn asshole," she mutters to the dormant oak. "He just can't stand being the bad guy."

Yesterday his daughter and a friend were caught stealing ice cream money out of another kid's desk. Her grade three teacher phoned Anita; they agreed it was out of character, an isolated incident. Bonnie was given a week's detention. Anita didn't say anything to Bonnie when she came home. She's his daughter after all, she thought. It's hard enough being the stepmother. It's hard enough being a friend-aunt-babysitter, not being the real mother but doing the real work. She asked Ron to speak to Bonnie but he refused. He said she'd been punished at school already. Anita let it go, too tired to argue, but this morning she's convinced he should say something.

"Just have a quiet word with her," she said. "I think it will mean more if you tell her it was wrong."

"There's no need to tell her twice," he said. "She knows now."

"But she needs to hear it from you too."

"Are we all out of chili sauce?" he asked, piercing his egg yolk with a fork.

Typical, she thinks. If it's unpleasant, he ignores it. She walks towards the ski trail. It's the little things that wear you down. The constant bickering. It's always the same half-dozen arguments. She has them categorized in the back of her address book: parenting, chores, sex, money, going out, in-laws. Each time they have a round she puts a check mark under the appropriate category. Parenting is a distant

second, sex (✓✓✓✓✓) is winning hands down these days.

Sometimes Ron clips out articles about sex — how many times a week most couples have it (2.1), what percentage of women have clitoral orgasms (55) — and he leaves these on her dresser. They never talk about them. After they do make love, far less often than the supposed norm, he's affectionate, generous, accommodating. Until the next time, until the next bout of his arousal, his cold hands on her thighs, her automatic refusal, their late-night argument ending with her giving him a hand-job — joyless for both of them. If only I could give in, she thinks. It would make things so much easier.

If we'd had sex last night he would have talked to Bonnie.

She slips her boots into the bindings and closes them. One ski slides forward as she sorts her poles, the metal tips rattle against the ice, then — WHAM! down she goes. Bum, back, flat. Rock ice. She pants, wheezes. Her breath comes out in small white puffs. She lies on the cold ground. The falling snow melts as it hits her warm face, her closed eyelids. She blinks at the stalks of dead grass sticking out of the ice. They waver in muted light. There's a flickering in her left eye, like poor reception on a television.

Her optometrist says she'll have to see a retina specialist in the city. He says he doesn't have the equipment or expertise to really know what's wrong.

"There's no use worrying," Ron says tersely. "It's probably nothing."

He rolls over and falls asleep. Anita lies in the dark, remembering a day in seventh grade when the teacher made them pretend they were disabled. The idea was to instill some empathy, some appreciation of the obstacles. Some kids had cotton stuffed in their ears, others had to use wheelchairs. She had to be blind for a whole day. The teacher took her glasses, put cotton pads over her eyes, and tied a scarf around her head. He gave her a retractable white stick. Her girlfriend had to guide her home at lunch hour.

In a half-sleep Anita remembers them crossing the boulevard when suddenly the friend is gone. Cars honk at Anita. Someone yells for her to get off the road. She tugs at the scarf but it won't come off.

Anita opens her eyes and stares at the familiar dark shapes in the

bedroom. She's sweating. She hears Ron's regular breathing and her heart pounding.

Anita's appointment is at ten but she knows it'll be a long wait; the place is packed with grey-haired men and women, squinting under the fluorescent lights. I'm too young to be here, she thinks. A chubby technician puts two sets of stinging drops in her eyes. Her pupils dilate, she can't focus, can't read. She puts on her sunglasses and sits there, watching everyone else in the room, listening to their conversations about gall bladders and gout, wondering what it's like to be old, to lose your sight.

Finally the receptionist calls her. Dr. MacDonald leans her way back in a chair and peers into her eyes with a blinding light. She tries not to blink, not to think. Then he gets out a piece of round glass and leans in for a closer look. She feels his warm breath, smelling of mints.

He tells her she has Presumed Ocular Histoplasmosis Syndrome in both eyes. He writes it down on a piece of pink paper. "It's a virus," he says, "carried in old, buried poultry excrement."

"I can't believe it," she says. "Chicken shit?"

Dr. MacDonald explains that the virus scars the retina. Later the scars weaken, a blow can break them open. That's why she sees the shining light. Holes in her left eye.

He says he's going to close the holes with a laser beam before they get bigger. More may develop, he says. He tells her not to worry, lots of people have it and they see just fine. He pats her arm. She's cold.

As she drives home all she can think about is what it would be like to be blind. She's crying before she crosses the bridge over the hydro bay.

Ron's working late and then he has hockey. Anita keeps hoping he'll call though she knows he won't. She's asleep by the time he gets in. The next morning she tells him what the doctor said. He says he'll try to help more with Bonnie. She's heard that before — she's heard almost everything in six years of marriage — but hugs him anyway.

She asks if he'll take the day off to drive her to the clinic. Dr. MacDonald said she shouldn't have any trouble driving home but she's sceptical. Ron says he's swamped at work.

"Ask Wanda," he says, trying to be helpful.

He is busy, Anita thinks. But this is important. Then he asks how she's feeling, but half-way through her third sentence he starts turning pages in his *Times Literary Supplement*. She tells him he better get going to work. Jerk, she thinks.

Wanda agrees to drive her. She has to pick up some things at the Indian food store anyway and is glad to help.

"It's just so terrible," Wanda says. "So unfair. Listen if there's anything I can do, you know, even if you just want to talk . . ."

Anita smiles vaguely. She cannot talk about it, even to Wanda, who has revealed that her husband bores her in bed, that she can't have orgasms with him any more. Anita cannot talk about it to anyone. It might become too real. It's better to keep it vague, blurred.

She sits in the waiting room. All the same people seem to be there. Finally she's called into the laser room. A coffin-shaped machine takes up most of the space. Dr. MacDonald points to a chair in front of it and shows her where to rest her chin and forehead in some straps. It looks like an instrument of torture, she thinks. Something out of *A Clockwork Orange*.

"I'm not ready for this," she tells him, her voice breaking.

He hands her a kleenex; she hadn't realized she was crying.

"Is your husband here?" he asks.

"No, I'm all alone."

He explains the whole thing, his low voice is soothing. He says she's lucky they found the holes so quickly. She doesn't feel lucky, but after a while she calms down. After all, she thinks, what choice do I have? He tells her to sit perfectly still.

He sits opposite her, peering through a lens. She hears loud clicks and sees the most amazing lights, purple-pink, magenta — vibrant, almost tactile colour. For a second her eye feels hot, then it is over. He tells her to make an appointment for the next week so he can see how it's healing.

She tries to get along with Ron, but she finds herself getting angry again and again. He dipped into their savings for hockey fees. (Money - ✓) She runs the house, always assumed she would because

he seemed so overwhelmed. She told Wanda that Ron is living impaired. She accepted this, but over the years he's grown even less capable. He balks at the simplest tasks, refuses to take responsibility. He wouldn't help her take down the Christmas lights. (Chores – ✓) He'd promised. She only put them up for Bonnie anyway. She couldn't care less.

They only made love — had sex — once all month though he relentlessly badgered her for more. (Sex – ✓) She can't separate sex from the rest, from the daily routines, from the endless arguments. Marriage is a package deal, she thinks. It all works together. Or it doesn't work at all.

She asked Ron to help her sweep the basement. (Chores – ✓)

"It's a waste of time," he'd said. "It'll just get dirty again when I put in the next load of wood. Wait till spring."

"But it's filthy," she replied. "The dirt gets tracked through the whole house and then I have to clean it up. It's not fair."

He shrugged and opened his *Sunday New York Times*.

"Are you just lazy?" she asked, vying for a reaction.

He glared over the top of his paper: "Are you a ball-breaker?"

"What?"

He dropped the newspaper to his lap, stared at her over top of his glasses: "Is this what I have to do for sex?" he said in a low monotone.

"What the hell does it have to do with sex?" she asked.

The newspaper rustled in reply. He'd stopped talking. (Sex – ✓) Now he'll give her the silent treatment. He'll talk to her about what they're having for supper, or whose turn it is to take the dog to the vet. The necessities, that's all. I shouldn't have pushed him, she thinks.

Last fall they didn't speak for nearly two months. By the time they made up she'd forgotten what they were fighting about. Understanding him is like trying to read a closed book, she thinks.

Anita doesn't remember exactly when these fights started to happen. Doesn't remember when she began keeping the check list, trying to be objective and practical. She recalls frozen moments, never thawed, never resolved.

— "Please take off your boots," Anita asks. "It makes such a mess on the floor." She wets a rag and wipes the muddy boot-prints

tracked across the kitchen floor, up the stairs to his den. And it happens again and again and again. Wearing her down into a shrew so she shrieks at him: "Take off yer boots for gawd's sake!" (Chores – ✓)

— In from grocery shopping on a rainy spring day; water dripping onto the floor, damp paper bags ripping. "Hello," she calls out. "Can I get some help?" Muffled sounds come from the TV room. Grocery bags spill over the kitchen table. She returns to the car, sleet freezes on her glasses, she slips on the sidewalk, nearly falls. Again and again she trudges to get the week's groceries which she has bought and will now unpack and put away, which she will then prepare into nourishing dinners for them, the two of them, Ron and Bonnie, sitting there watching a re-run of *Star Trek*. (Chores – ✓)

— Ron, screaming at her in the late night: "You should have told me you were sexually burned-out before we married."
(Sex – ✓)

These moments accumulate exponentially.



Anita's eyes seem to be fine now — no flashes or anything. They're a bit tired sometimes, especially if she reads too much and she's reading everything she can get her hands on, ploughing through two or three books a week. She tries not to think about it but it's always there, growing in her mind. She calls the city CNIB and asks about services in Madawan. There aren't any.

She gets on with her work. She makes wooden coffee tables — sensuous tables she calls them. The legs are twisted, forked branches — useless for anything but firewood. The tops are beautifully-grained cross-sections from large trees. She's started to sell some at specialty furniture shops in Toronto. She finishes sanding a table and checks the cupboard for varnish — she uses a special kind, all-natural, made

from Chinese nuts. She reaches for some on the top shelf and a plastic bag filled with old brushes falls on her head. She sits down on the work bench. I have to be careful, she thinks. My eyes could develop more holes.

After supper she lies on their bed, reading Sherlock Holmes stories. She loves piecing the details together, figuring out which ones are important. Midway through "The Speckled Band" she notices a black spot on the page. She closes her left eye, the spot is gone. She closes her right eye, it's back again. It doesn't move, it's not a speck of dirt. She focuses on the sheets, the white wall. The black spot. She dials the after-hours number Dr. MacDonald gave her and his answering service says he'll call her back.

Anita sits on the edge of her bed, kneading the duvet with her strong fingers and then pounding the mattress in frustration. It's so damned unfair, she thinks. Why did this happen to me? Children play in the dirt — Christ, they do it every day — I didn't take any chances.

Dr. MacDonald calls. He says he'll see her in the clinic at eight the next morning. He says not to worry. That's like asking me not to breathe, she thinks.

When she tells Ron he asks who's going to look after Bonnie — it's a school holiday. It occurs to her that he just can't deal with anything this traumatic, this serious. It's not his fault really, she thinks. But then he comes to bed without his pajama bottoms, looking for some relief, he says. She is furious with him, his insensitivity. (Sex - ✓)

In the car she spills coffee all over her new Billie Holiday cassette. The clinic is deserted. Dr. MacDonald flashes the glass disk in her eye, prods her eyeball with his forefinger so he can see all the edges. She digs her nails into her palm, nearly piercing the flesh.

"There's a new development," he says.

Like it's a twist in the plot, she thinks. Another piece of evidence to consider.

He explains that a blood vessel is growing into her fovea. "Sometimes that happens in areas that are heavily scarred. It's trying to bring blood to the damaged area. We'll have to stop it or it will block your vision."

"Block?"

"If it keeps growing you'll lose the central vision."

He draws a picture for her. A blood vessel, tiny, seeking. Destroying in its attempt to nurture, she thinks.

He starts the laser up; its dull drone is powerful, serious. She sits and rests her chin in the cup, forehead against the straps. She stares at her twisted reflection in the chromed machine. He writes something on her chart.

"I'm going to cauterize the vessel," he finally says. "Then I'm going to build a ridge of scar tissue to protect the fovea. It's very delicate, you have to stay still."

"Yes," she says, surprised by the strength in her voice.

The light comes again and again. Magenta at first, then she loses the colour. All she feels are sharp jabs in the dark like a thousand needles, again and again.

"That should do it," he says at last.

She leans back, blinks. Her eye feels pierced. She glances down at her faded blue-jeans: the black spot is still there, it always will be, but maybe he has stopped it from growing.

"Thank you," she says.

He nods. "Now keep a look out for new black spots. The vessel could start growing again. You never know."

Her throat closes in, she cannot speak.

Bonnie watches TV downstairs while Anita rests in bed with a damp, musty-smelling washcloth over her eyes. She tries not to think or dream, just lies there. When she opens her eyes it's dark outside. Her alarm clock glows 5:42. She goes downstairs and begins peeling potatoes. For once, Ron comes home promptly at six. He doesn't ask how it went at the clinic and Anita doesn't say anything. Bonnie comes in and starts chattering about her TV program. Anita is distracted and burns the chops. Ron gives her one of his looks as she scrapes the char off. She stares back coldly. Pinpoint pupils.

Supper is a mournful affair. Bonnie pushes the food around her plate. Who could blame her? Anita thinks. The chops are burned, the potatoes overdone and mealy, the winter green beans tasteless. Anita excuses her and Bonnie runs upstairs. She scrapes her own dinner into the dog's bowl. She feels sick. Where did it go wrong? she wonders.

Ron sits, watching her.

“Are you really that miserable?” he asks.

“I just don’t understand what you expect,” she says. “You don’t want to be part of my life. I mean you aren’t even interested in what happened today at the clinic. I don’t think you care.”

“Of course I care,” he says.

“Yeah, you care about how it will affect you.”

She pauses for a moment and looks at her husband. “What do you expect from me anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s your idea of the perfect wife?” She wonders why she didn’t ask him this years ago.

He pauses for a moment, squashing his mashed potatoes with his fork.

“I guess she’d be self-sufficient and sexually willing. Those are the two main things.”

“Self-sufficient! You mean like a room-mate? Only willing to have sex at your beck and call. I don’t believe it! Is that all?”

“Those are just the main things, there are other things too. You know, a good mother and all that.”

Her cheeks pulsate as she grinds her teeth.

“Now don’t get all excited,” he says. “You’re just upset because of your appointment. Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Her face is hot, she knows it’s flushed. Her voice quavers. “You want me to be self-sufficient? I’ll do it. I’ll handle this myself, but it works both ways. You better learn to be self-sufficient too, you better learn to take care of your own needs.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that if you won’t give me the emotional support I need, then I won’t give you the sex you need. Seems pretty equitable, don’t you think?”

“Why don’t you just leave if you’re so damned unhappy?” he shouts, jabbing his index finger in the air between them.

Tears come to her eyes but she refuses to let them fall, brushing them roughly away. She starts stacking the dishes.

This is all I need, she thinks. Shit. Every time things get really rough he asks if I’m going to leave. I guess that’s what happens to

people who have been divorced: They always think it'll happen again, they lose confidence. She tries to remember how many times he's asked her. Twenty, thirty? Each time she'd been overwhelmed and immediately tried to make things better. But this time she doesn't feel sad. She's angry, fed-up. She realizes it's just part of the game to get her to give in. She turns to him.

"Is that what you want, Ron? Do you want me to leave?"

He pauses a second. His face doesn't reveal a thing but she knows he's surprised.

"All I want is for us to get along," he says too loudly in the still house.

She begins running water into the sink. All she can think of is leaving her home, leaving Bonnie behind. I've invested so much in this, she thinks. My energy, my love, my youth. Is it all for nothing?

"Let's not quarrel," he says. "You're upset about your eyes."

He walks over and puts his hands on her shoulders. She shrugs him away and begins wiping the table. It's amazing the mess three people can make, she thinks.

And where does love enter into all of this? She remembers how she used to love him, how she used to be "sexually willing" as he so bluntly puts it. But the years of marriage have made things different. I like having him beside me in bed at night, she thinks, but I hate the constant sexual availability of marriage. I hate knowing that I am expected to have sex with this person no matter how I feel — no matter what unresolved differences linger between us, no matter the lack of passion. You lose control over your body, your personal boundaries blur and melt. You feel indistinct. When they make love she wills her body to cooperate, concentrates on closing her mind, succumbing to the purely physical pleasure. But the tension comes out and she hears her teeth grinding. She knows he hears too, but he doesn't say anything, just keeps on using her body.

It's odd, she thinks, I began by loving him for the ways he was different from me — his easy-going nature, his obsession with literature, his disdain for the mundane — and I ended up demanding that he be just like me. It's like we're all petty household gods, trying to re-create each other in our own image.

Ron's not talking to her again but she doesn't give a damn. She has nothing to say to him.

She has a lot of back orders to fill. She's busier than she was at Christmas. She advertises for an assistant and looks around for a bigger workshop. She often goes back to work in the evening to finish up sanding and varnishing. Her tables are getting bigger, more elaborate. She has started experimenting with paint. She mixes that magenta, paints jagged holes and squiggles on a black background. She tries different colours, textures, working late into the night, loving it, listening to the radio or old jazz tapes — Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington — avoiding Ron. She tiptoes to bed, carefully around the squeaky floorboard near the door. He's always asleep.

Her eyes seem to be doing fine. She doesn't even see the black spot. She thinks it's remarkable how her right eye has completely compensated for the spots of lost vision in her left. Her next appointment isn't for six months.

On Ron's hockey night she quits working early and goes to bed to read for an hour or two. Tonight she opens the window in her bedroom, brushing aside the dead cluster flies. There's a real smell of spring in the air: decaying leaves, dampness, melting dog shit. A breeze floats through the stale room, touches her face and bare forearms. She sits down on the edge of the bed, her face toward the window. She looks out at the half-moon and it's marred by a black spot. A new one? She closes her right eye. There are two spots now, the old one small in comparison. She begins to weep uncontrollably, gasping for breath like a small child.

Dr. MacDonald says to meet him at the clinic at eight again. She lies in bed, staring at the ceiling. Ron comes in after twelve. She pretends to be asleep, concentrates on breathing regularly. I'm in this alone, she thinks. She finally dozes for a few hours before dawn. She doesn't dream. She wakes up before his alarm goes off and slips out of the house quietly without leaving a note.

She waits at the clinic for the drops to make her pupils dilate, clutching the edges of her chair. Dr. MacDonald says it's the same thing, another blood vessel growing into the fovea. He says this time it's even

closer and her stomach lurches. He lasers again, but this time he's not so optimistic.

"I may not have stopped it. I was afraid to go too close. Keep an eye on it."

An eye, she wonders. Which eye? *Keep an eye out. See you later.* Sight platitudes race through her mind.

She sits in the waiting room for a while, looking out the window over the patches of snow clinging to the roof vents and elevator shaft. She waits for the vessel to grow. She knows she will lose the sight in that eye. Her nose tickles, lips purse. Tears sting the winter-dried skin on her cheeks.

But I still have the other eye, she thinks, the better one really, the stronger one. I still have that.

