

# When the Dark's All Done

by Mary Zdrojowski

4:00 a.m.

Lucy lay squished against the far side of the king size bed she and her husband, Russ, had bought so they could sleep in stretched-out comfort. She had been five months pregnant with their second child and, in the store at least, the bed had seemed more than sufficient space-wise. She remembered the awkward feeling of trying out the bed while the salesman stood close by and how Russ, in typical fashion, had just stood there also letting her ask all the questions.

Lucy woke and saw their six-year-old daughter, Jenny, sleeping sideways and their four-year-old son, Timmy, nested in at the foot of the bed. Lucy sighed forcefully as much to vent her frustration as to awaken Russ. Getting no response, she got up and hauled the children back to their beds. She resented that she was the one who always had to haul the kids out, always had to tell them to brush their teeth, always had to go to school conferences, always had to clean up the baby's puke. It was as if Russ weren't even there.

Lucy returned to bed and tried to return to sleep. Russ's snoring set her thinking that life with him during the day wasn't a whole lot different; when she wanted to talk, he might just as well be asleep for all the effort he put into the conversation.

6:30 a.m.

The alarm went off, waking Lucy who had just fallen back asleep. She, in turn, went in and woke Jenny for school. Russ was already downstairs reading the paper. He had made coffee, for which Lucy was grateful, and a mess, for which she was not.

Lucy began to make breakfast while Russ read, and Jenny whined because she couldn't find her shoes. "Ask your father to help you, Jenny," said Lucy.

The baby started crying upstairs at the same time the toast popped up. Lucy hurriedly buttered the four pieces, stuck them in the oven on warm, took the boiling oatmeal off the burner and started towards the upstairs to get the baby. On her way she noted a shoeless Jenny watching cartoons and a prone Russ with the paper turned inside out and quartered to the crossword puzzle.

"Do I have to do everything around here?" Lucy said somewhat rhetorically and added more directly, "Russ, can't you at least help Jenny find her shoes?" He muttered something and threw the paper down in reply.

Lucy stomped up the stairs and stepped barefooted in the dirty diaper that a proud Timmy had taken off the baby and left on the floor.

7:30 a.m.

Jenny's schoolbus arrived, and she departed. Russ exchanged his robe and slippers for a three-piece suit and a pair of wingtips, planted

a round of kisses carefully avoiding getting his tie glazed by the baby's snot, and left for the "real world," leaving Lucy in what she logically extrapolated must be the "unreal world."

Lucy watched her husband of ten years drive away and moments later become a mere dot on the horizon in the picture window. She wondered if in his rear view mirror she, too, shrank to nothingness. She gave a shrug, turned slightly and stopped when she noticed the reflected light from the television behind her turned the window into a mirror. A moment ago the window had framed a scene from outside, her freshest memory of Russ. Now the view was of the inside and Lucy studied what Russ must have seen.

Lucy saw her short brown hair matted against her head from sleeping and a used Kleenex peeking out of the pocket of her faded robe, which hung on her like a wet paper towel. Timmy, his back towards the window, was oblivious to the graham cracker crumbs cascading down his chin as he sat absorbed by the television show and the man in the cardigan sweater telling him that "you are special." The baby was lying on the floor, his rounded tummy holding him too high for his flailing limbs to help him crawl and looking like a turtle on its back in reverse. Lucy saw the baby spit up and wished the milky little puddle were just on the window and not running into the carpet fibers.

8:00 a.m.

Lucy went about housecleaning with the intensity of a good work out. She warmed up by bending and stretching to pick up clothes, toys and the detritus of children. Twenty minutes of vigorous floor scrubbing, dusting, vacuuming and stair climbing worked her aerobically and left her sweating. She cooled down by dressing the kids and unloading the dishwasher. She surveyed the house and the order which had emerged from the previous chaos and felt good.

Lucy put the baby down for his morning nap, plugged Timmy into some story books with corresponding cassettes and went upstairs to shower. She luxuriated in the steam and could hardly see around the bathroom when she had finished. She opened the door to let some of it escape and dried off.

As the vapor gradually dispersed, the foggy mirror began to clear from the bottom up. Lucy saw parts of her begin to appear and tried to appraise them as Russ might. First to come into sight were her legs — long, lean and not yet marked by veins. Next, hips — gravity and three kids had taken their toll, but still nothing to be alarmed about. Her belly was a little saggy and showed some stripes of motherhood, but nothing a swimming suit couldn't hide. Lucy had regretted her smallish breasts, but when she saw them to be yet high and firm, she decided the pendulous boobs of older women weren't anything to rave about. Her arms were nicely toned, neck smooth and face a little thinner than her college days.

Russ used to tell her that a man could fall into her big blue eyes and drown. She wondered if he still felt that way. Except for a small mark

on her cheek where last week Dr. Clark removed a mole, her face looked pretty much the same as it had ten years ago. All her friends told her she looked young. All her friends except Russ.

10:30 a.m.

"Mommie, I wanna go to the park," said Timmy as he crawled up on the couch and rattled the newspaper Lucy was reading.

"Mommie wants to finish reading the paper," said Lucy.

"But I wanna go now," he whined trying to crawl into her lap.

She pushed the child off her lap and began the same paragraph for the fourth time.

"I WANNA GO NOW," he demanded and kicked her leg for emphasis.

As Lucy slammed down the paper, sprang from the couch and tried to grab the fleeing boy, the baby's cry from upstairs and the phone ringing in the kitchen caused her to halt her step in mid-air indecision. When her foot came down, she was headed for the kitchen.

"Lucy? Dr. Clark here."

The small boy buzzing around the kitchen and the screaming baby upstairs faded into the background as Lucy's senses became focused on the call. Doctors don't call. Receptionists or nurses call, but doctors don't unless it's serious.

"Yes. What is it?" she asked. Lucy felt her heart begin to beat faster.

"Hopefully it's nothing, Lucy," began Dr. Clark, "but I want to be sure. I sent a sample of tissue to the lab and the report just came back."

"But you said it was just a mole and nothing to worry about," said Lucy, waiting for him to quell the fear that was beginning to reach her conscious mind.

"Lucy, there might well be nothing to worry about. The report said that the specimen was a carcinoma *in situ* which simply means . . ."

"Cancer."

"Very early stage cancer, Lucy. There is a difference. This should be highly treatable."

"How is it treated, Dr. Clark?" Lucy asked as she touched the small spot on her cheek. She thought of how her mother had, over a matter of weeks, been gradually whittled away under a surgeon's knife.

"That depends on how far, if at all, it has advanced. Lucy, can you come in tomorrow for some further tests? I don't mean to alarm you, but I think you'll feel better."

"Yes, of course. I'll be there." Lucy hung up the phone, grabbed the still racing Timmy and held him close against her as she tried to stop shaking.

2:00 p.m.

Lucy kept busy so the dangerous "what if" questions simmering just below her conscious thought would not rise and cause her to fall apart before Russ got home. She fed the kids lunch, then cleaned the

refrigerator, jettisoning the leftovers of questionable age. She sharpened pencils, updated her sitter list, straightened the linen closet and took down the kitchen curtains to wash. She realized that the last time she had washed the curtains was just before the baby was born and she knew she would be gone for a few days.

Lucy tried to call Russ. She needed more than the doctor's standard assurance of "nothing to worry about." She needed Russ to tell her how much he loved her and that he always would.

Russ was in a meeting.

4:00 p.m.

Jenny and Timmy watched cartoons while the baby bounced in his walker and swatted at the toys stuck on with suction cups. Lucy was in the kitchen fixing dinner and everything had fallen into the comfort of the evening routine. Russ would be home soon and Lucy felt she could be positive until then.

Lucy selected a large potato to bake for the three kids to split. As she scrubbed it, she noticed a bad spot on it. She began to cut it out with a knife and realized the spot extended nearly all the way through the vegetable. Lucy jammed the potato into the disposal, turned it on, and felt a wave of nausea rush through her.

6:00 p.m.

Lucy paced in front of the window waiting for Russ to come home. As she saw his car approaching, her first impulse was to run out and meet him and blurt everything out at once. She was held back, though, by the realization that they could talk more rationally after the kids were in bed and not there to interrupt.

Russ walked in the door and was tackled by Jenny and Timmy whose shouts of "Daddy's home" drowned out all six kids in the *Brady Bunch*. Lucy went about putting dinner on the table and within five minutes had everyone seated and eating. She was grateful for the spilled milk, bickering and fussiness of her children; it added to her feeling that all was normal.

7:00 p.m.

Lucy washed Jenny's long dark hair — hair the same color as her own. Combing out her daughter's hair had been a special time for Lucy. The ritual was somehow intensely private; a quiet moment between mother and daughter when they shared secrets. Tonight Lucy wondered, "How much longer will she be little? Will Jenny one day have a little girl whose hair she'll comb?"

And welling up inside Lucy, gaining momentum against her effort to control it was the question, "What if I die — who will love my child and fix her hair and share her dreams?"

7:30 p.m.

Lucy readied Jenny and Timmy for bed drawing out the ritual. With a sudden urge to linger on this quiet time, she found herself saying, "Yes, one more story. Yes, four more kisses. Yes, I love you, I love you, I love you."

She picked up her infant son and held him as if he were a dancing partner — her cheek against his tiny one. Though his feet hung down no further than her ribs, his giggle reverberated through their touching cheekbones and went gently coursing down to her toes.

8:00 p.m.

Her babies asleep, she went down to Russ.

Lucy was surprised at how calmly she related her previous conversation with Dr. Clark to Russ. At the word cancer, he turned from the football game on television and looked straight into Lucy's eyes. She felt as if he were looking deeply into her, almost to her very soul. When he said, "Don't worry. It won't do any good and everything will be all right," she felt as if she had perceived something that wasn't there. She had wanted him to say something less shallow, something that didn't ring so hollow in her ears. What Lucy longed for was a verbal potion or word elixir to ease her fear; what she got was a pat on the head.

9:00 p.m.

Lucy got ready for bed and stood in front of the mirror examining the mark on her face. She wished she had microscopic vision and could pick up any stray cells. Everything looked normal, but would it tomorrow?

She went to bed glad that Russ was still downstairs. She found it hard to be close to him when the chasm between them was so wide.

1:00 a.m.

Lucy woke up disoriented. The darkness told her that morning was still a long way off, and her extended leg told her that she was alone. Fear flared in her heart, and she knew why. Lucy could no longer distract herself or find something else to do. She tried to erase the images of grieving children, of Russ trying to make dinner, and of herself with parts of her body being carved away in a sterile operating room. The fears became tears and she buried her face in her pillow to muffle the sobbing she could no longer control.

Lucy noticed that it was suddenly hard to breathe. Russ had nested in behind her with his arms around her as if he were a parent restraining a child in a tantrum. She screamed that she was afraid of dying, afraid of becoming something so ugly that he wouldn't be able to look at her, afraid that her children would be motherless.

Russ said nothing throughout Lucy's sobbing, only lay there with his arms around her. And when the dark was done and morning had come, she knew that in the agony of her loneliness, he had held her heart.