

In the Doghouse

Clarence didn't realize his wife was missing until the game was over. She had been sitting on the couch beside him, watching the game, but she left at the end of the fifth inning. Or maybe it was the sixth inning. Yes, it must have been the sixth inning because Murphy had just hit into an apparent double play, but it was under review. His wife said she was going somewhere to get something, but the umpire was announcing the results of the review at the same time so Clarence didn't catch all the details. He caught the announcement that the ruling on the field was upheld and the inning was over, but he wasn't quite certain where his wife was going or what she was going to get.

It was only after Olsen hit a walk-off home run in the bottom of the tenth that Clarence realized his wife hadn't returned. He wasn't worried, because she often went into the bedroom to read when a game got tense. She didn't like the stress when it looked like her team might lose. Clarence began to get a little uneasy, though, when he looked in the bedroom and she wasn't there.

He didn't think she would have left the house, but he checked the garage just to make sure. Her car was still there. He started looking in every room of the house. First the upstairs, then the main floor, and finally the basement. He got very concerned when he didn't find her anywhere.

He was pretty certain she hadn't gone outside, but he turned on the outside lights and stepped out the front and rear doors just in case. No sign of her. He started looking upstairs again, this time calling her name and looking inside closets and other unlikely places. He wasn't shouting because he didn't want the neighbors to think they were having an argument, but he was sure he was calling loudly enough that she could hear him if she was nearby.

He began to panic when he hadn't found her after the second sweep through the house. Then he remembered the root cellar. They called it a root cellar, but it was really more of a pantry - a cool, dark closet in one corner of the basement off the laundry room. They had no idea what the original owners of the house had used it for, but carrots, potatoes, and onions seemed to keep well in that room so that's where they kept them, along with preserves, pumpkin pie filling, and other foodstuffs they didn't use very often. He opened the door and saw his wife sprawled out on the floor.

"Emily!" he shouted as he dropped to his knees to check for a pulse. She jerked into a sitting position when he yelled and they almost banged their heads together.

"You're OK!" he shouted in relief.

"I'm not OK," she said. "I've been trapped in this root cellar for hours. I called and called, but you never came. Finally I got so tired I lay down and fell asleep."

"I was so worried about you," he said.

"I told you I was going to get vegetables to make stew tomorrow. You weren't listening."

"I was listening," he said. "I knew you were going somewhere to get something. I just didn't remember the details. How'd you get trapped in here?"

"I opened a bag of onions and they rolled all over the floor. I bent over to pick them up and accidentally banged into the door. It flew open, bounced off the washing machine, and slammed shut. I tried to open the door but it wouldn't budge. I told you months ago that door handle didn't work right."

"I fixed it," Clarence protested. He turned around and examined the doorknob.

"See here," he said, pointing to the base of the doorknob. "It's one of those old-fashioned doorknobs that clamp onto the shaft. I tightened it, but it must have worked its way loose again. Guess I need to replace it with a new one."

He looked up, but his wife wasn't looking at the doorknob. She was staring directly at him, and she didn't look happy.

"I guess you do," she growled. "You were too cheap to buy a new one when I told you this one wasn't working, and I got locked in the root cellar as a result."

"Why didn't you call me?" Clarence asked.

"Because my phone is upstairs in the bedroom," she retorted. "I don't carry it everywhere I go, you know. I didn't expect to get locked in the root cellar because I assumed you'd fixed the handle!"

Clarence had often suggested they had reached the age where they both should keep their phones with them at all times, just in case they fell or had some other emergency. He sensed, however, that this wasn't a good time to bring that up.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really did fix it. It just broke again."

"Sorry didn't keep me from being locked in that root cellar for hours!" she said as she stormed out of the room. Clarence just stood there, feeling dejected. A minute later she stormed back into the room. Without a word she grabbed an armful of vegetables and stormed back out again.

Clarence stood in the laundry room for a long time after she left. He wanted to give her time to cool off, and he didn't feel much like talking anyway. He was too busy feeling miserable. He knew he'd screwed up. He wasn't paying attention when she told him where she was going, and he was too focused on the game to realize she'd been gone too long. He should have started looking for her earlier. And most of all, it was his fault she'd gotten locked in the root cellar. He was certain he'd fixed that doorknob, but he should have come down to check it every now and then. It had slipped once, so it stood to reason it might slip again. He was really in the doghouse this time.

Eventually he turned out the basement lights and trudged back upstairs. He knew he'd be spending the night on the couch. He was surprised, though, when he got to the top floor and saw the bedroom

door was closed, with nothing in the hall. Usually when she was mad at him she threw his pillow and a blanket into the hall before she closed the door. How was he going to sleep on the couch with no pillow and no blanket?

He went back to the main floor and rummaged around in the coat closet. His overcoat would provide some warmth, but it wasn't long enough to use as a full blanket. It also wouldn't feel very good wrapped around his shoulders, since it doubled as a raincoat and had a cold, slippery outside surface. His wife had a fuzzy pink bathrobe in the closet. Their daughter had given it to her for Christmas one year, and she kept it downstairs because she liked to wrap herself in it when they were drinking coffee in the breakfast nook on cold winter mornings. He also found a hooded sweatshirt. He carried all of these to the family room, took off his shoes and his trousers, and lay down on the couch. He wrapped the bathrobe around his upper body and covered his legs and feet with the overcoat. He wadded up the sweatshirt to use as a pillow. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing.

Clarence had almost fallen asleep when something told him he was being stared up. He opened his eyes and saw his wife standing over him.

"Aren't you coming to bed?" she asked.

"Oh," he answered. "I thought you were mad at me."

"I am mad at you," she said, "and with good reason. But I got to thinking. I knew you weren't paying attention when I told you where I was going, but I didn't think it was important at the time. And I was as mad as a wet hen when I discovered the doorknob didn't work. I thought you'd never fixed it. But after I got back upstairs I remembered it worked OK a couple weeks ago, after I'd told you it was broken, so I realized you must have fixed it. And mostly I realized I really should carry my phone around, like you're always telling me to. I do take it with me whenever I go outside, I just never figured I'd need it in the root cellar. So, while this is still your fault, I could have done a few things differently myself."

Clarence stood up and opened his arms to hug her. "I love you," he said. "And I'm sorry for how I screwed up tonight."

She hesitated briefly before stepping forward and hugging him back. "I love you too," she said. "But no kisses, because I'm still mad at you."