

Blanket of Ivory

by Teresa Houle

Diane couldn't shake her compunction. Though eight and a half months had passed, nothing felt right anymore. Their conversation played out in her dreams, and stilled her during everyday errands. "Do you want me to go or not?" Vince had asked, stuffing a forkful of warm cabbage roll into his mouth.

Could you at least taste the food I spent all day making?

Diane calmed herself before continuing; she didn't want this to turn into another fight. Not in front of Jonathan.

"It's not that I want you to go," she said. "I'm okay with it. I'm letting you." She knew that she didn't really have a choice. He was going to Eastern Europe whether she liked it or not.

"My parents will help you out with Jonathan and I'll only be two weeks," he said.

For years, Vince had been talking about this trip, but when he started looking up flight information, Diane lost hope that it was just a fantasy.

Her sauerkraut tasted bitter and she made a face. "I'm not helpless you know. I think I can handle being home alone with our son for a couple weeks."

"Exactly," he said, smirking, as if he was proving something.

It would be nice to have some time apart.

Jonathan was six at the time; he knew that his dad was going on a trip someday for all he talked about it. Diane worried that his father's actual departure would send Jonathan into a depression. He was a very sensitive child who waited patiently for his dad to come home from work so they could play hockey in the basement.

"Who will play hockey with me?" he asked.

"If I play hockey with you, then who is going to make dinner for us?" she answered, smugly.

Diane didn't roughhouse like Vince did.

"I never said you were helpless," Vince said. "But if you need a hand, you know that my parents will jump in."

“So it doesn't need to be said then.” She tried to hide how upset she was over him leaving, but there it was. *He always gets his way!*

The phone rang late at night. Vince's connecting flight in Bucharest had burst into flames during take-off. *Smoke inhalation due to faulty oxygen masks.* He and twelve other passengers died inside.

Not a day went by that she didn't loathe herself. She could have claimed that she couldn't handle being alone, or that she thought Jonathan would suffer. Her stomach twisted in knots when she tried to sleep.

I should have kept him home.

She spent the first three days in bed, drugged on Valium. Her in-laws came over daily to help out. They handled the news more gracefully than she would have, had her son died in the plane.

Eventually, as the need for Valium wore off, she had a shower. Sweat and tears washed down the drain. She used scented shampoos, conditioners, and body wash for herself while Vince had only used Ivory bar soap and dandruff shampoo. The soap sat in the holder, as Vince had left it. Its smell overpowered her floral products until it filled the room. It was like being in his arms.

“I miss you so much,” she whispered, reaching out to the soap.

Jonathan had his own holder for his clear glycerin soaps. Neither of them would touch the Ivory.

In time, the bar diminished. She knew that it would disappear, one day. She wasn't sure if either of them would be ready for that.

“The bathroom smells like Dad.”

“Yes, it does,” she said, smiling at Vince's carbon copy.

Jonathan took to sleeping next to Diane most nights when the dreams of his father were too difficult to bear, and she relaxed slightly, having someone on his side of the bed.

One day in the shower, she missed the scent of the Ivory soap. The bar was reduced to mush in the holder. While toweling off, she went into the cupboard and opened a replacement. The smell of Vince filled the room. Diane smiled, glassy-eyed.

That was two months ago.

Diane marveled at how long a bar of unused soap could last in the shower. She and Jonathan never spoke of it again, but she was sure that the smell also affected him. No fresh bars remained, so she put it on her grocery list.

That weekend, in the soap aisle, another woman was standing directly in front of the Ivory soap and the generic store brand.

"Excuse me," Diane said. "I just need some soap."

"Here you go," the woman said, handing her a generic bar.

"Thanks, but I need the Ivory."

"This is cheaper, and you're only paying for the smell of that stuff."

"Exactly."

