

# Addicts

by Tree Riesener

She doesn't have to huddle in misery because he won't sit there with her and just *be*. Anyway, he does it a lot of the time, smiles and tries to enjoy the quiet evenings, television, at a certain time a treat, something she has baked that they can comment on as they drink the decaf that won't disturb the long suffocating night in the double bed.

So they have to move around a lot, but it just takes a little effort. You don't have to live out of boxes until the next move. Look at people in the military. They do it all the time, get their orders, pack up, unpack, make it nice, even enjoy new places, joke about the gypsy life.

He tries to jolly her along.

"Here, let's make a game out of it. See who can empty a box and find a place for everything first."

As long as he does it with her, she smiles wanly, droops on the floor, fishes things out with her tired white hands and then gets into the spirit of the thing and empties two or three boxes.

But when he comes home the next evening, she won't have done anything, expects him to fire her up again. Just emptying boxes, for Chrissake, it wasn't as if she had to get a job, work, really contribute.

She could do what he does, take courses, join things. There's bonsai, and then carpentry, and as he finds more and more need for involvement, there's always a shabby little church where he finds funding for a new roof so the fungoid, spongy old one no longer smells and drips, and then he says there's no problem getting money for a new heating system, and he organizes bingo and hoagie sales and finds a matching grant, and as the church settles down into a comfortable winter, he finds the fire department, locates the shack to burn down for practice, learns first-aid, CPR. Most of these things have social events but he goes alone.

He thinks well, she's okay, she's comfortable, that's her way, to turn off the telephone and leave the answering machine on. Maybe he could ask her again to join his activities, maybe she's waiting to be asked. It's hard to know, but before, she answered vaguely and let her sentences sort of trail off at the end, evading his eyes and changing the subject, and he thinks she will find other ways.

When she lies pale and watery in tepid bath water, he sneaks quick glances into the scrapbooks where she tapes clippings, the diaries she keeps hidden in drawers, the "research" she vaguely refers to. Where has it gone, her brain, at one time she had been a good student, had promise.

Will her reading, saved texts, favored photos give him a clue? She's getting weirder, dreamier, quieter. Will he have to give up the kiss of life, the screaming journeys on the back of the fire truck, the letters of thanks from the congregation? What in hell is in her mind? She doesn't even fight him now, just cries and runs into their bedroom, shuts the door, turns on that music, and the next morning he sees the scattered scissors and tape, newspaper scraps on the floor.

There is never a time when he can really get into her stuff, try to find out what she is thinking, but one day she must go away overnight to an aunt, to help sort out the papers from a dead husband, and he knows that that will be the night and he doesn't go to the fire house, or the church, there is no night course, no town meeting, no paths to shovel or grass to cut for the old neighbor.

His heart thuds, his chest rises and falls quickly with childish memories of his grandmother's damp, earthen cellar, a feeling of something ancient and terrible waiting to happen, as he carries his cup of coffee to the table in their bedroom where she keeps the diaries, the albums of clippings, and her scissors, and paper bags for the debris.

He stares at the row of albums, so subtle and terrible, not clear and easy to read like leaking roofs and the screams of victims, noting any irregularities of placement that could give him away in

case he's not supposed to look, it's so hard to know her intentions, maybe he was supposed to look a long time ago.

He didn't think there would be girlish confidences, hopes, dreams but he is shocked, appalled, by the little boys aging at ten-speed, already wizened old men ready for cancer and heart attacks with toy trucks in their hands, skeletal women beloved by men, half-ton men young women's darlings, kidnapped executives buried for safekeeping like a squirrel's nuts for winter, agonized deaths, couples committing suicide in search of their drowned baby, Siamese twins, obituaries, beloved companion of, beloved wife of, beloved sister, son, daughter, friend. Accomplishments listed. Beloved husband of, fundraiser for churches, life-saver, fire-fighter. Sarajevo.

Where in hell does she even find all this? And is this all there is? What will balance this? Where are dried prom corsages, grade school poems, concert programs, college term papers, campaign buttons, hair ribbons, photographs, letters tied in blue ribbons?

Where is baby laughter, the first dive off the high board, Chanukah gelt and Christmas candy, stolen kisses, grandmother's lap, the exotica and promise he married her for, him a fostered orphan drawn to her security, the big noisy family, ancestors tucked inside her for generations, like a Russian doll?

He replaces the volumes so carefully that he thinks she will never know and is as hearty with her as ever, continues his community involvement, helps the ill, the sick, the poor.

"You're doing great," he says to the dying heart attack as he rides in the back of the ambulance. "You'll be out dancing next month!"

He goes on, addicted to the fervent thanks of night-awakened women as he fits the oxygen mask over their husbands' faces, gives them shots that keep their hearts pumping as they are strapped to the cot, rushes them into the night with sirens screaming.

When he returns to her, he knows she is waiting to be filled by him, waiting for him to fit together with her and say yes, now he has come home, never to go away again, but he's tired from fighting the

fires, organizing the festival, running the fundraiser and he puts it off night after night.

The night comes when she lays unconscious way past dinner time, and he's getting himself a snack when he realizes she is still sleeping, thinks about his meeting that night, thinks he will take her up a cup of tea and then hears the stertorous breathing and shakes her, and his trained hands tremble and almost fail him as he tries to jab the buttons on the phone.

After she is pumped out and he comes for her, they hold each other tearfully. She sobs, over and over, "You saved my life. I would have died. I don't know why I did such a stupid thing, but you saved me!" The rush of love in his heart surprises him and he finds it easy to be tender, to care.

He doesn't need his meetings for a while and everybody assures him they can get along okay, considering, you know, everybody understands, you take care of your wife now, and we'll get along without you until she's better.

So he is able to get in to work a little late the first week and that lets him fix her a breakfast tray, things she likes, toast with the butter sinking in and a poached egg in her childhood's little glass chicken. He calls her from work several times a day and rushes right home after. No, no need to go to the church, to the firehouse, to the township building.

She is all he needs to take care of for a while, and as he tucks her in and makes her take her vitamins and listens to the self-help tapes with her, he wonders why he has never realized how satisfying home can be, but she does get better and puts on pretty dresses and has the long blonde hair cut into a belling pageboy bob. He convinces her to join a swimming class at the high school and she starts to make a quilt, then soon he has to go to the firehouse again and find other limp and pallid people to rescue.

They go through it again, a slight variation as she stuffs towels under the garage door and attaches a hose to the exhaust. He wonders briefly at such initiative, for she has gone to the hardware store for a dryer exhaust hose and got a new yellow rope to fasten it

to the exhaust, but her timing is pretty good and he is just coming home from work when her face is going pink. He doesn't feel quite as alive tending her this time and hates feeling impatience, guilt, longs for the sirens and rushing through the darkness toward the unknown crisis.

By the time she is reading garden books on the front porch in the sunshine, he knows she lacks imagination and will do this again, and somewhere deep inside he realizes he'll be able to stand it only by being the one helped this time, and he sees himself being distracted from his grief by rescuing more and more damaged and desperate people.

