

THE OLD WIFE

When I came to Dr. Singh's office regularly, years ago, I would arrive early and sink into one of the cushy chairs to have a good read in his fresh *New Yorker*, *Architectural Digest* or the usual childrearing periodicals you'd expect in an OB/Gyn office. The waiting room is full today and as quiet as a library. Even the two toddlers appear to be reading at the little table in the corner. Everyone seems patient except one woman directly across the room from me. Nikki Gordon. She must be in her late thirties by now. That child-like short hair of hers isn't looking so good these days, the pixy turned a touch butch. She's gained weight and she's wearing a big shirt, but my guess is, she isn't pregnant.

It's tough living in a small university town—everyone feeling proud of themselves to be part of this liberal community where every child no matter what his family's income receives swimming and skiing lessons. We have so many good things to offer, just no privacy when things go wrong.

After my husband left me for Nikki, one of his students, I wanted to take our two teenagers back to Manhattan where they could suffer in anonymity. I was longing to escape the almost unbearable load of pity the town was rushing in my direction, but the counselor said the children should be near their father, especially our son Kevin. Kevin,

himself wouldn't give me any kind of signal regarding his needs as though having an opinion would implicate him in the mess.

Karen, on the other hand, was about to be a senior in high school and asked me to stay. So I bargained for a better, though smaller, house and stayed. Both kids are off on their own now. I won't say they're settled – whatever that amounts to these days – but they are grown up enough to be kind to their mother.

Arnold did love the children. Other than his work, they were his only passion. Helpless against this one irrational bond, he was like seaweed swept back and forth by the tides of their tempers. After he told them that he and Mommy wouldn't be living together anymore, Karen yelled at him, "Why are you doing this to me?" He turned to me wide-eyed, breathing through his mouth. *Help me.* In the past I had always told him what to say to the children, and I'd told them how to approach him. This service was part of my obligation to people who were foreign to each other.

Having always been a hands-off father, Arnold's arms couldn't naturally gather his children to him. And without me to write his lines for him, he was also mute. Kevin wasn't speaking to any of us. Karen had a tantrum every time she had the chance, and those flare-ups appeared to have worked for her. Soon both kids moved on with their schoolwork and friends, and left me to my second-rate lawyer and Arnold to his superconductor and his fiancée.

The poor man had no idea how all this had happened to him. He had his head in *Low Temperature Physics* and never saw her coming, the smart girl who made him think he was a god. I had never done that for him. I told him he was handsome which he

still is. His main attraction for me had been that he *needed* me to get his life under way, to upgrade his wardrobe and jump-start his social life, to teach him about real food and wine that came with corks. He assumed that this coaching would include sex, which it did, so he played along. But when I looked at him across the table in the lawyer's office at the time of our divorce, I saw no evidence of my influence. He and his sweetie pie were probably eating spaghetti crowned with Chef Boy R Dee and washing it down with Gallo.

What I must admit on Arnold's behalf is that I let him go without a fight. I could have gotten a better lawyer. I could have made the divorce financially prohibitive. I could have put on a seductive counter assault. But I took the position that I wouldn't stand in the way of his happiness. Which was a lie. That first night he didn't come home to me, a surge of hope and wicked excitement charged through me. Could it be that Arnold's passions had expanded beyond the children and the superconductor?

And now, here is the hot young thing, fifteen years later, finally coming to see Dr. Singh who handles all our wombs, fertile and barren. Poor Nikki, she is perhaps the real victim of my not fighting for Arnold. Isn't that what the wife is supposed to do, what the young sweetie expects her to do – to stop them before it goes too far? Did she wonder when I was going to take him off her hands? Or was she desperately in love, greedy for this treasure, this tenured professor, occupier of the Fletcher Chair in Physics, the giver of papers in London and Bombay who'd raised the temperature by fifteen degrees, for God's sake, at which the superconductor would conduct. What lusty sophomore physics major could resist all that?

So maybe she is happy, fulfilled. She graduated and got a job at one of the journals in which Arnold often published. That journal later published a paper of hers. Maybe everything is ducky. But as I look across Dr. Singh's waiting room at her, I don't think so. Everyone in town has been waiting for that next edition of Gordon offspring, waiting discreetly I'm sure, but with such brainy parents it's like when two basketball players get married, friends can't help but speculate about the height of the children.

And perhaps, today she sees me across the room, preening in my maternal fulfillment, all the work over – diapers, adolescence, even menopause. I'm here about a pesky yeast infection. Dr. Singh hasn't seen me in years. Is this Nikki's first visit or is she well down the line in the quest for fertility? Has she gotten to that visit where the good doctor nods his head, ear to shoulder in that Indian way, and shrugs. "Nothing wrong with you. Perhaps we should have Dr. Gordon in for a sperm count."

Wait! I sit up straight, my body going cold, my mind running to catch up. Nikki won't handle her situation the way I did. I ran sperm tests on Arnold for five years. I knew how to read a thermometer and watch the calendar. And I knew when to accept that it wasn't going to happen. I could look ahead, see my husband's bewilderment, his disbelief, his embarrassment. And what was almost as bad, the sympathetic eyes of the town as we exhausted all scientific avenues and turned to a sperm bank. How, people would ask, could we ever find a donor worthy to stand in for a genius?

I remember the day I pulled the plug on my long experiment. I had just paid another visit to Dr. Singh where he again told me, "Nothing wrong with you." I had looked at myself in the mirror. I was 28, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, still totally juicy in

my own opinion and aware of a golden opportunity: another young man who needed me to get his life under way, to upgrade his wardrobe, to jump-start his social life. I had already begun tentative, motherly efforts in this direction. Arnold's lab assistant. Christopher came to our house often anyway. He was shy enough, good-looking enough, loyal enough to Arnold to keep my secret. And his graduate assistantship lasted just long enough for a repeat of what had the first time been an almost overnight success.

All these years I've thought I was so smart. I told myself that Arnold and Nikki were probably using every kind of birth control, so that they could always devote themselves to science. What was I thinking! Now, here she is.

I stand up. I must stop her. She will put her faith in science. They will exhaust every avenue. If Arnold is sterile, where did I get my two children? What will I tell them? Will my daughter Karen want to seek out the lab assistant, run him down on the internet? I promised him that nothing like that would ever happen. My brain is swelling. Lights are flashing. I can't breathe. I take a step toward her. Wait! Arnold could have had the mumps or chicken pox *after* our children were born. I turn to sit back down. But she saw me rise, and she is rising.

She bends beside my chair. "Could we speak?" she whispers.

We go out onto the weathered porch of this old colonial Dr. Singh has converted to an office. I smile blandly, trying to erase the fact that I almost approached her. What would I have said to her? Don't expose me? Don't put your faith in science? In fifteen years in your embrace has he learned passion?

Looking lost, she stares at the toes of her running shoes. It is cold here on the porch, and I want to put my arms around her.

“Sarah,” she begins. “We’ve never been friends.”

I nod and wait.

She looks away, down the street toward the University. “I’m thinking of leaving Arnold,” she whispers

“No!” I cry. I mean it. I don’t want her to leave him. He will wander back to me. “Why?” I ask.

She stares at me, her eyebrows up on her forehead. She thought I would be the one person to understand. But I have let her down, again.

“I haven’t told anyone,” she says.

“That’s smart. This town.”

“I just want to slip away.”

“Sure.” I take her cold fingertips between my warm palms. “Have you found someone else?” I ask.

“I’ve been so lonely.”

I give her another nod, the least I can do.

THE END