

“HUSBAND IN CHARGE”

by Erma Bombeck

I once read a poll of what husbands think wives do all day long. The results were rather what you would expect.

Thirty-three percent said women spent five hours out of each day putting lint on their husbands' socks. Twenty-seven percent said they spent four hours daily pouring grease down the sink and watching it harden to give husbands something to do when they got home. A walloping 58 percent said women divided their time between watching soap operas, drinking coffee, shrinking shirt collars, discarding one sock from every pair in the drawer and lugging power tools out to the sandbox for the kids to play with.

I thought a lot about that poll, but I never mentioned it. I figured that someday ... sometime ... somehow ... some man would pay for those remarks.

Some man just did.

The other day, I was summoned to Ohio to help my mother, who had had surgery and was going to be flat on her back for a few weeks.

“Are you sure you can handle things around here?” I asked my husband. “The kids, the cooking, the laundry, the whole routine?”

“Does Dean Martin know how to make a drink?” he sneered. “Of course I can handle this stuff. You just go off and do what you have to do and don't give us a thought.”

I didn't give them a thought until I was paged at the airport just before my flight took off.

“One quick question,” said my husband. “What does ‘Bwee, no nah, noo’ mean?”

“Who said it?”

“Whadaya mean who said it? Your baby just said it and looked kinda desperate.”

“It means, ‘I have to go to the bathroom.’”

“Oh. Well, that’s all I needed to know. Have a good”

“It also means, ‘I want a cookie. Where are my coloring books? The dog just crawled in the dryer. I am floating my \$50 orthopedic shoes in the john.’ The child has a limited vocabulary and has to double up.”

“I can handle this. It’s just that she looks so miserable.”

“It also means, ‘It’s too late for the bathroom,’” I said, and ran to catch my plane.

There was a message awaiting me at Mother’s, so I called home before I unpacked.

“What’s up?”

“No problem” he said cheerfully. “It’s just that Maxine Milshire just called and can’t drive the car pool tomorrow because she’s subbing for Janice Winerod on the bowling team. She can do it today ... unless it rains. Her convertible top won’t go up. However, if the weather is decent she can trade with Jo Caldwell, who is pregnant and three weeks overdue, but who has a doctor who was weak in math. That means I will drive Thursday unless Jo Caldwell’s doctor lucks out. In that case I’ll have to call Caroline Seale, because I have an early meeting and it might rain. Do you understand any of this?”

“No.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow night.”

When I answered the phone the next night, there was a brief silence. Then, “I hope you’re happy. I am now the only 38-year-old boy in my office who has been exposed to German measles. And my job is in jeopardy.”

“Why is your job in jeopardy?” I asked.

“Because your son answered the phone this morning while I was putting catsup on sandwiches and told Mr. Weems, ‘Daddy can’t come to the phone now. He’s hitting the bottle.’”

“Tomorrow is Saturday. It’ll get better,” I promised.

The phone rang early Saturday.

“Hello,” I answered. “This is Dial-a-prayer.”

“Oh, you’re cute,” he snarled. “Real cute. Just a couple questions here. First, where are the wheels off the sweeper?”

“On the back of the bicycle in the garage.”

“Check. When was the last time you were in the boys’ bedroom?”

“1996.”

“Check. What do you do when you have perma-scorched all the perma-press?”

“I’ll be home in two days,” I said.

When he didn’t call me on Sunday, I called him.

“I can’t talk right now,” he said irritably.

“Why not? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing is the matter! I bought a box of chicken for dinner, and the box caught fire in the oven.”

“You’re supposed to”

“Don’t say it. Then your baby chose a rather inopportune time to get a penny stuck up her nose; I’ve got 35 boys in the bathroom watching

movies; I just tried to make a drink, and there are no ice cubes. And ... Maxine Milshire just called to say I've been named Homeroom Mother!"

I arrived home early in the morning. My husband staggered to the door. "My wife gives at the office," he mumbled.

"I'm home," I announced. "Tell me, why is there an X chalked on the side of our house?"

He rubbed his eyes tiredly. "A baby-sitter put it there. I think we're marked for demolition."

I wandered through the house, thinking it was too late. The dog was drinking out of an ashtray. There was a pad of blank checks by the phone with messages scribbled on them. The blackboard bore a single inscription: "I am leaving, and I am not coming back. Daddy."

"Why is the baby sleeping in the bathtub?" I asked.

"She drank four glasses of water just before bedtime."

"There's a crease on your face shaped like a duck."

"I had to separate the boys, so I slept in the baby's bed."

After breakfast, my husband leaned over to kiss the boys goodbye. They turned away. "He murdered our guppies!" one of them snapped.

"We'll talk about that tonight," he said.

Then he turned toward me. "Goodbye, dear. You'll find everything shipshape. I mean, all you have to have is a routine. By the way," he whispered, "could you call and let me know how Lisa makes out on 'As the World Turns'?"

As I watched him leave, I thought to myself that he looked too old to be carrying a Donald Duck thermos and a security blanket, and sporting a red rash on his neck.