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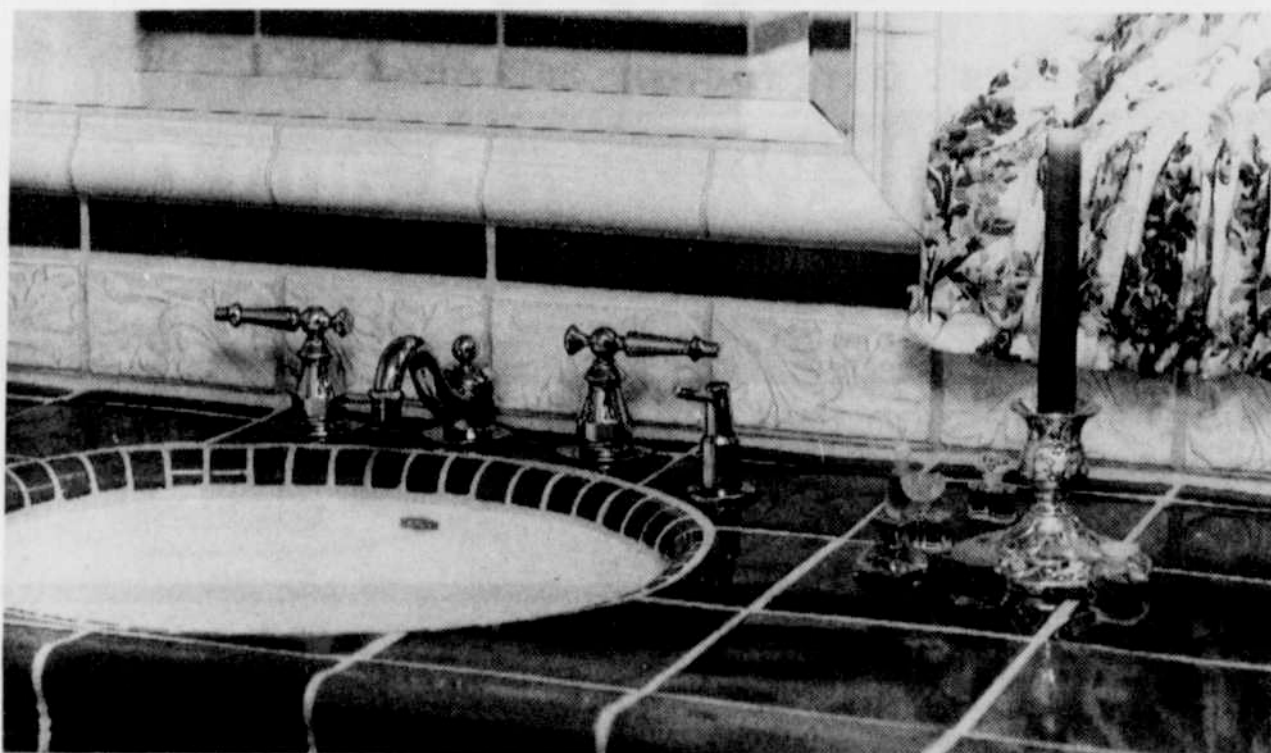
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Without her

*I miss my mate—my keel through life,
my shelter from the storms*

by Lee Lynch

Only for two weeks. We're not talking major breakup here. As a matter of fact, we'll celebrate Valentine's Day when she gets back and a sixth anniversary this year.

Just two weeks. Not even two weeks in a major metropolis fraught with danger and temptation. Two weeks with her mom to bird-watch. But see, that's why it's a matter of survival. Even if she calls nightly, this half of the couple is susceptible to the lonelies without her. And there's no sadder phrase than "without her."

I'm not saying I won't enjoy "batching it." Briefly. There are certain advantages to living alone—setting one's own schedule, not having to accommodate anyone else's needs—aren't there?

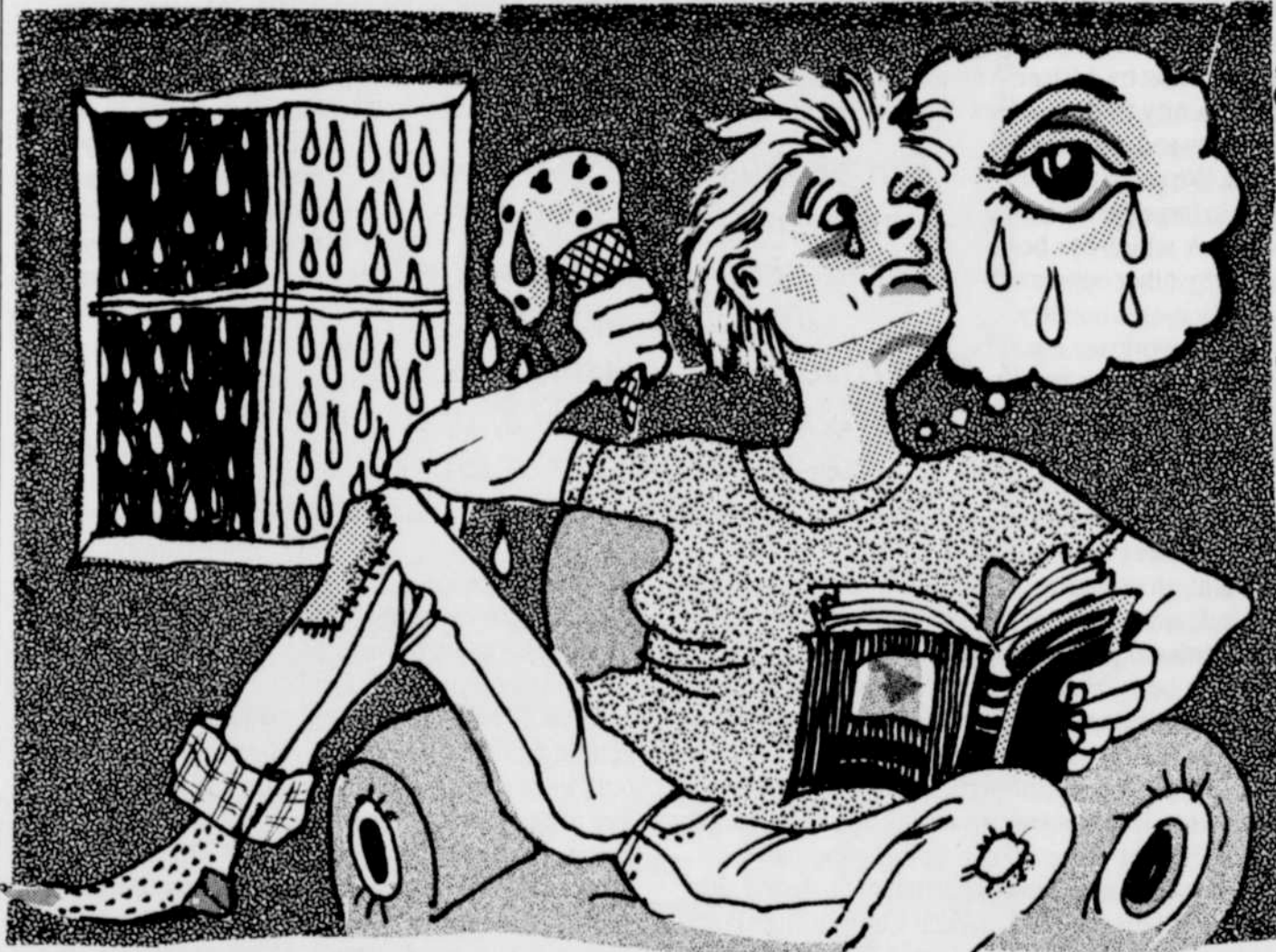
Already I've got my menu planned. If I don't have enticing tidbits to anticipate, I'm likely not to bother feeding myself without her. Boca Burgers and tortillas, and maybe I'll make myself a big ol' pot of baked beans (we have different food allergies at the moment). How about some ice cream with carob chips? Maybe I could even get to the point of looking forward to my solitary meals.

I know if it's any good?

The real scenario goes something like this. Remember hearing about those rains in California? Roads closed, people evacuating, killer creeks? Well, we're just north of California and the rain isn't respecting any borders. Lover leaves in a few days. I expect I'll keep doing what I've been doing all week—playing in the mud, black boots up to my knees, rain-suited from head to boots, trying to divert rivers of runoff water from our gravel road, and building a little dam (no dykes allowed in Oregon) to keep our well house from flooding. With two more major storms predicted, I'll barely notice that Lover's gone.

Then, too, it's the time of year when I sequester myself in my office all weekend to pore over columns of numbers, bundle up hundreds of receipts, and trundle it all through the wet streets to share with the accountant. Lover's lucky to miss tax season.

The worst of it is, it's not just gloomy outside. If disaster does strike—doesn't it always, when Lover is away?—and I'm stuck at home with the roads and electricity out, trying to heat up canned



Meals are the least of it. I'll finally have time to put up the new bird houses. Then, when Lover returns, we can watch all the little bluebird couples move in together. I'll bet some of them have six years together, too. And maybe I'll visit people we never get to see when we're home together enjoying each other's companionship, too content to go out.

I'll write more, instead of cozying up to the wood stove with her, maybe do a short story to surprise her when she comes back. I'll fix that squeaky drawer so I don't wake her on the rare occasion when I get up first. I'll read! I'll catch up on all the review books languishing on the to-be-read shelves, but she won't be around to listen to my complaints and raves. I'll work more hours at my job to buy her an extravagant Valentine's Day gift. I'll have a Sonic the Hedgehog Spinball marathon with the hand-held game she gave me for the holidays. I'll run over to the coast, though I can't imagine walking on the beach without her to show me the rare agates and jaspers she spots.

The truth is, I probably won't do any of it. I'll be lucky if I get my usual stuff done without Lover here. I'm even writing this column early to make sure it gets written at all. Without her, how would

beans on the wood stove and mopping up the melted ice cream from the freezer, where's the fun in it without her? I actually love the rain, the raging waters, the whipping winds, the brute power of nature humbling her tormentor, mankind. Still, rain or shine, I miss my mate—my keel through life, my shelter from the storms.

It's the little things that make it rough. Like the things that go bump in the night when Lover's not here for me to reassure—or to reassure me. Like taking a break from a long, long day of work and knowing that her hugs left with her. Like silently discharging the endless weekend chores because no one's around to grumble to. Like being reminded constantly that Lover may be femme, but she's the one with the strong arms. Like listening to the evening Newt on Public Radio when Lover's not around to share the horror.

The news is that, in the vast scheme of things, even Newt's a blip, and winter storms always go away. The sun comes out. Lover returns safe and sound. And suddenly I'm bobbing and grinning at the window then running to her and stumbling all over myself to carry in her luggage, tell her everything, and soak up all the hugs I can get.