

Topic: Wild card, but all stories were required to use the words or phrases “the 2008 elections,” “gas prices” and “dog park.”



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Fiction

2nd Place

The Test

By Cullen A Curtiss

When Clare pulled David into the bathroom, he'd been kneeling on the floor of their bedroom following the instructions on how to set the VCR clock for more than an hour.

Through the pregnancy test's plastic window, they watch the baby blue stripe bleed. She tells him to hold the instructions up beside the tester, to compare the stripes. Using her digital sports' watch, she keeps an eye on the numbers, forgetting and then remembering the time it all started as if her mind is blinking open and closed. They don't speak, but she can hear David thinking—not about what this might mean, but about how to react.

The growing stripe is soundless but very loud behind Clare's eyes and in her chest—the same shocky reverberation she feels when she is up too high, on a ladder or a chair lift, or when a confrontation is imminent. A door slams in their apartment building, and she takes a quick breath. Then a dog barks once, and her head throbs.

Holding the instructions, David's hand is tentative and twitching. Like a squirrel, she thinks. How unattractive.

The stripe stops growing. The minute is up. Probably at the same time they both realize it is foolish to keep staring at the results, but they keep staring, much the way she's seen people do at the pump as they watch gas prices rise unabated. It cannot be true. This isn't fair. Someone should fix this.

Clare thinks about how close she is to exploding, how close she is to destroying the stillness by throwing up her arms and coming into contact with every single object in the room—the test, and then the incense holder and leopard-print soap dish in one swipe. She stands up. He follows.

Clare is doubtful that she'll get what she wants, but feels she has reason to expect something from David right here, at this moment. A hug perhaps, and a particular kind. Not a dismissive, charitable, or pitying one, not one that involved patting or petting. Nor a deep and smothering one, accompanied by the drama of tears.

And certainly not this. His shoulders in his ears; his palms open and unsure. His twisted mouth, his skittish eyes.

When her mother killed herself a year ago, he skulked for days. He obsessed about quieting the noisy things in their new apartment: the drip of the kitchen faucet, the front door hinges, a rattle in the ring of the phone. If only he could have rubbed her back or asked if she wanted to sleep alone, instead of assuming that she did. Only recently had she forgiven him for being unprepared to act, for not treating her the way she wanted—for being David.

But now he is holding his breath, waiting, as if he is nine and has broken a special mantelpiece dish. As if her pregnancy is entirely his fault, and he is saying, "I'll never do it again as long as I live, I swear," and also as if he is completely innocent: "It wasn't me. I didn't do it. He did it."

If only he would do something with his hands, say something with his head, with his heart. Declare something. Anything.

"Whatever you want to do, Clare, I'll do," he could say. He could put his hands

on some part of her body, some place no one else would touch her, like on her butt or her neck.

She would accept that—it might not be as much as she needed, but it would be enough. She'd much rather slap him for being wrong than for being a coward.

She begins counting. She's seen parents do it to their kids with great effect. Of course, children understand the rules. She knows it is slightly unfair. She should tell him what she's thinking, but there's just too much. And only barely can she remember the stuff at the beginning—when he bought her a plane ticket to introduce her to the farm where he grew up. He showed her how to milk a cow and made pancakes for her with berries from the property. By twenty, she promises herself she'll walk.

One, two... David sighs and stuffs his hands in his pockets, making fists. This habit is only acceptable when he can't decide which movie to see, or whether to take Stella to the dog park or on a hike. And then, even, perhaps it's not because she has to make the decision and then be responsible for it going bad.

Five, six... David embarrasses her. Drinking in social situations, he is first obsequious, then boastful, and then more boastful, while everyone else is just normal. He namedrops authors he's met, celebrities who have his name in their Blackberrys. As the lead Democratic Party organizer for the 2008 elections, he does know more people than most, but why does it have to matter so much? People seem impressed, but she knows that they're just being polite because they always excuse themselves. But it's worse when he isn't drinking. He either broods all night, one inch from her, as she circuits the party or he claws at her, claims her to the point where it's messy and red where his hands have been. She thinks she should want this kind of attention, but it feels desperate and people look at her like they are sorry. She doesn't tell him about all of the parties she goes to anymore.

Nine, ten... her best friend outlawed discussing David a year ago. Until Clare has new insight, her sisters also don't want to hear it. Recently, even Clare has omitted the fact of him in her life on occasion. Even when he is jerking inside of her, dripping sweat in her eyes, she has mastered taking herself away. She has memorized the swipes in the plaster walls of their bedroom, devised a set of landscapes of city and country. She provides her body, sequesters the rest, and is amazed he doesn't notice. It occurs to her that it's a miracle—that a life could be born under such conditions. Maybe ~~it was~~ meant to be? Part of some master plan? But to teach her a lesson or because she really did love him?

Thirteen, fourteen... people have suggested a therapist, but she knows she would have to explain why she's been David's girlfriend for the past two-and-a-half years. Convenient, always there. But isn't that something?

Seventeen, eighteen... the truth is there were men before David, men during David, men she imagines will be in her future after David, but none of them are sticky like he is. They say what they think, but what they think is hard to hear, and then they don't stick around. It has always been like this.

She looks at David with a stare that she gives no one else, least of all herself. There is a large dose of resignation in it, making her mouth curl and her forehead divide into lines, but it doesn't feel awful or boring. Her eyes give her away. They are not narrowed. If they could just start anew, she thinks.

By the count of twenty, his eyes are blinking. The light begins to buzz and dim as it does when it's been on too long. He shifts the weight on his feet.

"Clare?" He pinches clumps of hair in his beard.

"What, David! What?!" She shouts in his face, grabbing his arms.

He backs away. "I'm just... just..."

"You're just unbelievable!" Clare pushes him against the glass door of the shower stall. "Damn you!"

She runs into their bedroom and grabs her keys, her coat, and her bag. Turning, she sees David in the doorway of the bathroom and he is fingering a button on his shirt. She can't think of a time he's looked more ridiculous and she wants to say something flip like "Ciao" or "Sayonara," wants to kick him in the balls, butcher his beard, or tell him she has just never been a happy person, and that she needs his help. But she can't find any words. The going is all she has. It would mean everything if she could just do it. So, she does it.

"You can't leave," David demands, as if he is trying out for the part of a general in a play.

Hearing this, Clare turns in the doorway and sees, not David at first, but the VCR clock. It is still blinking 12:00. Midnight or noon, she wonders. The beginning of a new day or a continuation of the same?

"I can't leave?" Her head throbs again and the adrenalin makes her hands ache.

"I don't want you to leave."

"Now?" Her voice feels like it's coming out of her ears.

"Ever."

"But." She stamps her foot. Isn't it all too impossible?

And before she can think it, he is stripping her body of her coat, keys, and bag. She wants him to keep going, to take everything off of her. She wants to grieve in heavy hot tears for the disrespect, and the waste.

"David, will you..." she begins, but he is already pulling on her shirt and pushing his mouth into her neck. She lets herself breathe deeply and drops her body into his arms.