

The Belief of Feeling by JANET ARNOLD-GRYCH

He dropped into the chair, absently scanning the diplomas on the wall. She gingerly lowered herself into the chair beside his. He didn't really want to know. She wanted him to, desperately. And so he had consented.

For 24 hours, until the implanted fragment dissolved, his brain would be convinced that he, too, was pregnant. The technology was still relatively new but their neighbor had gone through the procedure to better understand his mother's dementia and couldn't stop talking about the intimacy of the experience. That's what had sold her.

Hers had been an exhausting pregnancy. Morning sickness has passed the baton to relentless fatigue then on to constant indigestion and now to pulsing back pain. It all left her feeling quite flattened. The suggestion that she was "glowing" or beautiful seemed wholly laughable to her. She didn't even feel like combing her hair most days. But then, as if to apologize for the unfortunate trappings, the baby would move, and she would soften, mystery and wonder enveloping her. For a few moments, she would feel lifted by soft images of tiny toes and gummy smiles.

For his part, yes, he'd agreed it was the right time to grow their family. But her constant complaining across these many months had not enhanced his experience. When she told him the depleting pain required her to start her leave early, weeks in advance of the due date, he felt some empathy but more concern about the accompanying financial hit. He wanted to ask what the difference would be between sitting in front of a computer screen and sitting in front of a television but caught himself in time to reinsert the pin into that grenade. Still, he couldn't understand why, since she was now home, she couldn't just wash the pots that seemed to be in a constant tower in the sink.

He knew this was supposed to be a magical time yet he just didn't feel excited by any of it. It was too unreal. He was too removed. The sonogram looked like some alien image. Even assembling the crib had seemed more like mowing the lawn—just another task—than readying space for his progeny.

Even in her bedraggled, swollen state, she felt his lack of interest. And so she suggested, then pleaded, then nearly demanded that he feel what he was missing. Now they were waiting in the small exam room, quiet, separated by more than space.

The doctor knocked and entered at the same time, chirping a greeting. "What an exciting day," she declared, looking up from the chart. "Pregnancy is one of our most asked-for experiences. The expectant parents I've worked with have really bonded over this shared experience. Any questions? No? Then let's do this."

"Let's do this," she echoed, reaching for his hand and leaning in, her eyes wide across her large belly. With a soft whoosh and a small wince on his part it was done. "Take it easy for the next 24 hours--and enjoy," the doctor added before exiting the room as swiftly as she had entered. Alone again, they rose, he hoisting her elbow. They moved into the hallway, he half a beat behind her, wondering if he'd have time to mow the lawn later.

He turned on the car radio as they approached the highway. "Anything?" she asked on a stiff inhale as the baby leaned into her diaphragm. "It's only been five minutes; you know it can take up to an hour," he said. "If at all," he added under his breath. The music tried to hold the space between them.

Ten minutes from home he became aware of the acrid smell of old coffee, remnants of the cup he'd left in the car this morning. His stomach lurched a little. He then began to shift in his seat, trying to find a position to lessen the emerging ache in his low back. And why did he suddenly have to pee so badly?

She couldn't help herself, couldn't wait for him to offer up something and so she leaned across the car seat. "What are you fee-ling?" she asked, elongating the words, practically holding out her hands to catch everything she imagined him about to say. "Just a bit out of sorts, I guess...more of a general weirdness," he replied as nonchalantly as he could. "Can you feel it? Can you feel the baby?" she pleaded. "No, nothing that specific," he clipped. "I just...I just really need to get home."

Pulling into the driveway, he opened her car door and ran into the house, leaving her to hoist herself and lumber as quickly as she could into the house. When he came out from the bathroom, he was wearing a distant stare and something in her knew to be very still and to wait. He walked to the couch and stiffly sunk into it. Never taking her eyes off him, she walked to the armchair and lowered herself into it as silently as she could.

The muffled ticking of the clock down the hall was the only sound for what seemed a very long time. And then, without saying a word, he rose and walked to the kitchen. Bubbles began to emerge from the sink as he filled it with hot water. She softly followed him and paused in the doorway, one hand on her belly, her neck craning forward.

He turned to face her, mirroring her wide-eyed gaze. He didn't speak, couldn't speak. He slowly turned back to grab the crusted skillet on top and immerse it into the warm, soapy water, lost in reverie of what it would feel like to wash ten perfect little pearl toes and gaze into a gummy, angelic smile.

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