The Test

Jordan Meier

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol29/iss2/24

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inscape by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Nick awoke to a screeching alarm clock rapidly dragging him out of his dream. It had been a good dream, too. Gabby. Yes. Gabby had been in it. Nick tried to remember more, but couldn't. He sighed and stepped into his ratty blue slippers, the terrycloth feeling rough against the bottom of his feet. Everything today seemed to be exaggerated: the light slipping into his room through the slits in the blinds felt like ultra-violet lasers, burning the hairs off his forearms. His room seemed especially messy—every dust mote had its own identity, its own purpose. His jaw hurt, probably from grinding his teeth. The third step on the way downstairs seemed to creak louder than it had last night. He could hear the television perfectly—not the usual drone he awoke to every other day.

His mother was making breakfast. She had already laid pancakes on a ceramic plate in front of the chair Nick usually sat in. She had set the table for five, as she usually did, as if Greg was going to step through the front door and join them. Nick wanted to tell her to stop—Greg was gone.
They'd never hear from him again. That was life. They had to get over it.

"I thought you could go ahead and start," his mom said, watching Nick stare blankly at the plate in front of him. "Today's the big day. Need a big breakfast so you can do your best, huh?"

Nick slid into the wooden seat, the coldness of the hard surface seeping through his pajama pants.

"Syrup?" she asked. She stood over him eagerly.

"I'm not really hungry," Nick told her. He pushed the plate away. "I think I'll be good with some juice."

He could see he had injured her a little—she only wanted to help—but what good was it now? It wasn't like eating a huge breakfast was going to make Nick perform any better on the test. He knew she wanted to avoid another Greg situation, but she wasn't going to help Nick at all. It just put more pressure on him.

"Do you feel like you're ready?"

Nick's sister, Allie, walked into the kitchen. She sat next to Nick and poured some juice into his cup.

"I think so," Nick replied. "I mean, I studied really hard...I'll just have to see what happens."

"Do you want to go over some stuff before we leave?" his mom asked. "Algebra? Calculus? Geometry? I know those were the ones that got you hung up the most."

Nick felt his impatience with his mother grow to pure anger. Could she just leave him alone for a second?
He wasn’t in the mood for his overbearing mother to put pressure on him. He had enough pressure. From Gabby, his father, Allie. It didn’t matter what he studied; he knew what he’d be tested on, but he didn’t know where he was going after the test. No one knew. The unknown scared Nick more than anything, but he couldn’t tell anyone. He had to cope with it—this was the way things were now.

“I don’t need help, Mom,” Nick said sharply, his voice a piece of jagged glass. “I just need some quiet before we have to leave! Is that too much to ask?”

He couldn’t look at his mother—he knew he had crossed the line. Her chin quivered, a promise of tears to come.

“You know how much it hurt when Greg—” she stopped, gasping, fighting the urge to break down. She let out a long, pain-filled sob. “I can’t—I can’t do it—I can’t do it again.” She ran out of the room, her hand over her mouth, muffling her cries.

Nick’s dad sauntered in shortly after his mother disappeared.

“This is an emotional day for your mother, Nick,” he said in his deep, baritone voice. He rested his hand on Nick’s shoulder. “It’s an emotional day for all of us.”

“I’m going to get dressed,” Nick said, and with one swift movement, he was out of the kitchen and up the stairs, leaving his breakfast to grow cold.

“Here we are,” Nick’s dad announced. The rain pat-
tered lightly on the windshield, a white noise that could lull Nick to sleep. He rubbed his eyes, blurry from lack of sleep.

"Do you have everything?"

He patted his pockets. "Pencil, calculator, ID—yeah, I think I've remembered it all."

He stepped out into the rain, the water seeping down the back of his shirt. He felt numb all over—he didn’t care if he got soaked. What did it matter in the end, anyway?

His father rolled the window down. "Good luck, son," he said. "We'll be back to get you at seven."

The proctor stood in the front of the room, wearing a suit and tie. Nick saw Gabby being escorted to her cubicle. He saw John Reynolds, his friend from the first grade, and waved nervously at him. The line was getting shorter. There was a half an hour before the test. In front of him was Whitney Miller, who had given Nick a valentine in the third grade and had been his first girlfriend several years later. She was shaking, her whole body a quivery mass, ready to fall apart at any moment. The guard at the door took her shoes and looked at her palms. He patted down her pockets and made her empty them. Whitney cried silently, her tears sliding down her face and onto the floor, splashing as they hit the tile.

Soon, Nick was being escorted to his cubicle. He put the headphones on first, adjusting them carefully, to be sure to hear absolutely everything clearly. He got out his
pencils and his calculator and set them on the desk in front of him. Now, all there was left to do was wait.

"I'm Mr. Morris Howley," the voice in the headphones said. It was the proctor—Nick recognized him from his father's dentist office. "The test will start in two minutes. Every section is timed. Every test is different to ensure that cheating does not occur. When you are given your test, you will wait until my word to start. There will be one five minute break and one thirty-minute break, during which you will eat lunch. You may not speak to anyone during this entire process. Failure to comply to these rules will result in automatic failure."

Nick's palms were damp. He rocked back and forth on his chair, attempting to calm his nerves. A hand dropped a paper through the slot, and almost instantly, Nick heard, "You may begin."

Gabby and Nick waited anxiously with the others. Now that the test was completed, they were able to talk to each other. No one said much—they were mentally weak from the test and emotionally weak for what lay ahead of them. "You have to promise me that you passed," Nick said to Gabby. "You have to be here with me."

Gabby closed her eyes. "I wish I could," she said. He enveloped her in his arms and held her. He breathed in her scent, making a memory of vanilla and peppermint. He tried to imprint the color of her eyes in his memory,
just in case. They were sea-foam green with glints of gold in them, near the pupil.

At 6:55 the parents were allowed to come in and join their children. Parents hustled to their sons and daughters, asking them too many questions at once. The quiet of the hall erupted into a frenzy of nervous chatter. Nick saw his father making his way down the hall without his mother.

"Where’s Mom?" he asked as his father approached. "She couldn’t deal with it," he said. "Being here—Greg—it was too much for her. She’ll see you when we get home."

Reality was starting to set in. Nick’s future was to be determined in less than five minutes. What would he do if he failed? What if Gabby failed?

Nick loved everything about Gabby. He loved the way she ate corn on the cob—in a circle, instead of in long rows. He loved the way her eyes were the exact color of mint ice-cream. He loved how she volunteered at the hospital, helping old people. He loved (and hated) how she cried after work, feeling the loneliness of those who never got any visitors. He loved the way her upper lip twitched when she was concentrating on something. He loved that she loved animals. Twice, she had taken in orphan cats and nursed them back to health. She road horses on the weekends, and she mesmerized Nick with the way she could stand so close to that strong animal, and be so gentle with it, clean-
ing out its hooves and brushing its mane with such precision. He loved the way she treated her family with the utmost respect. He loved the way she helped her brothers with homework, the way she made her dad dinner when he was going to be home late, the way she offered to baby-sit on Friday nights when her parents went off to their seminars. He loved the way her front tooth was a little crooked, and that she refused to get it fixed, even though Nick’s father offered to fix it for free. She claimed, “It gives me character.” He loved the way her hand fit effortless in his. He admired her compassion and devotion. These days, people didn’t have the kind of compassion that Gabby had. Gabby still cared about people. She wasn’t looking to get ahead with money or fame. She wanted to just be a good person. She wanted to be someone to whom others could turn. Her warmness, her affection—it was something that Nick wanted to bottle and keep with him forever.

Before Nick knew what was happening, a lady in a sleek black suit and a grim sense of self-worth in her eyes walked down the hall carrying a heap of envelopes. Nick held his breath as he listened to the click of her pointy-high heels on the linoleum.

She stood in front of the students and their parents, looking at her clipboard. She slowly brought her reading glasses to face, letting them rest on her nose.

“Okay,” she said, her voice like skin ripping across saran wrap. “I’ll call out your names, and I will hand you an
envelope. Inside are the results. We will open them after they are passed out to all of the participants. Under the results are instructions on what to do following the test, given the results. If there are any questions, you may call the number at the bottom of your letter when you arrive at home.”

Nick’s father gently set his hand on his shoulder, squeezing it slightly. As more and more people got their envelopes, the din of the hallway died down more and more, until Nick could hear his heart pounding inside of his chest. The lady called Nick’s name, and he felt his feet propel him forward, his hands grab the envelope, and his feet propel him back.

The wait was over. This was it. Nick slowly opened the envelope, his father looking over his shoulder.

“No matter what this says, Nick,” his dad whispered, “you’re always going to be my son. I will always love you.”

Nick looked at the paper and held in his breath. On the top of the page was his full name: Nicholas Wentworth Carmichael. Under his name was one word: Pass.

Nick exhaled heavily and hugged his father. “Well done, son,” his father said into his ear. “Well done.”

Nick looked over to Gabby. She was crying. Her mother had buried her head in her arms, shaking violently. He didn’t dare ask her how she did. He didn’t know if he could talk to her—he was too afraid of the results.

Marco Conursi’s mother threw herself at the feet of the
lady who had distributed the results.

“Please!” she screamed. “There must be some mistake! Please! They can’t take away my baby! They can’t take away my baby! Please!” She collapsed on the floor, sobbing. The lady stepped over her and walked back down the hall, saying nothing, reacting to nothing.

Nick looked at Gabby. She walked slowly over to him, shaking her head. He took her into his arms, burying his face in her glossy hair.

“I—I didn’t pass,” she said, on the verge of a new round of tears. “I—I’m sorry—”

“Shhh,” Nick told her, rubbing her back in circles, the way she liked. “Shhh.”

Gabby sobbed into his shoulder, holding onto his waist tightly.

She nodded, then collapsed back into his arms. She looked up again, sniffing. “I’m scared,” she whimpered. “What—if I never find anyone else like you?”

“You have to find someone. You have to be happy.”

“How do you even know that I’ll be allowed that, where I’m going? How do you know I’ll be allowed to be happy? We know nothing about where I’m about to go. And...and I have to do it alone. Without you. Without my family.”

Nick told himself to stay tough. If he acted scared, Gabby would have a sure breakdown. He pushed her dark hair out of her face, and leaned into her, gently brushing his lips against hers. They kiss slowly this time, making memories of one another, remembering the contours of each
other’s faces. They were saying good-bye without speaking. For a split second, Nick wondered how he’d be feeling if he had chosen to deliberately fail the test; if he knew that his future lie with Gabby. He pictured his mother, her swollen eyes dried not from comfort, but from lack of energy to cry anymore. She would shut down completely—she sort of had after Greg—and Allie would be stuck with a ghost of a mother. Allie needed her mother. There were some things her father wouldn’t be able to do or say quite like a mother could. Nick couldn’t hurt her anymore than she’d been hurt before. He knew that he had to say good-bye to Gabby forever.

“Why?” Nick cried to his father. He could barely find the words to say. His voice was low, raspy, pleading. “Why does it have to be like this?”

“You know why, Nicholas,” his father said calmly, his hands gripping the steering wheel. “This is the way life is now. We can’t change it because you and your girlfriend can’t be together anymore.”


“Nicholas, I know you’re hurting right now, but then one day you’ll see. You’ll see that all of this is for a reason. It’s for the greater good. Before all of this—we were stuck. There weren’t cures for cancer yet, and technology was not progressing at all. It was at a standstill. Since the
program started, scientific breakthroughs are occurring daily. Technology is advancing at rates we have never seen before.”

Nick stared out the window. He couldn't look at his father. A lecture? Honestly? What Nick needed was for someone to understand.

“So you think it was okay for them to ship Greg away?” Nick accused softly. He wiped his nose. He faced the window as he spoke to his father, to keep himself calm. “You think it was okay for them to take my older brother? Mom's son?”

“We knew when we had kids that this could happen,” Nick's dad said. “We blame ourselves for what happened to Greg, but we don't blame the rules. We could have handled Greg's situation better, and we didn't. Those are the rules, Nicholas. It's the law now—it's been the law for the past twenty years. And for the most part, it's worked to our advantage. They cured my sister's cancer in a matter of weeks. And look—look at dentistry—if I had a bunch of idiots on my staff, we'd never be where we are right now. The innovative technology we're using—it's mind-blowing.”

Nick said nothing for the rest of the car ride home. He hated his father at that moment. His father had no sympathy. He knew, deep down, his father was right—it was the law now—but Nick vowed to never let himself feel the way his father did—ever. He was never going to become so heartless.
Nick remembered Gabby's plan to save the rainforests—when there were rainforests to save. He remembered when she beat up a much older boy who made the claim that girls were no good at soccer. He remembered the time that she made fliers for her neighbors when their dog ran away, and that she spent the day riding around town, posting them everywhere. It seemed unfair to Nick that his life would have to go on without Gabby's spirit, her charm, her devotion.

Nick walked through the door, his face grey and emotionless, like concrete. He trudged up the stairs and down the hall to his bedroom. As he passed Greg's room, he saw his mother sitting on his bed. Greg's room hadn't been opened in years. His mother immediately noticed his presence in the door frame. She was holding his yearbook from a few years ago, open to his soccer picture. He was smiling with a trophy after his team won. Below the picture, his name and the exact date was printed. “Gregory Carmichael. September 24, 2031.”

Nick cleared his throat. His mother came out of her trance. She closed the book, set it down, and focused on the son in front of her. “How'd it go?”

Nick's face crumpled. His mother covered her mouth, afraid to speak. Her eyes teared up.

“Don't you tell me—”

“I passed,” Nick said quietly. “Gabby—” He was choking back tears. “Gabby didn't.”
The next morning, the crickets shrieked noisily, the moon still shone in the steel grey sky. Nick lay away in bed, listening for the bus. He could hear Gabby's mother, bidding adieu to her daughter. He could hear the sobs of her father, who usually acted so macho that Nick was intimidated. He heard the roar of the engine, the halt of the brakes in front of Gabby's house. He could hear her cries. They broke his heart.

As he walked downstairs to the kitchen, he expected no one to be up. His mother had left the front door open, and he could see through the bay window that his mother was embracing Gabby's mother, rocking her back and forth, assuring her that Greg would take care of Gabby, and that she knew, she knew, she knew how it felt.