Test Pattern

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Abstract

They played the National Anthem and said the sermonette. Sharon watched the test pattern for a few minutes, and then she flipped the set off...
Rummaging through the bureau drawers for her glasses, Mrs. Popham frowned when she heard a heavy thud from the porch. Rushing to investigate, she found Mr. Popham slumped over on the floor clutching the letter and holding his left shoulder in an awkward position. In her fright, Mrs. Popham wrenched the letter from his grasp, noting the unusual number of dirty fingerprints on the envelope. "Dear God. Oscar, oh what shall I do? No one's around, no phone. I'll run to the lodge and call a doctor." And as she got to her feet, the wind came up suddenly over the lake, swept around the summer cottage, and slapped hard at the windows.

Test Pattern

by Donna McKee

English, Senior

They played the National Anthem and said the sermonette. Sharon watched the test pattern for a few minutes, and then she flipped the set off. She leafed through an old magazine restlessly. Car lights reflecting off the living room windows sent her flying to look outside. The car passed and she collapsed onto the sofa again. Pete had been due home two hours ago and she hadn’t heard from him. Sick with worry, Sharon imagined the worst. She could see the moving van he drove, overturned in a dark ditch, or cut in two by a speeding train. She began to gnaw the pink polish off her thumbnail. Another car's passing made the pain in the pit of her stomach worse. Her hands shook a little as she gulped down a tranquilizer that the doctor had prescribed for her nerves.

Sharon gazed at the phone. Someone was going to call soon, she knew. The caller would say, "Mrs. Thomas, I'm
sorry, but there's been an accident. Your husband.

She shook her head violently to make her mind stop producing such horrible thoughts. Sharon was terrified. She should have known that it would come. It had to—sooner or later. She had been waiting for it ever since that day, years ago, when her mother had taken her aside. She and Sharon sat on the couch together, and her mother had taken Sharon's little hand.

"Everyone has their own cross to bear, dear. One day God will test you to see if you are a worthy person. He's tested me with your sister's death," she had said. Sharon hadn't really understood it then, but in the last few years she had been constantly waiting for her testing day. Oh, from time to time she would forget it, but whenever she was really happy, or exceptionally carefree, she would remember. It would seem only logical at those times that it was to come soon—that one great tragedy. She had lived through twenty years with nothing even remotely horrible happening to her. I've been too lucky, she would think over and over again. She had a good home, nice parents, clothing, food—and now she was happily married. I even got the chance to go to college, she thought, and I've never even known anyone who has died—except Betsy. But that was Mother's test, and I was too young to be aware of unhappiness when my little sister died.

Sharon wrung her clammy hands and peered out the window again, her mouth automatically shaping the words of the old prayer. Every day she said it. Every day she begged that it wouldn't come today.

"Dear God," she whispered, "not today; please keep him safe." She turned away from the window, unable to see anymore through her tear-filled eyes. She knelt beside the couch and clasped her hands together. "Not this time," she sobbed, "please!"

The fear wasn't new. Every Christmas Eve since she was seven or eight she had felt the same awful terror. Everyone was so happy at Christmastime. Sharon would sit up in bed on Christmas Eve, trying to stay awake so that she could prevent any disaster. Every year she wondered if this would be
the time for the house to burn down, killing her parents and brother, leaving her orphaned.

Then there were the Friday nights. Her mother and father would go grocery shopping, leaving Sharon to take care of Johnny. They never found out how she would sit by the window, waiting for them and crying. Sometimes she would become so hysterical that she would run into the bathroom and throw up. She never thought they would come home safely on Friday nights, and she would sit crying and trying to think whom she and Johnny would live with after her parents were gone. But they had always come home, and Sharon knew that the time was still to come.

The worst time of her life had been the night before her wedding. Sharon had been terrified that something would happen to Pete on the way to the church and that the happiest day of her life would become the most tragic. Now, every time she said goodbye to Pete in the morning, she wondered if it would be for the last time.

Sharon pulled herself up off her knees and began to pace up and down the room. She wanted to call her mother, but that would keep the phone tied up in case Pete was trying to call, or in case... Maybe she should take it off the hook. If she answered it and a voice said, "Mrs. Thomas, I'm sorry but..." She wouldn't be able to bear it. No, she would call her mother. But what would she say? "Mother, I'm frightened because of what you told me when I was six years old. I'm afraid my testing time has come." Her mother would think Sharon was crazy.

She was surprised to find the telephone in her hand, and she put it back on the hook. Her head ached. Her mind felt cluttered with a million unwanted thoughts. If anything happened to Pete, what would she do? Kill herself? She had thought about it many times. She would want to die, but where would she find the courage to do it? How would she do it? Pills, yes, sleeping pills! That was the way. She won-
dered if she needed a prescription for them. If she couldn’t do it, what then? Marry someone else? It was unthinkable. Still, she couldn’t bear to be alone. Who? Was there someone in the world just like Pete? Sharon again shook her head. Her mind was going on and on by itself, no matter how hard she tried to stop it. She lurched into the bathroom and took another tranquilizer.

Don’t be stupid, she chided herself. You prayed, and now you’re supposed to have faith. Pete will be all right. Sharon relaxed a little at the thought.

Maybe Mother was wrong. Sharon had wondered about it many times. But, no. All those people killed every day in accidents, murdered, committing suicide—there had to be a reason. Certain people aren’t just unlucky. No, her time was coming. She clutched at her stomach, where the gnawing had begun again. Her heart was pounding hard. She could feel it in every part of her body.

The tranquilizers had made her light-headed, and she staggered into the kitchen for a drink of water. The floor felt spongy, and she stumbled a little. She began to giggle at her clumsy efforts at walking. The giggle grew into a loud, unsteady laugh, and Sharon leaned over the sink, roaring and hiccupping while tears streamed down her face. The kitchen whirled about her when she looked up. She filled a glass with water and slopped it over the kitchen floor as she reeled back into the living room. Weak with hysteria, she teetered about, tidying up some scattered newspapers. Water splashed over the hardwood floor. Laughing drunkenly, Sharon lifted the glass and drained it.

Suddenly, her weaving body snapped to attention. Her laughter ceased. She stopped crying. The house was dead silent. Then, the shrill bell of the telephone rang out, filling the room with sound, reverberating from all the walls.

The glass slipped from Sharon’s nerveless fingers and smashed on the floor.