

## Perpetual Check

By Samara Kanegis

Alice knew right away that she didn't want a baby. Jack agreed, although he did make one wistful and half-hearted comment about her maybe having the baby and giving it to him. This he said on a tree-lined sidewalk as they headed out to a neighborhood café, but she didn't consider it. She had always known what she would do if this situation arose; the answer was ingrained in her since childhood. Her mother used to interrupt bedtime stories with her newly found feminism, "She doesn't have to marry the prince, you know; in this world a woman has options." She and Jack both had plans for their lives. She wanted to travel, get her master's, maybe. Children were for later.

Despite her conviction, the process was grim. She called all the numbers on the first page of the phone book, anxious to have it done with, and finally chose a clinic three blocks from their apartment, an inconspicuous brick building she had passed blindly on many happier occasions. She didn't like the doctor, a stocky sarcastic man with hard looking eyes, but no other clinic could take her so soon. She and Jack marked the time until the final appointment, and each day something built within her, grew like a tumor. It was not the right time, she knew, and therefore she was very careful not to think of it as a child.

Six months ago they'd moved in together, up the coast to a small apartment in the Emerald City. They spent the first few months enjoying its surreal charm; an intentionally hip city full of environmentalists and pink triangles, coffee-houses and pot smoking computer geeks. The weather was strange; constant drizzle diffused the bright sunlight and created, instead of rainbows, a sort of glow, as if the place radiated light from the inside. Later, when Jack began his acid phase, which he kept to himself, he would claim that the city's lush, rainforest-like plants sent out rays of light, even after dark. Alice didn't take this comment as a sign of his drug use. She had noticed it earlier herself.

There were three pre-schools right on their street, converted houses with brightly colored doors and finger paintings hanging in the windows. It was one of the many discoveries she made in the first week her period didn't come. So many things she had never noticed suddenly appeared everywhere: children walking in pairs to the park across the street, pregnant women sitting beside strollers in the outdoor cafes. And then there were those younger girls with babies, gathered in the juice bars wearing colorful skirts and Birkenstocks. She watched them pour soymilk into bottles and laugh easily with their friends. They aroused in her a feeling of pity and finally envy, for not having larger goals, for being so content and flushed with motherhood.

When the day came she called in sick to work, and sat trembling on the doctor's table as he produced a chart of the various methods of birth control. He explained each one and its side effects, including an implant that sometimes caused hair loss, a shot that might lower the sex drive or cause mood swings.

"Which will it be?" the doctor asked.

"What?"

"Which of these do you want?"

"Um...condoms, I guess."

"You guess? You have to know," he said. "Condoms, as you've learned, are not one hundred percent effective."

"I don't know. A diaphragm, maybe. I can't really think about this right now."

The doctor took a step back and crossed his arms. He scrutinized her above his glasses. "You have to think about this, young lady. You have to plan for the future. Termination of pregnancy is not birth control." His voice rose slightly with the last words.

"I know," Alice replied, stunned. "I know that. I just told you what I would use, I said condoms. Which of these hormones would you put in your body?" She immediately recoiled from her outburst. This was not a time to make him angry. "I'm sorry, it's all I can do just to get through this," she said, feeling the beginning of another cold sweat, "I really can't make that decision right now."

"I see hundreds of women in here. Half of them are back within a year. Most gals who have an abortion do it again and again. You have to know what you're going to do." His anger was not directed only at her, she observed.

"Don't worry," she said, "I will never come here again."

Jack met her at last, in the recovery room where a blond woman slept on a cot beside her. "Hey Lady," he said gently, kissing her forehead. Surprisingly, there was still daylight shining bluish gray through the slats of the blinds. After several hours he walked her home, that old familiar three blocks of espresso bars and glowing trees, laced with the sounds of children's laughter.

The doctor said it would take a week to recover, but for nearly a month they both drifted awkwardly through the maze of each day, uneasy with secrets. At work she told everyone she'd had the flu, inducing groans of sympathy and disgust. "I had that one last month," Stu said, "It must be going around." This compassion was horrible and yet she wanted to take comfort in something. She felt changed somehow, and there was no one to tell. They had no close friends in town yet, and it was not a story for acquaintances.

Each night they came to each other with a feeling of relief. We're accomplices in silence, thought Alice. Inside her, it felt as if a light had burned out, and something indiscernible was

beginning to stir in the darkness. She imagined it would be awhile before this thing shaped itself into words.

Since they didn't speak much, they began to play games. In the quiet evenings they ate dinner on the floor, dried dishes side by side, then Alice would pick out music while Jack dealt the cards. For a few days they played gin rummy, the satisfying slaps of the cards filling the apartment, then backgammon, but that didn't last too long. Jack bought an old chess set at a sidewalk sale on his way home one day, and that was the game that stuck. The figures were carved wooden characters, a tall and slender Queen and King, bishops holding parasols. Alice liked the motion of the game, its demand for her complete attention. She could fade into the black and white squares for hours, weighing the outcome of each move, diffusing the tangle of her thoughts until she was too tired even for nightmares. For weeks they played three or four times a night. Sometimes they put down a wager to liven it up; the loser must strip naked and do a belly dance, the loser must act out the winner's fantasy. But these rewards were never collected.

On this particular evening, after Jack had won twice, he pulled a notebook and a pen from the desk drawer and handed it to her. "Write down your winner's wish before we play, and fold it up," he said, "I gotta pee, be right back."

Alice sat dazed for a few moments, unable to think of what she might want. Santana thumped out a steady beat from the CD player. Finally she wrote, "Loser must make love to me in the bathtub." Then she crossed it out and wrote, "Loser must give me a massage."

She noticed him fidgeting as they played, rocking slightly back and forth. When he won she opened his paper, which read, "Loser must actually leave the apartment. With me. Tonight."

"Let's really do it this time," he said.

Outside, the mist breathed down on her face, and she remembered how much she loved it here at night, the hazy deep blues of the sky winding down into glimmering city. She took off her hood and inhaled the smell of wet leaves.

For several blocks they were silent. Jack walked with his hands shoved in his pockets, head bowed toward the ground. She listened to the sounds his boots made against the wet pavement.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked, finally.

"Don't know. It's still early," he said.

"Alibi's?"

Jack answered by beginning to walk in that direction. They passed her favorite house, the gray Victorian with one turret painted in rainbow colors, then turned right toward the main strip. Soap bubbles shot from a machine in front of the bookstore and floated up the sidewalk toward them, making it seem for a moment that they were walking toward someplace enchanted. Then

they passed the bookstore and the half crowded street returned to normal; a steady parade of dyed hair and platform shoes, flowing dresses and body jewelry glowing under neon lights.

Jack straightened suddenly and took a deep breath, blowing out in a slow and controlled sigh. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of Camels, then put them back, glancing quickly at her as if to determine her mood.

"I had this dream last night," he said, at last, "about the baby."

"Oh." She was surprised he'd said it out loud. She looked down and waited with a vague dread.

"Yeah. He was sitting on the porch at my old house, wrapped in some kind of blanket. He was stuck somewhere between here and heaven."

Her shoe clicked against a brass footprint molded into the sidewalk. On closer inspection she realized it was part of a public art installation. There were two sets of feet numbered 1, 2, and 3, with curved arrows connecting them. "Waltz," it read, in little brass letters.

"Alice?" Jack said.

"I heard you."

They passed the movie theatre; the last crowded spot on the strip before it spanned into the next neighborhood, large houses with steep gardens.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," he said, "what it means."

"Okay," she said, looking at him. He was staring back, determined. "So, what is it?"

"Do you think we'll go to Hell for what we did?" he asked, quietly.

Something turned in her stomach and rose, pulling from inside her chest. A sick feeling shot through her, not at the thought of Hell, but at this unknown side of him presenting itself. Immediately she felt betrayed. "How can you think that?" she said.

"I just feel different now. I feel ...evil."

"Don't," she said. "You can't think that way, it doesn't change anything. It will just torture both of us."

Jack moved his shoulders as if to shrug and kept walking. The drizzle had stopped, and the soft, surreal glow off the gardens was fading.

"I'm not that kind of person," he said.

"You're not what?" She clenched her hands together, waited for the thing in her chest to loosen. "What are you saying? That I'm evil? I'm not that kind of person either, Jack. I love things, I love children and animals and I'm not one of those people who doesn't care what they hurt." She was crying now, convulsing, hot tears running into her raincoat. He touched her shoulder for a moment, then drew back. A man rushed toward them on the street, looking down as though he wasn't listening. Jack waited until he had passed.

"Listen. I'm just thinking about what it really is that we've done."

"It wasn't a child," she said. "It's not so clear like that. It's awful, not evil. I don't feel like myself now either, but people do it all the time."

"Other people," Jack said, "not us."

She wanted to sit down, to keel over on the wet sidewalk. "I thought you were in this with me."

"I was," he said, "I am." He reached again into his pocket for the Camels. "I just wonder what kind of people it means we are."

At the Alibi room Alice cried into her latte while a female couple watched Jack suspiciously from the next table. He took her hand and knocked it gently into his forehead. "I'm sorry," he said, hitting himself with her palm, "I'm sorry."

The next evening, Alice got home to find dinner ready and Jack sitting on the floor by the chessboard, smiling. "Hey Lady," he said. "You ready to lose?" They played twice while they ate, and listened to the radio, avoiding any need to discuss things. She knocked out his knight, then his rook, sweeping her Queen diagonally back and forth across the board until he was in check. He moved his King, with its natural limitations, one space at a time. One square black, one square white, one space forward. After she won, they began again, and proceeded in this manner through many more nights of conspired silence.

Alice spent the morning of her day off sitting on her stoop, staring at the pre-school across the street. On the playground, two small girls were pressed chest to chest, battling over a plastic dinosaur. The smaller of the two let out a high pitched squeal that built quickly into hysterics. She watched them struggle like that for what seemed a long time, yelling and crying over who had it first. Then a curly haired boy on a tricycle raced up, took the dinosaur and sped away. The girls were frozen for a moment in that strange space between screaming and laughing. Then the bigger girl said, "Want to play princesses? I'll be Cinderella."

"I'll be Snow White," said the smaller girl.

"No, I'm Snow White," yelled another girl, running from across the playground.

She decided to take a walk. At the end of the street behind hers, she came to the top of the trail that led over a bridge to the park. The entrance was marked by two weeping oaks, bending

their tops together like a canopy. Beyond that she could see the woods spread out in every shade of green, ivy and fern softly filling the spaces between trees. Inside the park, lilac blossoms and azaleas had begun to work themselves open. She sat down, ran her fingers through bright patches of grass where the sun pierced the leaves. The trees stretched upward like gods, huge and forgiving.

She imagined how this place must have looked centuries ago, Salish women walking in groups toward the water, carrying babies wrapped in deerskin. How strange, she thought, to live in a world where you always know your future; to marry, carve cedar, cook salmon. A world with no knowledge of other ways, without all the choices that carry you to greatness or allow you to fall from grace.

Even as she thought this, she knew it wasn't true. Every world held the possibility of failure and pain. Even fairy tales had those dire moments of choice: the fork in the road, the poisoned apple. But those who were good somehow chose the right thing. The princess was always good. The princess was beautiful, and knew what she wanted. Alice was more comfortable here, in the ambiguous woods, home of witches and fairies. The woods always sheltered and changed those who lost their way. Forever they had taken lost innocents and returned them home wiser.

A couple with a golden retriever settled themselves on the grass nearby, breaking her meditation. She stood and began to walk home, pausing to pet the dog, who slobbered on her hiking boots.

"He's a friendly boy, isn't he?" said the woman, "Such a sweet boy."

On her way out she tore a cluster of cherry blossoms from a tree to take with her. It didn't come easily. She wrestled it off using both hands, and then felt a sudden remorse. Why couldn't she have just left it there, on the tree, where it would have lived? She looked at the wound on the branch where the flowers had been, then dropped them to the ground near its trunk.

Jack was waiting for her in the apartment when she returned, sitting on the edge of the bed in his raincoat. He looked up solemnly when the door opened, then back down at something he was holding in his hand. Smoke hovered around his head, swirling toward the square of light coming through the open window.

"I thought you'd be home," he said, "so I cut out early."

She closed the door behind her and stepped toward him. He looked miserable but cute at the same time, like a giant version of Eeyore, hunched over, smoking cigarettes. She wanted to tackle him with kisses, but as she neared she could see he was serious, so instead sat down quietly on the carpet.

"I went to the park," she said. "It's pretty out. Why are you wearing that?"

He looked down at his coat as though surprised. "Oh. It was raining this morning." Beside him, a stub still burned in the ashtray. He held out a blue piece of paper. "You remember Cynthia? From work? She wanted me to give this to you."

Alice took the paper. It was an invitation to a baby shower. Little pink ribbons lined the edges. She stood up and dropped it in his lap. "Why are you doing this to me?"

He flinched. "I'm not doing anything."

"You're not helping. I was actually feeling good today for the first time since..." She threw up her arms and walked out of the room, then turned and walked back in. "It's hard enough for me without all your judgment, your little symbolic gestures."

"What the hell did you want me to do? She wanted me to give it to you. What was I supposed to do? Tell her no?" He waited. "Tell her why?"

"It's not just this. Why are you trying to make me feel guilty? If you think I'm so awful you should leave. Just leave."

He stared at her for a long time, motionless, from the bed. Then he stood up tensely and crossed his arms. "I don't want to leave," he said. "I want to talk."

For awhile she didn't look at him. Then she softened a little, leaned back against the wall.

"You don't think it's been hard for me, too? I don't have any control here," he said. "It's not just you. I have to deal with the consequences, too."

She looked at him, took in the pleading shape of his body, the way his sorrow seemed to soften the space beneath his eyes. She knew it wasn't just his fault, this doubt she felt. "Which one of us would have taken care of a baby, Jack? We couldn't even afford to feed it, or take it to the doctor. What about the consequences for the child, for us?" She wanted him to come to her, to forgive them both. "You agreed when we decided."

"How could I not? Bottom line, it's not really my choice."

"You were with me," she said. "We did it together." The room felt close around her.

"I know. It just seems like," he paused, closing his eyes. "We gave something up. And it should be for a good reason, you know? We should be doing something great now, travelling to India or going back to school. Living that life we wanted to have. Something that's worth more than what's missing."

"Maybe it doesn't weigh out that way," she said, slowly. "They're such different things. How can you know what's worth more?"

The light was beginning to fade, and voices of children leaving the pre-school floated in through the window. He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward him, the raincoat crunching between them. "I didn't know how it would change me."

"Neither did I."

"I don't want to leave," he said, again. "I want us to get through this."

Alice pressed her forehead to his, breathed in the smell of his skin, Camels and rain.

Jack made his favorite truce dinner, spaghetti with cream, and they ate sprawled on the living room floor, playing chess. He began talking about his ordeal with an avalanche of onions at the grocery store, how the man from across the street was there, laughing. "Shh," Alice said. She was glad to throw her concentration into the game, the checkerboard landscape where each piece had its specific value, its limited capacity for movement. She slid her rook boldly to his side of the board, then realized, once he moved, that it was a trap. His bishop now threatened two of her pieces. She deliberated. Obvious choice, she'd sacrifice her knight. So easy to see, for that moment, what had been lost, and why, and who was responsible.