

You Can't Be Too Careful

Curt Eriksen

Her name was Amelia Gameheart and she showed up every Wednesday morning, at five minutes past eleven.

Breathless, as if she had run up the six flights of stairs, she would tell whichever receptionist was sitting behind the desk that she was sorry she was late.

In the beginning the receptionists would ask her for her name and then, when they couldn't find it on the computer screen, they would inform her, politely, that she didn't seem to have an appointment.

“Of course I do,” Amelia would insist, hoisting her handbag onto the counter and rummaging through it without success.

“Well, I can't find the card,” she would admit at last, brushing some of the unruly hair out of her eyes. “But I called yesterday and confirmed the consultation with Doctor Meyers. I know I'm a bit flaky sometimes, but I'm very scrupulous about numbers and dates. You can't be too careful when you're as far along as I am.”

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It wasn't long before the receptionists—there were three of them, working in pairs—conferred among themselves.

“She's crazy,” Becky said, noisily slurping her pomegranate Frappuccino through a straw. “And she gives me the creeps.”

“It's no use telling her anything,” Amanda declared, eyeing the cute new waiter she planned to ambush. “She won't listen.”

Carol was the most sympathetic of the three young women. Though she was always busy while she worked, answering the phone or consulting with the technicians in the lab on the other side of the city, or ushering the patients in to see Dr. Meyers and helping him when necessary, she also found time to observe the blissfully self-conscious women thumbing through the celebrity magazines that Dr. Meyers subscribed to.

Carol was fascinated by the way each of these women cherished a unique yet quite ordinary secret that they were just bursting to share. Most of them came with their husbands, or their partners if they weren't married, but Carol remembered seeing Amelia come in alone. One of the first things Carol did was mentally classify the pregnant women by how much they were showing and, if they were, by the size of their bump.

Of course there was always the daunting threshold of those first three months—before the embryo could be considered a fetus, when the risk of abortion was greatest—that all of these women hoped to get beyond. And then, when recommended or required because of age or previous tests, the dreaded amniocentesis.

Sometimes Carol would discretely study the anxious women who came in to have their abdomens pierced. She would watch them as they glanced around the room at the other couples, incapable of concentrating on anything but the image of the long needle their fear kept conjuring before their eyes, their hands clutching their bellies as they beat back the fierce instinct to protect their treasure at all costs and sneak back down the stairs. When Carol saw these women, suffering through the long wait to see Dr. Meyers, the statistics would always chill her. Amelia Gameheart, who was forty-four, had been that one in a hundred. But she was the only one to come back and pretend that it hadn't happened.

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Dr. Meyers, who had built a very lucrative practice on the reputation of a sure hand that was unblemished by the skillfully worded waivers and the shocking premiums he paid for negligence, had tactfully decided that the best thing was to humor Ms. Gameheart. But Amanda was always rude to her and Becky wouldn't even look at her. Carol, who wanted to further her career before she took time off to start a family, always treated Amelia with respect. She couldn't admit to the other two receptionists that that there was something she admired in Amelia's stubborn determination to deny her own fate. Of course Carol was a little older than the other two, more melancholy and serious too. And she had always regarded pregnancy as a state of grace, even though it involved such a terrible gamble. That's why she had taken the job in the first place, whereas the other two liked the pay and the flexible shifts.

“Just take a seat over there,” she told Amelia. “Doctor Meyers will be with you as soon as he can.”

“Thank you,” said Amelia, stuffing her sunglasses and the dog-eared pocket book of names into her handbag. “And forgive me once again for being late.”

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