

The Test
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I entered the outhouse and pulled the door shut behind me. The bright sun outside dimmed to dusk. I sighed as I turned the wooden rectangle that served as the privacy lock.

Dear God, I thought morosely as I stared at the sky through the ventilation slits at the top of the structure, I'm not doing very well, am I? I had such high hopes for the week. Lad must be so disappointed in me. I know I certainly am.

I sighed again as I reached for the toilet paper and froze. My gentle sigh morphed into a gargle of revulsion. There, sitting on the roll of tissue, staring at me with evil intent, was the largest spider I'd ever seen. My skin crawled and sweat popped out all over my body.

Wonderful! Now I'm trapped in the outhouse for the rest of my life. That'll really make Lad proud.

I shrank as far from the creature as I could which wasn't too far even though the structure was a two seater. My back itched because I *knew* the ugly thing had family lurking in the corner behind me, waiting for the signal to jump me at my most vulnerable. Apprehensively I scanned the small

structure. The fact that I saw nothing suspicious except my obvious tormentor didn't soothe me much. I knew malevolence when I saw it, and it had eight hairy legs and a fat little body. I blinked against tears.

When the letter had arrived from Lad's parents with the plane tickets to Canada so we could join the family for one week of their annual month long vacation at their cottage on Austin Lake, I'd actually been glad and excited. Lad and I had married in May as soon as we graduated from Penn State because Lad had been given a wonderful opportunity to do graduate work at the Colorado School of Mines in Boulder, one of the only schools in the country that still had a pure metallurgy program. Almost every other school had gone to materials science, including all kinds of ceramics and polymers in their programs. But Lad loved metals, and this opportunity was too good to pass up.

So I gave up my bid for Wedding of the Century and married him quickly in a small ceremony so that I could go with him. It wasn't a hardship. I'd do most anything for Lad. Certainly I'd join his family at Austin Lake at the southeastern tip of Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario.

I'd heard Austin Lake stories since the first night I met Lad at our Campus Crusade group at State. When he took me to his home for the first time, I was told more Austin Lake stories, this time from the point of view of the rest of his wonderful family. I particularly loved the stories his nineteen-year-old sister Marly told, mostly because she made Lad the scapegoat. I loved the way the Winters all laughed at her exaggerations,

especially Lad. It showed such a fine spirit and deep, genuine affection. I knew I wanted to be part of a family that loved and laughed like this.

And now I was. Soon I'd have my own Austin Lake stories.

We flew to Ottawa the first week in August. Pop Winters and Marly met us at the airport and drove us the two and a half hours to the lake.

"The weather's been great," Marly told us. "Sunny and warm. And the water's in the seventies!" And she began telling Lad about who was presently at the lake, who was putting on additions to their cottages, who had been too outspoken at the cottagers' annual meeting, who had preached for the past two Sundays at the chapel, and who was actually putting in septic systems.

"Indoor plumbing?" Lad scoffed. "At the lake? Give me a break!"

"Sounds good to me," I said. I had secretly been wondering how I'd fare for a whole week without a hot shower.

Marly and Lad looked at me in disbelief. Pop eyed me in the rearview mirror, left eyebrow raised. I blushed, but I still thought that a flush toilet sounded a fine thing.

After a moment's silence, conversation resumed among the three Winters, and I settled back to listen. I like to listen. Probably that's because I was raised an only child by parents who never stopped talking. Or arguing. They were both lawyers, though thankfully they worked for different firms with different specialties. I shuddered to think what life would have been if they had ever had to go head to head in court.

Because they were so abnormally verbal, it became easier to be quiet rather than fight for speaking space. One of the things I loved most about

Lad was that he waited for me to state my opinion. Slowly I was learning to speak up, and I was finding it very freeing.

Marly glanced at me and said in no context that I could see, "You needn't worry, Jenn. You won't have any trouble passing the Austin Lake Test. None at all." And she smiled sweetly.

I blinked. "What's the Austin Lake Test?"

Marly looked at her father and grinned. "Pop made us promise we wouldn't marry anyone until he or she had been to the lake and proved himself an acceptable Laker. The worst thing in the world would be to have a Winters who wasn't a Laker!"

Lad felt the jolt her statement gave me. He took my hand and said, "Not to worry, Marly. Jenn'll pass." He looked at me, his eyes full of love and trust. "Right, honey?"

"Right," I said with as much assurance as I could muster.

Oh, Lord, let me be a Laker, please!

The closer we got to the lake, the more Lad vibrated with excitement. I could feel waves of anticipation rippling from him like heat shimmers from macadam. The implosion occurred when we reached the turnoff for the lake road.

"Stop, Pop!" Lad called out so loudly we all jumped, including Pop who actually swerved in reaction. "I want to drive the lake road."

Pop pulled over as soon as he made the turn, and we played musical seats. Lad and Pop sat up front, Marly and I in the back. Lad drove and drove and drove. I knew the nine kilometer dirt road wasn't as long as it

seemed. It was my nerves, already tight, now strung to breaking with the idea of The Test.

Then we crested a hill, and there lay Austin Lake. It was so beautiful my breath caught, then whooshed out in pleasure. Sun jewels shimmered on the softly rippled lake, and rank upon rank of evergreens and deciduous trees marched to the shore. A motorboat cut through the water, a foamy white wake trailing like the tail on a kite, and plump white clouds sailed like three masted schooners across a vivid blue sky. Here and there cottages and cabins were tucked into the shoreline. The overwhelming sense was of limitless space and freedom.

"She likes it," Marly said, smiling.

I nodded. "It's glorious." Massive understatement.

We drove to the public dock, unloaded our luggage and put it in the family motorboat while Pop parked the car. Lad piloted the boat across the lake, and soon we were unloading our things and carrying them up to the cottage, a large brown-stained building with windows all across the front giving a spectacular view of the lake.

And so began one of the most wonderful/awful weeks of my life as I tried to prove to the Winters that Lad hadn't made a mistake marrying me.

The trial by ordeal began moments after my arrival when I faced the outhouse for the first time. I'd never used one before. My mother's idea of roughing it was a Holiday Inn instead of a suite at a five star hotel, so such basic facilities were beyond my ken.

"We've got one of the best outhouses around," Marly boasted. "Clean as a whistle. I know. It's my job to clean it."

As I tried not to breath while inside, I couldn't imagine what it would be like if Marly didn't clean it. And how did one clean an outhouse anyway?

Then came waterskiing.

I'm as coordinated as the next woman. I like walking and hiking, I love the outdoors, and I even like biking in moderation, but I'm not a certified jock. I've always been very happy not being one. Until The Test.

I finally gave up trying to stand on the two fiendish wooden strips when my legs became so wobbly I could barely hold myself upright, and my arms were so rubbery I couldn't undo the clips on my life jacket. By this time, I was so full of water that I sloshed when I moved.

"Why don't you just be the spotter?" Lad suggested kindly as he steered me to a seat in the back of the boat after pulling me, exhausted, from the water.

"What's the spotter have to do?" I asked. "Watch out for great whites lurking?"

Lad laughed as if I'd made a clever joke, but I wasn't entirely jesting. I was used to the soft sandy New Jersey ocean floor or the smooth hard concrete of a pool. The endless depths of the lake below me as I waited for the tow boat to come rescue me after yet another fall made me exceedingly nervous.

I spotted for Marly who got up on her skis immediately and with grace and ease. She wove back and forth through the wake as we sped from one

end of the lake to the other. A black cloud of inadequacy and looming failure sat directly over my head as I watched.

Then I spotted for Lad who was magnificent, skiing with not only one hand but one ski. When we raced back toward the cottage, he skied so close to the shore I was certain he was going to kill himself. Instead he let go of the tow rope at just the right instant and glided to a stop in the shallows where he stepped lightly out of his ski and onto land without even wetting his feet.

Then there was fishing.

I got the hang of casting fairly quickly, my flying hook grazing Lad's cheek only once. And I'm not squeamish. I didn't mind handling the worms. After all, I was a gardener and worms went with the territory. I did however feel each prick as I impaled the poor things on my hook.

But sitting silently in a small aluminum boat staring hopefully at the water? Talk about boring!

"How long will we be here?" I asked Lad after an hour of doing nothing. At least I was doing nothing. Lad had caught two keepers, small mouth bass he said, and several he deemed too small to keep and tossed back.

"Don't worry," he said with that magical smile of his. I found myself smiling back in spite of my pique. "We've got plenty of time. We'll stay until dark."

"And how soon until dark?"

"Up here it gets dark later, so about two more hours."

"I should have brought a book," I said with sinking heart.

"What?" Lad was scandalized at the idea. "Don't you enjoy being with me?"

Now there was an are-you-still-beating-your-wife question if I ever heard one.

"I'd enjoy being with you more if we talked, just a bit."

"You can't talk and fish. The fish might hear."

As I said, boring.

I did have a moment of temporary glory on one of our cooking days. Mom Winters has made it very clear that she doesn't plan to spend her vacations in the kitchen cooking for a largely take-it-for-granted crowd, so she has divvied the days of the week among the family.

"Once you turned sixteen, you got a day," Marly told me as she served us pancakes on her day

Apparently once you got married, you got two days. We had Tuesday and Friday.

I'd planned our meals carefully, and we'd come prepared with a plastic cooler filled with our needs, sealed with more duct tape than was sold annually at Home Depot. The piece de resistance of Tuesday's dinner was to be a blueberry cobbler made with freshly picked blueberries. The five of us boated over to the small cliff at the south end of the lake where blueberry bushes thrived.

We picked and picked until we had enough for the cobbler and for blueberry pancakes the next morning, Mom cooking. It was appalling to

realize how many of the little indigo fruit it took to gather a useable amount. By the time we were finished, my back ached from bending over, and I had a wasp bite on my palm from when a wasp and I went after the same berry. I had a nervous twitch from glancing over my shoulder all morning looking for the bear Marly kept insisting must certainly resent our taking his food, and my left knee was scraped and seeping blood and fluid from the terrifying moment when I'd slipped on a mossy rock and gone down, certain I was about to fall right off the cliff into the lake.

But in spite of my physical impairments the dinner turned out quite nicely, the cobbler a raging success.

That night when Lad took me in his arms and said, "You're going to make a great Laker. That was a wonderful dinner, sweetheart," I felt such a fraud. Great Austin Lakers didn't have aching backs, skinned knees and swollen palms, to say nothing of the new fear of meeting a bear on the way to the outhouse.

The caper to my week of trial by ordeal was our sailing endeavor. Pop Winters had a sixteen foot day sailor, and Lad decided we should make use of it.

"Bring a book with you," he said. "You can just lie back in the sun and read."

It sounded wonderful to me. I'd brought ten books in my suitcase, and I'd only had time to read half of one. I was going nuts with reader's withdrawal.

"He's taking you?" Marly asked as we came down onto the dock with the detachable rudder and all the required safety gear in hand. My paperback was tucked firmly under my arm.

"Of course I'm taking her," Lad said. "While sisters are wonderful, wives are more wonderful still." And he smiled that glorious smile at me. My heart soared. I vowed I would be the best sailor he'd ever met.

"Lad, maybe Jenn doesn't want to go sailing." Mom Winters was lying on her chaise, book in hand, Coke beside her, sun hat pulled low over her sunglasses.

Lad blinked. Obviously he couldn't imagine such a thing.

"Oh, I want to go," I said emphatically. "I do."

Mom nodded, taking me at my word, and went back to her book.

Lad helped me into the boat and showed me how to pull the rope that lowered the centerboard. "When I give the word, pull as hard as you can until you hear the clunk. Then cleat the rope."

I nodded. I could do that. I settled myself on the gunwale amidships while he seated himself in the back on the opposite side.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded, my rope held firmly.

"Here we go!" He pushed off from the dock. "Pull!" he called, and I pulled. I heard the clunk and tried to cleat the rope. As I struggled, I felt the sail fill with wind and the boat begin to move, then tilt alarmingly. I looked up to see the boom coming straight at me. Giving a strangled cry, I backed up and threw myself overboard to escape the lethal swing.

As I sputtered to the surface in about four feet of water, I knew I'd done something wrong. I had no idea what, but I'd obviously made the boat tilt. Another black mark! I looked wildly for Lad.

"I did what you told me!" I shouted as water streamed down my face.

There was a moment of absolute silence as Mom, Pop and Marly, all dry and comfortable on the dock, and Lad, still dry and seated comfortably in the boat, stared at me. Then Marly snickered. She clapped her hand over her mouth to contain the noise, but she couldn't. In a moment everyone was laughing, me included. I could imagine how I looked -- a drowned rat came to mind -- and how I sounded -- my mother, the defense attorney, was apt.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Lad finally had breath to ask.

I shook my head. "I'm fine." Just inept. "What happened? What did I do wrong?"

He had the grace to blush. "You didn't do anything wrong, sweetheart. It was me. I was so intent on making sure you knew what you were doing that I forgot to attach the rudder. I reached back for it when I pushed off, and it wasn't there. The wind caught us and whipped us 180 degrees."

I noticed for the first time that the boat was facing in the opposite direction.

"I didn't do it?"

He shook his head.

"Really? You're not just being nice?"

"You didn't do it."

I was so relieved that I hadn't accrued yet another failing grade that I climbed back in the boat without a word of complaint. Lad attached the rudder, and this time we sailed off without complications.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Nowhere. We're sailing!" He said the last worshipfully. "Just sit back and relax. Read."

But I never got to read a word. I spent all my time pulling ropes at Cap'n Lad's orders or climbing from one side of the boat to the other when we tacked or needed to balance against the wind. Every time I clambered over the centerboard housing, which was every time I moved from one side to the other, I clomped the insides of my legs on said housing as I ducked the swinging boom. I suppose some people might find it fun to bruise their bodies while risking their lives in front of a great swinging piece of metal, but, alas, I wasn't one of them.

And so I found myself, finally dry, sitting in the outhouse, held captive by a spider. Arachnophobia was the final ignominy, the definitive black mark. I knew I had a huge red F imprinted indelibly on my forehead.

I also knew I couldn't sit here forever waiting for the horrible insect to move. After all, dinner was in about thirty minutes, Pop cooking.

With shaking hands I reached down and slid off my sneaker. I grasped it tightly and raised my arm. I swung at the toilet paper with all my might. It went flying across the outhouse, striking the far wall with a muted thud.

The wily spider had felt me coming. He jumped free at the last moment. I watched with fascinated horror as he now sat mere inches from my unclad foot. I could already feel his fangs as he took a great venomous bite. I could picture Lad's grieving face when he broke the outhouse door down and found me seconds from expiration, panting, writhing in pain, a contented spider sitting on my chest, cleaning his many toenails.

The spider suddenly moved across the floor, and I screamed even as I watched him swagger away from me. He went to a small crack between two boards and slid through.

I sat for several minutes, trying to calm my beating heart. Finally I had the courage to reach for the roll and get myself out of there. I shuddered all the way to the dock.

The westering sun was turning the gentle hills on the far side of the lake golden, and the water had become as smooth as glass. I stood there alone, basking in the solitude, bathed in a strange mix of sorrow and worship, sorrow that I was failing The Test, praise for the obvious proof of our great God.

"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't realize Lad was there until he slid an arm about my waist and pulled me against him, my back to his chest. He leaned forward and kissed my temple.

"It's so beautiful," I said. "I could look at it all day. It speaks to my soul."

His arm tightened. "I know."

"I understand why you love it so." The last was a whisper because I could barely speak around the tears clogging my throat. "I love it too. I think that's why it hurts so much."

"What hurts?"

I took a great gulp of air. "I'm so sorry I've failed The Test!"

I whipped around and buried my face in his chest and sobbed. Lad said nothing, just held me until I cried myself out. Another reason to love him. My parents would already have given me fifty reasons why crying was foolish.

When I finally quieted, he took a step back, caught my chin in his hand and forced me to look at him. Not that I was a delightful sight with my runny nose, swollen eyes and blotchy face.

"Why do you think you failed The Test?" he asked.

"Because I can't do any of the things you like to do." My chin wobbled again. "I'm a lousy Laker!"

He shrugged. "That's not The Test. I already knew you weren't much of an athlete. I was just giving you the chance to try some new things."

I stared at him, confused. "You don't care that I can't ski or that I don't like fishing? You'll still love me even if I don't sail with you?"

"It would be fun if you liked doing those things, but it's not imperative." He grinned. "I think we have what's important in common."

I reviewed the week in my mind, searching diligently for what we had in common. "We both like blueberry cobbler?"

"We both love this place," he said.

I nodded as I looked over my shoulder at the golden hills and gilded lake. "We do."

"Then you passed and with flying colors."

I stilled. "What?"

"You passed."

"Because I love the place?"

He nodded. "Because you love it. Because you can stand here and quote Scripture about how great God is to have created it. Because you can stand here and stare without tiring of the beauty."

I searched my husband's face, looking for a catch, a loophole. All I saw was acceptance.

He smiled at me. "What is the chief end of a Laker?"

I smiled back at his corruption of the Westminster Catechism.

He answered himself. "The chief end of a Laker is to love the lake and enjoy it forever."

"I can do that," I said as my heart soared. "I can do that."

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: The chief end of man is to love God and enjoy Him forever.