

TESTING...TESTING...

Short Fiction (3,999 words)

Faith Kimball was worried. That wasn't unusual; she was often anxious—about everything. Sometimes the cause was her downstairs neighbor, a scruffy bachelor who eyed her on the elevator. Sometimes it was her mother, always fussing when she confessed she didn't have a boyfriend. And, as always, she was concerned about her magazine career.

She'd been at *American Homemaker* since graduating college and, for the past eight years, had been assigned to the American Homemaker Alliance, testing and evaluating products for the magazine. The lofty image of the Alliance was such that its seal of approval was coveted by the makers of most consumer goods.

The Alliance occupied one floor in an aging building on West 23rd Street in Manhattan—one floor above the editorial staff and two floors above the sales staff. Although editors sometimes visited the Alliance, its director, Alicia Wentworth, permitted no one from sales to appear there. The Alliance prided itself on its purity, impartiality, and non-commercial thrust. That's why Faith and her colleagues—particularly Hilda, who

tested cookware, and Georgia, who did cleaning products—were puzzled when Marge, Ms. Wentworth’s assistant, distributed invitations to a compulsory Friday meeting in the conference room. The notice was not from Ms. Wentworth but from Carlo Vininni, *American Homemaker’s* new publisher.

The Alliance staff hadn’t met Mr. Vininni, but his reputation as a tough and genuinely ruthless executive preceded his arrival. People company-wide pondered how he might change the magazine. No one in the Alliance was particularly concerned, though; their unit functioned mostly on its own, under Ms. Wentworth. Nearing seventy but still energetic and opinionated, she ruled the Alliance like a fiefdom.

“What does this mean?” people wondered. The idea that someone from sales could call a meeting of the Alliance staff—even if he was the publisher and, essentially, their *über*-boss—was unprecedented.

Faith could see that her colleagues were as edgy as she, filing into the conference room that Friday. Sy, who’d been testing vacuum cleaners, dry mops, and floor waxers for thirty-five years, was still in the crisp, pressed smock that nearly matched his thinning white hair. The other staff members looked neat and professional, no more than that.

When everyone was seated, Marge appeared briefly and returned a moment later at Ms. Wentworth’s heels. The director took her place at the head of the conference table, unsmiling, of course. She never smiled. She

nodded to her staff, then looked to the far end of the table. “Let’s keep that seat open, shall we?” she asked shrilly, and Marcella, whose expertise was packaged, canned, and frozen foods, reflexively leaped out of the chair and took a seat behind Frank, the bearded authority on garden tools.

The room was still, but the tension was palpable, and Ms. Wentworth did nothing to ease it. Saying nothing, she opened her notebook and began writing—what? people wondered. Then their attention shifted as a tall man in a slick dark suit strode into the room, followed by a youthful clone of himself hefting a carton. Both men wore clothes that seemed to have been stitched to their skin, so well did each suit fit them.

The older man, obviously Carlo Vininni himself, began speaking immediately, ignoring the seat intended for him: “I appreciate your willingness to meet. It’s unusual, I know, for us to come together like this. But, frankly, these are unusual times. I am aware that your independence is much respected throughout the industry. But—and I cannot emphasize this enough—the fate of our magazine is in the hands of *everyone* on the staff, including all of you.”

Before continuing, Mr. Vininni paused to let his words sink in. “One request I made of the board before becoming your publisher was that the talents and expertise of the Alliance be aligned more intimately with the business interests of the magazine. How that change is to be executed

will be made known soon to Ms. Wentworth”—he smiled and nodded briefly in her direction.

Now he began to pace more assertively: “There’s no time to lose, my friends. We must do something radical and *immediate*—to command the attention not only of our faithful readers but also of advertisers, who may be feeling that the magazine is getting—well—a bit musty. I’ve discussed these thoughts with the board; I needed their compliance before presenting my plans to you.

“You see, we are about to embark on a new product-testing program *together*. We’re going to explore an area previously untouched by any consumer magazine edited for women. How our work will be perceived, and responded to, may help us re-channel our quest for business.” He paused and looked around, then introduced his colleague, Peter Sorrel, who, he said, had been collecting samples of a particular product that would be distributed for testing by the Alliance staff, irrespective of their proven specialties.

What he meant was that, even if you were normally in major appliances, like Lucinda, or functioned in the world of cosmetics, like Letty—he knew everyone’s name and category—you would participate. This, he reiterated, would be a team operation, but all of the testing would be done independently *and* off premises.

“Peter,” he called out, and only then did the young advertising sales director begin to speak. He circled the room, distributing small packages,

each one wrapped in transparent cellophane and tied with string. It took but a moment for people to grasp what they were handed, what they were being asked to test: *condoms*.

Peter's voice was much like his boss's, though more refined. "You know what these are; we're all adults here," he began. "These devices have a serious purpose. Forget birth control and unwanted pregnancy. Their primary purpose, as I'm sure you're aware, is preventing the spread of disease. And since the last decades of the twentieth century, disease—mainly, HIV/AIDS—has been a global concern. There are people in remote countries who would weep to have what you've been given."

"Actually," said Mr. Vininni, breaking in, "our concern is not men and women in remote places but those here at home. We want to work with the companies that make devices like these to help get their message across. They have vast amounts of money, which they've been investing in sad little ads online and on the back pages of men's magazines. We're determined to alter that pattern." He gestured toward Peter, who resumed his pitch.

"I am also handing out evaluation forms—three each, as I believe you've received three products to evaluate. Please study the forms, so you can deliver the data we need for our tabulations.

"Excuse me, sir." It was Sy Fishbein raising his hand. "Sorry to interrupt, but—"

"We can take questions afterward," Mr. Vininni assured him.

“Well, may I speak with you privately, then?”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary. Like Peter said, we’re all adults here. We needn’t keep secrets.” Sy Fishbein straightened up and stared straight at the publisher.

“My problem, sir, is these are too small—I can read the labels through the wrapping.”

“One size fits all, you know, except in rare cases,” said Peter, looking amused. “Are you one of those, Sy?”

“Yes,” Sy asserted, unblinking.

There was a muffled gasp and some shuffling of feet around the table, but nothing was said and nobody so much as giggled or chirped.

“We’ll take care of you, Sy,” Peter assured him. “Anyone else have any—uh—problems?” No one responded—or seemed even to breathe. “Good. Now keep in mind that our deadlines are tight. We must process test results quickly so we can go full steam ahead with our marketing rollout. You’re involved in what promises to be a truly major thrust for *American Homemaker*.”

“You have a month—four weeks to the day,” added Mr. Vininni. “We *must* have your reports in hand, ready to work with, by then. You’ll see that Peter’s business card, with his email address and cellphone number, is included in each package. Please get in touch if you have any questions. Thank you, Ms. Wentworth, and thanks in advance to all of

you.” Once again he nodded to the woman at the head of the table, then signaled that he and his associate should leave.

Silence followed. Nobody spoke, and no one seemed eager for eye contact. Ms. Wentworth—who’d not been given a package—slowly closed her notebook and returned her pen to her handbag. Then she stood, turned and, without uttering a word, left the room.

Faith returned to her office and sat numbly at her desk. There were calls to return and emails to review, but she did nothing. She’d dropped her package into her purse and stuffed the evaluation forms into her briefcase, without hardly seeing them. She’d never imagined being challenged this way, not since she decided to make magazines her life’s work.

The stillness that prevailed that afternoon continued in the days ahead. Faith was aware of whispered confabs in various cubicles and offices, but no one talked openly about the assignment. As the days passed, the atmosphere became increasingly fraught. Were people testing as requested? Or were they postponing their assignments or perhaps devising ways to avoid doing them at all?

Faith didn’t want to talk about condoms or hear about anyone’s experience with condoms. Though she wanted the world to know she felt put upon, she was much too mortified to say so. But day by day it became

harder for her to keep her mind on what she considered her most important tasks, and some days she was too overwrought to even eat.

“So, how are things going?” The voice sounded vaguely familiar. When Faith looked up, she realized that the down elevator had stopped at the sales floor and Peter Sorrel had boarded. He smiled and stood beside her, saying nothing more until they reached the lobby. “Are you having any trouble with the tests? I realize we’re asking a great deal.”

She looked up at him, realizing that he was expecting a response. “Actually, I’ve been too busy. I haven’t had a chance to—”

“Listen, maybe I can help you. Do you have time for some lunch?”

“Well, I was just going to—“ she gestured toward the takeout sandwich shop at the corner.

“No, let’s find someplace better. A neat little bistro just opened right across the street. Will you join me?”

How could she say no? Not to a man whose smile oozed innocence and, at the same time, confidence. Once seated, he ordered wine with their pasta, a glass for each of them.

A few sips loosened her tongue, however, and soon she was talking nonstop about herself, but what she never revealed was that condoms were alien to her life experience...and that she’d never been intimate with any man.

When the topic of testing came up, Peter was suddenly serious: “Do you happen to have your assignment with you?” She nodded. “Good. Now let’s go where we can be more comfortable.” It was an unseasonably warm spring day, and there was a tiny vest-pocket park around the corner, but as they left the bistro, she saw Peter raise an arm to attract a taxi.

“I know the perfect spot,” he said. A hint of a wind had stirred up, so she took his arm to steady herself. When a cab pulled up, she let him urge her into the backseat, as he gave the driver an address. She was feeling looser now, and slightly heady. When the cab stopped in front of a brownstone, she allowed Peter to help her out and nudge her up the steps to the front door.

Where were they going? she wondered. To *his* place? Really? Why did they have to do that? She just wanted to tell him how distressed she was, how fearful that—

“Right this way, Faith. My maid came this morning, so the place’ll be presentable.” He led her up a staircase to the third floor. It took three keys to open the door, and inside she saw a scattering of furnishings, none of particular style or distinction. “Here,” he said firmly, “let me have your coat.” Then he seated her in his desk chair, pulling a battered stool from his tiny kitchen and plunking it beside her. “So, show me what’s in your package?” Carefully she withdrew it from her purse.

“Let’s look at them one at a time,” he said. She wanted him to undo the knot and pull out the little packets stuffed inside, but he waited for her to do it. He could see that her hands were shaking, so he put his hands on top of them. Their warmth calmed her and, for the first time—in weeks, it seemed—she smiled.

“I don’t know what to do with any of this,” she confessed. “I really don’t. That’s why—“

“Hey, we’re working together, remember?” He watched as she spread out three little packets on the desk and for the first time read their contents. One boasted “Super Thins”; another said “Teaser Bullets”; the third one proclaimed “Raspberry Jam.”

“We should start with Super Thins. And you should be making notes now. I believe the form asks for comments about packaging, too. Actually, I framed the questions—to include every aspect of the product in the test.”

He looked at her now. “Please try it,” he added. She shrugged and began examining each product. Super Thins came in a sampler package—two for the price of one. She saw how to tear it open and expose two small, rubbery disks, each individually wrapped. “Don’t take one out till we’re absolutely ready.”

Faith threw a questioning look at Peter, who finally explained why he’d brought her there and the challenge they were going to meet. Together. “This is business,” he said softly, “what we have to do to keep

our jobs, okay? So come along, and bring your notebook.” He rose and gently pulled her to her feet, then led her through a doorway. They were in his bedroom now and he quickly shut the blinds before opening the bed. “We’ll need to simulate the experience of everyday users of products like these. We’ll first undress, then take it step by step.”

His voice was so authoritative and mellow, she couldn’t hold back. She unbuckled her boots and yanked off heavy stockings. “That’s a good start,” she heard him say, aware that he was a step or two ahead of her, as he stood there, his tie askew, his shirt open, his pants off. She paused before unzipping her skirt, but his businesslike manner made her press ahead.

Off came the skirt, the sweater, the blouse. “Everything,” she heard him say, aware now that he was naked and standing close to her. Then he moved to the other side of the bed and, when she, too, was naked, he climbed in and reached across to pull her in beside him.

“Now you can open that little packet,” he ordered. “Be careful, though. What’s inside is pretty fragile. I’m afraid *you’ll* have to handle it, as *you’ll* be writing up the test.” Once again, his hands covered hers as she tore into the packet.

“Do I unroll it?” she asked, as she held the tiny rimmed disk between her fingers.

“No, no. Actually, I can take it from here this time, but I want you to note every step. See, I place it over the tip of my organ, leaving a margin

for—well, you’ll see. Then I roll the rest of it down as far as it’ll go.” When she started to get up, he smiled and, for the first time, held her. “No, no, Faith, this is just the beginning.” He began fondling her, kissing her neck, touching her breasts, tweaking her nipples. And suddenly she had feelings she’d never experienced before.

“See, I have to prepare you, or this might be a little uncomfortable at first,” he whispered, moving his lips from her mouth to one of her ears while touching her where no one but she had ever touched before. She shut her eyes, seeing bolts of color flash across the inside of her eyelids.

Now Peter was twisting his body so he could apply his kisses to tender spots beneath her breasts and then along the lines of her tummy and then...my God, he was kissing her *there* repeatedly, until she heard herself cry out and he exclaimed, “Bingo, I think we’re ready for action.”

Slowly, he entered her and, for a moment, was motionless. “I don’t want to hurt you, but—“ Then he thrust hard, and she cried out again, in spite of herself. The pain was briefly overwhelming and she was about to protest when she heard him swear: “Holy crap, it broke! Make note of that later. Super Thins are supposedly super-sturdy. This one’s not. We’ll have to start over.” He withdrew and quickly peeled off the damaged prophylactic.

“You have another one,” he said. “Let’s hope *it* will last. I can be gentler now, I promise, but I *will* need your help. See.”

She'd tried not to look too hard at his penis before but now realized that it was nearly flaccid. No way could he roll a condom onto it—even she could figure that out. “Please,” he whispered. “Touch me.” She'd never handled a penis before, had only seen one when her father let her shower with him when she was four. She petted it, and it began to swell again.

“Why don't you grab that other one *now*,” he suggested. She let go of him, pulled the second sample off the nightstand. He watched as she removed the delicate device from its wrapping and started to hand it to him. “No, you do it. You'll be doing the write-up, and I know you noted what I did before.” She had, of course. She'd made a few barely legible squiggles, but every action had been inscribed in her memory.

“Good, good, that feels really great,” he whispered, kissing her once more—“I think you're more than ready”—then entering her. Stroke by stroke, slowly, beautifully, he was bringing her pleasure she'd never known. Soon she was matching his movements, and he was touching her again. He was so gentle she felt herself wanting more from him, and then in an almost blinding flash of color and feeling, the pleasure faded.

“I'm going to remove myself now, okay?” She nodded, and in an instant felt the absence of him. “Note that the device felt snug but not constricting, that it went on easily—this one didn't break—and could be removed without effort.” She nodded agreeably and then, to escape his focused gaze, scribbled a few more notes. They lay together a moment—

until he suddenly consulted his Rolex, then rolled his body out of the bed. He grasped the used condom and carried it to the bathroom. She heard the toilet flush.

Back by the bed, he gave Faith a businesslike nod. “Duty calls,” he told her, as he pulled on his socks and stepped into his briefs.

“But there are more to test,” she insisted, her voice sounding hoarse.

“Of course, but not today, Faith. I’ve got a pretty full schedule.” Resigned, she climbed out of bed and slowly began putting her clothes back on. She was beginning to feel empty and sad, particularly when she saw him checking his smartphone. “Please make notes while your memory’s fresh,” he counseled. “That test will be useless if you don’t make a comprehensive report.” She nodded, assuring him she would.

“When?” she asked, whispering now.

“What?”

“Those other tests—the deadline is a week from Friday.”

“I know, but it doesn’t have to be *me*. I think Carlo’s doing some counseling, and—”

“No, no, *please*,” she said.

“Okay. Well, let’s see...” He sighed as he checked his phone again: “Georgia, the detergent lady—forget it, that was Monday. Today... um...*ah*, I’m meeting with Letty here at four. Then I see Marcella tomorrow—very early, but only after I’m sure her traffic-cop boyfriend

has left for work. How are you this Friday at noon? If I have a steak for lunch and take another pill, maybe we can do up both tests.”

She stared at him briefly and took a deep breath. “Good,” she said, finally, trying to sound casual.

“It can be your place if you like.”

“No, no,” she said, “this is fine. I just don’t understand what those other—uh—products are for.”

“If I remember right, one is beaded or ribbed. Which means it has little pleasure points buried in the surface. We’ll have to decide whether they’re effective or intrusive.”

“The other one—?”

“That’s Raspberry Jam. It’s flavored. You’ll be on your own when we test that one. It’ll be up to you to determine if the flavor is apt.” She looked at him, clearly mystified. He blinked a couple of times and chewed on his tongue before continuing to speak “Well, after we prepare ourselves, you’ll want to taste it—you know, like licking a lollipop.” He could see that she blushed and bit her lip.

Fully dressed now, he opened a small bottle he’d pulled out of his valise and downed a pill, not needing water. “I gotta be fortified,” he declared.

“Uh-huh,” she said, trying to sound unconcerned.

“Letty’s coming *here*, so I won’t be leaving, but I can hail a cab to get you back to the office.”

“Uh-huh,” she said again, as she collected her coat and handbag. Her face now wore a serious expression.

“Everything all right?” he asked with mock cheeriness.

“Uh-huh...Well, see...there’s something you probably should know. I hope it won’t alter the structure of our testing.” He looked suddenly weary and, if she were to define his expression, also concerned.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

“Well,” she began, “see...raspberry’s really my favorite flavor.” She noted with delight the flash of relief that crossed his face.

“Even so, I know you’ll make every effort to be fair, and I feel confident that that particular test will be successful.”

She smiled slightly and nodded, aware of the care he was taking not to touch her at all as he helped her with her coat and urged her toward the door. “Now that I have another specialty,” she announced, “I wonder...”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I could ask Ms. Wentworth for a raise.”

“Oh. Well, you can certainly give it a whirl,” he said, as they descended the stairs.

“It really *is* like having a new career.”

“I guess, well, in a way, it could be,” he replied, clearing his throat. “I mean...there’s certainly a new world of opportunity out there for you, Faith.” She flashed him a radiant smile that made him momentarily

shrink. When she reached for his arm, he recoiled slightly and raised it, calling, “*Taxi. Hey, taxi!...* Oh, good, here’s one.” When it pulled up, he held the door open but didn’t help her in.

“There you go, Faith. Have a good afternoon...’Bye now.”

As the cab accelerated, she leaned into the seat and shut her eyes. This had been an astonishing day—almost too overwhelming to process. She hoped Letty and the others would glean as much from their test experiences as she did. She smiled as she let herself wonder if Sy Fishbein was married, then shrugged off the fantasy by whispering, “This is business.”

By the time the taxi reached West 23rd Street, she had focused her thoughts on what lay ahead—the tests she'd perform on Friday. Over the years, she had tested more products than she could count, but nothing she’d ever done before could have prepared her to deal with this mode of evaluation. She felt like a soldier girding to go into battle.

And she could hardly wait.

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