

Tendencies

by Jennifer Clark

My tendency began slowly at first. With things. Not people. The first time I realized something unusual was beginning to happen to me I'd been home from work for about an hour when I noticed two paperclips stuck to my blouse. They were easy enough to pull off, but the minute I set them on my bureau, they jumped up and re-attached themselves. It was like they had a mind of their own. After several rounds of this, I took off my shirt, and the paperclips immediately pulled away from the blouse and attached themselves to me. I set them on the bureau again, but this time placed a book over them. That silenced the paperclips.

Over the course of several months, I would return home to find more paperclips littering my clothes. They became harder to pull off.

Pardon? Oh. Yes, I do believe that is your husband's wedding ring on the side of my nose. My tendency has reached a point where I find it almost impossible to remove items that attach themselves to me. I tell you, it is so nice to talk with someone about what I've been going through. I've felt so alone lately. And you are a good listener. Now where was I?

Oh, yes. It was not long after that the people attraction set in. I was at work, in the break room, finishing lunch and listening in on conversations between several of my co-workers when the Equal Opportunity employer poster—that had been hanging forever on the bulletin board—fell down. All conversation stopped. It was a seemingly mundane occurrence, but the air felt different somehow. Even smelled different. Like burning metal. I don't know if others could smell the change, but we all watched the poster as it sashayed back and forth, slowly landing on the floor. At the same time, I felt a sting on my arm, then noticed a tack pressing into the flesh of my forearm. This is going to sound strange, but it felt like it belonged in me. I didn't want to pull it out. At least, not right away.

You go through life, or at least I have, feeling like I'm missing something. With that tiny tack biting into my skin, I felt whole. I could feel this infinitesimal bite vibrating all through my body, tingling even my toes. I realized that whatever was occurring had intensified my senses, particularly my sense of smell. In fact, even though we are, what, five hundred feet apart, I can smell you from here. So at that moment—

Okay. Sure. You smell like a musky marigold swirled in garlic, glazed in lemon sauce. The marigold scent I'm picking up tells me you must be menstruating. The garlic means you had something garlicky for supper last night, no? And you are coated in fear. Fear, I have learned, is citrusy smelling. A bit

Fear, I've learned, is citrusy smelling. A bit acidic. Yours is so strong I can taste it.

acidic. Yours is so strong I can taste it. Your fear crackles like bitter lemons on my tongue. Don't look so surprised. I told you I could smell you from here.

Where was I? Oh, yes, the break room. At that moment I felt so alive. I was afraid that if I pulled out the tack I would lose that feeling of wholeness, so I put my hand over it and pressed it in harder. I thought everyone would go back to their conversations, I would remain an ugly little fly on the wall, but, in that moment, everything utterly had changed. A co-worker who had never before acknowledged my presence stepped forward and started stroking my hair. *Your hair is so shiny* she cooed as others joined in, brushing my hair with their fingers.

Push their hands away? Why, no, I just laughed. I don't think it was my imagination, but even my laugh seemed different. Huskier. Up to that moment, no one, particularly men, ever paid me much mind. Think about it. In all these years as neighbors, your husband has never gone beyond offering a half-hearted wave when he'd encounter me.

It was time to get back to work, but nobody wanted to leave. Then it dawned on me—they wanted to be near me. *Near me*. Something deep within me changed that day. I could feel it in my core. I felt shiny and strong. Still do. Maybe that's what my co-workers, on some level, sensed. They eventually tore themselves away. I reluctantly pulled the tack out of my arm. The shiny feeling remained.

Back at my cubicle, that day and for the rest of that month, it seemed that everyone made excuses to stop by. They couldn't keep their hands off me. At first, they made excuses. *Is that lint on your shirt?* one would ask, only to pick some imaginary particle off my shoulder, their hand lingering. *What shampoo are you using?* others inquired while their fingers reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

You can touch my hair if you want to. I see you looking at it. It glistens



in this morning light. No? Suit yourself.

I loved going to work—that attention, those touches, all so delicious. I also couldn't wait to get home, peel off my clothes, stand in front of the mirror and drink myself in. My eyes and hands were so hungry. I had deprived them of me for so long. Just to touch—

Don't look at me that way. Believe me, you would have done the same. To know, to actually *feel* one's beauty, it's, well it's intoxicating.

I wish my life could have stayed like that. It was just the right level of tendency. But, as my mother always said, nothing stays the same. If it had, you and I wouldn't be in this situation now, would we?

My tendency to attract things and people grew. Extra paperclips stuck to my blouse, loose change collected around my ankles, staples affixed them-

selves to my wrists.

Eventually, my co-workers stopped making excuses. They just hovered and touched. Touched and hovered. The boss finally had enough. She came over to my cube and sat down on my lap. With her legs entwined around my waist, hands sunk in my hair, she fired me. I could tell it was quite painful for her to let me go, but I understood. Nobody was getting any work done. I had become too much of a distraction.

My tendency continued to escalate. People, complete strangers mind you, were taking notice. It became uncomfortable to go out in public. I stopped going to restaurants altogether. Progressively more violent fights erupted between wait staff over who should take my order. Customers sitting near me felt compelled to draw closer. Some would feed me; others would blot salad dressing from the corners of my mouth with their napkin. A few even licked stray bits of crumbs from my lips. I'd leave restaurants with spoons dripping from my earlobes, forks stuck to my thighs, knives nuzzled between my breasts, and strangers wondering what had just possessed them.

In time, even simple errands became impossible. Grocery shopping is out of the question. The minute I set foot in the store, scanners stop working, cash registers open, change goes flying.

This tendency that once made me feel special and whole is turning me into a prisoner. Until last night, I hadn't stepped out of my home for over a month.

Of course I tried to get help. Shortly after I lost my job I went to see my doctor. I was sitting on the exam table—donning a highly becoming paper gown I might add—when the doctor knocked and entered. A thwack-thwump sound resonated throughout the room and I immediately felt a heaviness in my, my sex area. I looked down and saw a metal stapler pressed to my crotch.

I thought he would be surprised, stunned by what had just occurred. But, get this, he said I presented with symptoms similar to another patient he had seen only weeks earlier. Imagine that! The case was so unusual my doctor had contacted the county health department. He initially suspected that something might be in the drinking water.

What? No, the water is fine. After further consultation between the health department and several other physicians, they realized that there are clusters of this tendency developing in a handful of individuals across several counties and it has nothing to do with water. They brought in a geophysicist and—

A bit worrisome, isn't it? Clusters of people like me. Yes, I was getting to that. The doctor told me that these tendencies are most likely a response to earth's magnetic field changing. As the doctor's hand wedged slowly between the stapler and my womanly mound, he explained how we are experiencing a magnetic reversal of sorts. He gripped the stapler but did not attempt to pull it away. *Apparently*, he said, *this is what the earth did about 780,000 years ago*. The good doctor's knuckles began to rub back and forth, back and forth on my mound. *We are in the midst of another reversal, a slow flip of the north and south poles, if you will.*

I probably had the same incredulous expression on my face as you do now. It's crazy, I know, but it made sense. Felt right, you know?

Did you know, he said, knuckles more insistent, *that over the last one hundred and fifty years, the earth's overall magnetic field has weakened by ten percent?* At that, my thighs began to quiver. I could contain myself no longer. I let out a husky laugh. With great effort, he removed the stapler, put it in a cabinet, and locked the door. *There is no cure*, he whispered into my ear as he removed my paper gown. He then dressed me so lovingly, so tenderly that I cried.

That's right. No cure. He ordered me to stay away. *The only thing I can recommend is for you to stay home, young lady.* He walked me out of the exam room, down the hall, and out of the building. He wanted to come home with me—I could smell his intentions, a briny pool of anchovies mixed with the smell of damp leaves—but he was just strong enough, and I was just weak enough that it was not to be. He seized the handle of the entrance door and pushed me away, his musty regret trailing behind me.

Yes, it is time. Although I don't know if it is wise. Yes, yes. I suppose you are right. As his wife you should know what happened.

I'm tired of feeling so alone. I'm tired of eating food from a can. I'm tired of worrying what I will do when it runs out. I'm tired of being stuck in my house. And I'm tired of not sleeping well.

Last night, once again, I couldn't sleep. Did you know that from my bedroom window I can see your vegetable garden? Well I looked out and it all appeared so inviting: squash carpeting your backyard, cabbage heads bursting, tomatoes still swelling on the vine. Everything so lush and full. *What harm could come*, I thought, *from slipping out into the cool night to harvest a*

few vegetables?

And so it was I found myself standing barefoot in the middle of your garden, inhaling a bounty of provocative aromas. The beets, their earthy, sweetness were so enticing that I knelt down and dug one out of the ground. As I rose, not even bothering to brush off dirt that clotted to its blushing skin, I bit into it. That's when I saw him, your husband, standing not too far from where you are now, watching me. I had been so overcome with hunger that I didn't even hear the car pull into the drive. I swear, if I had known your husband wasn't home, was returning late, last night, I never would have gone out to the garden.

I could be wrong, but I don't think my tendency was impacting him. At least not at first. I did wonder what was going through his mind. He always struck me—and please don't take offense to this, it's just my impression—but he struck me as a shallow man. I thought he might even be repelled, was thinking why, in the middle of the night, his homely neighbor was tearing into a beet in his backyard. Ha, hah!

He took one step towards me. And then another. As the distance between us lessened, the attraction grew. We could both feel it. I kept eating the beet. He kept walking. I could smell his salty desire.

Then it all happened so fast. My tendency evoked a ghastly sucking sound from him. His teeth...

His teeth reached me first. Like bullets, they pelted my face and chest, searing my skin. His wristwatch unhinged, hurled itself at me, and struck me on the forehead. In similar fashion, his belt buckle popped, flew into the air and wrapped itself around my upper thigh. His body came to me with such force I staggered backwards. I fell hard, sandwiched between this changing earth and your husband's pulsating body.

Despite your husband's anguish, he wanted me. His throbbing gums gnawed on my earlobes, all the while his blood pooled into my ear. His fingers ached to wander, his hands yearned to stroke, and yet his limbs were immovable. It was excruciatingly painful for both of us, a repugnant feast from which neither of us could refrain.

He yearned to explore. It took all of my strength to help him, but we were able to lift and reposition his arms and legs, allowing him the opportunity to press close to my hips, breasts, and belly.

But, as I am sure you know, you married a weak man. After several hours of this, he grew weary. I tired of him, his weighty, sticky mess. His body resisted my attempts at separation, even protested with agonizing sounds, like pieces of paper being ripped apart.

With great effort, I managed to push him off me. He lay near me, a glossy mass of rawness.

In a tangle of vines and swollen fruit, we lay. Worn out from the tug of earth's strange new dance, I fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke, I was thankful that your husband's coppery smell had slipped into the soil. Before I even opened my eyes, I realized another shift, a deepening of my tendency, had occurred. The stars and moon had vanished, the sun had yet to make an appearance, but I knew I was in tatters. I felt shinier than ever but diminished somehow.

With dawn, I could make out pieces of skin—your husband's skin—stuck to mine. Look, even now I flutter in the breeze. See? See how they sway when I move my arms this way or that?

What? Oh, he's in the garden.

One of your hands has slipped, my darling. You want to go to him, but you know you cannot. My dear, you are trembling.

Oh, my. Tsk, tsk. Without even seeing the warmth that has streamed down your fine legs, I can smell your sweetness from here.

Please don't shudder. I don't want to hurt you. I just want to be near you. This has become too much for you, hasn't it? I should go back into my house, but you captivate me, my dear.

As the compass drifts slowly south, I just want to be closer to you.

One step. I'll just take one step.