

CONCENTRATION

A SHORT STORY

Sean Monaghan

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by Sean Monaghan

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CONCENTRATION



ONE

Aaron lost concentration when Casey aimed the car for the clifftop. There shouldn't have been a roadway up here anyway, he thought.

And she shouldn't have been driving.

"How much have you had to drink?" he said. He could smell it on her. A dull alcoholic waft.

"A couple of wines," she said. "And a couple of beers."

"I think I should be driving."

At this Casey laughed. She'd been at Victoria running hard at a bachelor's for three years. It would take her another year at least. She was twenty-five.

Aaron had met her earlier. When he'd begun his Concentration package for the evening. The swirl of thoughts still tried to draw him back into their vortex.

He was wearing a red, black and white plaid shirt, brushed cotton with a soft collar. Jeans and Osiris boots he'd bought at a discount from the Jimmy Peters' Shoep. Stupid pun, he'd thought, but the shoes were under his fifty dollar threshold. Red with white trim.

"Do you think I'm going to drive off?" Casey said. She jerked the wheel back and forth. The car's speed was no more than walking pace. A duck waddle.

"I think you're capable of driving off," he said. He liked her. She'd been forthcoming, laying out her details when they'd met. Pretty too, in a kind of grinning, exuberant way.

He couldn't imagine how she would like him back. Not that way.

She was trying out Concentration for the first time.

"I think I'm capable of flying," she said.

"That's what I felt the first time."

Across the bay's growing darkness he saw a big biplane dropping for the water. The aircraft's silhouette wallowed down at a surface glistening yellows and golds reflecting from the setting sun.

Casey tapped the brake. The engine chugged. "I don't know you," she said. "You could have brought me up here to do wicked things."

"You're driving. You brought me. And what is there to know?"

"Age. Star sign. Gender. School. Dreams and hopes."

"A simple five point test."

"If you can answer more than two you're doing better than most guys who manage to get me up here."

"Twenty-five," he lied. "Gemini."

"Two from two." She didn't look over. She was leaning forwards, intent and peering over the hood. Watching the edge of the cliff close.

"Male. St Ed-"

"Good," she said. "That's sometimes a tricky one." She flicked him a glance and looked again at the bay.

"St Edwards Catholic School for Boys."

"Not 'wayward' boys."

"I've never been wayward."

"Pity."

Aaron put his hands on the dash. "Slow down."

"One more question."

"To fly."

Casey laughed. "Not to make out with me?"

Aaron waited a beat. How did he answer a question like that? “Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Ow!” Casey squealed shrill enough to hurt his ears. “Aren’t you just a delight.”

The car stopped, front wheels on the precipice.



TWO

Later Aaron let himself run through a Concentration exercise. He set the moment on a loop.

The car approached the cliff.

He felt his concentration going.

Had she been drinking? Four drinks! Get out from behind the wheel!

Not before you answer some questions, mister.

I'm twenty-three. Gemini. Male.

Of course. I can see that.

I went to St Clement primary. On Wikiriphi road.

I dream I can fly.

Liar. You, Aaron Williamson, are one big fat liar.



THREE

The next day Aaron made notes. Calculus and chemistry. He tried to memorize the glucose cycle. Again. There was someone, somewhere in the universe to whom this made perfect sense.

The house stank of his housemates. Dull, linear football heads studying horticulture. There needed to be an ‘ostensibly’ in that description.

His own room felt cramped and claustrophobic after Concentration. After time with Casey.

Casey above the bay, he thought. Casey in the daisies.

He spent two hours watching stupid television reruns of sitcoms he hated anyway.

Sixty-two Facebook friend requests pending.

At midnight he made an omelet and hot chocolate. From the living room came the guttural primate grunts of Evan and Tony. Watching some cable game.

Aaron ate in his room. As he was finishing the phone rang.

He let it go six rings before getting up and going to the hallway. The boys still grunted in front of the television.

“Hello,” Aaron said.

“Hi.” Casey. “Let’s go watch the moonrise.”

He almost said, ‘I’m studying’, but substituted, “Sure.”

“Pick you up in five to ten.”

Aaron couldn’t help but hear the echo of a jail term in the phrase.

But five was plenty. He lay on his rumpled bed and stared at the ceiling. His mother had bought him the quilt when he'd first left home. Patchwork, hand-embroidered. Not a family heirloom, but he wondered if she intended it to eventually become so. It smelled of his grandma's house.

Aaron settled into Concentration.

The cliff. Growing nearer. The water glowing, reflecting the golds of the clouds.

I'm twenty-three, Gemini on the cusp, very definitely male.

Satisfying, she said.

I attended St... Andrews?

St Andrews on the Green. Yes. I kissed a lot of boys from there.

But not me.

Not yet anyway.

I dream of flying, but I'm not so sure now.

You say the sweetest things.

The edge of the cliff came too close. Someone needed to apply the car's brake.

With a thump the wheels went over the edge. The vehicle slewed sideways. Tipped.

Aaron scrambled for the handle. The car tumbled upside down. It rolled down the embankment. A terrible sound assaulted his ears. A wrenching, tearing, groaning noise. The sound of the car dying. Mixed with it was the sound of Casey screaming.

Aaron sat up on the bed.

That was all wrong. The loops should only be revisionary within an event. That was far too far outside his experience. It was all wrong.

The doorbell chimed. Accompanied by a fist hammering at the glass.

He straightened his clothes, blinked at himself in the mirror and went to meet her.

On the front step Casey looked pale and gaunt. He hadn't remembered that about her. Still pretty, though. She had her hair tied back in a

ponytail, and a baseball cap on. New York Yankees. Aaron smiled. That was actually baseball, if he remembered rightly.

“We’ll fly over the Hudson,” she said. “Across the Atlantic.”

“Sounds like fun.” He followed her out to the car. On the walk she took his hand and squeezed.



FOUR

The moon rose. A slave to celestial mechanics. Its cuplike crescent hung down, as if spilling stars into the mountaintops. Aaron told Casey.

“That’s nice,” she said.

They sat on the car’s hood, up near the cliffs. The breeze was cool, but Aaron didn’t mind. He snuggled into her and she snuggled back.

“Don’t you worry about Concentration?” she said.

“Worry?”

The program happened weekly. A small group of them, meeting in unoccupied rooms at an insurance office. One of the members worked for the company. They were trying to lease the rooms and let the group meet for a nominal fee. Gold coin donation covered that easily, and coffee. Someone always brought baking.

It wasn’t quite meditation, wasn’t quite study hall. Some of the group had been ADHD as kids. Some of them had been autistic. Aaron figured he was almost the most normal of the bunch. Aside from Casey.

They practiced looping, reviewing and concentration. There was a mantra, but it wasn’t mandatory. Some thought the evenings helped with family relationships. Others thought it helped them stay focused at work. Some thought it helped them go grocery shopping and come home with eggs, milk and bread instead of greeting cards, curry powder and packs of 64 clothes pegs.

Aaron knew it helped him study.

“Well,” Casey said. “They’re kind of a creepy bunch. I mean they way they make google-eyes at me. And the coffee table’s a mess. Biscuit crumbs and they put the wet spoon back in the sugar. Gross.”

Aaron watched the moon. Its size seemed to diminish as it ascended.

“I like it,” he said.

“I think I’ll stop going.”

“Oh.” He wished he had a better response. He wondered if he had anything stored up that wouldn’t sound needy.

He liked Concentration, but he liked it a whole lot more with Casey there.

“Well,” she said. “That’s the moonrise. Let’s get out of here.”

They drove to Carl’s Jr. for thick shakes, but his mind was verging on making a loop.

Not here, he thought. He sipped at the thick, minty, malty, milky, cool shake. It clung to his tongue.

He caught a hazy glimpse of Casey looking over her straw at him. Lips pursed she drew and inclined her head.

Up at the cliff.

The moon made an elegant being. A celestial crescent. The stars spilled.

Casey snuggled in. I worry about Concentration.

But I like it. The car’s hood felt warm under his behind.

The Concentration group. Each week a new theme, a new batch of baking. Practicing loops.

I’m thinking of leaving.

Aaron wasn’t sure if she meant him or the group.

He felt bereft. How could she leave?

Let’s get shakes.

Fast food. A thick shake. He sipped. Milky. Cloying his mouth.

Back at the cliff.

An elegant moon.

Snuggling.

I'm leaving.

No, Aaron thought. Don't leave.

I feel like one of those sweet thick milkshakes, don't you?

I feel like being with you. Up at the cliff.



FIVE

A hand on his elbow. Aaron became aware of the noise of the restaurant around him. Teens queuing with their phones in one hand, tattered banking card in the other.

“Wow,” Casey said. “You really disappeared there. I thought you’d gone for a vacation on another planet.”

Aaron saw the moon rise again. A perfect vision.

“I think Concentration will help you,” he said. “With study.”

“What do I need? Sixteen more credits.” She leaned forwards.

Aaron saw that her clear plastic milkshake cup was empty. He still held his. Three-quarters full. Melting now, almost warm in his hand.

“Concentration will help you in your life,” he said.

“Sheesh, now you sound like my mother.”

Aaron didn’t say anything.

“Did you ever think it’s like a cult or something? They suck you in, turn you over and never, ever, ever spit you out again?”

“No.” Was it a cult? It seemed a very negative view.

Casey twiddled her straw. Her eyes looked at him. Sad, hooded. The corner tips of her lips twitched. A slight smile.

“I guess you’d better take me home.” Aaron set his milkshake cup on the table.



SIX

Casey didn't even turn off the car's engine. Aaron sat for a moment. He wasn't sure what he expected. He looked at his feet.

"It's getting cold." Casey glanced up at the house. There were lights on in the living room.

Putting his hand on the door handle Aaron gave it a tentative tug.

"I thought you liked Concentration." He wondered if what he was really saying was *I thought you liked me*.

"I thought so too."

The chugging of the car's engine felt like a beat.

He felt it coming on again.

The cliff edge. A thick shake. The car tumbling, trying to fly. It's getting cold. The cycles of the car engine.

"Pistons," he said.

"I should get home."

"What's wrong?"

She looked at him, looked away. "Whatever this Concentration thing is, it can't help me."

"What? It helps everything."

"Not everything," she whispered.

"It puts you in touch with the universe. Plus it's really good for memory."

"Maybe it's memory I don't exactly want."

"Casey."

“I don’t like you spouting it back. It’s like you’ve rote-learned their twelve steps.”

“It’s not a twelve-”

“Stop it. Get out.”

Now he gave the door handle a good yank. With a clunk the door popped open.

“I’ll call you,” he said as he stepped out.

“Don’t.” Casey popped the clutch and the car shot away. The door banged closed.

Aaron stood watching her taillights. The car stopped half a block away at the traffic signals. The red hung and hung. No other traffic.

With her car stationary it was almost as if she was waiting for him to disbelieve her and run up.

The lights flicked to green and she drove off.

Mullen Road was punctuated by a series of traffic lights. She stopped at the next red. The automatic cycle held her, even with no cross traffic.

Green and another stop at the last set. Aaron watched until her taillights had gone off around into Kennedy Street.

He trudged inside. The boys were still watching some game.

“You’re out late,” Evan said. “Not like you.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Getting out of your routine a bit.”

“That’s healthy.”

They both laughed, calming quickly with some excitement in the commentator’s voice. A penalty goal. Or something.



SEVEN

Aaron lay awake. The clock hands made their progression. A part of him wished there was a hand that moved somewhere between the speed of the second and minute hands. A decimal marker hand that took ten minutes to cycle around. Slow enough to ignore, fast enough to watch.

What did it mean, that image of the car tumbling away over the edge?

Concentration told him the past. The angles were different, the speeds varying, but only the repetition of what had been.

Good for study. Good for groceries.

Why was it revisionist?

3:00am. 3:01am. 3:02am. In twelve hours it all repeated. Steps around its face.

Now he felt like a man outside a clock mechanism, trying to explain how it worked on the inside.

Einstein. Everything was relative.

Aaron let Concentration wash over him again.

A big biplane out over the water. Propellers driving it forwards. Casey's car rolling ahead. A low fence at the edge. Nothing substantial enough to stop a determined ton of momentum charging towards it.

I like you. Casey held an empty cup. Don't call me.

The car drove again at the cliff.

The moon hung overhead. High in sky.

Too high.

Aaron looked closer. He wasn't in the car.

That couldn't be right.

Casey sat alone. The engine was running.

Aaron walked closer. He tapped on the window. Casey looked up startled.

Aaron?

What's going on? I'm in Concentration. It should be repetition. A loop.

Why are you here? She was crying.

Casey? What's-

With a graunch she shoved the car into gear. Popped the clutch. The car launched for the-

Aaron sat up. Concentration broken.

Weird.

Casey had driven away in the wrong direction. Instead of u-turning she'd gone way up onto Kennedy. Up the cliff road.

Tony and Evan were still in front of the game.

"Tony," Aaron said. "I need to borrow your car."

"You what now?"



EIGHT

Tony's car was a 1998 Honda hatchback. Both its wind-screen wipers stuck straight up on the glass, the return circuit busted.

Tony stopped at the lights. Aaron sat in the back seat looking at the moon through the side window.

"All this is over some girl, huh?" Evan said from the front passenger seat.

"Drive like a maniac," Aaron said. "The lights are just on a loop. They're not triggered by on-coming traffic."

"I'll get a ticket."

"Wouldn't be the first," Evan said.

"Exactly."

"I'll pay the fine," Aaron said. "We don't have much time."

The dashboard clock on Tony's car glowed back at him. 3:37.

The light stayed on red.

"Live a little Tony," Evan said. "You're always such a rule stickler."

"It's only sensible. What's the hurry?"

Saving someone's life, Aaron wanted to say. They were going to end up at the clifftop park and find it empty. He would see Casey tomorrow on campus. They would have a laugh and she would come on back to Concentration.

"Listen, Tony," Evan said. "If mister autistic in the back seat can get out of his routine, so can you." Evan looked around at Aaron and shrugged. "No offence, but, well, you know."

“I know.”

The light turned green. Tony eased forwards.

“Sheesh,” Evan said.

Tony ran the next two reds. He almost squealed the car around the corner into Kennedy. The headlights threw eerie shadows through the trees on the windy road up to the naked park.

“That’s more like it.” Evan’s voice came out high. He clung to the plastic handle above the door as the car swept through the curves.

The park was empty darkness. Tony slowed, turned. The headlights glinted from something red.

Casey’s taillights.

“Whoa,” Evan said. “Is there a guardrail over there or something?”

“No,” Aaron said. “Stop here.” He had the sense that in those other moments he’d been stepping from Tony’s car.

Casey’s car on the clifftop. Alone.

Aaron walking over.

Lit by the low-beam glow from Tony’s car.

That’s how it had been.

“Let me out,” he said.

Evan sat forwards and Aaron clamber over him. He ran across the damp grass.

Casey’s engine idled, a putt-putt-putt sound. Toylike.

He slowed at the back bumper.

The loop ran around his head. Tapping on the passenger window. The car launching over the cliff.

He went to the other side. Her side.

He didn’t tap.

He wrenched the door open.

Casey looked up in fright. Aaron grabbed her arm. He hauled her out.

Casey’s foot came off the clutch.

The car launched out over the cliff. The tearing, ripping sound ricocheted around the bay.

Aaron lay beside her on the grass.

She managed a faint smile. "Boy, am I glad to see you," she said.



NINE

Aaron sat in the circle at Concentration. The tellings buzzed around him. He couldn't concentrate.

He'd pulled her to safety.

Standing he pushed his chair back. It scraped. "Sorry," he said. "I'm finished here."

Casey was waiting outside. "Oh," she said. "I was thinking of going in."

Aaron shook his head. "I like it better without the loops."

He reached out to her hand. Casey grinned and took it with a squeeze.

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About the Author

Award-winning author, Sean Monaghan has published more than one hundred stories published in the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and in New Zealand, where he makes his home. A regular contributor to Asimov's, his story "Crimson Birds of Small Miracles", set in the art world of Shilinka Switalla, won both the Sir Julius Vogel Award, and the Asimov's Readers Poll Award, for best short story.

He is a past winner of the Jim Baen Memorial Award, and the Amazing Stories Award.

Sean writes from a nook in a corner of his 110 year old home, usually listening to eighties music.



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