

# THE XY DOT

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Austin Curtis Brown



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The XY Dot

All characters in this work are fictional. But some speak  
the words of others quite real.

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To my grandchildren who are not yet  
but who may be  
and I see distantly  
generations foretold  
mercy unto thousands.



Kill her and take her money, so that afterwards with its help you can devote yourself to the service of all mankind and the common cause: what do you think, wouldn't thousands of good deeds make up for one tiny little crime? For one life, thousands of lives saved from decay and corruption. One death for hundreds of lives—it's simple arithmetic!

Crime and Punishment





The  
**XY**  
Dot

# Chapter One



I wonder if a praying mantis, if he tried really hard, and if he had some insect snacks to keep him strong, could fly past the clouds to where it's always sunny? I bet his eyes would still follow me from up there, even if I was just a little dot waving on the ground below. The newest edition of *The Field Guide to Insects*, which I always carry in my backpack, because it's my favorite book, because, of course, I want to be an Entomologist, says that female mantises eat the heads off male mantises. That's really weird. Wouldn't it be funny if the guy mantis made a helmet out of bark or was a master sculptor and could make a pea look like a real mantis head? He would be like, "Here you go." And she would be all surprised, "Oh, thank you."

It would be *mucho excelante* if Egypt was our destination. I doubt people would know me there, which would feel strange, except they might notice that I'm not very tan and stare at me anyway. I know it doesn't snow in the desert, but it would be awesome if it did. Kids could sled down the side of the Great Pyramid, and camels with special parkas made just for them—so that the water in their humps wouldn't freeze—could pull us back up. And we could make a giant schnozer for the Sphinx out of snow and pretend that snowballs pulled out of it were ice boogers. I could keep my eyes peeled for a boy too. Maybe one was overlooked there.

I stopped looking out the plane window and asked Mom, "Hey, Mom. Do you think a praying mantis could fly this high?"

She kept staring at her book. "I don't know, honey."

"Do you suppose they taste like celery? I bet they do, or maybe like leaves."

Mom looked over at me and said, "Adam, put the barf bag away, ok? You're not going to be sick." But I could tell that she wasn't very serious because her voice was relaxed, so I kept it near me between the

armrest and my leg, right where I would strap a survival knife, if I had one.

In gym class we've been practicing a lot of gymnastics, especially floor exercises, so I didn't mind missing school to go to New York. The worst is stretching. I hate stretching. But I know it's good for me. If someone ever gets me in a kumora when I try out for the UFC, which is the Ultimate Fighting Championship, which I'm training for, then I'll be able to twist out of it. Girls can do the splits like it's nothing, I have no idea why. Once I asked Alisha to push on my shoulders to help me go down all the way, but when my entire wiener region felt like it was going to explode, I grabbed myself like Michael Jackson, who was a famous singer when my mom was a baby, and yelled out, "Oh, my allsbay" and fell over. Alisha thought it was hilarious, but not Mrs. Peterson. She told me to quit yelling and get up.

Mrs. Peterson has also been teaching us volleyball lately, which has been kind of fun. I'm able to put a lot of England on the ball when I serve, which makes it hard to return, but I definitely don't like practicing bump sets. When we were first learning how to properly bump set a volleyball, Mrs. Peterson gathered us all around in a big circle and said, "Ok, everyone, bend your knees." So we all bent our knees. And then she straightened out her arms in front of her with her hands held tightly together. Her silver whistle was dangling in the air because she was also leaning forward. "Now put your arms like this, everyone. Keep those arms stiff." So we did. She then held up a volleyball that was lying next to her and told us that we were supposed to bounce the ball off our arms to the person across from us. "Keep it going as long as you can," she said. When the ball finally came to me, I bent down low and sprang at it like a jump frog. I was thinking that I would hit the ball higher than anyone else, clear up to the ceiling, but instead, it ricocheted off my knuckles and totally nailed Kristen Bailey in the face. She instantly fell to the ground and started wailing, really loud. While everyone was standing over her, watching her just lie there with her hands over her face, Molly Baker came over to me and said that I was the stupidest retard, ever. I tried to tell Kristen I was sorry, but the other girls just told me to stay away. Girls are really good at making you feel like a deserted island sometimes.

When I told Uncle Brock what Molly said, he just rolled his eyes like he always does when we talk about women and said, "Don't worry about it, man. Listen, girls are finicky—they are *Fib-nub-kee*." I wasn't

exactly sure what finicky meant, and since I thought it was important to be absolutely sure, I asked, “Does finicky mean annoying?” He nodded his head, “Yep, you nailed it.”

Tuesday nights are awesome because that’s when Uncle Brock takes me to Dairy Queen. I wish I could download his brain data into my brain because it seems like he always knows what to say to finicky girls. “Focus on Molly’s nose,” he said, “That’s every girl’s kryptonite. Remember that.”

I shrugged my shoulders and wondered, “What’s so special about their noses? I mean, Molly’s nose looks pretty normal.”

Uncle Brock set his milkshake down and leaned in close with a serious look on his face, “That’s just it. Their nose could be the product of heaven, but all women are uneasy about them. Seriously, there’s not a woman alive who isn’t terrified of her nose.” That didn’t make a lot of sense to me, but he continued, “Try something. Try to look at your nose right now. See, you can’t, can you? So next time a girl says something rude, just say, ‘Look, I’m really sorry about your nose.’ And then they’ll be like, ‘What?’ And you’ll be all icy cool and say, ‘Do people ever stare at it?’ You watch what happens next. They’ll try to look at their nose and get all crossed-eyed and then feel like a dork. After that, they’ll run away, probably crying.”

“It really works?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah.”

“How do you know?”

He dug out an Oreo and said, “I’ve been doing reconnaissance work amongst the women folk for years. Trust me, it works.”

Uncle Brock is awesome, and my best friend.

Flying first class is cool. All the stewardesses are really nice and there’s plenty of room for my backpack under the seat. I don’t like the food, but Mom says that I’m really picky. If they served pizza from Pizza Hut, I would definitely chow down on that. I also like waffles and hot dogs with extra ketchup. Little Debbie cakes, the ones with colored sprinkles, and grilled cheese sandwiches, especially Gran-Gran’s, are yummy too. Actually, we didn’t get a meal on this flight, only a package of peanuts. I’ve heard that some people are extremely allergic to peanuts and that if they eat them their necks will swell shut. That’s weird. It seems like you should be able to send a mental message to your throat saying, “Look, everything’s ok. It’s just peanuts, not hydrochloric acid.” I’m not allergic to peanuts, but since I don’t like the

texture, I gave mine to Mom. But I was bored, so I took them back and tried smashing them without opening the package.

Mom set down her book and told me that she had to use the restroom. "I'll be back in a sec," she said. "Ok." I watched her walk up the aisle through a crack between the seats in front of me. Her flowing hair moved like a cloak behind her. When she was out of sight, I turned and pressed my forehead up against the window. There was nothing interesting to look at outside. We were flying above some wispy clouds that didn't look like anything but wispy clouds, and below that, a long ways down, the ground looked like a big brown blanket with green splotches; not a single car or building could be seen. Feeling a little bored, I picked up Mom's book. It was entitled "Pride and Prejudice." On the cover was a picture of a woman with ghostly white skin. She didn't look like a racist to me, but I've heard that looks can be deceiving.

One of the stewardesses, a woman always smiling and holding a pot of coffee, was passing nearby, so I asked her if she had any waffles. "I love waffles," I told her. She smiled really big and kind of laughed, but in a nice way. "No, I'm sorry. We aren't serving food on this flight. Would you like a drink, Adam?" I was kind of thirsty, so I said, "Sure," and then she asked what I would like, and so I said, "Mountain Dew" because it's like sweet nectar to my stomach. When she came back, I moved over to the aisle to get the drink and noticed that a lot of the other people in first class were watching me. There was a businessman sitting one seat back who lowered his newspaper to look at me. An older man with white fuzzy hair, who kind of looked like Grandpa, but not really, smiled at me too. There were others watching, but I didn't look at them.

When I was younger, strangers staring at me would have made me feel embarrassed, but now that I'm nine-and-a-half, it doesn't so much. I'm a lot more used to it now. Sometimes people will point and say things like, "Hey, look, it's Adam," or take a picture of me with their cell phones, but even that doesn't bother me too much. Midgets get stared at a lot too. So do people with missing arms. The only thing that bothers me is when people keep saying my name over and over again, "Adam! Hey, Adam! Hello, Adam!" I'll be like, "That's my name, don't wear it out," but my mom doesn't like me saying that, at least not to adults. She says it sounds rude.

Once in a while, though it doesn't happen very often, people won't believe that it's really me they're talking to. Recently I was playing the newest expansion of World of Warcraft, *World's Beyond* (which is totally awesome because now my 194<sup>th</sup> level elven warrior can attack with thunder strike), and some of the guys in this one group refused to believe that it was really me trying to join their clan. I asked [//OgRePimP//] if I could join his clan, but somebody named Halberd's Kiss said, "You sound like a girl to me." I thought the microphone on my new headphones might have needed tweaked, so I checked the settings and then said, "How's that?"

He said, "Nope, still a girl."

Someone asked if I put out, but since I didn't know what that meant, I ignored him. I told [//OgRePimP//], "I know I'm only nine-and-a-half, but I've got a really good character. My warrior has a crystal ax!" A lot of them laughed. One typed ROFL.

Halberd's Kiss said, "Yeah, right."

And I said, beginning to feel annoyed, "It *is* me. How many other nine-and-a-half-year-old boys do you know?"

He chuckled, "Wouldn't it be funny if it really was Adam? What would be the odds of that?"

I told them that the odds would be a lot better than  $10^{1.294}$  billionth power.

[//OgRePimP//] said, "*Hub?*"

But before I could reply, someone else said, "Hey, that's exactly how long my Johnson is in inches." They all laughed really hard.

Since my Grandpa gave me *The Guinness Book of World Records* for Christmas last year, I knew that his Johnson wasn't that long. Actually, after thinking about it for a moment, I realized that a person wouldn't be able to carry around a wiener that big, and so I said, "That's impossible. Do you have any idea how big that number is? A Johnson that long would never fit into a pair of jeans, even relaxed fit." They didn't answer but just kept on laughing. Then they kicked me out.

I can't say that I fully understand one in  $10^{1.294}$  billionth power either. Mr. Alfred, my math teacher, tried to explain it to the class when we were talking about the way things have been for the last twenty-one years. He told us that we had to imagine a 1 followed by over one billion zeros. Some of the other kids didn't know that billion came after million, and so he had to explain that for a while. "One billion," he

said, holding a piece of chalk near the blackboard, “looks like this.” He then wrote:

1,000,000,000.

“It’s three more zeros than one million,” he told us. Lucy Parker, this one girl who’s like a living Wikipedia, and who has really thick glasses and always wears long skirts, knew that trillion came after billion.

Mr. Alfred told her, “That’s right, Lucy.”

Then she said, “And I know that quadrillion comes after trillion.”

“Thank you, Lucy.”

“Then it’s quintillion, and after that it’s sextillion.”

When she said “sextillion,” several people started chuckling, including me. I was like, “*Sextillion?* What’s up with that?” Mr. Alfred frowned and cleared his throat. That’s what he does when he wants the class to settle down. Lucy tried to explain that sextillion is rooted in one of the cardinal Latin numbers, namely, sex, which made us laugh harder. Mr. Alfred said, “That’s enough, class.” Lucy’s comment did make me wonder if the number 6 is called sex in Latin because it looks pregnant. That would make sense, I guess.

When everyone settled down, Mr. Alfred continued, “Now one billion is itself a very large number, but a one followed by one billion zeros is a number so big, so gigantically enormous, it defies comprehension—that’s to say, the number is so big, I don’t have anything to compare it to. Nothing comes close.”

Jenny asked, “What about all the sand in the world?”

“It’s a much, much larger number,” said Mr. Alfred.

“How can that be?” someone else asked, which is what I was thinking.

Mr. Alfred said, “You could add up all the blades of grass in the world, all the sand, all the people, and all the fish in the sea, and  $10^{1.3}$  billionth power would still be much, much bigger.”

The class went, “Whoa.”

“Yeah,” said Mr. Alfred. “Whoa.”

Mr. Alfred sat on the corner of his desk. “And you know what? The number is continually getting bigger.” That was an awesome thought. I was going to raise my hand and ask a question, but he continued talking, “Every second, about five babies are born in the world. So each











She made a soft noise.

“How much longer before we land?”

She looked down at her watch. “I’d say about forty minutes.”

I scrunched my face.

“It does seem like we’ve been flying a long time, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

I looked back out the window. “Hey, Mom. What if we kept following the sun? Would time stop moving?”

“I think it would still keep going.”

“But what if we followed it around the planet? Would it always be daytime?”

“It would.”

“But then wouldn’t it always be the same time, like always noon?”

“Hey, did you brush your teeth this morning?” she said, leaning back, giving me a funny look.

I nodded.

“How long did you brush?”

“I brushed them good, even the ones in the back.”

“Let me see,” she said, putting her hand under my chin.

“*Mom.*”

“Just let me see.” Mom always wanted to see my teeth to make sure that I had brushed them thoroughly, especially if we were going somewhere special or having company over.

“Ok, they look pretty good.” She ran her fingers through my hair.

“Do you think Uncle Brock remembered to let Barkus out?” I asked, feeling a little panicky, because I know how bad he has to go to the bathroom in the mornings. Sometimes he’ll actually hop up and down by the door and tell you with his eyes, “I’ve gotta go bad! *Bad!*” I was thinking, *What if Uncle Brock thinks he just wants to play or likes to stretch his legs by jumping?* Mom assured me that he wouldn’t forget, but I wasn’t so sure, so I decided to check my email just in case Uncle Brock wrote me. I grabbed my backpack under the seat and pulled out my laptop. I entered my password: Not1/22/2009, which is my birthday. I added “Not” before it so that spies who might think to enter my birthday would be fooled.

Windows mail: Checking for new emails...

Receiving new emails...

You have two new emails.

The first email was a news update from BabyWatch.com, which could wait. The other was from Uncle Brock! I clicked on it:

Hey! How's everything going? The security guards didn't think you were a terrorist, did they? Have them give me a call if they put you in a holding cell. I'll get you outta there :-)

I can't chat because I'm running late for work, but Barkus has been great. He slept fine and is playing outside right now. Don't forget to take care of your mother in New York, ok? And I'm looking forward to seeing you on the Lisa Perry Show. Stay frosty.

Uncle B.

I felt a lot better after reading that. I imagined Barkus in Uncle Brock's backyard peeing on his favorite maple tree, smiling. He was probably also barking at cars driving through the alley. He loves to yap at cars, especially Volkswagen Beetles for some reason, and Stan, the mailman.

"See, I told you he would be fine," Mom said, patting my leg.

Since my heart felt like a sunrise, I decided to examine my mood ring (which I always wear around my neck except when I take a shower or train for the UFC with Barkus) to see if it agreed with my feelings. I held it up to the window. The stone was a swirl of greenish blue, which meant that it sensed my happiness. Bright blue is the best. That's super happiness, like when I got my ant farm starter-kit, or when we actually play something fun like kickball during recess. When I first found the ring in a crumpled old box in Gran-Gran's basement, it was dark, dark brown, almost black. I think it felt sad due to loneliness, because shortly after I found it and held it a while it turned blue. Both of us were glad to have found each other.

"Oh, I think it likes you very much, indeed," Grandpa said, when I showed it to him. I asked him if I could keep it, and he said, "I think that would be just fine."

"Is it magical?"

Grandpa sat up in his chair with a groan. “You mean like Gollum’s ring?”

I nodded.

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Can I see it?”

I set it in his large hand. The silver metal sparkled. He looked at it for a few seconds and then slid it on his pinky finger. “Did I disappear?”

“I can still see you.”

“Hmm, it must not be an invisibility ring. Am I floating at all?”

I bent down and looked closely.

“Nope”

“Well, I suppose you’re just going to have to figure out if it has any magical powers, other than knowing how you feel, of course.”

I’ve tried sending telepathic messages to animals with my ring on, but none have spoken back yet, though the neighbor’s cat did blink kinda funny when I asked it, “Do you prefer Meow Mix or Cat Chow?” I know it isn’t a ring of fire resistance because I’ve gotten burned while playing with a campfire. It might be a ring of dexterity +2 because it seems like I’m able to climb trees with more agility when I have it on. If monkeys could talk, then I could give one my ring and get an expert opinion whether it improves climbing—but they don’t, unless of course, you think that humans are more highly evolved monkeys, which I know about because I watch the Discovery Channel.

When Mom told me that I was going to be interviewed on the Lisa Perry Show, I’m not sure what color my mood ring was, because I didn’t look. It was probably yellowish brown though, which meant that I felt kind of nervous, but also kind of excited. If Mom is showing a house or doing realtor stuff at the office, she’ll sometimes record the program and watch it later. Lisa Perry mostly talks about boring things like losing weight, or she says things like, “Feed your passion,” which doesn’t make sense to me. So I usually go to my room and study the ants in my ant farm, so that I can learn their language. People cry a lot on the show too. But there’s also a lot of clapping and laughing, so it’s not always about sad people.

While we were eating supper one evening, Mom asked, “Do you know who wants to have you on their TV show?” I shrugged my shoulders, even though I knew because when she was talking to someone from the Lisa Perry Show on the telephone, I was hiding by the fridge listening to her conversation. “Lisa Perry invited you to New

York in order to appear on her show. What do you think?” Mom definitely sounded excited.

“I thought you didn’t like me to do stuff like that?”

“Well, normally, I don’t. But she’s different.”

“How so?”

“I respect her.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Will I have to cry?”

Mom tilted her head, “Will you have to cry?”

“Yeah, you know. People cry on there a lot. Will I have to?”

She chuckled, “No, honey, it won’t be like that. She wants to ask you fun questions, things like: What’s your favorite color?”

I answered, “Blue.”

Mom ruffled my hair, “I thought it was pink.” She grinned, and I gave her a dirty look, but not a real dirty look.

“Will I get to sit on one of those big couches?”

“I think so.”

“And we’ll fly there?”

“The whole way.”

I raised my hand and gave Mom high five.

After dropping the ring back down my shirt, I thought about reading the other email but didn’t because the leader of our plane began to speak. “Hello, this is your captain. I’d like to let you know that we’re beginning our descent and should be landing at LaGuardia in about twenty-five minutes. The temperature is a sticky 89 degrees today with clear, sunny skies, so I hope you brought some shorts.”

There was something about his voice that made me think he was strong like an army commander but also reclining in a lawn chair at the beach. Some of the other people sitting around me kept reading their magazines while he spoke, which I thought was strange since it was the captain speaking. The older man with fuzzy white hair sitting across the aisle seemed to be listening though. The captain finished by saying, “We hope you enjoyed flying with American Airlines, and we look forward to you flying with us again.” The peanuts were definitely a bummer, and the toilet had a freaky metal flap at the bottom. Actually, the toilet ended up being pretty cool because it used blue water to flush down my number one, so really, other than the peanuts, the flight was great.

The fasten-your-seat belt picture came on, so I quickly put away my laptop and buckled up. I also checked to make sure that my seat could be used as a flotation device, just in case.

The guy sitting behind me, who I could barely see by pressing my face up against the wall, had his eyes closed and looked asleep. I knew he wasn't faking by the way his head moved with each air bump. I couldn't tell if his seat belt was on or not.

Mom got my attention, "So are you getting excited, Adam?"

"Oh, yeah."

I looked out the window for a moment. "Hey, Mom?"

"Yes."

"I was thinking: Lisa Perry wants to have me on her show because I'm a boy, right?" Mom nodded her head. "But aren't all the other girls just as special? I mean, they could be asked a bunch of questions about what it's like only having one boy on the planet, right? So why doesn't she have them on the show?"

"I think it's because unique things usually get more attention."

"So I'm unique?"

"Very."

"Just because other boys haven't been born for a long time?"

Mom didn't have to think about the question for even a millisecond. "Some think that, but in my heart," she touched her heart, "you're the most special person on the entire planet. In fact, you know what?"

"What?"

"If I could only choose one person in the entire world to be with me, I would pick you, because you're my favorite, plus infinity."



## Chapter Two



**I**t began at 11:38 PM, the first of May, 1997. No one took notice. No one could have noticed. It descended as silently as a shadow, altering the course of human history without apology or permission.

Couples made love all across the globe, jostling with delight by the millions; and as they did so, vast multitudes of teeming sperm jostled in tandem, coursing through the darkness, rushing headlong toward plump gametes. Yet when the clock ticked near the midnight hour, a peculiar shift clicked into place, and all of the Y-bearing sperm slowly crawled to a stop, until they hung lifeless, like little specks of coiled string.

Seconds passed. No boys were conceived. Then minutes. Nothing. An hour. Then ninety minutes. Then three hours. Like tiny pinpoints of light twinkling in the night, thousands of girls sprang into existence with not a single boy to be found. No one had the slightest idea what was unfolding as each mother held the silent evidence deep within her.

Fertility clinics were the first to notice the mystifying surplus of female zygotes. Initially, it was thought nothing more than a fluke, like the improbable result of a long string of dice rolls; but when it became apparent that the situation exceeded the limits of credulity, doubt rose stern and sharp. Quietly sharing their concerns, noting with growing dismay their inability to force fertilize, the medical community burst into action.

As the weeks progressed with increasing alarm, expecting mothers battled morning sickness all the same. A monumental problem loomed, but for many, life seemed to bear the marks of normalcy.

The tipping point came when all the round bellies covered in purple gel bore their secrets. From propped positions, mothers eagerly watched as the shadowy image of their fetus wobbled in and out of focus. A head would appear, then a foot, a hand. They were then asked, "Would you like to know the sex?" For those whose children were conceived after 11:38 PM, the first of May, 1997, the verdict always

came back, “It’s a girl.”

Avalanches build in momentum. There is a minute tremor in the frozen depths, an imperceptible shift, and then another until the entire mountain is cascading downward with unstoppable force. The medical community served as the first tremor, but it was the countless thousands of mothers receiving news of a girl that truly dislodged society.

Nature had fundamentally altered human expectation, and it was not a welcome thing, since man is not a creature that enjoys losing control.

At first, late-night comedians indulged in the usual antics, suggesting old-fashioned tricks for determining the sex of a child, like tried and true positions, or certain strong drinks to get the little guys in the right frame of mind. But as the problem persisted, and it soon became clear that the situation wasn’t going to be resolved with a simple wave of the scientific wand, humor swiftly lost its footing.

Theories surrounding the crisis abounded with both the simple and the erudite speculating wildly and loudly. Conspiracists flocked to forums, propagating wild-eyed ideas, spawning confusion and doubt amongst the masses. Filtering truth from error proved insurmountable, fracturing society into sparing factions with each citing experts by the fistfuls to validate their ill-conceived notions. The news knew nothing else, and many knew nothing else but the news, and none were the better for it.

With the multiplication of theories came the proliferation of credulity. The discovery of a cure would spell real money. But real money could be acquired through snake oil. Both the gullible and the foolishly adventurous consumed concoctions that would never come close to seeing the light of the FDA. It was a lucrative business that couldn’t be controlled by the government. Too many were willing to take the risk.

Public stunts proved rewarding as well. A European billionaire argued that the problem resided in slight changes in thermodynamic forces, and if one could escape the earth’s atmosphere, the natural reproductive process would realign itself. With the backing of a major television network, the billionaire, along with a few “amply fertile” models, created a reality TV show chronicling his quest to impregnate the contestants on a space station. The show drew record viewership,

but he did not create a boy.

Strangely enough, the animal kingdom had not been affected in the least. As the data continued to pour in from across the globe, birth rates and gender proportions remained as constant as ever. If a child bought a hamster, he would have to flip it over before naming it like everyone else before him.

To the utter bewilderment of scientists, everything appeared perfectly normal. No chemical changes could be discerned in human sperm. No concrete differences could be detected in the environment. No signs of disease. Nothing. From a biological standpoint, reproduction carried on as usual, save one fundamental difference: human males could not be conceived, no matter the effort. Even those male zygotes that had been fertilized and filed away failed to grow when released from their icy chambers.

As more time passed, many began to imagine what the distant future might hold. If all of the remaining men on the planet donated sperm in prodigious quantities, filling up multi-level storehouses suited for centuries-long storage, how long could the human race last? 3,000 years? 4,000? And what would happen when women comprised the bulk of society, outnumbering men 100,000 to 1? What would the geopolitical landscape look like? Would it spell the end of violent wars? Terrorist organizations? Tyrannical leaders?

Or what about entertainment? Would the NFL cease to exist? Would traditional romantic comedies fall to the wayside? How might technology change? Or economics? Architecture? Love interests? For millennia the female spirit interacted and contrasted with the male psyche creating distinct expressions in time and culture. But with men slowly fading from the scene, it was hard to anticipate how the flower of femininity would blossom in a space all its own. The old saying, "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus," would hold for a while, but in this strange and foreboding new reality, the phrase would inevitably become, "Men are mere memories, women rule the Earth."

As the problem continued to prove intractable, defying explanation, governments across the globe redoubled their efforts. Something akin to the space race of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dominated national ambitions. The first to manufacture a cure would be king, controlling patents and securing unparalleled glory. All this fostered a peculiar mixture of open

competition and guarded secrecy as each nation desired information, and even help, while also wanting to be first.

The United States, Japan, China, and the European Union led the charge, investing incredible resources in fertility projects, unleashing the brightest, most ambitious minds to the task of solving the gender crisis.

One of the most prestigious teams assembled to investigate the issue, Zygote Solutions, a group comprised of genetic specialists, pathologists and engineers gathered from a wide array of American institutions, appeared most promising. Dr. Roger Larsen, one of the leading voices on the team proposed extraordinarily creative solutions. While many of his initial ideas did not yield tangible results, his resounding brilliance engendered hope. With enough resources, and with enough tireless ambition, a remedy was thought inevitable.

Dr. Larsen's ideas were not only brilliant, unlocking new vistas of knowledge in biology, but provocative. In order to truly explore new concepts, ethical lines needed to be stretched. As a result, the old debates over stem cell research and abortion were shelved; ethics are one thing, necessity another. Faced with the need to venture out into uncharted waters, new freedoms needed to be established, and the government was happy to comply. The mood of society had changed, and the people spoke largely with one voice, agreeing with the rallying cries of their politicians. A few, vocal detractors aired their concerns, resulting in a brief flash of public debate, but in the end, new measures were happily established, granting fertility clinics unparalleled latitude in testing for solutions. It was crucial to keep up with other nations who didn't quibble nearly as much over standards.

And this they did for twenty-one pride-crushing years.

## Chapter Three

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At the end of August, during an extremely hot spell, towards evening, a middle-aged man left his downtown apartment and walked out to the street, and slowly, as if indecisively, headed east.

The city sidewalk bustled with people, and Dr. Larsen moved with the tide, briefcase in hand, walking steadily with his agitated thoughts. It was terribly hot out, and the city felt tight around him, crowded, stifling. He pulled at his collar, eyeing the dipping sun through a cut in the skyscrapers.

For some time he had been in an irritable and tense state, drawn inward to protracted monologues of no productive value. He had grown obsessive, even reclusive, and as he stood at the intersection waiting for the crossing light to turn, the cell phone vibrating in his pocket failed to arrest his attention.

Soon he was on the subway sitting by a window staring outside, watching the rushing concrete, the tunnel lights. A child was crying near him on its mother's lap.

The cell phone in his pocket vibrated again.

Roger answered without looking to see who it was, "Yes."

"Dr. Larsen, we're nearly ready to move forward. Might you be here soon?"

"Yes."

A lingering pause. "Would you say within fifteen minutes?"

"I suspect so."

"Ok... Good. That's good. Dr. Walters is here. So is Carl Feinberg. They're—"

"I will be there soon."

Roger hung up and slid the phone back into his pocket and returned to the window.

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I'm not sure exactly why, maybe it's because they think it makes a person stronger, like when someone shows off their muscles, but almost all of the guys online think it's really important not to have a tiny johnson. Since they're always talking about it, and since it's obviously *very* important, it made me wonder just how long the longest johnson on the planet really was. So right before we left for New York, I tried looking it up on my computer, which was tough because of *Pure Eyes*, a program Mom installed on my laptop to keep me from seeing things I shouldn't. When she said, "Seeing things I shouldn't," I asked her what she meant, and she told me, "Bad things." I asked her what she meant by "bad things," and she said that it was hard to explain. I said, "Is it like rated M for mature?" "Yeah, it's a lot like that," she said.

I knew the longest johnson question wasn't like that—like a *really* bad rated M for mature thing—so I climbed into my tree house to look up the answer.

In order to do the research, I knew that I was going to have to concentrate like the Dali lama, because if I type in words like "sexy" or "mating insects," *Pure Eyes* blocks them. At first, I tried typing in "pee-pee," but that didn't work. Neither did "love hose," which I heard someone say at Burger King once. When I was little, I used to call it a "wanga," so I tried that. Only some stuff about a tribe in Kenya came up though. Then I thought about elephants and how they have really long noses, and that made me think of typing, "Longest body parts." I was like, *Mama Mia*, because it worked. A Wikipedia article with a bunch of really cool facts and strange pictures said that the Blue Whale has an eight-foot-long private part. That's 96 inches, or 243.84 centimeters, which is metric, which I'm learning about in math class. I used a calculator to figure it out. The article didn't say anything at all about whales bragging though, but maybe we just haven't learned enough whale language to be sure.

Wouldn't it be funny if humans had super long necks like giraffes? We'd have to build higher privacy fences. Also while eating we'd have to wait like four seconds to speak after swallowing. "And yesterday," gulp, four seconds, "I went to the chiropractor," chew, chew, swallow, four seconds. And turtle necks would use a lot more fabric too, which would mean they'd probably cost more than regular V-neck sweaters. In the winter, I'm sure everyone would spend the extra money to keep their

necks toasty warm though, unless of course, they lived in the jungle, then they would need to buy a lot of sunscreen.

It would have been perfect to have had a giraffe's neck while driving to Ms. Perry's studio because then I could have poked my neck out of the sunroof of the car that picked us up at the airport and gotten a really good look at all the awesome things in New York; like all the ginormous buildings that made me feel like an ant standing next to a telephone pole; or the freaky steam coming out of manholes; or the sweaty guy at the stop light drumming on some old plastic buckets; or all the people trying to cross the street before the timer hit zero.

During the drive, Mom sat in the backseat with Mr. Carter, one of the men in suits who met us at the airport. They talked mostly about the show, so I rode up front and talked with Mr. Benson, the driver, which was cool because (1) he knew where all the freaky manhole steam came from, (2) he called me "Bro" a few times, and (3) he gave me a stick of Juicy Fruit, which is the best kind of gum, except for maybe Bubblicious.

It took a while before we reached the studio, but I didn't mind. Besides all the people, and all the super tall buildings, and the boats floating in the harbor, the streets of New York twisted like shoe strings tangled in a knot. It felt like an adventure. It also felt like a race track because everyone was in a big hurry, zooming around each other, honking too. But then at one point, all the trucks and cars bunched up and barely moved at all. That was kinda weird. Mr. Benson simply said, "Welcome to New York." I told him that the traffic in Illinois wasn't like this at all.

People sitting in their cars right across from us didn't look over. Most were talking on their cell phones or simply staring ahead waiting for things to pick up. One guy with tall, brightly colored hair tapped his steering wheel while singing, which was funny. He didn't notice me waving at him.

After we drove for about an hour, Mr. Carter pointed towards a smooth, glassy building with fancy, reflective doors. A large sign with long, swooshy blue letters read:

The Lisa Perry Show  
-New York Studios-

.....

Dr. Larsen unlatched his briefcase and pulled out a notepad. He flipped through the pages slowly, staring blankly at the handwritten notes. Rows of equations, scratches, symbols. Years of thoughts combining to nothing.

When the train lurched to a stop, he slid the notepad back into the briefcase and exited, climbing a set of stairs out of the subway terminal toward a thirty-six-story building set in the heart of the city. Etched into a huge stone slab fixed above a bank of glass doors at the entrance: Zygote Solutions.

Inside, he angled toward the elevators, passing an assortment of potted trees and lush plants. The room was spacious and airy with inset lighting illuminating paintings on the walls, each bearing the image of boys playing, though in a faint and impressionistic fashion.

A security guard stationed behind a marble counter greeted Dr. Larsen as he passed by. Roger acknowledged the man with a forced smile, pretending to be looking for something in one of the pockets of his shirt. Three others entered the elevator with Roger. They all stood in mute silence, watching the digital numbers tick higher.

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I don't watch a lot of TV because the shows are made for either grownups or girls, with pretty much zilcho for boys, obviously. Saturday mornings are the worst. The first cartoon on the Cartoon Channel at 8:00 is Jasmine's Journey. It's all about a Chinese girl who finds a magical map that lets her travel to another world but only at certain times. She has to answer grammar questions to get a ship, or solve math problems to ride a horse, so it's educational and totally lamo. At 8:30 is a cartoon about mermaids living in an underwater city. Super girly and cheesy. Most of the mermaids even have pink scales instead of green ones. At 9:00 Dance Step with Teddy and another show called The Emperor's Daughter comes on. Pretty boring. Margo and Mutts isn't all that bad. That's on at 9:30. They at least have some boy dogs that are cool.

Something kind of weird about being interviewed is that you know what you're going to be asked before you go on the show. Mr. Carter explained that it was normal procedure. "We want our guests to know what to expect and to feel comfortable," he said. Mom didn't seem too



comfortable though. She kept asking me how I would respond to the questions, and even when my answer was fine, and she would say, “Oh, good job. That’s good. Say that,” she would still look nervous and mess with my shirt, or fix my collar, and then ask the exact same thing later.

I’m not supposed to be asked what my favorite cartoon is, but if Ms. Perry did, I would definitely know what to say, because Tom and Jerry is the best. They don’t show it on regular TV very often, but that doesn’t matter. Uncle Brock downloaded all the episodes onto a disk and surprised me with it one morning.

When I saw him pull into the driveway, I ran to the door to meet him. While walking up the steps, he held up a white box and said, “Oh, yeah. We got donuts!” I like donuts, so that was a good thing. He then held up a disk.

“You know what this is?” he asked, wiggling it in the air.

“A disk?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes, but do you know what’s on the disk?”

I didn’t have any idea.

He said, “I’m holding in my hand the greatest cartoon of all time.”

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Dr. Larsen slipped on a lab coat and walked through an air-locked door into a sprawling laboratory. A feeling of white sterility, industry. Technicians with latex gloves at work. A wall of windows offered a view of the reddening skyline and the bay and winding channels flowing out to the low stretches beyond.

His shoes clicked against the tile as he crossed the room and angled up a hallway to a windowless door where a low hum issued up from the floor. He waved his badge across a scanner and stood impatiently and then entered a wide chamber centrally dominated by an enormous machine. The thing was a mass of white steel—squat in shape, thick, studded with monitors imbuing it with life. Black cables coiled into the ceiling. Three hydraulic limbs hovered over a pair of stainless steel tables. Each of the arms were outfitted with an intricate network of imaging devices. Against the rear wall, in a dimly lit area, rows of computers formed a long interface with a large screen featuring prominently over a cluster of technicians.

A thin, handsome man wearing a bland assemblage of business attire approached Dr. Larsen. He was flanked by a younger gentleman

with thinning blonde hair and a face like that of an obedient dog.

“Ah, very good!” began Jamison, one of the lead coordinators of project P32. “We were growing fearful that the traffic had swallowed you up.”

Roger nodded silently.

“Roger,” continued Jamison, plunging a hand into one of his pockets while gesturing with the other, “I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Walters.”

Roger and the young doctor exchanged handshakes.

“It is good to meet you, Dr. Larsen. I’ve been following your work for a very long time now, and I consider it a distinct privilege to be included in this project, especially P32.” Pausing only momentarily, Dr. Walters added in a hopeful tone, “I have high expectations for this genome. I see good things coming out of it.”

Roger nodded half-heartedly, scarcely listening to what the man had said.

Catching the scent, Jamison, one of many who had grown accustomed to Dr. Larsen’s acerbic demeanor, clapped his hands and motioned towards the machine, “Well, gentlemen, no need to tarry. I believe everything is in order. Let’s see how P32 fares.”

.....

While waiting in a room called the green room, which wasn’t very green, except for one wall, which had a picture of a guy blowing really hard on a saxophone, Mom and I sat on some super comfortable couches. There was lots of candy in a dish on the end table, but Mom only let me eat one piece. I asked her if she was afraid I would choke on the candy while being interviewed, kind of like this one time Samantha choked on a chicken nugget at a birthday party after laughing really hard, but she said she just didn’t want me eating a lot of sugar.

Everyone was very friendly at Ms. Perry’s studio. They were also dressed nice, wearing clothes that made them seem like they were glowing, except they weren’t actually glowing. They were extra clean and shiny like new grapes or fresh apples at the grocery store. Maybe it was because they smiled a lot.

Some of the people at Ms. Perry’s studio wore headsets with microphones like Navy Seals, except they didn’t have guns, of course. But they did look like they were on a mission, walking around quickly,

exchanging papers, and saying things that sounded like code words. One of the guys with a headset, Mr. Haruto, who liked to poke his head into the room to see how we were doing, would sometimes just say a number like, “fifteen minutes,” and then disappear. Mom told me that’s how long it was before I would get to talk to Ms. Perry.

We could see what was going on out in the studio, which was pretty cool because in the room there was a TV hanging on the wall that wasn’t painted green. It showed Ms. Perry talking to a doctor. Ms. Perry introduced him as Dr. O’ Brian. The crowd clapped loudly when he appeared. I could hear them on the TV and in real life, but only just faintly through the wall. Mom said he was one of the leading fertility experts in the country.

Dr. O’ Brian looked important, and when he talked, his fingers tapped the air, almost as if he were dotting invisible “i’s.” He seemed really confident too, answering questions like they were simple math problems, like, “What is  $2+3$ ?” But I didn’t understand a lot of the words he was saying.

While sitting there, waiting and feeling excited, Mom and I watched the TV together:

Ms. Perry: “Reports are coming in from New Zealand that they’ve made advancements in the area of genomic reconstruction. Does this look hopeful?”

Dr. O’ Brian: “It does. As we all know, this isn’t a new idea; it’s been around from nearly the beginning. But new tools are allowing us to more carefully construct nucleus compounds and infuse them into sperm. It’s exciting stuff.”

Ms. Perry: “Very much so! Now when you say ‘infuse them into sperm,’ are we talking about natural sperm or prefabricated structures?”

Dr. O’ Brian: “It’s a combination, really.”

Ms. Perry: “How so?”

Dr. O’ Brian: “We do take natural components, such as the cell membrane, the acrosomal layer, the filament, and use them as housing. Think of it like the body of a car. The hood and windshield and tires

are all normal and fine, but when it comes to the engine—or the nucleus and genomic construction, in this instance—we try to build it from the ground up, modifying and tweaking it in a variety of ways.”

Ms. Perry: “Biological engineering then?”

Dr. O' Brian: “Indeed.”

Ms. Perry: “So what kind of modifications are we talking about?”

Dr. O' Brian: “Right down to the basic building blocks of life. By now it is extremely evident that the problem isn't one-dimensional. There must be multiple, tangential factors. That being said, something is still fundamentally amiss at the level of DNA. And while it isn't apparent what the problem exactly is, or what unseen connections are creating the anomaly, DNA is the final frontier. As a result, it is our job to format and reprogram the chromosomes, so as to bypass the monkey wrench that is still firmly lodged in the machine.”

Ms. Perry: “So here's the picture I have in my mind. I see an egg. I see a sperm that looks like any other sperm. But unlike a normal sperm, this one has been built from the ground up, carrying within it a whole new, what shall we call it, message?”

Dr. O' Brian: “Yes, message is a fitting word.”

Ms. Perry: “And you take this new message and send it into the egg through in vitro fertilization?”

Dr. O' Brian: “Not in this instance. We do take that new message and send it to the egg, but we have reason to believe, based on a few curious factors associated with the cortical reaction, that it is better to allow the sperm to go about its duty in the usual way.”

Ms. Perry: “Meaning?”

Dr. O' Brian: “Meaning that we believe it is better to allow the sperm to engage the egg normally, moving and piercing of its own accord. No injections.”

Ms. Perry: "I see."

Dr. O' Brian: "In essence, we prep the sperm, set up numerous eggs in a controlled environment, and then introduce the sperm to the solution. Part of the new technology includes devices that can detect incredibly subtle changes, and so we're not only able to scrutinize potentially unknown processes occurring in conjunction with the prefabricated sperm, but normal sperm as well.

Ms. Perry: "So have any of these new sperm successfully fertilized an egg?"

Dr. O' Brian: "They have."

Ms. Perry: "They have?"

Dr. O' Brian: "Well, X-bearing sperm have, which is good news, really. This tells us that our prefabricated structures are working. Without that, we would have nothing."

Ms. Perry: "That is very good news then."

Dr. O' Brian: "It truly is. The reality is that this is going to take some time, as there are a huge number of variables for us to work through. We have a considerable amount of work ahead of us, and while nothing has proven certain, I believe the future is bright. It isn't as if the basic process of life is broken. There is simply a glitch in the system, and we are determined to either fix that glitch, or, in this case, bypass it."

Mr. Haruto suddenly entered our room, clapped his hands, and announced, "Five minutes, Adam. You ready?"

I looked at Mom and she nodded. I leapt up and followed him.

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A partitioned container segmented into six squares with an ovum in each section hovering in clear liquid. Above the tray, the arms of the

machine swiveled into place, ready to record the internal mysteries.

Dr. Larsen watched in mute silence as Dr. Walters punched numbers on a keyboard. The arms slowly lowered and the intricate devices began contracting like the lens on a camera. A low hum filled the room.

On the main screen, all six eggs appeared. They hung like translucent spheres, each a stationary moon.

“If you would,” began Jamison, speaking to a female technician, “give us a close-up on number four. A little variety might be nice.”

The fourth egg tripled in size.

“If we’re ready,” continued Jamison, “inject P32 into sections one through four.”

On the central screen, a thin, black tip appeared. A moment later, small, wavy lines shot out of the syringe, swirling in the sudden current, their tails twitching. Dozens of sperm gyrated toward the egg.

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When Ms. Perry announced my name, music started playing and the sound of clapping erupted. As I walked out, bright lights shone from the ceiling making all the colors on the stage look extra real. The people in the crowd were standing. A few whistled loudly.

Ms. Perry stood and smiled, welcoming me to the couch next to her. Dr. O' Brian was sitting on another sofa clapping as well.

As I neared, Ms. Perry shook my hand and then looked at the audience, mouthing something like, “Ahhh,” as if she had just picked up a puppy. I could smell her perfume. It reminded me of flowers.

When I sat on the couch, Dr. O' Brian shook my hand. My hand felt really small in his.

“Well, it’s such an honor to meet you, Adam,” began Ms. Perry, settling back in her chair, eyes sparkling.

I sat forward on the edge of the couch, sitting up straight, just like Mom had told me. “It’s awesome to meet you too.”

“I’m just going to say it now,” began Ms. Perry, covering her heart and glancing at the crowd, “but you’ve got to be the handsomest young man, ever.”

I just continued smiling.

“So I’m going to ask the hardest question right up front. You ready?”

I waited.

“I want to know what your favorite flavor of ice cream is.”

The crowd chuckled.

I knew the answer immediately, “Strawberry.”

“With real chunks of strawberry in it?”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely real chunks.”

Ms. Perry slid a strand of hair behind her ear, “Now I’ve heard that you like insects.”

I nodded.

“And that someday you would like to be an entomologist.”

I nodded again, this time more enthusiastically.

“That could be a pretty cool job. Are you doing any research now?”

“Yes!”

“What are you studying?”

“Their language. I want to know how to talk to them.”

“Oh, I see. That sounds complicated.”

“It is. I have an ant farm at home, which Uncle Brock gave me for my birthday. When I give the ants some food, or when they’re getting ready to sleep, or go jogging, I record the movements of their antennae.”

“So they talk with their antennae?” Ms. Perry said, grinning again.

“That’s my current theory.”

Ms. Perry looked over at Dr. O’ Brian, “It looks like we have a future scientist as well.”

“I’d certainly say so,” said Dr. O’ Brian.

“Have you figured out any parts of their language?” Ms. Perry asked, leaning forward.

“When ants are excited, like when I’m about to give them sugar water, which is one of their favorite things—besides chocolate chip cookies, which makes them go bonkers with joy—their antennae point straight up. Remember the trash compactor scene in Star Wars when Luke is trapped and the walls are closing in and the weird creature pops up out of the sludgy water? It’s like that.”

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Dr. Martin joined Jamison and Dr. Larsen in front of the screens. Each man stood watching, their gazes shifting from screen to screen.

“Two have attached on number three,” Dr. Martin announced with sudden enthusiasm.

“So far so good,” Jamison said. “Lisa, can you focus in on number three?”

The image grew larger, the outermost rim of the egg arcing across the screen, its semi-opaque line several inches thick. Two sperm were fixed to the egg, tails jerking.

“They’re working splendidly,” Jamison said with a laugh.

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“I want to study bees too.”

“If you could speak to them,” Ms. Perry began, “what would you want to talk to them about?”

“How to get along with humans. They get angry very easily, and I think we can work that out. Come to an agreement.”

Ms. Perry nodded and laughed, glancing at the audience. “They do get pretty fired up, don’t they?”

“But I suppose I would get upset too,” I said, “if a giant kept bumping into my house causing my stuff to fall over. I just think that if we could talk about it, if we could be like, ‘Hey, don’t worry. I’m not here to take over your hive,’ they might calm down, especially if we traded them something for their honey, instead of just taking it.”

“What do you think they would want in exchange for some honey?”

“I don’t know,” I said, pausing, trying to think of what they enjoy besides honey. “I suppose it would be important to talk to the queen about that. I’d like to talk to the queen anyway, ask her what it’s like being the only female. Maybe she would have some advice for me. But then again, maybe she’d much rather talk to another girl.”

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One of the technicians near the three men announced, “Number five has been fertilized.”

“That’s good,” replied Jamison. “Is everything recording? Good. That’s good. We’ll compare and contrast shortly.”

“Look at number three, Dr. Larsen,” Dr. Walters fluted in a hopeful voice, pointing involuntarily.

One of the two sperm attached to the egg was burrowing through the outer coating, its head beginning to penetrate.

Dr. Walters stepped forward, squinting with interest.



The tail continued to flail, head tethered in place. It was unmistakable. The engineered sperm was pressing through.

Jamison called out, "Zoom in closer. Right on the head."

The screen snapped larger.

"It's through, isn't it?" exclaimed Jamison. "Has the reaction taken place?"

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"So I'm curious," began Ms. Perry. "What kind of insect ability would you like to have? Would you rather be able to climb up walls like an insect, or jump really far like a grasshopper?"

"Would my hands always be sticky? Because if I couldn't let go of my spoon while eating cereal, or the door handle in the bathroom, that would be a huge bummer."

The crowd chuckled.

"Well, let's say that you could turn it on or off any time you wanted," explained Ms. Perry.

"Oh, that's good," I said, rocking back and forth. "Because sometimes insects have sticky pads, but sometimes they have tons of hairs that are like tiny claws.

I paused and thought for a moment.

"I'm not sure I would want a bunch of hairs shooting out of my hands though. The barber would be like, 'Do you want your hand hair parted to the left or right?' That would be pretty weird. So if I could jump like a grasshopper, would I be able to land without breaking my legs?"

"You could land just fine," Ms. Perry assured me.

"Definitely super jumping abilities then."

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All three men stood before the screen as the machine hummed.

The sperm continued to gyrate, burrowing further into the egg, twitching wildly.

Roger's expression remained placid, though fixed. Jamison called out, "Are there any results yet? Is there a reaction?"

A nearby technician rapidly tapped the screen of his tablet, shaking his head. "Nothing yet."

Jamison rubbed his mouth, "It has to be releasing now. There is obvious intrusion."

Dr. Walters said nothing.

Roger watched in mute irritation as the flailing sperm pressed beyond the outer coating into the heart of the egg, its head thrashing like an injured bull.

Jamison's expression deflated, and Dr. Walter's regarded the two men, waiting to mirror their reaction.

On each of the other screens, the same dreadful effect took shape. The engineered sperms were burrowing through the eggs, drilling, and tearing the nucleolus.

Roger considered the sperm a moment longer and then turned, heading for the door. "Send me the data once it is compiled," Roger stated flatly, if not disdainfully, and then exited.

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Dr. O' Brian sat with one leg crossed resting easily on the other, smiling gently, saying little. I felt kind of bad for him. So after talking about school and different places I had been (which was cool because I got to talk about Holiday Splash, a water park with a scary slide shaped like a toilet bowl, and how I would like to invent a trampoline where you jump into a pool of water hovering in the air, held up by an anti-gravity machine, which we haven't yet figured out, of course) my brain nudged me, saying, *Hey, let's talk more about grasshoppers.*

"Grasshoppers lay pods full of eggs," I said, looking at Dr. O' Brian.

He nodded, "Oh, I see. I can't say that I knew that."

"Being a grasshopper has to be tough though, because there can be hundreds of little grasshopper babies you have to think about."

"That is a lot to think about," replied Dr. O' Brian, grinning.

I paused for a moment and then said, "I kind of have a question, Dr. O' Brian."

He sat up a little straighter, "Ok."

"I was thinking about what you said earlier, while you were talking to Ms. Perry about trying to make a boy egg."

Dr. O' Brian nodded.

“I was thinking, what happens to all the girl eggs while you're trying to make a boy egg? Because you said that you fertilize eggs—something about a special machine that can watch what is going on inside them. Is it like a microscope?”

Dr. O' Brian nodded again, “Good question, Adam. Yes, it is kind of like a microscope. It is a very sensitive tool that can measure incredibly small changes.”

“That sounds awesome.”

“Oh, it is very awesome,” Dr. O' Brian said, folding his hands together. “And as for the eggs, we have different procedures, or rules, depending on the situation.”

“Do you freeze any of them?” I asked.

“Sometimes. But not always.”

“Are they given to others?”

Dr. O' Brian looked like he was trying to remember a word that had been lost, but only briefly. “Since they are tiny eggs and really just a collection of cells, we don't use them for anything else. They have a very important purpose, and once they meet that goal they aren't needed further.”

“But if you found a boy egg you would keep it?”

“Oh, certainly! That would be wonderful.”

I couldn't think how to ask the next question, because my brain felt like a hose when it has a bend in it and won't let any water out; or like the question was hiding inside me, but I couldn't tell what door it was behind. But just as Ms. Perry was about to say something, the thought came to me, “What if the world was full of only baby boys? The baby girl eggs would be super valuable, right? And if we found one we would all probably throw a party, shouting, 'We found a girl egg! Everyone look! A girl egg!' So shouldn't we keep these eggs too?”

Dr. O' Brian looked impressed. “We have a scientist *and a philosopher* here!”

Ms. Perry nodded appreciatively.

“It is a very good question,” Dr. O' Brian said, “and I can assure you that we in the scientific community have thought a lot about this issue, and that we are very careful to follow guidelines instituted by the government.”

I wasn't sure why the baby girl eggs shouldn't be just as important, but I wasn't able to ask because someone suddenly began shouting in the crowd. I looked and saw a large man with a dark beard standing in

the middle of the audience. His voice was strong and loud like thunder, and nobody said anything, but everyone turned to watch him. The people around him were leaning away, almost as if he was made of electricity and they were afraid of getting shocked. Ms. Perry looked concerned. She wasn't smiling.

"You are the one, Adam," yelled the man, his arms waving with excitement. "You are the one who is going to save us all! It will be your sperm that fixes the world. It will be you! Your seed will refill the land and bring us hope!"

I wasn't sure what to do, and I wondered if I did something wrong.

Several men in suits ran at the shouting man and grabbed him and pulled him to the ground like Kung Fu experts. The man kept yelling and struggling, even when the men were telling him to stop. One of them put their knee on the man's back, but it was hard to see through the chairs and all the people moving away.

I heard Dr. O' Brian sigh, and he patted my shoulder, "It is alright, Adam. There's nothing to worry about."

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Dr. Larsen sat in the solitude of his office, notebook open before him, eyes vacant. A clock on a wall near his desk ticked in pace with a swinging pendulum.

In his dark and brooding mood, Roger pictured the world in a thousand years with its vast cities spired and glinting, with robots more alien than man-like ruling with their incalculable intelligence, the rhythmic thumping of industry pounding in the cold of dark, farming what minerals remained in the earth for the construction of yet more of them; silicon and processing; man finally obsolete, with but only a few kept in a museum as a kind of keepsake. Would the minds of such men care at all about the vain triumphs or inane setbacks of bygone days? If what will be is inevitable, why strive so in the present?

As the inner gears of the clock continued to click, Dr. Larsen wondered if anything would be remembered, or if it would all become lost in the dying breaths of a faltering future where the memory of humanity fades into nothingness.

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The funny thing about the bearded man was that once he was captured the guards had to carry him out. His legs just slid on the ground behind him. His belly hung out a little bit too. He looked kind of like one of those baby cows tied up at a rodeo. They run and run around the pen, thinking, “If I can just get away! If I can just get away!” but when the cowboy gets the rope around them and they flip them over and tie them up, it's like the baby cow gives up. “No need to fight now, I guess.” That's how Mr. Crazy Beard Face seemed.

Once things settled down, Ms. Perry stood and said, “Well, now that was exciting, wasn't it?” Her voice felt reassuring, almost as if we were invited to chuckle. One of the producers standing near a camera suggested that we take a break, but Ms. Perry shook away the thought, “I think we are good. No need to cave in to one man's disruptions. So if you're good, Adam, I'm good.”

I nodded.

“Well, then, where were we?” she fluted, inviting the crowd to clap. To which they did.

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The evening sky ran blood red into deepening pools of darkness. Along the western horizon, the dying sun ignited towering bulkheads threatening rain. The dark rim rolled toward the city, stuttering with lighting.

Roger sat in his office listening to the storm. The glass wall in his office ran with translucent streaks. Leaving the blank notebook on his desk, he silently stood before the window. Neighboring buildings warped in the flowing water, the globuled lights bending and flaring. Nothing but the sound of pelting rain.

Silhouetted against the window, Roger felt his phone vibrate. He looked at the caller ID. He answered and listened and turned from the window.

“I see. Is she calm now?”

His face remained placid.

“No. No need. I will be there shortly. Thank you. Yes. Thank you. I will see to it.”

Roger bent his head in mute discomfort, his hand finding his hair. A tired sound left his mouth.

## Chapter Four



When the interview was over, and all the people in the crowd went home, and we went back to the green room, we didn't stay long at Ms. Perry's studio. Dr. O' Brian came in and said that I was superb. I said, "Thank you." And he said, "It was entirely a joy to meet such a fine young man." I didn't want to say it was nice meeting such a fine old man, so I just said thank you again. He handed me a card and told me to call him anytime I had questions. He didn't say for science things, but I figured that's what he meant. Kind of like a phone a friend for super tough questions. Ms. Perry gave me a hug and said that I was brave and strong and that I could come back anytime I wanted. I asked Mom if we could come back next week, and she just smiled, "We'll have to see," which meant that we probably wouldn't.

Heading home isn't nearly as exciting as starting a trip. I asked Mom why it was like that, and she said it was because when you're going somewhere new it's exciting, but when you're going home it's like coming back to routine.

"Is routine like getting ready for school?"

"Yeah, it's like that."

"Or how a person is supposed to chew forty times before swallowing?"

"Um, no, not exactly."

"Why?"

"I mean I guess it could be a routine, but only if you made it part of your daily ritual somehow."

"So chewing could be a routine?"

"I guess so."

"For good eating habits?"

She looked doubtful, "Do you think fewer bites would be bad?"

"Scientists say so. They say to chew a lot if you want healthy digestions."

“Oh. Well, I suppose we can't argue with the scientists.”

Of course, when I ate ice cream in our hotel room that night, I didn't chew forty times. In fact, when I thought about counting, my brain was like, “Wait a minute! What counts as chewing with ice cream when I don't even chew?” Then I wondered if all your teeth have to touch each other when you bite regular food to make it really count. Like a full chomp. But then I imagined eating a burger with extra bacon, and extra cheese, and with lettuce, and onions, which I don't really like, and with piles of pickles stacked so high that both sides of your mouth couldn't possibly chomp its way through. What are the rules for that? I asked Mom what she thought, and she didn't say anything. She was sitting on the bed texting in her pajama shorts and T-shirt.

New remotes are weird. The one on the table next to the bed—underneath these lamp things attached to the wall which swiveled like an elbow and had a gold button to switch them on—had forty-eight buttons. I counted twice to make sure.

I turned the TV on. It was a cooking channel with a nasty leafy meat thing in a pan. Next channel. A man in a flannel shirt riding a bull. He didn't stay on. Next channel. Boring news. Next channel. A closeup of a guy with blue eyes getting ready to kiss a woman who looked kinda hungry.

Mom suddenly said, “Hey, let me have the remote, Adam. I don't want you just flipping around.”

I gave her the remote.

She squinted at it, “Where's the button to change the channel?”

“Near the bottom.”

“Where?”

“See the arrow?”

The guy on the television was totally sucking on the girl's mouth. And breathing heavy too.

“Oh, for heaven's sake,” Mom said.

She found the button just when the man was starting to slide the girl's shirt off. The next channel showed some kids inside the belly of an old ship that was filled with gold coins, and treasures, and a freaky-looking skeleton sitting in a chair with a patch over one eye, and a tight bandanna wrapped around his skull. One of the boys called him One-Eyed Willy. The channel info said it was a movie called “Goonies.”



I immediately started flipping on the bed and twirling, “This, Mom! This!”

She looked pained.

“Please, Mom! Please!”

“Don't wrap that comforter around you!”

“Huh?”

“The comforter.”

“Why?”

“Just don't. It's gross.”

“But can we pleeeeeease watch Goonies?” I said, kicking the comforter away. She considered it for a moment and then looked at me. Her eyes said I could watch it.

It was like the best movie ever, and when it was almost over, during a commercial, I wrote a sticky note on my desktop: “Be **SUPER SURE** to watch Goonies.”

While I was writing it, Mom said, “Hey, Adam.”

“Yeah.”

She looked kind of serious. “We haven't really talked about what that guy did in the audience. You ok, hun?”

“Sure.”

“Adam,” she said softly.

I looked over at her.

“You sure?”

I gave her a thumbs up, and she looked at me for a while and then nodded, “Ok.” A moment later she said, “I thought you did great today.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

After the movie was over it was time for bed. Even though I felt tired, I asked if I could stay up. Mom said that we had to leave early in the morning and that it was already late, so I went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth in front of a giant mirror and imagined how cool it would be to slide down a ship's sail with a knife. When I was done, Mom came in to take out her contacts, and I jumped into bed but then got back up and walked over to the window and pulled back the curtain. The lights of the city shone like stars, and the buildings rose like mountains, and I wondered what the other people were doing in all those little rooms like ours.

That's another thing that's weird. Planes are big metal tubes with wings that don't flap, and yet they fly. With people sitting inside. Being served drinks. That made me wonder if it would be better to shoot planes into the sky with a giant slingshot or powerful canon—with a parachute for when you come down, of course. It would save on gas. And it would be like an amusement park and transportation all at the same time. I asked the people on the “I Love Science” subreddit why we don't do it this way and only one person responded, “Because you'd blow your ass off, moron.” I don't know why it would blow your butt off if you're sitting on normal chairs.

Anyway.

When airplanes land, like when we finally made it back home to Illinois, they drive like cars up to a big tunnel which lets the passengers walk off. Everyone else was getting up and grabbing their bags and walking off the plane, but Mom had us wait. I asked why and she moved closer to me, pointing out the window, “Can you see them over there?”

I looked.

“The guys riding in the little truck pulling the containers?” I asked.

“Look more to the side—over there,” Mom said, redirecting my eyes with her finger. I squinted and could see near the building Uncle Brock's dark blue Bronco. He was leaning up against the front of his truck, arms folded, Cubs hat pulled low. Barkus was in the driver's seat, head out the window looking around excitedly.

My heart felt like a bottle of sunshine, “It's Uncle Brock and Barkus!”

Mom nodded.

“Are they picking us up?”

“Yup.”

“Right here?”

“As soon as everyone is off.”

I gave Mom high five.

Sometimes you have so much to say that you feel like your mouth is a giant dam holding back a flood of thoughts, because after I hugged Uncle Brock, and after Barkus jumped out the window and tackled me, licking my face until even my eyebrows were wet, and we were buckled up in the truck driving home, with Mom sitting shotgun and Uncle

Brock shifting through the gears, listening and laughing, with Barkus lying across me, I just couldn't tell them all the cool things we did fast enough.

That evening Uncle Brock tossed some fat brats on the grill, and as they browned and hissed in the fire, we sat on the back porch listening to the birds chirp. We had paper plates and macaroni and cheese and a fresh bag of potato chips that Uncle Brock kept exploring.

“So you think you're going to grow up and be a city man?” Uncle Brock asked, looking for the right chip in the bag.

“What do you mean?”

“Would you rather live in the city or the country?”

“I think I like the country.”

He nodded, “The country is nice.”

Mom was reclining in her lawn chair looking out over the wooded hills. Evening was coming and the first signs of fireflies could be seen sparking like momentary wishes.

“What about you, City Slicker?” Uncle Brock asked, turning toward Mom.

She grinned and didn't answer. Her contented gaze said enough.

Uncle Brock grabbed a beer and pulled the cap off and leaned against the porch railing, staring off with her.

As more fireflies continued to wink and flash, I ran inside and grabbed my tennis racket. A moment later, I was running across the grass with Barkus beside me sending lightning bug guts shooting through the air like comets.

“Adam, really?” Mom said, looking mildly disturbed.

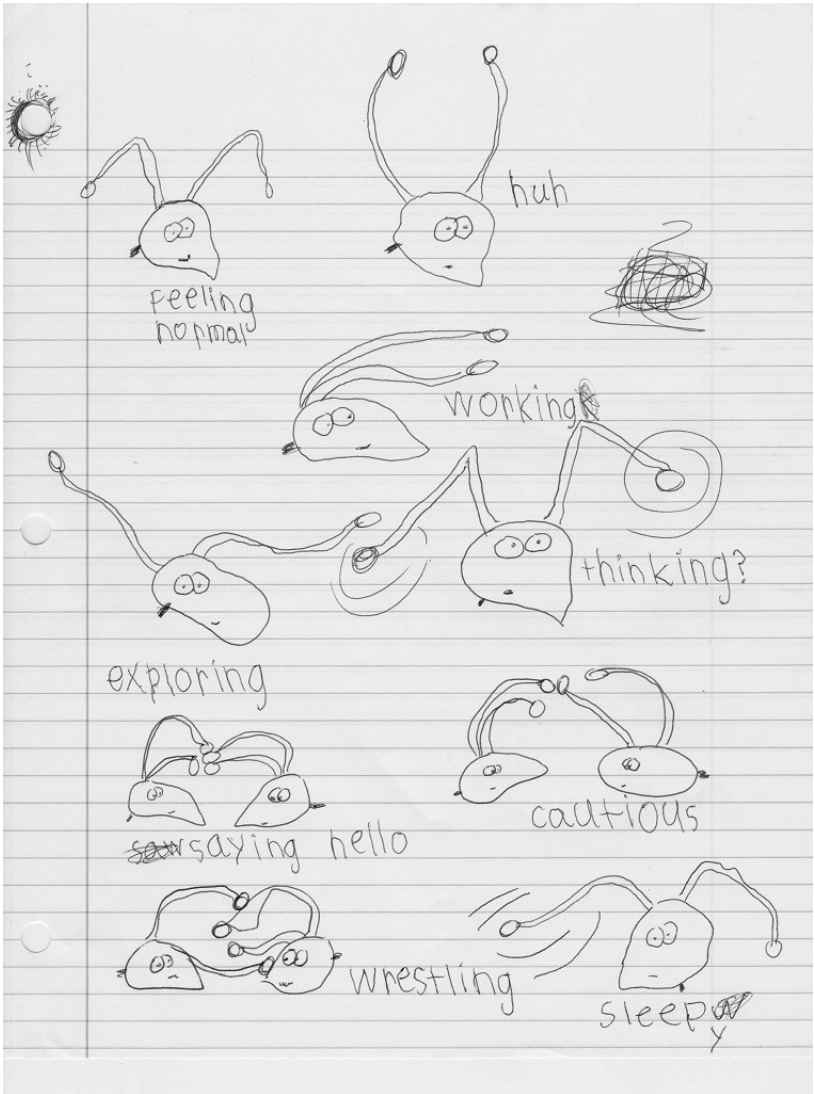
Uncle Brock watched with interest, “Right behind you, Adam. Right there. A big one!”

I swung and the firefly swooped in a quick curl, passing perfectly through one of the holes in the racket. I took another swing and sparks flew. Barkus ran and barked, flying across the yard, sprinting with all his might, and I followed, a bug-destroying samurai ready for combat.

Just before bed, I checked on my ants, being sure to record the movements of their antennae. They were still and clumped like silent dots. I peered closer, my eyes set only a couple of inches from the plastic wall, trying to imagine what it must be like to live in tunnels. A single ant near the surface was facing me, its dark eyes trying to tell me something. His left antenna moved back and forth like a man rowing slowly in a boat. I pulled out my sketchbook and recorded the motion.

It seemed as if he was saying, “Everything is good and calm. No invaders. Kind of sleepy.”

I placed my mood ring right next to the ant. The stone shone dark and blue, and the ant didn't move.



The next day before school, Mom stood in the bathroom trying to tame my cow-lick. No matter how much water she put on my head, the same spot would spring back up as soon as she stopped pressing on it. And each time it did, she would shake her head with a face like someone trying to untie a knot that smelled really bad. I think it was her final boss.

1. Wet my hair with water from sink.
2. Press hard.
3. Wait.
4. Remove hand.
5. Bouncy spring sound.
6. Stinky knot face.
7. Repeat every day.

Even while dropping me off at the front gate—right in front of Mr. Bill, the school guard, who always has a Glock and a tactical grip flashlight attached to his belt—Mom tried flattening my hair down.

“Mom, I have to go,” I said, pulling away.

“Ok, ok. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

During first period, our science teacher, Mrs. Blanche, talked about sedentary rocks and erosion and these mega gigantic plates under the earth that move and shake the ground. Susan Fisher tried passing a note in class, but Mrs. Blanche saw her and took it and said, “Ms. Fisher. You are eroding the quality of my class, and I don't appreciate it.” This made everyone laugh, and Susan cried a little. That's normal though. Susan once cried because she said life was tragic and full of injustices, and because it was Monday and cloudy outside. She also doesn't eat meat. I once asked her why, and she said that it was because animals have feelings too.

“But how do you know that plants don't have feelings?” I asked.

“Because they don't have brains.”

“But what about people when they die? A spirit doesn't have a brain.”

“My Dad says that there isn't an afterlife, and that we just end like a beautiful play or movie.”

“But doesn't that make it a sad movie?”

Susan said, “Nope. Just beautiful.”

In music class, while we were standing as a choir, Mr. Baker announced in an excited tone that we were going to be performing *The Wizard of Oz* for the annual school play. “It’s going to be just marvelous,” he said, clapping his hands. Picking up a paper on his desk, he began telling us all the amazing parts that we were going to play. Janice Bronshire raised her hand.

“Yes, Janice.”

“Can I be Dorothy?”

Mr. Baker raised an eyebrow and studied his paper. “No, I’m sorry, Janice. It looks like you’re going to be one of the flying monkeys.”

Janice stared like a deflated balloon, but Mr. Baker didn’t seem to notice. He was already explaining how we were going to make the yellow brick road out of a special kind of metallic paper and drop a foam-board house on the Wicked Witch of the East. I wanted to be a flying monkey, but Mr. Baker assigned me to the Lollipop Guild.

When recess finally arrived, we stormed outside like a flailing herd of lunatics. I don’t actually know what that quite means, but I once heard Mr. Baker say it to another teacher while on playground duty. Maybe he was thinking of all the girls who dive and fight for the jump ropes. He sometimes yells at them to act like ladies. Other girls grab colored chalk to draw on the pavement, and some just walk around in little groups, talking and chatting with lots of hand movements. But others, like Olivia and I, run as fast as we can for the swings. Since we can sprint like cheetahs, or Road Runner, with our legs spinning in a blur, we usually beat everyone else and get the best spots. We like to swing as high as we can with our feet pointing straight up into the blue sky, so that if you don’t look at anything else but the tips of your shoes, it looks like you’re flying.

Today, while swinging really high, I could see Molly and a group of other girls in the distance pointing at me and laughing. They were looking at something on Molly’s phone. I just ignored them and kept swinging, but then Olivia said, “Oh, great. They’re coming over here.” Molly and her friends walked by slowly, whispering and laughing while covering their mouths. I slowed down but didn’t say anything.

Molly said, “Hello, Chosen One.” The other girls giggled.

“Did you hear something, Olivia? I could have sworn I heard something,” I said looking all around.

“Hey, Chosen One,” Molly said. “I hear your sperm are going to fix the world.” Some of the girls laughed and a few made grossed-out faces. One made a gagging sound, “That’s so grodey!”

Olivia and I stopped swinging.

“What are you talking about?” Olivia said, clearly upset. Molly held her phone so we could see the video of Mr. Crazy Beard Face shouting, “It will be your sperm that fixes the world. It will be you! Your seed will refill the land and bring us hope.”

My heart felt like a heavy rock that wanted to sink in deep water. Ms. Perry said that the crazy person would be edited out of the show so that nobody would see it on TV. But this video looked like it came from someone in the crowd sitting near the man. It was now on YouTube.

“Knock it off, Molly,” Olivia said, looking over at me.

“What?” Molly said, covering her heart and faking innocence, “This is very important news. Spermy is going to save us.” The girls laughed again.

“You’re such a turd nugget!” I shouted.

“Oh... Turd nugget?” Molly repeated, acting shocked and hurt.

“Yes. A big, ugly, turd nugget with infected butthole hairs.”

“You’re such a freak,” Molly shouted back. “Nobody likes you.”

“Knock it off, Molly!” Olivia said, standing suddenly.

“Sorry, I meant special freak.”

“Come on, Adam,” Olivia said, grabbing my arm.

Molly played the video on its loudest setting as we walked away. Then a thought came to me, and I stopped and turned around. Olivia pulled on my arm, but I said, “Look, I’m really sorry about your nose, Molly.”

Molly scrunched her face and spit out, “What?”

“I’m really sorry about your nose. Do people ever stare at it?”

Molly looked at her friends and then back at me. She looked confused.

“Your nose. Do people ever stare at it?”

A tiny spark of fear appeared in her eyes.

“Freak!” Molly said, turning and walking away.

Olivia’s smile was like an upside down rainbow.



Two cool things happened in English class that made up for recess. When the bell rang and we were all sitting in our seats, Mrs. Jordan returned our writing assignment to us. We were told to describe three things that make us laugh. I didn't have to think for even a millisecond. I knew exactly what to write.

I have three things that make me laugh. These three things are farts, jokes, and Browntail, my stuffed animal monkey. First, farts make me laugh because they sound very funny and feel good to let them out. Next jokes make me laugh. I especially dig riddle jokes. Last, Browntail, my monkey, makes me laugh because he looks very cute and funny. And if Browntail could fart and tell jokes, I'd laugh all day.

She gave me an A- and printed the following at the top: "Very Good! But let's work at keeping it clean, Adam, even if it does make you laugh." I looked up and smiled at Mrs. Jordan, but she didn't see me.

Near the end of class, Mrs. Jordan walked around to the front of her desk and said, "Alright kids. I have an unusual assignment for you. Something new and challenging." This caught everyone's attention, but especially Lucy Parker. She adjusted her glasses and quickly opened a notepad, ready to take notes.

"As some of you may know, Adam recently had the distinct privilege of being interviewed on the Lisa Perry Show. So in honor of his visiting Ms. Perry, I thought it would be good for us to practice our interviewing skills—to better learn the exquisite art of asking good questions."

I turned slightly to look back at Molly. We gave each other dirty looks.

Mrs. Jordan paused and lowered her voice, as if she was about to tell us an incredibly important secret. "Here's what I want each of you to do. You're going to pick a person. It could be a family member. A teacher. A close friend. Anyone really. And you're going to conduct an interview with that individual—that's right, Amanda, it means that you're going to ask the person a series of questions—and the questions can be about any topic of your choosing. It could be about their job.

Or about the things they love. Or their family history. The sky is the limit here.”

A lot of hands shot up.

“One second,” Mrs. Jordan said, raising a finger. “Here's the thing. You have until the end of this six-week schedule to complete this. I want you to put forth your very best effort. Your very best! Make it something special. And listen, I want you to record it. If you don't have a recording device, I can provide you with one. But I want each of you to record and share your interview with the class. Do you understand?”

There were nods.

“Does it sound exciting?”

More heads nodded, and then a bunch of hands shot back up into the air. I didn't listen to the questions, because I was already thinking about who to interview. The first thing that came to mind was Grandpa and his time in the jungles of Vietnam. But then I remembered that he didn't like talking about that too much. I then thought about how cool it would be to interview George St-Pierre while sitting in an octagon. Or maybe a game designer at Blizzard. Or our mailman. Or Jason at the ice cream shop. Or maybe this one weird guy who runs shirtless on the highway with a big American flag waving at people. And then all of a sudden I knew what to do. The idea jumped on my brain and put it in a rear naked choke, “No, Adam, you have to do this!” And I was like, “Totally!” I pulled out my pencil and wrote on a scrap piece of paper, “Talk to someone about why the baby girl eggs aren't kept.”

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Dr. Larsen exited the elevator on the third floor of the parking garage, walking briskly, working the unlock button on his keys. The lights of a hybrid Sedan in an empty corner flashed in rapid succession.

A parking attendant waved without looking as Dr. Larsen drove into the blowing rain, windshield wipers thrashing. He rode through the city and made his way onto a freeway ramp. Traffic slowed to a crawl and somewhere ahead in the far distance police lights flickered in the gloom. Roger cursed and picked up his phone and checked delays. The road showed red for a mile. He cursed again, squinting outside like an angry mole. Blurred figures in raincoats milled around a heap of dark wreckage. A tow truck was angled off the road, hazard lights blinking sluggishly.

He sat in the darkness and snailed past a lone figure with lighted sticks directing traffic. A car lay crumpled in the grass with the rear of a pickup truck angling out of a nearby ditch. Ambulance lights were casting wildly in the night as Roger crept by, finding open road again.

He drove on and exited the freeway and came to Martindale's Assisted Living complex. Parking near the entrance, he ran through the downpour and entered through a pair of sliding doors. He pulled at his wet shirt while tapping digits on a keypad.

The room inside was spacious with a high glass ceiling and it was dotted with floral sofas and a large arrangement of bamboo and a single Bechstein piano. An elderly woman sitting on one of the couches watched him enter, her eyes wary and lost.

Roger acknowledged the nurse at the front desk and angled off down a hallway. Empty wheelchairs lining a blue wall. A janitor's cleaning cart and an open door. Inside a blanketed figure lying as still as death in the bluish glow of a television.

Roger turned down another hallway and approached his mother's room. The door stood slightly ajar, and he entered slowly. The room was dark and silent and an overweight nurse was sitting next to his sleeping mother. The familiar sight of old artifacts featured equally in the stillness. Pictures in old silver frames of family and forgotten places. Ornate glass pieces. A porcelain china doll and embroidered pillows. A walnut gingerbread clock with stately roman numerals.

The nurse looked at Roger as he drew near. His mother was lying on her back under a white sheet, her thin arm wrapped with dressing. She looked the coffin prefigurement of a funeral wake.

"How is she?" Roger asked quietly.

"Calmer now. The sedatives are helping."

"Pamela told me that she cut herself."

"Yes, it happened after dinner," the nurse began in a sympathetic tone. "Your mother wanted us to take her home. She tried to pack up her belongings and kept asking for her luggage."

Roger nodded wearily.

"She lost her balance and fell on the desk, breaking a vase under her arm. The green one. It isn't a deep cut."

"Does she need stitches?"

"Just bandages. But we'll keep a close eye on it."

Roger sighed and surveyed the room.

"I'm so sorry. We tried to—"

“It’s fine,” Roger interrupted with a half-exposed edge.

The nurse studied Roger uncertainly and then nodded.

“I’ll sit with her a while,” Roger stated flatly, hinting dismissal.

The nurse gently tidied the sheets and left the room, pulling the door shut softly behind her.

Roger moved the chair closer to his mother’s bed and stared at her spent face. Distant flashes of lighting silently pulsed through the curtains. He sat leaning forward for a long time, studying her, and then eased back to a more comfortable position. He checked his watch, and then by degrees abandoned himself to the long hours of the night, listening to his mother breathe, wondering how the human brain in all its complexity could ever work, and how easily it breaks, and how things once sweet and reassuring turn forlorn and cumbersome.

The ties of family are a strange bond uniting frustration with love that cannot quite come undone, he thought, like some terrible knot that cannot be picked loose, but isn’t entirely right or useful, getting caught in the ring through which it should pass; a dance of DNA where the maternal bond plays its music and casts its spells, tying infant to breast and heart to soul, irrevocable and sublime. The child yearns for the closeness; the scent calls like a drug; her voice a siren of pleasure; and the heart is entangled in a web, a biological grip releasing none.

The shape of one’s lot is cast without volition or vote, and your siblings are dealt like a random hand. You are thrust together for a moment, running and playing on the grassy hills of a favorite wood and along empty roads, peddling on bikes and running with kite in hand, a game of ball uncoupling in dispute. The years run long like eternity but mean nothing in the sight of it. Memories make the man and yet the memories fade, marching headlong toward the edge of nothing, where the mind breaks with dementia and skips like a warped record. The final reckoning bears no weight while resting heavily on one’s shoulders; the imponderable illusion of meaning enlivening and animating, driving men to believe that it is everything, that the most mundane tasks burn with infinite purpose, collecting towards some great end or story untold where they stand resolute and ponderous, the main character in a plot. Such are the ways of men in their vanity, indulging the beguilements of this uncaring world where life drains and dreams die.

Roger bore these and other thoughts with mute stoicism, marveling at the human predicament. “What is the point?” he wondered, knowing

his own answer. And yet Roger could not evade the feeling of a real point any more than he could believe that his mother meant nothing.

As sleep overtook him, his mother's eyes twitched and her mouth moved, and sometimes her frail arms searched for something nearby as she asked for her long-dead husband.

In the morning when she woke, Roger stirred to the sight of his mother sitting weakly on the edge of her bed trying to stand. Her blouse hung loose with two undone buttons revealing an unsightly bra, her hair matted on the side, a disproportioned curl of soft mess. Roger rose quickly and steadied his mother, sitting next to her on the mattress.

"I'm here, Mom."

His mother tried to stand, and Roger put a soft hand on her shoulder, "Mom, I'm here... Mom..."

She craned and regarded him, recognition vacant and thin.

"I want to go home," his mother stuttered with tortured restarts.

"Mom, you are home. This is where you live."

She lifted slightly, "Where is my bag?"

Roger squared in front of her, "Mom. Look at me, your son, Roger."

She looked at him.

"Mom. I am here with you."

A trembling hand sought an invisible object as her eyes searched the world in confusion.

Roger looked over his shoulder at a small writing desk, steadied his mother, and swiftly withdrew a red Victorian photo album etched with flapping tears.

"Oh, look here, Mom. I have a photo of Peter and Marilyn. Do you remember Peter?" His mother tottered as she mumbled. "Do you know who Peter is?" Roger asked loudly in an encouraging tone. "Mom. Do you know who Peter and Marilyn are?"

His mother looked, "Peter and... and..."

"Yes. But do you know who they are?"

"They are... Peter..."

"That's right. Peter is your brother. See him?"

Her gray eyes fixed on the picture.

"See how happy your brother is on the farm? With the cows behind him? Do you remember feeding the cows, Mother?"

“Feeding the cows,” she repeated. “I can't find my bag.”

Roger turned the page and exclaimed in a hopeful tone, “And look here, Mom. Mom look at this.” He pointed. “Your Dad's new Dodge pickup. Do you see him?”

She looked, “Dad's pickup.” Then she laughed with odd timing.

“That's right, Mom. Dad's pickup.”

She spoke with a hint of amusement, “You don't have to do anything since she's on his part of and going there... and...” She trailed off, laughing strangely again.

Roger followed the positive note, “Oh, that's good. What else did your Dad do? Did he take you out in the truck?”

“Yes.”

Was it fun, Mom? Could you feel the wind in your hair?”

“I smell something burning.”

“There's nothing burning, Mom. Nothing is cooking. How did you like your Dad's truck?”

“Good.”

“It was good, wasn't it?”

Roger lifted the page over the gold loops revealing more black and white photos. One depicted three boys in overalls sitting on a wooden fence, each holding a huge slice of watermelon. One was frozen in the act of eating, his face plunged to the rind, mute delight escaping through half-open eyes. Another stared directly at the camera, mouth full, his watermelon clasped like a supplicant making an offering. The corners of the picture bled yellow into burnt amber, and the sky shone white and clear.

His mother fidgeted and made sounds.

“And look at this horse, Mother. Isn't that just the most beautiful creature?”

She sat quietly, her eyes roaming again. “I want to go home now.”

“I know you do.”

## Chapter Five



Roger left his mother sitting at a table in the dining area to be served breakfast. An elderly woman with wire and skin for arms was sitting opposite her sipping orange juice. They stared in mute solemnity, unmoved and unconcerned, frozen like prim sepulchers. He told his mother goodbye and kissed the side of her head and surveyed the room before leaving. A dozen others sat scattered about, waiting, empty plates and silverware before them.

Roger went to the restroom. He stared in the hard light before the mirror and unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and rolled back his sleeves. He kept testing the water until it was hot and then washed his face, dripping and flipping his hands. He dried his face with paper towels and fixed his hair, widening and working the weariness out of his eyes.

The drive back into the city was tedious and slow with commuters jostling for inches. The sun lay hidden, a burning haze orbiting through overcast skies. The air was already hot and thick and the stop lights seemed to run red for hours. In the distance, buildings loomed tall and faint like dreams, and birds perched aloft thin wires silently studied the horizon.

Roger spent the afternoon in his office sifting through medical data and freshly published journals. Papers and books lay scattered across his desk. He drank coffee long since tepid and took a call from a scientist in southern Beijing speaking flawless Mandarin.

Evening crept into night and Roger closed his laptop. The room was dark and quiet with the light of the city drawing a sharp line across the tile floor.

He ate a bowl of pork soup alone at a small Taiwanese restaurant. Young men with foolish hair and long fingers laughed loudly in their garish attire at a corner table. One recounted a story of obscene drunkenness while another texted with nails painted black. A ceiling fan

rotated slowly. A small oriental woman dutifully wiped down vacant tables.

He woke early in the morning and lay thinking, his mind already looping and snagging on ill-formed ideas. Solutions felt like names that couldn't be recalled. They beckoned and hung familiar and near, yet veiled in some shadowy depth, separated from the light by what seemed the thinnest of margins.

Roger showered and shaved and wore a suit with a gray tie and sat reading an obscure journal in a style befitting an older era. Steam rose from his dark drink.

The days bled into the next with Roger rising and sleeping, the endless hours filled with unremitted study. Abstraction continued to replace reality and the outside world became little more than an annoyance to be tolerated. Even the mundane tasks of life felt like bitter interruptions. Like wearisome knots requiring attention.

He attended a meeting in a conference room on the thirty-third floor of Zygote Solutions. Scientists gorged with privilege and coffee congregated in casual conversation around a massive mahogany table. Leather chairs surrounded it like black petals. Roger sat waiting while others milled about in their business attire, reflecting angular and dull on the table's smooth surface.

Jamison convened the meeting, introducing a Northern European biologist tasked with addressing current advancements in bio-genetic engineering. The man droned endlessly while flipping through PowerPoint slides.

Roger's phone vibrated in his pocket and he glanced at it, pulling it out only slightly. The text from her read simply: Dinner? Your place after?

He looked up across the table. She sat feigning attention on the presentation, her eyes glancing only briefly at Roger, the faintest hint of a sensuous smile. A moment later, she returned to listening and recrossed her legs.

They ate that night at a luxurious restaurant with Roger saying little. The steaming food arrived on wooden slabs in shallow oriental dishes, dark greens wreathing succulent lamb. They drank a dark wine.



She glided into his apartment and turned, her black dress following like a resettling dream. She studied him. He stood inside the door, waiting and watching. In the darkness, she soundlessly removed a pin from her hair and the strands fell long and thick down her bare shoulders. He took in the sight of her and moved near, sliding the straps of her dress off without haste. The fabric dropped gently to the ground in a dark pool. The skin of her neck curved smooth and perfect in the night, an invitation to drink deeply.

They lay in his bed, spent and quiet, her head resting softly on his chest. In the dim twilight of the room, banks of windows held the city skyline, and the shadows of plants stretched across the floor like spilled oil, bending up the wall at ghastly angles, darkening a grand canvas of orange and red abstractions.

She shifted, rolling onto her back.

“Would you like something to drink?” he asked.

“No, thank you.”

“I have some Montrachet.”

“Is that a french wine?”

“Yes. It's very good.”

“Perhaps later.”

Her leg brushed his under the sheets and neither spoke. She shifted again turning to face him. He lay on his back, an arm bent behind his head, his face and chest a dark silhouette.

She studied him and softly said, “Roger.”

He answered with a low sound.

“You shouldn't let it weigh on you so much.”

“Tell me again what I should let go?” he said, knowing her meaning.

“It's not ultimately your burden. Not yours to carry like this.”

“Then whose is it?”

“I'm just saying it isn't personal. Like your character is on the line.”

He looked at her, “Is that how I view it? Like a personal affront? Or personal failure?”

“It seems that way. At least sometimes.”

He shifted and exhaled slowly.

“Look, I just care, and I think you're stretched thin.”

Silence fell between them as they lay in the darkness. Roger finally spoke, “Do you ever wonder why you're here?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” she asked, stiffening.

“Not here. Life.”

“Like the meaning of it?”

“Yes.”

She weighed the sudden turn, “Sure. I've wondered that.”

“And?”

“And what do I think is the meaning?”

“Yes.”

The simple question suddenly felt unwieldy like a heavy object with handles in all the wrong places. “I suppose I would say what most people say. You follow your passions. Look to make the most of our short time here. Live and love.”

“And then?”

She paused. “I don't know.”

“I think I do know.”

“Ok,” she said, trailing. “Then what?”

“Nothingness. Pure, inexhaustible nothingness.”

“Ok,” she said in muted surprise.

“But is it ok?”

“I didn't expect that answer.”

“But supposing it is the answer. What then?”

“I don't know. Are you asking me how I feel about nothingness?”

“I'm asking how the knowledge of it affects you now.”

“I guess I don't see why that should affect the enjoyable things we experience in the here and now. Why worry about such what ifs?”

“Except that we're not thinking in terms of a what if. It's an inevitability.”

“Let me ask you this,” she began after a moment's reflection. “Would the sex we had have felt any different? I'm not getting pregnant. So what difference does a fertility problem make at this moment? Little to none. In the same way, suppose we blip out of existence tomorrow. Does it change how I feel now? It doesn't.”

He turned towards her, “You really don't feel a difference? You don't feel the weight of it pressing down like some kind of sick joke? Like there's an insane god hidden away somewhere toying with us like laboratory rats? Let's see what they do with this, or do with that, or how it feels for them to see the bleak end coming like an unstoppable train.”

“Honestly, I just don't.”

He took in the admission and sunk back into his pillow, exhaling wearily. “Well, when I think about my life. And the passion I feel. And I view both through the lens of eternity. And I feel the futility of it all. Like really feel it. Deep in my gut. I desperately want to see this problem solved, so that I will be so caught up in the moment, so filled with the joy of having beat this thing, that I forget about the fucking pointlessness of it all. If but only for a moment. Blunting the laughter of the insane god.”

As she lay listening to him talk, watching him speak to what seemed another person in the room, his naked honesty startled her. For a brief moment, it made her feel vulnerable.

“But isn't it a matter of perception?” she asked, more hesitantly. “How you choose to see it? Granted, a person can focus on the bad things. But why do that? There's too much good to be enjoyed. No need to taint it all.”

“And my point is that it isn't a matter of perception, but deception. You and I both agree that life's all about the pursuit of our passions. But we also know that our passions will terminate in a whimper. So it's an illusion. We're trying to cover up reality. And when we know that we're playing a cover-up job, the game is seen for what it really is, and life takes on a different hue.”

“So it's a game of passionate distraction?”

“Seems so.”

“Not the most healthy thing.”

“I never said it was.”

“And that's why I'm concerned,” she said, running her hand softly along his arm.

“Truth is we should all be concerned. You're a doctor. You know this. Our fancy houses and fashionable etiquette conceal from us the thin line of death that lies crouching at the door. Life is just so incredibly fragile.”

“It is,” she admitted. “And it's certainly hard. But that just means we have to push back harder.”

“Hence what you view as my unhealthy dedication,” he said, gesturing. “So which is it? Give up or push back?”

“Be dedicated but balanced. That's all I'm suggesting.”

He sighed, “I just really want to see this through. To beat it.”

“I know you do. We all do.”

Silence fell between them. "I'm going to solve this," Roger said with quiet conviction. "It will happen. And when it does, it will be like a good dinner, and a good drink, and a good night's sex. And we'll forget everything until morning."

.....

The final bell at school rang and everyone poured out of their classrooms into the hallway, walking in groups and talking loudly. I went to my locker and stuffed my backpack with books and lifted it on my back. On the stone steps outside, I could see Mom parked in her usual spot. I said "Bye" to Olivia, and she said, "See you tomorrow!"

When I got in the car, Mom was sipping on a Diet Coke and shaking the ice in it.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, Honey. How was school?"

"Good."

"Anything interesting?"

I thought about the YouTube video, but said, "Nope. Not really." I paused and then said, "Actually, in English class, we have a cool assignment."

"Oh, yeah?"

"We have to interview someone."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, it's going to be totally cool."

"Who are you interviewing?"

"Anyone I want."

"Oh, wow. About what?"

"Anything."

"Open-ended."

"Yeah."

"So what are you thinking?"

"I don't know. My brain is doing a lot of computing."

"Sounds intense."

"Do we have a tape recorder?"

"Like an old one?"

"Yeah."

"I think so. Why?"

"Mrs. Jordan told us we needed to record our interview."

“Would the one on your phone work?”

I looked at my phone, “Oh, yeah, I forgot about that.”

Mom smiled.

“But where's the other one just in case?”

She took a sip of her drink, “I think it's in the hall closet somewhere on the top shelf. It would need batteries though.”

“Ok.”

We drove for a while. I looked out the window at the blue skies and the green trees.

YouTube is kinda weird. Even if there are already a googolplex of comments on a video, people still keep adding new ones. I don't know why. Maybe it's because humans have to let out the thoughts in their brains, and if they can't say them, they'll feel super sad, or like an unopened soda can all shaken up.

Sometimes I'll scroll all the way down to the bottom of the comment section just to see what is down there. Kinda like a deep sea diver. Except that there isn't water, of course. Or fish. Or sunken ships. It's like swimming down into loneliness. I don't know why it is like that either. But the bottom makes me feel strange inside, almost like I'm moving away from a crowd of happy people.

In the Bruce Lee vs Chuck Norris HD video, which is totally awesome, and which has 3,374 comments, you have to scroll *really* far down to reach the bottom. I suppose it depends on whether you choose “newest first” or “top comments,” but someone named grapplejoe said, “Chuck Norris looks like a hairy thumb.” I wonder if he would write that if he knew only one person would ever read it?

Anyway.

After we got home and Mom started making dinner, and after I threw a frisbee outside with Barkus, which didn't last long because he got distracted by a squirrel, I went into my tree house to watch the crazy bearded guy video. It already had 2.1 million views. Before playing it, I looked out the window. Barkus was still on the other side of our yard looking up at the squirrel. No one else was around. I hit play.

At first, it was hard to tell what was happening since it was shaking so much, but then it steadied, and I could see the side of crazy beard man standing in the crowd. The person recording things was holding the cell phone really low, so it made him look like a giant. “You are the

one, Adam,” shouted the man. “You are the one who is going to save us all!” He was wearing a plaid button-up shirt and jeans and he waved his arms a lot. His eyes were really wide, or open, or white, like he was surprised but not surprised; maybe more like an insane wizard trying to cast a really hard spell. “You are the one who is going to save us all!” he said. “It will be your sperm that fixes the world. It will be you! Your seed will refill the land and bring us hope!”

Right after that, the guards knocked him down. An older woman with short gray hair tried to move away from the struggle, but there were too many people. She looked scared. The camera lifted higher, but all that I could see were the backs of guards wrestling him and people moving blocking the view. After that, they carried him away. Then the video ended.

I looked outside again. I could see Mom through the kitchen window. She was dancing a little while listening to music.

I thought about why the man would think a little boy could fix the fertility problem, but nothing made sense. I wondered if he wondered if it would take something unlikely to fix another unlikely thing. Or maybe it was because he had an ultra-realistic dream that made him think he knew the answer? I have had dreams I thought were real, though not for very long. Or maybe he was a farmer-scientist who thought my sperm could cause people to grow like plants somehow? Scientists are trying to grow organs, so maybe he was like, “Well, if we can grow organs, maybe we can just grow boys?” Instead of orange trees, we would have boy trees in the field, which would be kinda weird though. I just don't know how I could help him do that. I've never even planted a tree. And who would be the little boys' mom and dad if they were grown on a farm? It seems like way too many kids for the farmer to raise. He is good at taking care of lots of chickens and cows though. So maybe it would work.

I looked at the comments. There were already 1,289. I started reading them, and as I went deeper and deeper, scrolling down to the bottom, my heart felt more and more lonely, and confused too, since I couldn't understand what some of the people were saying.

Even though Mom tells me not to write comments on the internet, I logged in using my secret account, ElvenDragonWarrior, which no one knows about, not even Uncle Brock, and I added one. It made me feel kind of naughty, but not too naughty. I suppose my brain felt like it had to say something like everyone else.

Bunny Duckling: "Get down! I said down!" LAWL beating

J LaReaux: HEHHE. HE SAID SEED

CoyoteGT: 1:48 Frog belly! Huge Frog belly!

Garth Davis: My money is on Adam's seed.

Aggro Vader: What?!? No billy clubs? Knock that mother f&\$ %@\* out.

Swan Loft: I like how security unceremoniously drags him out the side door. Teach that crazy SOB some manners.

Sammy G: I bet ms. perry was seriously crapping her pants... I would

Scot Was Here: Thanks for showing this! It is quite disturbing how this being acted so foolishly and angrily. I won't use the term human because I have more respect, hope, and love for my species than affiliating my brothers and sisters with what this being was doing on that day. Disgusting.

tim van der velde: terrible sound quality

Lauren Brodecki: I hope Adam is ok.

Vinicius Biel: Video de maluco

fine gurl 45: Who else came here because of the thumbnail?

DD: Kind of looks like my insane uncle. Sorry, Ted.

Itrain32: How did this guy get past security? I mean come on the guy looks like a molester. Those tiny perv eyes.

HotSaus: Look at the man next to the guy with the glasses. He's like "Wut's up with this guy... Uh, oh, standing up... yelling, he's yelling... \*&## he's yelling... run!!!!!! Get out of the way lady!!!!!"  
HAHAHA.

TEACH HIM!!!!: lol too funny.

I Love Wendy: Dude needs to tan that gut

SakuraPrincess: I hope this doesn't keep Adam from doing other shows. Nothing but love for him!

Irlrp: I'd have Adam's baby.

isignal: Can't help but wonder if the %&#%\$@ is right.

Pogomaster: This is Natures self-correcting reflex that is predestined for all forms of life no matter how great or small. Man is neither great nor small and we have no reason not to bow down to Natures medicine. The Earth will not tolerate we termites who destroy its verdant world. we should humbly accept this correction and look to a brighter future... maybe one that has no humans...

PlayAndroidGames: 1:34 illuminati confirmed.

feroz khan: today is my birthday plz wish me

Dream Myers: This is not funny

Dannyboy: THIS IS WHY FOOLS SHOULD NOT BE GIVEN GUNS. SERIOUSLY PEOPLE. WAKE UP! JUST IMAGINE WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF THIS LUNATIC HAD A GUN

Soft Taco: Gut! GUT!!! My eyes!!!



Mildcaseofcrabs: I bet Adam's sperm are going to shoot like rockets right into the center of an egg and create a new type of human. He'll be banging women left and right repopulating the world like a bonobo on viagra. calling it now. wait and see

sam neale: good thing that guy didnt have a weapon or a bomb will be curious to see what charges are brought against him

ElvenDragonWarrior: I don't know why mr crazy beard face said those things. I do not think Adam knows how to solve the problem. I do not think farming will help it

## Chapter Six



Jamison called early the following Sunday. Roger's phone vibrated on his desk, and he regarded it momentarily, questioning whether to answer.

“Yes,” Roger said absently, fingering through a stack of papers.

“I have something you need to see, Roger,” Jamison said, his tone serious. “It's very important.”

“Ok.”

“Do you remember the Genetics Institute in Shanghai? The one Dr. Zhao heads?”

“Yes.”

“They have something.”

“Ok.”

“Are you at home?”

“Yes.”

“I sent the video to you. It's in your private folder.”

“The company folder?”

“Yes.”

Roger opened his laptop and leaned forward entering the password with his phone crooked in his neck. “The one sent today?” Roger asked, highlighting the most recent folder.

“It's labeled 'Pan.’”

Roger clicked the folder. Two PDFs and a video.

“Do you remember Dr. Hua Tuo?” Jamison asked. “He served as a close consultant several years ago.”

“Yes. I remember him.”

“Well, let's just say that he's been privy to some very interesting things as of late at the Genetics Institute. He's acquired footage of their latest project.”

Roger waited, listening.

“It's not a boy, exactly, but an alteration that could spell promise.”

The words arrested Roger's attention, "An alteration?"

"Watch the video," Jamison urged.

Roger clicked the video. A media window appeared. At first blackness. Then a jostling image of a laboratory came into view. White and bright. Figures in lab coats sliced out of frame, only their chests and legs showing. The camera bounced as it moved in step with someone walking.

"A camera was hidden in Dr. Tuo's shirt pocket," Jamison explained. "It will smooth out shortly."

Roger watched with interest.

The sound of footsteps mingled with indistinct chatter. An arm suddenly blurred into view sending the image out of focus. Dr. Tuo was shaking someone's hand. The arm dropped and they were moving again. A long brightly lit hallway stretched before the two men. The walls smooth and white. Black lines segmenting the ceiling panels. They turned and entered through a key-coded door. The back of the lead figure blocked the view, and Dr. Tuo shifted and approached a round observation window. White light flared as the camera sharpened through the transparency revealing a cubed enclosure inside. Entirely transparent. Sterile and stark. A single domed incubator fixed in the center. Cables streaming from it. Roger could just make out the words of someone explaining to Dr. Tuo oxygen levels. The camera shifted to the right with the contents of the incubator angling into view. Cradled naked in the incubator, a small bloated chest rose in rapid breaths. Its skin red and blotched. Head deformed and hairless, a tube projecting out of its stretched, misshapen mouth. There appeared to be no arms, only stumps that bubbled like cottage cheese. Small fleshly protrusions where one might find shoulders. Dr. Tuo said, "Extraordinary," and the man whose bent face remained largely obscured agreed. The camera remained fixed for several moments. The creature in the incubator tightened suddenly as if touched by something cold. Its genitals came into view briefly, revealing something akin to a penis. Scab-like and folded. The camera bobbed and refocused. Roger peered hard at the screen. "I have no words, Li," Dr. Tuo said. "The chromosomal fusion is structurally functional." The camera turned framing a middle-aged Chinese man with parted hair and round glasses. His face beamed with pride. The camera swung towards the incubator again. Then it turned back to the man. "Come, come," Li said. "Allow me to show you something else." Dr. Tuo began walking. The video snapped to black.

Roger leaned back in his chair, silent astonishment mixed with sober reflection.

"It's an incredible breakthrough," Jamison said.

Roger sat silent.

"I know," Jamison laughed. "I didn't know what to say either when I first saw it."

Roger's countenance tightened, "How sure are you that the footage is real?"

"One hundred percent. Not only did Dr. Tuo get us the footage, but he secured most of the experimental data. Look at it, Roger. It's in the two PDFs."

Roger clicked the first PDF. 336 pages of information flashed before his eyes as he slid the scroll bar to the bottom, stopping momentarily at random points.

"I don't know all of the details," Jamison said, "but it looks like they've figured out a way to successfully cross a boar with human DNA through a new form of splicing technology. It's explained in the other PDF."

Roger clicked the other PDF.

"It's a chimera, Roger!" Jamison trumpeted. "A successful chimera!"

"What percent?"

"I'm not sure. I received this only about an hour ago. I would guess under three percent. But it might be more."

"Who else has this?"

"Dr. Thompson was with me when I received it. After you, I plan on calling Dr. Jeffrey."

"And after that?" Roger asked.

"We're going to keep a tight lid on this until we have time to digest it. Joyce and I will put together a team."

Roger rotated in his chair, "No team. Not until we know what we're looking at."

"Don't worry. It's only going to be a handful of people."

Roger sighed and tapped his desk with a pen. "There's a lot that can go wrong here. No team. Not yet."

"I know. Look, I'm as concerned as you are. We'll tread carefully. In the meantime, I need you to put everything you have into this."

A lingering silence fell between them before Roger agreed and hung up. He sat thinking in his chair and then turned back to the computer

as if awakened from a trance. He brought up the video and started it again from the beginning.

Roger sat fixed like a hunched gargoyle before his computer, reading all through the day and night eating little. Near daybreak he rose from his chair and stretched and paced, trying to fight off the growing fatigue. He prepared a fresh batch of coffee and spoke aloud to himself as the dark liquid poured into the glass pot.

By early afternoon he gave in to sleep, unceremoniously removing his outer shirt and falling into bed, his face turned from the light of the windows. He woke after thirty minutes and his head throbbed and he felt ravenously hungry. He shuffled over to the kitchen cabinets in search of food and rifled through the contents, roughly brushing aside unwanted cans and boxes in search of a quick eat. The fridge bore nothing of help. He returned to the cabinets and pulled out a half loaf of bread and unscrewed a jar of peanut butter and spread a thick layer across three pieces. He stacked them and ate. Behind his eyes a fingering pain bore into his temples where it echoed to the back of his head. He poured a glass of water and shook three pills into his hand and drank before returning to his desk to read.

Roger finished the first PDF by evening and stopped to compile his notes, a rude assortment of scratches scribbled on a yellow legal pad. He looked them over slowly, typing up those most critical into ordered sanity. Several of the newly obtained formulas presented him with astonishing insights, and he pondered these at length with all the preoccupation of a cloistered monk transcribing a divine text, visualizing how the compounds could be tweaked to suit new biological paths. The chemistry was ingenious, and with each serendipitous moment of clarity, he felt a mixture of anger and excitement, knowing that these scientists had turned a key he knew existed but could not find.

The day slowly bled into night, and Roger's head continued to hammer. The back of his throat felt raw and a crawling ache ran through his muscles. It hadn't occurred to him until that moment that illness was taking hold. The realization infuriated him and he cursed, demanding an answer from the room why such injustices marked him. Clutching the bottle of medicine, he irritably tossed his head back and downed a fresh cluster of pills, but for all that a fevered chill and swell

of nausea gripped his mind, and as he tried to absorb the second PDF, the paragraphs ran empty and meaningless. He rose from his computer blinking and finally succumbed to reality, coughing and shuffling to his bed where he laid down slowly.

The night bore strange and repetitive dreams that played in confusing loops. He kept waking and would stare at the shadowed creases on the ceiling. Somewhere outside the siren of an ambulance wobbled faintly across distant streets. Sleep found him again but he woke in the dark of morning. The bed felt all wrong and his mind kept running. He thought about getting up to read but knew it would be of no use. When he drifted off again, he dreamed that he was at work trying to operate a microscope but couldn't find the dials. The glass slide on the stage wouldn't move and an old high school classmate helped him, fixing it with ease, but Roger couldn't see through the lens, and he acted like everything was fine for fear of looking like a fool. He thanked the classmate repeatedly but the man would not leave.

Come morning, Roger woke cold and wet to a newly risen sun. He squinted and ached and knew that his sickness was more than glancing. When he rose, he felt momentarily dizzy and sat back down on the edge of the bed collecting himself. The next attempt proved more stable, and he walked heavy and bent to the bathroom where he emptied his watery bowels and sat leaning forward on the toilet bitterly wondering again at the timing of the illness. He checked his watch and shook his head and returned to his desk where he read pale and wrapped in a blanket.

That afternoon Jamison convened an impromptu meeting, issuing directives to the select band of specialists. Everyone attended in person except Roger. He sat forlorn and disheveled before his computer, participating through a video conference call. The group looked bright and cheery and they made a habit of referencing Roger with half ridiculous remarks, commenting on both his health and looks. Dr. Binkard, a round man with protuberant eyes, at once both inquisitive and derisive, searched Roger over with particular delight. "Chicken noodle soup, Dr. Larsen," he said with a sideways grin. "Plenty of chicken noodle soup."

Roger spent the following night in the grip of fever. The same repeating models of new ideas cycling ceaselessly. Concepts on the

edge of definition. The image of the bloated chimera twitching in his mind's eye.

He woke in the dead of night and lay in his bed, shifting endlessly, searching for a measure of comfort, when no comfort could be found. His pillow was soaked with sweat. When morning came he sat up and regarded the room silently. He wanted to use the restroom but remained in bed, choosing stillness over movement.

Across the room he could see his computer, silent in sleep mode, a single green light indicating power. Roger stared at it and weighed how he felt. Groaning softly he rose, used the restroom, and tottered over to his desk. The screen came to life and the final pages of the second PDF beckoned him to read.

.....

Mom and I ate hamburger helper with green beans and applesauce for dinner. The green beans were the really long ones that she cooks in a big pot. Not the barfy ones from a can. When Mom makes those, sometimes I try to give them to Barkus under the table, but even he won't eat them. While we were munching our food, I asked her why people sometimes write in all caps, and she said it was because they want to show they are shouting their words. I said, "It isn't because they have poor eyesight?"

She said, "No."

I said, "So what if someone writes in all caps but uses a bunch of symbols?"

She said, "What do you mean?"

"Like on YouTube. In the comments."

She tilted her head, "You really shouldn't be reading comments on YouTube."

"Well, then in an email."

She gave me a look, "Why, did someone write a bunch of capitalized symbols in an email to you?"

"Mom."

"What?"

"Just pretend they did."

"Ok."

"Like imagine they said, 'Can't help but wonder if the (bunch of symbols) is right.' What do the symbols mean?"

I could tell that Mom knew. She nodded, “Oh, I see. Well, it means they are saying a bad word.”

“A bad word?”

“Yeah.”

“Like how bad?”

“Bad.”

“So you just write a bunch of crazy symbols to mean a bad word?”

“Yeah.”

“But why?”

“Because they don't want to actually write it out.”

“But why?”

“Well, because it would look bad.”

“But if they want you to know they are saying a bad word, then why would writing something else make it better?”

Mom kind of bobbed her head like she was agreeing and thinking at the same time, “Good question.”

“So it makes it worse to actually see the right letters?”

“I guess so,” Mom said.

“That's weird.”

“Yeah, it kind of is, isn't it?”

“Humans are kind of weird.”

“They are.”

“But we're humans.”

“Uh-huh”

“So do you think we're weird?”

“A little.”

“Yeah.”

I ate the rest of my applesauce.

“Do you think aliens would think we are weird if they came here?”

“Oh, for sure.”

“Do you think there are aliens?”

Mom sat back, “I don't know. Probably.”

“Do you think they would be friendly?”

“I would certainly hope so.”

“Me too.”

“Do you have any homework?” Mom asked, starting to look at her phone.

“Not much.”

“That's good.”



“Hey, Mom?”

She made a soft sound while looking at her phone.

“If there were only two men left on the earth would there be any way for them to have kids?”

Mom looked up and waited, and then spoke like she was in a dark room unsure where to step, “Um, no. Biologically, it's impossible. Why do you ask?”

“So there is no way that their sperm could combine to form a baby?”

Mom hesitated again and then said, “No, honey, it doesn't work that way.”

“But could it somehow? Like with science?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don't know, it just seems like a person could add some electricity and Barium, or maybe mercury, with some special water, and make the sperm create life.”

“Are you learning about the periodic table in science?”

“Not right now.”

“Ok,” she said, her voice trailing off. “So why are you worried about this?”

“What if I was gay?”

Mom looked a little surprised and then leaned forward and spoke in a soft, gentle voice, “Oh, do you think you might have feelings for other boys?”

“Mom, there are no other boys.”

“Well, yeah,” she stammered, “but you know what I mean.”

“No.”

“'No' you don't know what I mean? Or 'no' you don't have feelings for other boys?”

“I don't want to marry a boy, Mom.”

“Ok.”

“But if I did, do you think the world would be angry?”

“Why would the world be angry?”

“Because then I couldn't have any kids.”

Mom looked unsure again and then nodded slowly, as if she suddenly understood something, “It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks, ok? Do you understand?” I nodded. “There are always going to be people who think this and that, and expect this and that from you,

but it doesn't matter. Not even a little. Not even a tiny bit. Less than a tiny bit.”

“Like microscopic?”

“Like microscopic.”

“So like an atom?”

“Even smaller.”

I nodded.

She reached across the table and touched my hand, “Don't worry about what kids you will or will not have. Ok? What will happen will happen. There are stupid people out there who say all kinds of things and expect all kinds of things. But listen. They don't know. They don't know anything at all.”

“Like crazy beard man?”

“Exactly like crazy beard man.”

I nodded.

We sat quietly for a moment.

“Adam.”

I looked at her.

“You ok?”

“Yeah.”

She looked at me like I was something small she wanted to hold and protect. Then she stood up and walked over to me and hugged me, “You know you can always talk to me about what's on your brain and your heart, right?”

“I know, Mom.”

“Ok,” she said, waiting. “How does your heart feel right now?”

“Good.”

“On a scale of 1-10?”

“I'd say an 8.73”

“Ok,” she said. “Love you.”

“I love you too.”

She kissed the top of my head.

I said, “Can I play Mario Kart?”

She looked at me, “Sure—but hold on. Help me clean up and then you can go.”

.....

The idea came to him the following night. Roger woke from a vivid dream in a cold sweat, and before he knew quite what he was doing, he was up, pacing in the darkness. He stopped suddenly and looked curiously toward the floor, head tilted as if something was crouching nearby. He stood like this for a long time and then spun towards his desk, eyes half wild. "That's it," he breathed. "That's it," he repeated, nodding. "That's it, isn't it?"

He rushed to the chair and took up his pen and notepad and began writing frantically through fits of coughing. When he realized that the room was dark, lit only by the lights of the city and the half-hidden moon, he flipped on a nearby lamp and returned to recording his thoughts. The new idea hung clear in his mind, its elegance self-attesting and glorious. It poured out of him, and he knew with perfect conviction that he had discovered the solution, one destined, through some variation of minor adjustments, to circumnavigate the chromosomal fusion barrier. Roger saw it as clearly as a lone tree in an open field. For hours he wrote, stopping and looking over his notes and laughing like a giddy child. "This is it," he said, patting the table and laughing. "I found you. I have found you."

Time didn't exist, nor hunger. He wrote endlessly. Filling his notepad. Scribbling with sublime freedom. Like a madman set loose. Or a caged animal finding escape. Nothing mattered save the theorems that came forth. Not even his thirst. And all was dark around him save the light of his lamp.

The next morning he rose, holding his notepad with a strange look. "It is finished," he said with all the conviction of a messiah having fulfilled his destiny. "Now we can make things new." A strong urge to share his idea washed over him, but he quickly buried the feeling. "There's no need to say anything. No need," he muttered. He checked the time and was suddenly struck with the disquieting thought that someone else was working on the exact same solution at that moment. He imagined them typing up their plan, laughing as he, knowing with delicious certainty that they were about to change the world. Roger shook the thought away confident that he was the sole forerunner. "It is not so," he said, reassuringly. "Do not let your heart be troubled by such foolish thoughts."

Shortly thereafter, his fever broke and his shirt ran dark with sweat, and Roger looked over his notes again, adding a few quick details

before returning to bed to find sleep for the monumental tasks of the coming days.

Dr. Larsen held his idea close, keeping a finger on the pulse of the team's direction. Confident they were lagging far off the scent, proposing essentially old, fruitless techniques, he reached out to Dr. Tianshi, a quiet soul, and a man of supreme intellect with whom Roger had felt a strange affinity. In former days, they worked briefly together on an international project before the countries of the world drew tight lines around their proposals, eagerly racing towards victory in a kind of fertility arms race, with China and America being especially secretive.

When Roger reached Dr. Tianshi, he solicited his help through subtleties, being careful to obscure the essence of his idea. Complex models needed to be compiled and run through computer simulations, and Roger struggled to navigate the finer mathematical points. To his surprise, Dr. Tianshi coldly declined, detecting subterfuge. Roger feigned appreciation and pressed no further for fear of raising too many suspicions.

When Roger felt it was time to unveil his idea, he opened his briefcase and slid the stack of freshly printed papers inside and latched it and left his apartment, taking the usual path to work. He mused at the thought of what others could not imagine lay tucked away in his briefcase. On the train, he regarded a familiar advertisement outside his window. It depicted a young, vivacious woman blanketed in pink roses holding a golden bottle of perfume. He watched it fade away until there was only concrete and tunnel.

He met privately with Jamison, walking into his office later that morning. Jamison sat half stunned when Dr. Larsen strode wordlessly into the room and slid a thin folder onto his desk, stating with perfect assurance, "The solution."

Jamison regarded Roger momentarily and then straightened the folder, flipping it open to the first page. He removed his glasses and smiled welcomingly as if a woman gifted with unexpected jewelry, "Those are bold words, Roger."

"And I mean them."

"By solution you mean..."

"I mean exactly what you think I mean. This is the solution."

Jamison studied Roger again. Even though Roger stood pale and weak and his eyes bore the marks of weariness, it had been years since he had seen the man look so confident. Jamison picked up the folder and flipped through the pages, "So what is it? What's the answer?"

"Genetic engineering."

"Yes, but how?"

"Gene regulatory network. The hybridization process affords a distinct workaround. We were relatively close a year ago. Project 11B. We can use much of it."

"And by workaround do you mean fooling the problem or creating a new creature, because you know as well as I do that if we land on The Island of Doctor Moreau the situation is going to bog down quickly."

"No grotesque travesties of men," Roger stated flatly. "The problem can be hijacked and manipulated with precision. Of this I am confident."

Jamison looked down again at the folder and worked his hand in the air, lost in momentary thought. "And here I thought the day was going to be boring," Jamison chuckled. "Now you're saying that we're on the edge of solving the world's greatest dilemma."

Roger stood watching while Jamison messed with his face. "Well, let's get this out to the group and get feedback," Jamison said with finality. "I for one am certainly eager to read through it."

The reality that others would weigh his work conjured within Roger a sharp feeling of disdain as if he were an artist ready to present his latest portrait to pretentious sophomores. The strength of the feeling surprised him, but he said nothing.

"Let me get the proper procedures in place and we'll move immediately. Will you be here? I want to talk very soon."

"Yes."

Jamison lingered, "I hope you're right, Roger. I hope to God you are right."

"It's right."

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When I beat my previous fastest time on Bowser's fire stage, which is super hard because the computer cheats if you are in first place,

making sure to give Princess or Yoshi a red shell to kill you, my heart jumped to a 9.78. Maybe even a 9.89. Barkus was really excited too, because when I jumped up and shouted, he immediately stood up and started wiggling and wagging his tail like when I first arrive home from school.

Since I was going to be spending the weekend with Uncle Brock, and since I knew that I wanted to interview Jason at the ice cream shop about the baby girl eggs, because he's really smart, because he can remember tons of orders without writing them down, and because he lives near Uncle Brock's house, which is good because I might have to ride my bike, I thought it would be a good idea to do some uber deep research.

In my room, I sat at my desk and pulled out a new notebook with a green cover and opened it to the first page. It felt all fresh and new. Like it wanted to have ideas put on it. Mom buys me lots of notebooks since I draw a lot. This one was going to be for notes only though. I sharpened my number two pencil and wrote at the top in big letters: Interview.

I turned on my laptop and told Barkus not to make too much noise since this was going to be important. He was already pretty sleepy, and so when I said his name he just tilted his eyes towards me without moving his head. I then Googled “how to interview people in a good way.”

One was, “11 Unusual Ways to Stand Out in a Job Interview.” I told Barkus that that one wasn't right. Another one said, “6 Ways to Be Interesting During Your Interview.” Nope. Too weird. “3 Ways to Improve Your Job Interview Skills.” More dumb job stuff. Then I found one that had a bunch of dos and don'ts, which was super helpful because it was a short list that was easy to understand. It also had a picture of a cool-looking guy behind a microphone with sunglasses smiling like he knew where a secret treasure was located. His hair was black and long and slicked back too.

I told Barkus that we had hit the jackpot and started writing down the tips that I thought would be good to remember.

- 1) Don't ask YES or NO questions.
- 2) Be enthusiastic.
- 3) Ask questions that reveal a person's character.
- 4) Listen!

- 5) Be yourself!
- 6) Actually want to understand them.
- 7) Provide a welcoming environment.

After I finished writing down everything, Barkus and I searched the closet in the hallway for the tape recorder. Mom was right, except that it wasn't on the top shelf. It was on the floor in a box under a bunch of winter clothes. I held the recorder in my hands and turned it around, examining it closely. It was thick and heavy and had large plastic buttons with a small clear screen on top so you could see the tape inside. "Look at this, Barkus. It's awesome." He drew closer and sniffed it uncertainly. I pressed the buttons. One of them stayed down when I pushed it. Another popped it back up. And one made the top lid thingy open like an automated handicap door. There was an old tape inside that had "music mix" written on it, and it was popped out a little so a person could grab it. On the back was a secret cover with a tiny plastic lever that would open it. "Batteries," I said. "We need batteries."

I ran to the kitchen and opened the junk drawer near the fridge and dug through all the pencils and papers until I found several batteries. It needed four thin ones, which we had. Even though I was careful, they kept falling out since the little springs that pressed against the batteries weren't very tight. When I turned it completely upside down, I was able to get them to stay long enough to put the plastic cover back into place. When it clicked shut, I turned it over and looked at Barkus and then pressed the button with the word PLAY above it. The plastic machine came to life in my hands. The small circles in the tape started rotating and the sound of a woman singing blasted out of the old speakers. Her voice was sad but strong and someone else kept saying "turn around" after her. She said that she sometimes would fall apart, or was a little bit nervous, or tired, which made me think she was struggling with depression. Barkus stared at me, and then back at it, and then back at me.

When I looked up, Mom was standing at the door with an amused expression. "This is the coolest thing ever," I said, holding it out to show her.

"It still works," she said.

"Yeah."

"Do you know how to operate it?"

"Kinda. Not really."

“Well, let's start with this,” she said, moving something on the side that controlled the volume. The song went from a shout to a whisper. She held it with interest for a moment, squinting at the tape inside, and then began to explain the different buttons, starting with the one that records your voice.

School on Wednesday was boring.

So was Thursday.

Friday wasn't too bad though. That's pizza day. And it's just before the weekend, of course. And we played kickball during recess. No one cried which was a miracle. I also started a chapter book about Brown Tail in art class. Mrs. Ellison told us to draw pictures for each chapter of our book. She said I was off to a good start:



Brown tail  
the monkey



## **Brown Tail the Monkey**

### Introduction

My name is Brown tail. I want to tell you about my life. I've had sad and happy moments of life. So I'll just start at the beginning.

Four years ago on a warm night, my parents and me were sleeping. My parents then... fell off... the tree. In the morning I couldn't find them. Then when I did they were dead. While I was crying, a boy named Adam adopted me and brought me home. And that's where I am now.

### Chapter 1: A New Life. Monday.

His house was so awesome. I loved it. He had a box that would show a bunch of pictures called a T.V. The bathroom was nice too. I had a toilet, sink, and bathtub. Ok the toilet was a seat with a pool under it. A sink is a tall bowl with two levers. You pull one and out comes tasty water. That is easy. The bath tub is like a giant in-door pool. I love swimming and playing in it.

When Uncle Brock came by to pick me up, I hopped in his truck and read him what I had written. He said, "Pretty intense beginning."

I said, "Tall trees are dangerous."

"Sounds like it."

The first thing we did at his house, obviously, was go over our survival pack inventory. Sometimes he says to pack for a nuclear holocaust. Sometimes a potential terrorist attack. Or an earthquake that knocks down everything, even the trees. We sit in the basement with just our flashlights and compare items to see what the other thinks would be most important. This week he told me to prepare for the zombie apocalypse. I totally knew what to bring. I packed my modified

Nerf Zombie DreadBolt, which can shoot sharpened sticks right into the eyes of zombies to stun them, firecrackers (to distract them, of course), some Tic Tacs (as water purification tablets), a butter knife (as a survival knife), a chainsaw (which I had to draw as part of my inventory), a sawed-off shotgun (ditto), some grenades (ditto), a flamethrower (ditto), a ski mask (to represent a gas mask), a salt shaker (which was meant to be a lighter), and a shoe string tourniquet (in case I get bit and have to cut off my arm).

I could tell Uncle Brock was very impressed, because when I finished, he sat back nodding his head while making a whistling sound. "Bravo," he said.

"So what did you pack?"

"Well," he said, clicking his tongue, "it's not going to beat your list. Though I just might have an item or two we're going to need."

"Like what?"

"Well, lemme see." He dug around in his green army bag and pulled out a yellow gadget with an antenna.

"Is that a radio?" I asked.

"Nailed it. But you know what? See this little crank on the side?"

I nodded. He started cranking it, "This radio doesn't need batteries."

"Really?"

"Yup." He cranked it a few times and then turned it on. Some staticky AM music started playing.

"Cool," I said.

"We'll definitely need one of these to hear emergency broadcast instructions. Or maybe even signals from other survivors."

"Totally."

When we were done, and when we had packed up all our stuff, being sure to leave our bags in a spot where we could get to them quickly in case some zombies started banging against the door, Uncle Brock made popcorn and told me we were going to watch a movie called Predator. I asked him what it was about, and he said, "An invisible alien creature that hunts army guys." I asked him if it was violent, and he said, "Extremely." But he felt confident I could handle it. "Just don't tell your Mom, ok?"

The movie was super violent and the most amazing thing I had ever watched. He said, "I thought you would like it."

I said, "*Mucho grande excellent!*"

We were sitting in the dark in the living room when the movie was over. Uncle Brock reached over and turned on a lamp, and we talked about the coolest death scenes, and the part where Schwarzenegger rubs mud all over his body (and how MythBusters busted it), steroids, and what we would do if we had to fight Predator. “I think I'd just be toast,” I admitted.

Uncle Brock stretched his legs out on the end table, right next to the empty bowl of popcorn, “Tough fight for sure. Maybe next time we'll have to pack for a Predator battle.”

“Yeah.”

“Or maybe for an alien invasion in general.”

“Hey, Uncle Brock?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think there are aliens?”

He found a stray piece of popcorn on the couch and tossed it into his mouth, “Universe is a big place.”

I watched him and waited.

“Ever heard of Fermi's Paradox?” he asked.

I shook my head.

He looked excited to tell me about it, “Well, there was this physicist by the name of Enrico Fermi—an incredibly smart guy—like off the charts—who figured there pretty much had to be aliens out there. Just too many planets. I mean we're talking trillions and trillions of planets scattered all over the universe.”

“That's a lot,” I said.

“It's a crap ton a lot. And here's the thing. Out of those planets, billions of them can support life. They would be kind of like our planet.”

I kept listening.

Uncle Brock sat up and leaned forward, “So here's the thing. Billions of good planets. Scattered all over the universe. And yet, here we are, having never met an alien. The question is why? Why haven't we come into contact with anything?”

I thought about it and then said, “Maybe they don't have spaceships.”

“Could be.”

“Or maybe they do but they haven't found us yet.”

“That's very possible.”

He paused, “But it might be another reason.”

I waited.

“What if there are aliens out there, but they know it is critical to remain absolutely quiet? To hide. To not make a single sound.”

“But why?”

He spoke more softly, “Maybe the universe is so quiet because others don't want to draw attention to themselves. Maybe it is because they know there are some really bad dudes out there who will take them over if they are found.”

“So everyone is hiding?”

“Yeah.”

“And that is why we haven't found any aliens?”

“Could be.”

“That's kind of freaky.”

“Kind of is.”

“Do you think that is what is happening?”

Uncle Brock sat back, “Nah. We're probably just alone.”

I thought about that, “But that's freaky too.”

He laughed a little, “Yeah. That's pretty freaky as well.”

“Do you think the bad aliens would be like Predator?”

“I doubt it.”

“Because you think they would look more like octopuses?”

“Or maybe they are something totally unimaginable. Like a crystal. Or a thought.”

“Like an angel?”

Uncle Brock tilted his head, “Yeah, I suppose so. Whatever an angel is made of.”

“Do you think there are angels?”

“Do you?”

“I think so.”

“I'm not sure. Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Would it depend on whether God exists?”

“I suppose it would.”

“Do you think God exists?”

Uncle Brock bounced his head in slight agreement, “Sometimes I do.”

“Why sometimes?”

“Well,” he said, thinking momentarily, picking at the bottom of the popcorn bowl. “Sometimes when I'm outside, and I look around at all the beautiful things—like this one time when I was hiking in Colorado

and standing on this huge mountain, right on the edge, I mean right on the lip where the rock juttred out of the ground over a deep expanse of trees, and you could see for what seemed forever, clear across the earth to where it curved into the sky—I was just overwhelmed by the beauty and the splendor of it all. Somehow at that moment, I was certain God existed. It just seemed so plain.” He paused and then added, looking uncertain, “But sometimes when I look around at the world, and I see all the pain and sadness, you know, all the bad stuff, it makes me wonder if we're all alone.”

“Like we're the only living things in the universe?”

He nodded.

“Wouldn't that be freaky and a bummer?” I asked.

He nodded again, “If you think about it, whatever is ultimately true is freaky weird, really. There's just no way around it.”

I thought about that. Then I said, “Hey, Uncle Brock?”

“Yeah, Buddy.”

“Can you take me to Dairy Queen tomorrow?”

“Got an itch for ice cream?”

“Well, not exactly. I need to interview Jason for something we're doing in English class”

“Oh, sure, of course,” he said with a shrug. “When you thinking?”

“First thing.”

“Can do.”

## Chapter Seven

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In the white light of the laboratory, sprawled across the northern wall of the room like an experiment in hieroglyphics, a web of diagrams and handwritten formulas were scrawled on a whiteboard in an assortment of colors. Lab technicians wearing white coats and powder blue gloves dotted the room, working quietly amid banks of instruments sitting atop rows of pale steel counters.

Roger stood among a group of doctors staring admiringly at his theorem on the massive board. With near unanimity, his idea was recognized as a work of genius, and in the face of promising results, the full weight of the institution shifted, funneling all available resources toward its realization. In less than a week, the first test of the seminal project would launch. Prefabricated human sperm spliced with bonobo genes.

Roger's usual reclusive self morphed into hyperactivity, his abrasive and terse manner now mildly congenial with awkward commendations and laughing. He hovered over the work of others like a fastidious general scrutinizing the attire of underlings. Slight paranoia gripped him in the night, and the days ran long and frenzied.

On the eve of the test, several heads of the project ate together at an exclusive restaurant. They sat like gods around the table, recondite and odd, a strange combination of eccentricity and nobility; with Dr. Thomas looking on quietly and austere, his stout beard and thin spectacles framing his pinched face; and Dr. Samantha Burns, a thin, hawkish woman with a metallic laugh sitting opposite the CEO of Zygote Solutions, a decidedly short man with a stare. Jamison joked with ease engaging the table with lighthearted humor, and to Roger's eternal consternation, he was sandwiched next to the encroaching presence of Dr. Binkard whose plump build tested the space of those around him.

Roger ate in a state of marked distraction while the group conversed clumsily.

Having very nearly conquered his heaping plate, Dr. Binkard wiped his mouth and turned to Dr. Larsen, signaling the group's attention with a loud question, "I have to know, Roger. Supposing for a moment that tomorrow we change the course of history—solve this problem outright. We fertilize and incubate boys to maturity. What then?" Dr. Binkard looked around at the group, "Do we envision the state raising the boys? Or granting select cases of adoption? Or something else? I know the opinion of many at this table, but I'm curious what you think."

Roger held his silverware momentarily and then continued cutting, "The truth is that I really don't care."

"Oh, come now. How can you not?"

"I'm not a fan of politics."

"Maybe so, but in these days of ours, there is no keeping out of it. It's all intertwined from top to bottom," Dr. Binkard said, gesticulating like a self-assured prophet. "Surely you have an opinion. Even a slight one."

"There's no good solution outside of natural procreation."

"Well, yes, I agree. But until that hurdle is crossed, we are faced with other matters—pressing ones!"

Roger lowered his fork. He studied Dr. Binkard and decided to play along, engaging the man with fresh enthusiasm.

"Here's how this works. Suppose there are three distinct approaches to this problem. X, Y, and Z. Because we live in a world full of conundrums, where things do not work as they ought and tie us up in ethical knots, each position presents us with strengths and weaknesses. I could voice my interest in one of these views—put my stamp of approval on it—but that would merely lead to your citing its flaws. To which I will feel compelled to defend it by citing the flaws of the other positions, and especially that of your own. At this point we will spin round and round playing the game of defense and attack. Like lawyers adjudicating a case. But unto what end? Until one of us is magically satisfied and submits to the other? Or until we agree to disagree with all the sincerity of cons?"

Dr. Binkard leaned back in his chair, amused by the sudden energy. Roger continued, "The truth is that our agreeing or disagreeing all falls back on hidden assumptions. What is our standard of right and wrong?"



For it is to this we will both appeal, even if unconsciously, and find ourselves feeling disgusted or perturbed at the others' priorities. And why? Because each of us has adopted a different set of moral intuitions that coordinate only partially, leaving us to fight over differing ideals. So the real question, Dr. Binkard, is why we harbor the intuitions we do. And if we thought choices X, Y, and Z were challenging, with respect to questions of the state, how much more the very foundation of ethics? It's merely another quagmire lurking under the surface—a more fundamental one, and one we will not emerge the happier, as there is no end to the squabble there.”

“So your answer is that there isn't an answer?”

“There are answers. They are just subjective.”

“But wouldn't you agree that some are better than others?”

“Again it depends.”

Dr. Binkard looked amazed, “On what? There are obvious shortcomings to certain views.”

“Obvious to whom?”

“Any sensible person.”

“Sensible? That's just another appeal to subjectivity. It slides on a continuum.”

“With obvious limits. What if someone suggested that we raise boys only to melt them down into a beef stew? Only a madman would find that sensible.”

“You and I may very well label that creature a madman, but make no mistake, our sense of repulsion is nothing more than a biological adaptation. Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. Hence the basis of ethics does not lie in god's will—or in the metaphorical roots of evolution or any other part of the framework of the universe. In an important sense, ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate. It is without external grounding. Hence, ethics is produced by evolution but is not justified by it. Sensibility is a shared illusion of the human race—and it is one that is not shared by the majority. Just small pockets of agreement. And that tenuous.”

Dr. Binkard looked around at the group with an incredible expression, “Seriously, Roger, I find it hard to believe that you wouldn't universally condemn the melting down of boys for food.”

“You're missing my point.”

“How so? Either you think it's wrong or you don't.”

“Just because I think it is unpalatable, it doesn't mean that it is objectively unpalatable.”

“Then I guess I would question your unreasonably high view of objectivity. It would seem that nothing can meet your lofty ideal.”

“Not when it comes to morality. It is utility and preference from beginning to end.”

“But utility has objective results.”

“But which results do you prefer? Name the goal of the intended result and I will cry, 'Preference!' You can't avoid it.”

Dr. Binkard gave an exasperated snort and considered the remains of his food. Roger shifted his attention to the others, “Suppose for a moment that while we are sitting here eating, aliens from another planet descend upon Earth. As we converse with them, it quickly becomes apparent that we are mere children in comparison to their intellect. Mere ants. Our technology, in comparison to theirs, borders on that of the stone age; our sense of purpose proves, at best, myopic and elementary. Now suppose that they desire something from us. Perhaps our very planet. Or our very selves. Yes, suppose they believe the right course of action, given their set of priorities and purposes—which are alien to us—is to farm our bodies for energy. They use us. And in so doing destroy us. Here each and every last one of us will object and cry foul at such behavior, calling it unethical and immoral, but just because we call it immoral, it doesn't mean that it is objectively immoral. It would only be objective from our vantage point. Which means that it isn't universally objective. Which means that it isn't objective. It would merely be our voiced preference to not be destroyed. But for the aliens, they are functioning according to a different standard. Their decision is no less objective in their eyes.”

“Ah, yes, we now have aliens added to the equation,” barked Dr. Binkard with exaggeration. Roger ignored the comment and appealed to the others with a look.

Dr. Burns gestured sympathetically toward Roger, “Even if we grant that it is all subjective, there's no reason why we can't choose to be nice nihilists, as it were. Why not prioritize those ends that we find most conducive to human flourishing, granting fully that it's subjective to the core?”

“That's a far more frank admission of the game we are playing.”

“I'm just not sure I would call it a game.”

“We can call it whatever we like. Game. Strategy. Consequentialism. At root it is my preferences rooted in intuitions bumping up against your preferences rooted in intuitions.”

“But as scientists, we both recognize that there are scientific facts surrounding human flourishing. Melting down boys is not conducive to life. Isn't that a fact?”

“Melting down boys is melting down boys. That is a fact. By itself, it is nothing more or less. Our feelings come into play when that fact is couched within our larger moral framework. That determines our judgment.”

“But here again I would stress that the judgment isn't disconnected from the facts. Life and death have objective borders. Melting down children doesn't promote life.”

“It doesn't promote life. But so what? Should we favor life? Ought we to value that more highly? Note that we are making a move from 'is' to 'ought,' and that move is rooted in subjective values.”

“I see your point. It just seems to me that if we cannot agree on the essential value of life, we spiral into a terrible free fall. What do we have if we do not have that?”

“Not much. Unless, of course, we look at the rest of the animal kingdom. They eat and prey on each other with little to no concern. And why? Because of the structure of their brains.”

Roger could see Dr. Binkard eagerly wanting to interject, so he added quickly, “Think of it this way. We carry around in our skulls a complicated mass of neurons and synapses. If our brains didn't possess the connections which produce within us a sense of right and wrong, we wouldn't care about rape, extortion, lying, or murder. We would be like everything else. No sense of injustice. No moral concerns. But it just so happens that our brains—through a purely accidental process—are wired in such a way that when we perceive or think about certain actions, an emotional reaction is triggered. If the emotional reaction makes us feel offended, or disgusted, or angry, we naturally attribute badness to it. But nothing about the current structure of our brains should lead us to believe that it is the right way to be wired. It could have been quite different. So when viewed from the perspective of the universe, we carry around in us an infinitesimally small organ that happens to create moral intuitions. It is a curious case of hubris to think that these chemical reactions carry universal weight, as if anything outside of the emotional matrix of our own being should care about

what transpires between our ears. It's just an emotion: a tiny, neurological, fleeting, subjective feeling. If it didn't strike us as being so potent, something significant demanding attention—which is itself another happenstance product of our brains—we would never be tempted to elevate it as highly as we have.”

To this the group sat quietly absorbing the point, and after a moment's reflection, when it felt like the subject had been sufficiently bantered, and nothing of any particular good would come by pressing further, Jamison made a humorous quip, saying something to the effect that they had plenty of food and food for thought for one evening, and that the next day's events loomed large and historic, and that he, unlike the others at the table, would turn into a pumpkin at 9 PM. With that the small party dissolved into niceties, expressing their appreciation for the delightful meal, confessing that they needed to do it more often. Then they each went their own way.

Roger slept poorly, his mind running like a fugitive from sleep. Images of the forthcoming procedure played in vibrant clips with the divergent results mirrored in the expressions of those watching. He imagined gasps of success. Stunned looks followed by shouts and handshakes. Faces full of joy at the impossible made real. He could see Jamison laughing. Wiping tears. And the hugs. And the looks of relief. And the uninhibited celebration. Tribal and timeless. Like a reunion or fantasy. Almost mystical. Or spiritual. Peering straight into the beatific center of science itself.

Then there was the cold possibility of another outcome, one he could not keep his mind from envisioning in bitter loops. Bright expressions suddenly drowned in disappointment. An awkward fumbling for words followed by a horrible silence. Uncomfortable shifting, empty stares. A lab technician waits for someone to say something. But there is nothing. No one will speak. No one will look each other in the eyes. The silence continues to crush, breaking heart, and soul, and bones, and the room, and the world, and everything. The consummation of futility cresting in the plain declaration of nothing.

Something not quite like either response occurred.

When the machine lowered over the freshly prepared zygotes, and its lenses spun into place, and the band of specialists stood watching in quiet solemnity, listening to the technology hum with promise, with technicians positioned at their stations, time ticking faithfully along its track, and the sperm were released and did less than nothing, twitching in the solution like insects caught in water, the moment passed like the countless previous moments of failure. Roger stood watching in mute disgust. And when they injected the sperm into the nucleus, multiple times over, and there was no reaction, but it only hung there like a spear lodged in a creature's side, the group looked on inquisitively with a touch of melancholy. One would almost think that no one really believed it could work. Or perhaps there was some strange measure of comfort in facing normalcy; that the day's expectation should never come to pass but only shimmer like a mirage, distant and hopeful, receding continually in the foreground, never nearer, never farther.

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The next morning I packed my backpack for the interview, double-checking to make sure I had everything I needed. Uncle Brock was still asleep at 8 o'clock, and so I woke him to make sure we wouldn't be late. He rolled over and looked at the clock. "It's 8 AM, man."

"I know. I don't want to be late."

"But they open at like 10."

"Uhuh."

"That's two hours away."

"Uhuh."

He squinted at me and then rolled back over, "Wake me up in an hour."

So that's what I did. I watched a streamer on Twitch until 9 o'clock and then woke up Uncle Brock. "Ok, I'm up. I'm up. No worries." While he showered, I went back over the dos and don'ts of interviewing making sure I was ready. At a quarter til ten, I was feeling a little panicky, but Uncle Brock emerged from the bathroom dressed with his hair wet and messy in a good way. "Ready to roll?" he asked, grabbing the keys to his truck.

"Roger."

The day was cloudy and cool, but not rainy, with the sky looking like a thin white sheet stretched in all directions. The ice cream shop was

only a few minutes away, and so it didn't take long to get there. When we pulled into the parking lot, Uncle Brock asked if I wanted him to wait in the truck. I told him that I didn't know since the rules for interviewing people didn't say one way or another. "I'll just hang out at one of the outside tables."

"Ok."

I looked inside my backpack and then asked him to wish me luck.

"Stay frosty," he said.

When I opened the main door, a bell chimed, and Mr. Ray, a thick man with a shiny round head turned around and greeted me loudly from behind the front counter, "Hey, Adam! Good to see you."

"Hello, Mr. Ray."

"How can I help you?"

"Mrs. Jordan my English teacher asked us to interview someone. Like for an assignment. In English class. At my school. So I was wondering if I could interview Jason."

Mr. Ray put both of his hands on the counter and leaned forward like a mighty tree, "Oh, sorry, but Jason isn't here. He's got the weekend off. Camping trip, or something or other. Maybe rock climbing. I can't remember."

I stood thinking for a moment. Uncle Brock was sitting outside at one of the tables looking at his phone.

"Yeah, sorry, it's just Anthony and me this morning," Mr. Ray said, apologetically.

Since I didn't want to be rude, and since I had already trained and meditated a little, doing the Virabhadra warrior pose for a full three minutes, which I know about because Mom does Yoga, I asked, "Do you think I could interview one of you?"

"Sure!" he said, half shouting. "Though let's go with Anthony. I'm afraid I'm just about the most boring person on the planet. But now Anthony, he's something entirely different. Popular as can be." Before I could say anything, Mr. Ray turned around and shouted through an opening back to the kitchen area, "Hey, Anthony! Someone's here to see you. Yeah, for you. Come on up." A moment later Anthony emerged from the kitchen area. He had a towel in his hand. When he saw me he looked a little surprised. Mr. Ray said, "Adam here has an English assignment, and he was wondering if he could interview someone from the ice cream store." I smiled. Anthony straightened and smiled back, "Oh, ok."

“How long you need, Adam?” Mr. Ray asked.

“Not too long,” I said.

“I think I can cover for Anthony for a few minutes, no problem,” Mr. Ray said, looking confident.

“Can we sit at one of the tables in here?” I asked.

“Sure, sure. Grab one in the corner. The place should be pretty quiet for a while still.”

Even though I was planning on talking to Jason, Anthony seemed really friendly. When he came out from behind the front counter, he shook my hand and said that it was awesome to meet me. He was wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt with the name of the store written inside a swirl of ice cream, and when he gripped my hand, I could see the muscles in his arms. They shimmered and flexed and made me think he was a bodybuilder or an Olympic wrestler.

We sat down at a spot in the corner by a big window, and I unzipped my backpack and set the old recorder on the table, along with a vase with a couple flowers I found in Uncle Brock's backyard. I also set out a few Jolly Ranchers and an unopened Pop-Tart on a crystal dish. “These are for you,” I said enthusiastically, wanting to create a welcoming environment. He looked at them and said, “Oh, thank you.” And then he picked up a Jolly Rancher and pulled at the wrapper, causing it to make that loud, crinkly opening sound. But he didn't open it entirely. He just messed with it, and then held it.

I needed to ask him if it was alright to record him, but in order to avoid a yes or no question, I said, “How do you feel about being recorded?”

He looked at the recorder and then at me, “Yeah, man. It's all good. No problem at all.” Then he added, “So this is for your English class?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Jordan?”

I nodded.

“Cool.”

I said, “Yeah.”

I took out my notepad with my questions and pressed the record button on the tape player. “Hello, my name is Adam,” I began. “It is good to meet you.”

“Good to meet you as well,” Anthony said, smiling warmly. “I'm Anthony.”

“What is your favorite ice cream flavor?”

“Definitely strawberry. That's the best by a mile.”

“Oh, mine too!” I said.

“Bam!” said Anthony, putting a fist out for me to bump.

“When was the first time you ate strawberry ice cream?”

I could tell the question surprised Anthony because he leaned back and looked at the ground, sucking in air. His eyebrows went up too. “Boy, I don't know. It might have been at my sister's birthday party. I was like five, and she had a huge cake with buckets of strawberry ice cream. I remember sneaking three bowls and eating it behind the house. Felt like I was going to puke,” he said, laughing. “My Mother asked me if I was feeling alright, but since I didn't want to tell her what I did, I had to act like everything was fine.”

“What is your favorite color?”

“It's a toss-up between green and blue. But if I had to choose, I would say green.”

“What is your favorite thing to do for fun?”

“Probably playing basketball. Or just chillin' with friends.”

“Cool,” I said, turning my notebook to the next page. “If baby boy eggs are so important, and we would go bonkers if we found one, why do you think we don't care as much about baby girl eggs? Because if there were a bunch of baby boy eggs and the baby girl eggs were super rare, we would go bonkers over finding a baby girl egg.”

Anthony sat with a strange expression, saying, “Um...” like he didn't understand what I was asking. Since I didn't want things to start getting awkward, I asked the question another way, “When scientists do their science experiments, why do you think they get rid of the baby girl eggs?”

Anthony still looked a little uncomfortable, like his chair was bothering him, but after a moment, he said, “Get rid of the baby girl eggs?”

“Yeah.”

“Like when they're trying to find a solution to the fertility problem?”

“Yeah.”

“I, uh...”

“Is it a bad question?” I asked, breaking the rule.

Anthony snapped to attention, “No, no, it's fine. I'm just...” He looked unsure and didn't say anything for a while. “Well, I suppose if



the experiment doesn't work, I would imagine that they wouldn't need the baby girl eggs anymore," he said.

"So they just throw them away?"

"I guess so."

"But what if there were a ton of baby boy eggs and no baby girl eggs? Would they throw away the baby girl eggs?"

"Um," Anthony said, rubbing his hands together. "Well... I suppose they wouldn't throw away the girl eggs."

"Why?"

"Because they would be very important, I guess. I mean, I don't know. I suppose it would be like a woman's right to choose."

Since I didn't know what he meant by a woman's right to choose, I asked him, and he said, more cautiously, "Well, like abortion." Since I didn't know what abortion meant either, I asked, "Is abortion like failing a mission? Like when an Army commander says, 'Abort! Abort! Fall back, men!'"

Anthony looked towards the front counter. Mr. Ray wasn't there. "Not exactly," he said. "Abortion is when a mother chooses to end her pregnancy."

"By having the baby?"

"No... Um... by ending the pregnancy."

I didn't understand, and Anthony could tell, and so he said that I might want to talk to my mom about it. But since it was important for me to understand his answer about the baby girl eggs, I asked him if ending the pregnancy meant not having the baby.

He said, "It is like not having the baby."

"So they just wait longer to have the baby?"

"No... They stop having the baby."

Since I was starting to feel dumb, like I couldn't understand what he was saying, maybe because he was older and smarter, or maybe because I wasn't asking the right questions, I asked, "But how can they just stop having the baby? Do they have a special machine that can pause the baby and then unpause it later to start growing again?"

Anthony looked at me like a man in a maze trying to find the right path out. "I'm not an expert, Adam," he said, talking to me like a dear friend, "but I would imagine that the scientists get rid of the baby girl eggs because they just don't need any more baby girl eggs. And since they are the ones who own the eggs, then they can decide what to do with them."

“But aren't the baby girl eggs important because they are baby girl eggs? Like the baby boy eggs. But just girl ones?”

“I'm sorry, Adam. I just don't know. I'm more of an ice cream and basketball kind of guy. This is pretty deep stuff.”

“Like outer space?”

He just looked at me.

“Or like mathematics?”

“I suppose so.”

By now a couple customers had come in the store and were being waited on by Mr. Ray. He seemed fine taking their orders, but I could tell Anthony was ready to head back to work.

“Can I ask one more question?”

“Ok...”

“If you could either breathe underwater or have perfect night vision, which would you choose?”

He look relieved, “I'm gonna go with night vision.”

“Me too!” I said. And then I thanked him and shook his hand and pressed stop on the tape recorder and told him not to forget his Pop-Tart.

When Mr. Ray saw that we were done, he asked, “So how did it go?”

I told him, “Good.”

Anthony smiled but his smile looked like he was being stung by something a little painful. Mr. Ray looked pleased and said, “Well, look here, you can't leave without ordering something, for both you and your Uncle outside. It's on me, Adam. Anything you want.” I said that some strawberry ice cream would be great. He asked me if I wanted it in a cone or cup, and I said in a cone. “Both of them?” he asked. “Both would be great,” I said. Mr. Ray nodded at Anthony, and Anthony dished it up.

When I came out with two cones of strawberry ice cream, Uncle Brock sat up and said, “Now we're talking, breakfast for champions.” He took it and licked the side where it was beginning to melt down onto the cone, “So how did it go?”

“Pretty good, I think.”

“Good.”

“Well, I don't know. It was good but not quite what I expected.”

Uncle Brock anticipated another drip, “What do you mean?”

“I don't know. It was good.”

Uncle Brock gestured with his free hand, making a sweeping motion, “Step into my office, good sir, and tell me your problems, as I can see that there is clearly something on your mind.”

“Well,” I said, trying to think why I felt like someone who wanted to eat a bunch of potato chips but only had two. “Anthony was good. And really nice. And his arms were like the Incredible Hulk's.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Dude's got some guns.”

“And he tried to answer all my questions.”

“But...”

“I don't know. It was fine, I guess.”

Uncle Brock eyed me and said, “Sounds like you're thrilled.”

“Maybe my brain needs to think about it a while.”

“Alright. But you know you're not married to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you don't have to settle on that one interview. Do another and pick the one you like best.”

“I could do that?”

“Well, yeah, why not?”

“I don't know.”

Uncle Brock bit into his cone, “Oh, man, crunchy and soggy on the edges. Just perfect.”

“Yeah.”

“When is the assignment due?”

“Not for a couple more weeks.”

“Oh, well, there you go. You've got all kinds of time to think about it. If you're looking for something different, I say go for it. Do what you want. You gotta feel good about it.”

It ended up that my brain didn't need too much time to think about it. Even before we arrived back at Uncle Brock's house, I thought about the kind of person who could better answer my baby girl eggs question. I turned and asked Uncle Brock, “Hey, Uncle Brock?”

“Yeah, Buddy.”

“Do you know any biologists?”

“Biologists? Like personally?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Or what about that one physicist you were telling me about?”

“Fermi?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“He's been dead a long time.”

“Bummer.”

He looked over at me, “Why?”

“I kind of want to interview a scientist. Someone who knows a lot about biology stuff.”

Uncle Brock nodded while looking ahead at the road, “That would be a biologist.”

“But you don't know any?”

“No. But we could find one easily enough,” he said, pulling into his driveway.

“How?”

He stopped the truck and shut it off and pulled the parking brake, “Follow me.”

I followed him inside to his computer, and he pulled up a swivel chair next to his and started typing. “University of Illinois should have what we're looking for,” he said, squinting at the screen. A crisp website came up that showed a campus with big fluffy green trees around it. There was also a picture of a group of students laughing together on a sidewalk. They looked like they were having a lot of fun.

Uncle Brock clicked on the faculty and staff link and scrolled down to the biology department. “Ok, let's see here,” Uncle Brock said, scrolling through the different professors, talking to himself as he moved along. “Yup, super smart guy right here. Another super smart guy. And another. And—” He stopped at the picture of a woman with long blond hair who was smiling slightly, kind of like Mona Lisa. The funny thing was that her name was Lisa. Dr. Lisa C. Richards. She was very pretty.

“Hmm,” Uncle Brock hummed, moving just a few inches from the screen.

“What?” I said.

He was zooming in on her hands. He looked a moment longer, squinting further, and stating slowly with growing confidence, “I Don't. See a. Ring.” Then he turned towards me, “I think she's exactly what you're looking for.”

“You think so?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Is there a phone number?” He moved the mouse over to the side, right next to a number, “Yup. Want me to give her a call and see if we can't set up an appointment?”

I nodded, and Uncle Brock put up his hand. We gave each other high five.

Later we grabbed some burgers and brought them back to the house. We were going to eat outside on the back porch but it started sprinkling, so we ate inside at the kitchen table. Uncle Brock showed me how to balance a salt shaker at an angle using only a few grains of salt. He had to try it a few times, slowly pulling his hands away and then rebalancing it as it began to fall, but when he tilted it just right, it stayed in place, half falling and half standing, frozen in place like time had stopped. I tried to do it but couldn't. He had to help me.

When we were done eating, Uncle Brock patted his stomach and said that he felt like a bloated tick. He also said, "I'd better run this off, or I'm going to get as big as a house."

"So you going to run on the treadmill?"

"Man, I better. But not quite yet," he said, looking full and sleepy. "Feels more like nap time."

"Can I play some games on the computer when you run?"

"You can play now if you want."

I said, "Ok" and ran to his bedroom and turned on his desktop and double clicked Call of Duty. After a while, Uncle Brock popped his head in and said that he was going to run downstairs on the treadmill. I said, "Alright," and he left. While it's hard to hear over the speakers, the rhythmic sound of his feet hitting the treadmill could be faintly heard through the floor.

Since I had already unlocked all the guns, and since this Call of Duty wasn't all that new to me, I exited the game and tried to think what else would be fun to play. I sat looking at Uncle Brock's desktop, which didn't have very many icons on it, because he likes things to be simple and clean. He says that while he is a barbarian by nature, he is a very neat and tidy barbarian. He also says that it helps him think. At home we have some walnuts, and the package says that eating them boosts brain function. Since the walnut vitamins actually get in your brain, that makes sense to me. But I'm not sure why having only a few things on your desktop would make your brain compute more powerfully.

Another thing I didn't understand was the image on Uncle Brock's desktop. It was a cartoon picture of a man and a cat and a dog all

bending over at the same time to pick up a ball, with all three hitting each others' heads. There was also a bird in a cage off to the side. Below the picture, it read, "Simultaneously all three went for the ball, and the coconut-like sound of their heads hitting secretly delighted the bird."

Anyway.

All the things I didn't understand made me think of my interview with Anthony and my upcoming interview with Dr. Richards, and how it would be important for me to be better prepared, especially since I would be talking to a real-life biologist. Since Anthony talked about a woman's right to choose, and the word abortion, which seemed to be connected with choosing things, and which seemed to be an important part of his explanation about the baby girl eggs, I thought it would be smart to look it up online.

I opened Google and typed "what is abortion?" Near the top was a link for Wikipedia. I clicked it. There weren't very many pictures. Only a drawing of a hand holding a long straw-like thingy which was inside a human body. Below the image, it said something about a vacuum aspiration abortion at eight weeks gestational age, which I didn't understand, obviously. I scrolled back to the top. The first sentence read, "Abortion is the ending of pregnancy due to removing the embryo or fetus before it can survive outside the uterus." I didn't know what a uterus was, so I had to look it up. I felt a little weird because the first thing that appeared when I searched "uterus" was a drawing of a woman's private parts with an arrow pointing to her V J region. I listened to make sure Uncle Brock was still running. It looked like the uterus was the place where a baby grows inside its mother.

The part that was still confusing to me was that the Wikipedia article said an abortion removed the fetus before it could survive outside its mom. That didn't make sense. I couldn't think why someone would want to take the baby out. And the way they said it made it sound like the baby would die. Since I knew that couldn't be what they meant, I decided to click one of the videos explaining abortion on YouTube to help me understand what it really meant.

I hovered the mouse over a video that had a thumbnail of someone with rubber gloves holding a tiny, red baby. The video was only a little over two minutes long, which was good, since I wasn't sure how long Uncle Brock would keep running.

When it started there was nothing but a black screen with soft music playing. Then in the center some white words slowly appeared. When they were clear and bright, they read, "My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth." I didn't have much time to think about that because the image shifted to video footage that was hard to understand. The camera was really close to a pile of red goo, like red jello, though chunkier, almost like a cherry chewed up and spit out. A hand wearing rubber gloves was holding something like a pair of tweezers, prodding a dark pile of something thick with two tiny feet sticking out. It was in a metal dish. A red liquid was everywhere. The hand kept moving the sludge with the tweezers which made the two tiny feet flop around. The music sounded sad. The image froze on the two tiny feet. Then the video went black and showed something else.

This time there was a large patch of wrinkly skin with some dark hair with blue fabric all around the edges, like it was a picture frame for the skin and hole in the middle. Another hand wearing blue rubber gloves held a long, metal clamp thing. It kind of looked like what Mom puts in the salad bowl when she makes salad for dinner. The person holding the shiny metal clamp inserted it inside the hole and started clamping and moving it around at different angles. A moment later they pulled it out. At the end of the clamp, stuck between the prongs, was something that looked like a small leg. All bloody and torn. With a piece of skin. Hanging like a plant without water. The person set the leg on a metal plate and pulled out an arm. He set that on the plate too. A thick red liquid dripped. Then he put it back inside the hole and moved it around. And clamped. And pulled. And another leg came out. He set it on the plate. Then an arm. With a lot of torn stuff. Which he set on the plate. He put it back in and pulled harder. The skin around the hole kept moving in a weird way. Then something small and crushed with what looked like a face came out, like when you step on a ping pong ball, and the hand moved it over to the metal plate and set it at the top above the other parts. It looked like a baby in pieces. Like a puzzle. With space between the pieces. It wasn't moving, and thick red blood was all over in puddles. It looked horrible. Like a scary movie. Which I'm not allowed to watch.

I looked away. I don't know why, but I felt like I kept needing to swallow. My heart was beating fast too, like when I run and put my hand on my chest. Outside Uncle Brock's window, the branches of a

large tree in the distance were moving with the wind. Rainwater was on the window. The tree looked peaceful, like it was supposed to be doing what it was doing. I could still hear Uncle Brock running.

When I looked back at the video, the screen was dark again with white text. It said, "Abortion ends a life. Stop the horror of abortion." Then it was over, and another video prepared to play, with the circle timer ticking down.

Later that night, when I was back home lying in bed, I still felt like I needed to swallow a lot. I tried sipping some water but that didn't help. Neither did putting tissue paper under my tongue.

I didn't tell Uncle Brock or Mom about the video, since I figured it would make them upset. I also wondered if they had ever watched a video about abortion, which I figured they did, since they are grown-ups and grown-ups seem to know most everything. But then I thought about how scientists still don't know everything about Quantum Mechanics, or black holes, or whether or not bacon is good for people. On the History Channel, there was a program about bacteria, and how doctors didn't know it was a bad idea to handle dead bodies or poop before performing a surgery, which was weird because I would have thought it would have been obvious. That reminded my brain that we are always learning, and that there are mysteries, and that sometimes even things that seem obvious aren't obvious. I thought about the little baby parts on the metal plate and wondered what I might learn to help me understand it. I then started to think about questions to ask Dr. Richards, but I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke, it was early Sunday morning, and I could hear birds singing outside.



## Chapter Eight

!

Evening came and slid into night, and Dr. Larsen pasted half-agreeable smiles on his face, hoping to end the strained condolences of his colleagues as quickly as possible. "It's only the beginning," a few said. "We have only scratched the surface."

Roger worked in the solitude of his office, and when the last of the vigilant left for home, leaving him with quiet hallways and lonely janitors, he wandered around the main laboratory, anomalous and numb. A fluorescent light buzzed above a table littered with microscopes covered with semi-opaque bags. He regarded the light and looked about the room at nothing and everything at once.

Around ten o'clock he noticed that the nursing home had called and left a message. He listened balefully and stood like a man weighing the options of the world. Nothing seemed to matter at that moment. Sliding the phone back into his pocket, he left for the elevator and descended to the main lobby, whereupon an older security guard, a thin black man with short white hair, bid him goodnight. Roger said nothing. He walked out into the late summer night intent on finding escape.

The thatched windows of the tavern glowed dimly, spilling red light onto the street in invitation. Roger fell in among the patrons finding a seat at the curve of a long wooden bar. Rows of dark liquors dressed in ornate labels lined the wall before him. The drink he ordered bit and kicked as he drank, and he fought to keep from coughing. "Strong one, isn't it?" a bearded man next to him said with flashing eyes. "That one'll grab you by the balls." Roger cleared his throat and shared an acute expression, and the two of them spoke and drank, and the man introduced Roger to the rest of his friends, a stylish grunge of thirty-somethings who were already well into their spirits.

Under green lamps furnished with curls of Irish brass, the group joked and laughed and continued to drink, jumping from inane topics to world conflicts with irreverence and ease, making little sense in their

perceived profundity. A red-haired sprite with a youthful smile edged near Roger and touched him often. She asked him what he did for a living, and when he said he was a doctor, she said that she always wanted to go into medicine but did not, saying that life sometimes steers you in unforeseen directions. Roger agreed and bought her a drink and the two of them slowly drifted from the group, speaking privately with interest for more. When her friends asked if she needed a ride home, she looked at Roger and said that she would be fine.

In her apartment, his flesh rocked against hers until the booze and pleasure lifted him from the pains of what then seemed another life. In the morning he felt ridiculous and old and dizzy, and as he dressed, buttoning the shirt that bore the faint reminder of a tavern's night, she stirred and sat up bare-shouldered with the sheet covering her, "What time is it?"

"Little after six."

"You have to go already?"

"Yes."

"To work?"

"Yes."

"Will I see you around?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe not then?"

"You never know."

She groggily messed with her hair and accepted the statement without emotion. "Well, help those patients get better."

Roger nodded.

"Actually, I never asked what kind of doctor you are."

Roger studied her momentarily, "Genetics."

"Fertility?"

"That's right."

"Then good luck saving the world."

Roger said nothing.

"The door sticks when you shut it. Can you make sure to pull it tight on your way out?"

Roger looked across the apartment at the door. He nodded vacantly and then left.

Roger poured over the data. Nothing made sense. At every point where one would expect to find some indication of error, or incongruity, or sign of incompatibility, the information appeared entirely sound, suggesting, in an otherwise normal world, that all would proceed as expected. To the eyes of all those who scrutinized it, there was no reason why it shouldn't have produced results, at least on some dim, even perverse level. But it didn't.

To Roger the utter inconclusiveness of it all felt like a slight as if nature was toying with him, jeering his efforts with a contemptuous smile. He continued to read with growing anger, muttering under his breath in agitation, until at last he cursed aloud like some impenitent soul before the gates of Hades, bound and defiant, daring the damned to take him; and when a desk drawer snagged momentarily causing him to jerk at it with sudden fury, he rose and toppled the small chestnut desk with both arms. The bulb of a small lamp shattered on the floor and papers whirled in the air, leafing down slowly, until they came to rest on the floor in a scattered patchwork of forsaken promises. He stood breathing heavily, the frustration coursing through him. His face twisted and he cursed bitterly, jaw clenched. Then he tilted his head slowly to one side as if examining the reaction of the wall with narrowed eyes. And he stood trembling.

As the spent anger slowly gave way to self-awareness, and he regained a semblance of composure, standing more erect and fixing his shirt, an uncommon weariness descended on him.

He again sought solace in the indulgences of the flesh, intent on finding liquor and a pair of tan legs. She approached in the neon light of the club with purpose and mascara, speaking loudly over the music, and Roger weighed the sight, at first thinking his course was charted, but a feeling of despondency bordering on sickness overcame him, and he rudely brushed the woman away. She swore at him and strutted away with a superior look.

While the thump of techno pulsed through the walls, Roger stared at his drink, tilting it slowly, watching the golden bubbles rise and jostle.

He abandoned the bar and took the streets, a man lost in himself, walking aimlessly by glowing storefronts and derelicts and other creatures of the night loitering with their cigarettes.

By an unconscious purpose of will, he returned to the Institute, entering through the main lobby and passing by the old security guard. “Another late night, Dr. Larsen?” The elevator opened and Roger thinly acknowledged the comment.

Roger found himself in the main laboratory, questioning aloud the results of the experiment, and his life, and the inequities of the world. He grabbed a random folder from a shelf and held it with a look and then tossed it roughly on a nearby counter. He pulled out another and did the same. Then a third. “Such pointlessness,” he muttered. “What a fucking joke. What a—” he trailed, shaking his head.

Anger was building within him, and he felt the urge to kick a chair, or break something; but as he turned, scowling, the feeling instantly transformed into a desire to retest his theorem, though not in a methodical fashion, but abusively with demand, as if he were goading something to react, or intervene, or manifest in some corporeal presence that he could strike or mock.

He booted up the main machine. The arms jerked to life. He stood watching half mad. “What? You ready to do nothing again, you worthless piece of shit for technology?” He swiveled to a touchscreen and tapped aggressively. When he mistyped, he scornfully pressed a rigid finger against the screen. “Oh, I see.” He tapped harder and entered another wrong number, but instead of calmly backspacing, he jabbed crazily at the screen, conceding nothing to his imaginary opponent. It was now a bitter game of hitting the right numbers with the exact imprecision he demanded.

The screens on the wall blinked and the emblem of Zygote Solutions appeared. Roger glanced up and then back to the touchscreen. He entered two codes and made his way to a steel door on the far side of the room. Never a more lonely portal, thick and bulky. The room it guarded was a surgical cabinetry of tiny compartments, rising morgue-like, floor to ceiling, sperm and eggs encased in storage with a chill in the air.

Roger squinted in the light, pulling the long metal containers out and tilting them for a better look. Cartridges full of reproductive biology stacked neatly in rows, numbers like names segregating the specimens. He grabbed two from the front, slid the container back into its space, and fished out a selection of female gametes with equal disconcert. He left and returned to the machine, feeding the capsules into its side. There was a slight spring-loaded resistance followed by an

agreeable click. He returned to the screen and studied it. "Just go," he said derisively. "Show me again. I'd love to see it. Just love to see it." He initiated the program. Normal sperm with normal eggs. No modifications. "Don't be shy, friends. Come on out," Roger said, standing before the screens gesturing in mock invitation.

Opaque filaments coiled and twitched into view. On the main screen, a huge ovum appeared, central and nova, a granular portal opening to places alien and blue. "Yes, there we go," Roger said as the sperm neared the egg and slowed. "Feeling lazy again, I see. Such a shame." Roger shook his head. "Well isn't that fun?" he asked with a ludicrous look. "You having fun, men?" Roger stood as if waiting for a response. "No?" he declared suddenly. "Well then..." With a swift movement, he ejected the dish from the machine and held it over a waste basket. "No more fun." Then he dropped it unceremoniously.

Roger laughed strangely and returned to the machine, leaning oddly as if drunk. "So who's next?" He tapped the screen and the soft sound of inner gears churned to life. The arms lowered. The lens spun. "And here we go..." On the main screen another egg framed into view.

Somewhere along the dimming shore of Roger's remaining propriety, a fresh vision of his absurdity rose before him. Something like embarrassment crept into view. It peered from out of the darkness like a ray of light calling for him to stop. The thought manifested itself in a slight hesitation. While typing on the screen, he was caught up like a man snagged on a line. But as quickly as the thought appeared, it blinked away, as if engulfed in a great furnace.

Sweat dotted Roger's forehead as he stood staring contemptuously at the screen. Sperm inked in from the right, a fog of lines gyrating wildly. Roger clapped, "That's it, boys." Scores of sperm angled towards the egg, edging nearer, but as they did, they slowed to a lethargic crawl as if drained by an invisible force. Roger shook his head without emotion, saying nothing. The room felt suddenly very empty. There was no sound but the hum of the great machine. While standing there, a terrible weariness crept into his soul, and the accumulation of disappointment bore down upon him with all the weight of unrestrained grief. He cursed quietly and looked as if he could weep.

Roger rubbed his neck and sighed and looked back at the screen. Among the hovering constellation of frozen tendrils, pressing forward like a soul dislodged from the grave, a single sperm, fully animate and vivacious, bounced along the arc of the ovum. Angling inward, its head

battered against the egg, tail flailing wildly. Roger's hands dropped and he stepped forward, his face a fulfillment of wonder. Soundlessly the lone sperm continued to gyrate, burrowing deeper into the small gamete, until at last, in a flash of beauty where mystery is wed to sight, and life's essence confounds imagination, with the inscrutable bearing witness to love and joy, a boy was formed before Roger's unblinking eyes.

He stood breathless and confused, reality threatening to uncouple. When by degrees the world reformulated back into focus, he approached the machine, weak and shaking, staring down through the smooth glass at the unthinkable. A pale blue light shone around the circular dish, the zygote a tiny speck barely visible to his searching eyes.

"How can this be?" he whispered in complete bewilderment. "How..."

He straightened and looked behind him, grabbing the back of his head. "You've got to be kidding me. How..." He looked at it again and then rushed to the touchscreen, typing frantically. The robotic arms retracted, drawing together and lifting in one smooth movement. He reached for the dish and stopped, unsure how to best hold it. "How can this-" He reached and straightened again, working his mouth with his hand. "This can't be happening," he heard himself say.

He stopped. His words gave him fresh pause, striking a rational chord within him. Casting a searching look, he reflected, frozen in place, and then he refocused on the dish, sobriety very nearly regained.

"How can it be?" he asked in a very different tone, now reexamining his surroundings. For a brief moment, Roger felt sure that the whole thing had been set up, and that if he looked hard enough, he would see others hiding in the room, or standing outside, waiting to exclaim that they had gotten him, having pulled off their practical joke. But when he replayed his steps, and stood listening in the utter silence, knowing with perfect certainty that the events could not have been staged, he dismissed the notion and returned to the glowing dish.

He stood over the zygote with an imponderable expression. Then he said something to himself and reached for the container. Holding it before him he looked more closely, turning it slowly, the life a mere dot in his palm. He chuckled dismissively and lowered the dish and looked again, bringing it right before his eyes. "There's no way. Not like this." He looked around in search of someone and then laughed strangely. He was sweating. "What is this? Huh?" he asked darkly.

He walked briskly with the dish across the room to a microscope and prepared the heating stage and positioned it. He leaned, peering through the lens at a world both small and extraordinary, the edges of the fragile life focusing and blurring as he adjusted the distance. With the sleeve of his shirt, Roger wiped sweat from his brow and peered again, clearing his throat. He flipped on a nearby monitor. The zygote flicked into view, bright and clear, real-time data scrolling in a side window. The result was unmistakable. A Y-bearing sperm had fertilized an egg.

As time seemed to stall, grinding to an eternal now, various courses of action played in Roger's mind like images flashing in quick succession; and as he kept staring at the screen—petrified by the realization that he just witnessed the incalculable—an intruding thought kept burning in his mind. It was a thought born out of a feeling that something was toying with him, or dangling yet another anomaly from a stick, as if to tease or mock, like a man presenting a farcical gift designed to embarrass; or perhaps it was a deep sense of pride arising from the efforts of a lifetime's work still waiting to blossom; or none of these, but only a strange conflagration of madness and arrogance caught in the momentary tumult of an unhinged mind, where the light is chased away by the darkness and tucked into a latched box. Whatever it might have been, Roger couldn't help but see the newly formed cell as an affront, as if nature itself could be heard laughing in the shadows, lifting a stiff middle finger in his face.

Roger's countenance hardened as he prodded the zygote with the tip of a pipette, shifting it in its watery world against the holding. “No,” he muttered, a fresh bead of sweat rolling down his neck. “I'm not playing your fucking game.”

He blinked and squinted and muttered. As Dr. Larsen held it in place and pushed, the side of the cell bent inward like a balloon pressed by a finger. He watched, repeating the motion, the outer rim springing back into form each time—until at last, with a sudden stab, the instrument drove through, dividing life like a small bubble bleeding granulated air.

As soon as Roger withdrew his hand and could see what he had done, a terrible sensation like nausea coursed through him. In that moment, he suddenly felt as if he had been shaken from a dream; the fog and dizziness had ceased, but his hands were still trembling. He

stood and craned to make sure no one had entered the room. No one had. Then he shuddered and shook his arms as if in search of feeling.

“Ok... Ok...” he repeated softly, if not reassuringly.

His attention returned to the microscope and the image on the screen. He froze as a shot of terror suddenly seized him. The real-time data scrolling in the bottom right window reminded Dr. Larsen that the moment of fertilization had been recorded. He spun toward the hulking machine, knowing that it knew. Roger ran to it and searched it like a frenzied child, trying to think how the data could be erased. He eyed the rubber lines snaking from its depths and he circled all around it, touching the steel casing, knowing that any tampering would leave evidence. He swore and whimpered.

“How could I be so stupid?” he said as if enduring a tremendous pain. “Think, Roger,” he said with clenched fists. “Think, dammit.”

The sudden sound of his phone ringing startled him. With ragged breaths he pulled it out, fearing what he would see. It was Jamison. Roger held the phone with a terrified look unsure what to do. He cast wildly about thinking to flee but composed himself. The phone kept ringing. Then it stopped. He couldn't imagine why Jamison would be calling at two in the morning, but he couldn't imagine that it was a coincidence either.

Roger looked about the room, and at the machine, and then at the main screen. A green light shone above it, and he couldn't remember if it had always been there or if it was new. He noticed that another green light was shining on the upper lip of the imaging device. He wheeled and looked. Above one of the doors another light signaled green.

“Oh...” he breathed, realizing that as soon as the egg had been successfully fertilized it triggered an alert. *Of course, it would*, he thought. *Of course, it would.*

“You've got to think, Roger.”

His phone made a small chiming sound. He looked. A new voicemail. Uncertainty gave way to resolve and Roger lifted the phone to his ear: “Roger, I need you to call me right away. I don't know what's going on, but I just received notification of a successful cortical reaction at the lab... XY chromosome... It shows you logged in. As you can imagine, I'm freaking out over here... Ok... As soon as you get this give me a call. I'm heading down now... Alright?... Call me.”

Jamison's voice brimmed with concern. It also sounded like he was shuffling through drawers, dressing hurriedly.



Roger looked at the clock and the time when Jamison had called. Only minutes earlier. Fumbling with nerves, Roger dropped his phone when he tried returning it to his pocket. It fell clattering on the ground. When he picked it up it rang again, vibrating in his hand, with Jamison's number flashing on the screen. Roger's world spun in doubt and the passing seconds felt like eons of time draining away as if each precious moment was being squandered.

With every thought of what he should do, a chorus of objections immediately confronted him. His first urge was to simply flee. Then he wondered if he could play the whole event off as a glitch in the system. He imagined what he would say when Jamison walked into the room, with him working quietly behind a telescope, acting surprised at the supposed concern; but when the absurdity of this fell obvious in his mind, and he realized that his shirt was wet with sweat, and that he would never be able to calm his breathing, he knew it couldn't possibly work. For a brief moment, he entertained the absurd notion of faking illness, with him lying on the floor unconscious, but when he couldn't think how that could be spun into an explanation of the recording, he faltered, turning and staring about the room, hoping to find a clue. He imagined smashing the machine with something hard and then playing ill, but that immediately struck him as ridiculous.

“Dammit!” he said, pacing with trembling hands.

He glanced again at the time. Seconds hammered on. He felt sick.

Roger tried to make a mental note of everything he brought into the building. Everywhere he had been. *Nothing*, he thought, except the things in his office. He thought about the things he had touched but knew that covering his tracks would prove futile.

The phone rang again. He cautiously muted it being careful not to answer. Then he stood pensively in the middle of the room. A dark, tormenting thought was rising in him—the thought that he had fallen into madness and was unable at that moment either to reason or to protect himself, and that he was perhaps not doing at all what he should have been doing.

The growing indecision suddenly surged into raw panic forcibly driving him toward a simple course of action. He ran for the door, thinking only to flee—but when he thought of the dish still lying on the microscope, and the small dot of perished life crying out for justice, recounting the night's true events, he ran back and replaced the lid and crammed the container into the front pocket of his pants. Then he

burst out the door into the hallway, running awkwardly, his dress shoes clacking against the smooth floor. Ceiling lights streaked in the frenzied dash flashing like police snapshots. He came to a turn, still running wildly, and he slipped and fell sprawling on his side, crying out pitifully, and then scrambled to his feet, pressing forward with a flailing limp.

Fumbling with the lock, he opened his office door and rummaged frantically, unsure what to take. He grabbed only his briefcase and laptop and the keys to his company car. He stood panting trying to catch his breath. His elbow ached. A sound clanked in the hallway outside, or so he thought, and he stood frozen, trying to listen over the pounding of his heart. Breaths came hard and loud. Something like terror coursed through him, and for a moment he contemplated throwing himself out the high window. He warily edged toward the door and sheepishly peered down the hallway. Empty. He stood waiting half expecting a band of soldiers to round the corner with rifles and masks. Nothing came. Only laminate tiles and walls and a lone painting of an ocean vista.

He was running again down the hall past the labs to the elevators, his briefcase bouncing and keys jingling. When he came to another bend, he slowed to a stop and glanced around the corner with quick stabs. No one. He ran on.

The elevators were three silver doors set in marble enclosures, the calling buttons smooth circles set in gold plating. Above each hung a brass lamp shaped like a flower box, the soft bulbs lighting the ceiling above. A small wooden bench and potted plant rested against the rear wall near a stairwell. Roger panted half hunched while weighing his next move. With his head turned towards the stairwell door, the digital number ticked higher on the far elevator. A moment later, as the weight of the elevator could be heard settling in place, the bell tolled announcing its arrival.

Roger jolted in surprise. He considered sprinting for the stairwell but knew he didn't have time. All he could manage was to turn slightly as if to merely delay the inevitable. The doors opened and Roger turned trying to look normal. The old security guard stepped out slowly, hesitation in his eyes.

"Well... Karl," Roger fumbled with a broken smile, glancing at the dangling identification badge. The old man didn't move nor speak with one hand extended slightly, fingers splayed, as if imploring reality to slow. Roger stood sweating profusely.

“Is there something wrong, Dr. Larsen?”

“No... Why no... What's the problem?”

“I just need you to come with me, alright?”

“Why?”

“There's no problem, I just need you to come with me. Some things have to be apparently sorted out. That's all.”

“Well, what kind of problem? I'm not aware of a problem,” Roger said, shifting slightly toward the stairwell.

The old man looked worried, “Now Dr. Larsen, I'm asking you to please come with me.”

“It's late, Karl, and I was just leaving for home. Whatever it is can wait until morning, I'm sure,” Roger said, backing away.

“Please, Dr. Larsen, you need to come with me,” Karl said, matching his step, beads of sweat glistening on his ebony forehead.

“It's Jamison, isn't it? He called, right? Look, I just spoke with him and said that I would meet him outside. It's the usual science stuff. No big deal. Just a glitch in the system.”

The old man stared and swallowed. Roger kept smiling oddly.

The phone clipped to the guard's belt started playing an old fifties song. Karl slowly tilted his head, daring to regard it. Roger shook his head, “Don't answer that phone, Karl.”

“Dr. Larsen, I don't want any trouble, you see.”

The song continued to play.

“Don't answer that phone.”

“Dr. Larsen, please,” the old man said, backing toward the elevator, reaching for the phone.

Roger lunged and their bodies collided and pressed up against the space between the elevators, a tangle of struggling limbs. Roger could feel the warmth of the man's breath heaving against him. The sweat from his face. They struggled along the wall and nearly fell but righted and spun away, tilting precariously. The music stopped leaving only the sound of men grunting. Each had a hand on the others' face, fingers digging, Roger's head turned upward and to the side. Roger arced his back and dug his feet and drove forward, slamming the security guard into the metal push bar on the stairwell door, jarring it open. The old man cried out. Roger surged again finding leverage. He could see the phone as he pushed. He reached but found that they were suddenly careening, feet peddling in the air, the steps descending downward. Roger fell hard against flesh and bone and slid to a stop on the lower

landing with the old man's body beneath him. His wrist sang with pain as he rolled to his hands and knees trying to orient himself. Then he stood horrified at the sight next to him. The man's body lay crumpled, a marionette cut of strings, arm bent at an odd angle.

"Oh, God..." Roger said, his voice barely audible. "Oh..."

Dark blood was spreading like syrup from behind the old man's head.

"Karl? Karl... You alright?" The man's eyes were half shut, staring at nothing. Roger's legs went limp and he fell in a heap. He lurched and vomited on the concrete. Rising dazed and lost he stumbled up the stairs and vomited again, dropping to one knee. In the hallway above, he fumbled clumsily and grabbed his briefcase and thought to use the elevator, but thought differently. He eyed the stairwell uneasily and cursed, rubbing his face. "What is happening?"

He took the steps passing the body of the old man. The blood had spread and was dripping down the first step of the lower flight. Roger descended pale and cold until at last he came to the first floor. He cracked the door and peered out. He listened and wiped sweat from his eyes. Limping with his briefcase in hand, he walked briskly through a vestibule and across an open lobby and through a door, climbing several flights of steps into the gloom of the parking garage where the darkness felt comforting and welcome.

He ran and unlocked his car and set his briefcase in the passenger seat and sat watching. Sloped concrete bathed in pools of white light. Faded arrows painted on the ground. Dim stillness. He looked in the rearview mirror. The lights of the neighboring buildings visible through the concrete gap.

Roger blinked and coughed dryly. "Think. You have to think."

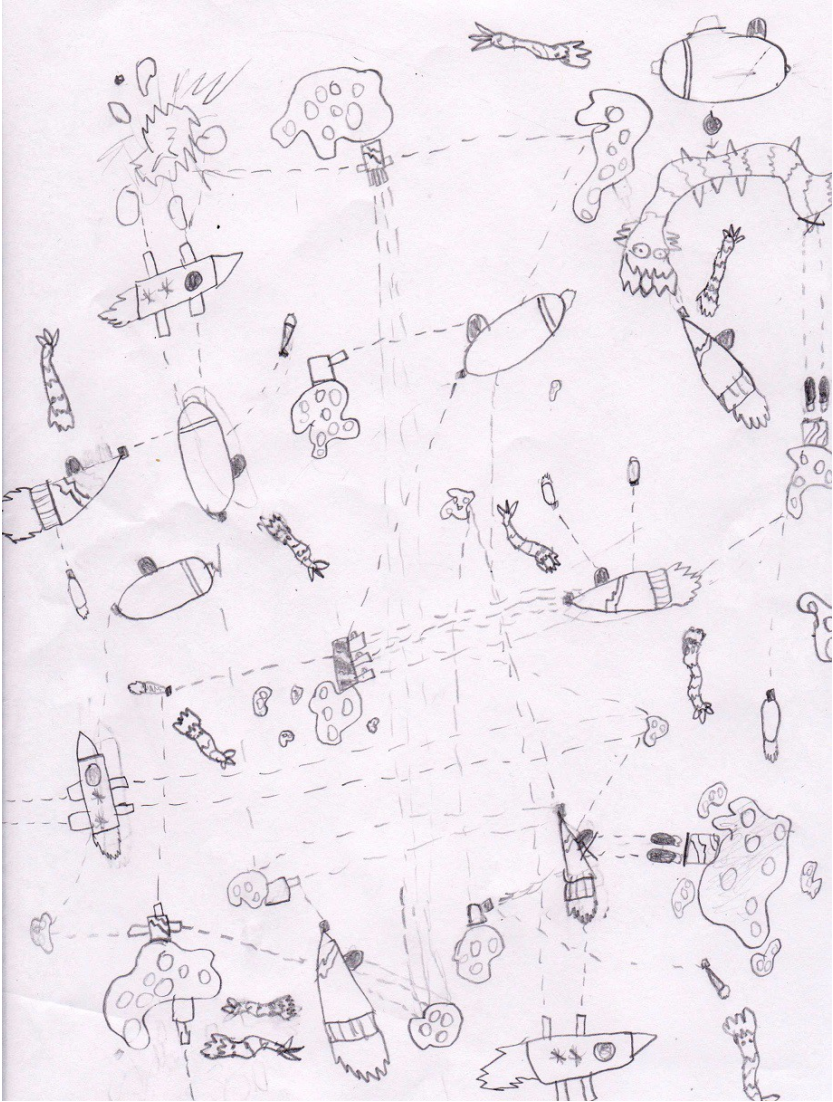
He exited his car and rushed to the ledge, craning to the east, trying to see the entrance of the main lobby. No police cars. Only two cabs and the frames of nameless pedestrians. He peered down. A couple walking under the red light of a Chipotle sign. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the sound of someone laughing loudly. A name was shouted. Not his. Up the street traffic lamps shone green. The faint sound of a car honking in the distance.

Roger returned to his car and turned the ignition and pulled away, trying to drive normally. No garage attendant at the late hour. Trembling he reached and entered a code on a stained terminal. The

gate lifted. He turned left and drove panting, glancing wild-eyed in the rearview mirror.

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While waiting for Mom to wake up, I quietly drew a picture of a battle in outer space. There were circle ships fighting triangle ones, and asteroids, and space stations fully armed with lasers pointing and shooting in all directions, and special fighters carrying large bombs. Bullets were shown by drawing small dashes moving across the page. Sometimes they ricocheted or hit pulse shields. Some of the ships were goners though, exploding into pieces. It depended on how big the laser shots were. Sometime while drawing I heard the shower running, which let me know Mom was awake.



I checked my ants and recorded their feelings and went out to the kitchen and said “Good morning” to Mom. She was wearing a white robe with a purple towel on her head.

“Good morning,” she said, looking under the stove for a pan. “You sleep well?”

“Yeah.”

I sat at the kitchen table with my notebook watching a cartoon while Mom made breakfast. She took out a carton of eggs from the fridge, lifted one out and hit it on the side of the pan, cracking it and pouring out the insides. The insides were clear and yellow. Not red. And very smooth. She threw the shell in the trash. Then she cracked another one open, pouring it into the hot pan with a lifting motion. After that she washed her hands.

“What you watching?” she asked.

“Bear Time.”

She set the plate with the eggs before me. I looked at them. Then I ate them with some toast and milk. Mom drank a smoothie.

“I need you to pick up your room, alright?”

“Ok.”

“And take a shower first thing.”

I made a face.

“We're planning on going over to Grandma's and Grandpa's house for lunch, and so we need to be ready.”

I brightened and said, “So today?”

Mom nodded.

I did a little dance in my chair. Mom bobbed her head like she was dancing along. The real dancing wouldn't happen until later though during cleaning time. That's when Mom turns up the stereo really loud and plays Buble' or Mumford and Sons. Sometimes she plays disco music too.

Grandma and Grandpa live a long way out in the country in a white two-story building with a big porch and swing, where corn fields stretch out for as far as the eye can see. Sometimes in late summer it looks like a green ocean. In the winter it definitely doesn't. Grandpa also has a tractor. But he doesn't ride it much anymore.

When we finally arrived at their house, Durango and Mudbath leapt off the front porch and ran toward us, barking the whole way while we drove up the gravel driveway. The way they bark says, “We’re glad you’re here, whoever you are, but be sure to remember who is in charge!” Durango is a snorting pug who can’t breathe very well, and Mudbath is a big shaggy dog that always looks dirty. He farts a lot too. Grandma threatens that she is going to get rid of him, though she never does. She just acts like she hates him, even though I think she really loves him. Grandpa never seems to notice either of them.

Mom always knocks on the door and enters, saying, “Hello. Is anyone home?” even though she knows they’re there. When we entered, Grandma was standing in the kitchen wearing an apron with a wooden spoon in hand, smiling at the sight of us. The air was full of the smell of meat and green beans. She put her arms out wide, and I ran over and gave her a hug. She held me tight while wagging back and forth. Then when she finally let go of me, she gave my mom a hug. The sound of Grandpa’s voice echoed from the living room, “I hear some voices out there, Grandma. Did some folks wander into the house?” I ran to the living room and said, “It’s us!”

He was sitting in his recliner tilted back with his feet up. He pulled the lever letting down the foot rest and sat more forward, groaning, “It’s us’ is perfect.” Then he gave me a hug. Mom poked her head from the kitchen and said, “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, Sweetheart. Life treating you well?”

“It is.”

“Good, good.”

Grandpa was watching TV on his new 65” flat screen. Even though his old one was surrounded by a *huge* wooden box thingy with ornate carvings all over it, it had a *really* small screen—a screen which was also really janky since everything looked fuzzy. Grandpa said it was as old as dirt, but it worked well enough. He also said that all the newfangled TVs were confusing, which made him feel prehistoric, which isn’t as old as dirt, but is still pretty old.

The show he was watching was paused with the image of a man sweating in a small metal room with a panicky expression. His face was lit by a red light. There were a lot of pipes on the walls too.

“What are you watching?”

“Oh, a documentary,” he said, finding a comfortable angle again.

“What’s it about?”



“The USS Tang,” he said, slowly and with a deeper voice, like the word should be said with reverence.

“What's that?”

“That, Adam, is one of America's greatest submarines on the bottom of the ocean, mortally wounded by one of its own torpedoes.”

“Oh... That doesn't sound good.”

“Not at all.”

“How did it happen?”

“A strange twist of fate, if there ever was one,” he said, pausing only briefly before adding, “Want to hear?”

“Yes.”

I was still standing, and he motioned toward the couch for me to sit. I moved Grandma's afghan to the side and sat and waited. “In the second great World War,” he began, sounding serious, “the USS Tang served mightily as one of America's most deadly submarines, sinking over thirty enemy ships by stealth of water. A deadly assassin if there ever was one. Now in its fifth war patrol, all alone deep in Japanese-occupied waters, it came across a string of enemy ships. Torpedo after torpedo was fired, and ship after ship fell. They were devastatingly accurate. That is until they fired their 24<sup>th</sup> and last torpedo—a mark 18 electric torpedo.”

Grandpa paused and cleared his throat. He started again, “Now here's the thing. This last torpedo did something unexpected.” Using his hand to make a circular motion, he said, “It broached in the water and curved to the left ultimately making a circular run.

“What do you mean?”

“It went in a big circle and came back around. Right for them. Now as you can imagine, they tried to dodge it, pressing the engines to max power, hoping to fishtail out of the way. But they couldn't dodge it, and the torpedo struck the rear of the ship inflicting massive damage. Mortal damage.”

I watched him grow more serious. He sat up in his chair. “Now what happens to a ship with a big hole in it?”

“It sinks.”

“That's right. And where does it sink?”

I thought for a moment, “To the bottom of the ocean?”

He made a deep rumbling sound. “It sank down 180 feet. Do you know how deep 180 feet is?”

“In meters?”

“No.”

“Oh, ok. Then how deep?”

“It's deep. Very deep for humans. But here's the thing. Not so deep that you die instantly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” he said, weighing his words, “the further you go down into the water the heavier it gets. Around a few hundred feet it will begin to crush you. At deeper depths, at what's called crushing depths, it will crush you instantly, like a soda can getting stomped.”

“But how?”

“It's like it's all stacked up on you. Like cars made of water being set on your body.”

“That's weird.”

“And scary?”

I nodded.

“And so when the men aboard the USS Tang dropped to the bottom of the ocean floor, they were deep under water, in full darkness, a skyscraper of water above them.”

“Did they have scuba gear?”

“They didn't.”

“But why not? Isn't that like a parachute for water?”

Grandpa's eyebrows tightened, “Takes up too much space. And most of the time when a sub goes down it's a helpless situation. So much so that scuba gear wouldn't help.”

“So how did they get out? Was there something like an inflatable raft, but like a big bubble that would blow up when you pull a cord, and everyone could climb inside and rise to the surface?”

Grandpa's eyebrows lifted, “No, I'm afraid they didn't have anything like that. The sad truth is that 78 good men perished in the belly of that submarine that day.”

“But how?”

“Some died in the explosion. Others drowned. Or ran out of air.”

“So the water came in on them?”

“For some, yes.”

“All because of their own torpedo?”

Grandpa breathed, “Sadly, yes.”

I stopped, and I thought about the humans inside the ship's belly, and whether anyone on the outside knew they were in there, wanting to live, and whether anyone could hear them being hurt. Crying out. While

banging against the walls. I thought about the hole, and how they wanted to come out alive and not dead, and how their mothers must have felt, and how some probably floated out of the hole in parts. And how others if they knew about them would try to help them any way they could. Because they valued them so much. Because they were valuable. Each and every one of them. Even those who were messed up and would never be normal again. It all seemed so sad. And tragic. And made me feel uneasy. Like life should never be that way.

“So did anyone get out?” I asked, feeling like water was stacked on my heart.

“Actually,” Grandpa began, his face brightening, “some did manage to escape and live.”

“How?”

“Well, that's where we're at in the documentary. There are some men in the forward torpedo room preparing to exit. They're talking and planning now. They're going to try to escape from the deep. Would you like me to press play?”

I nodded excitedly and jumped back on the couch facing the TV. Grandpa started the program and we watched what happened next.

When it was time to eat lunch, we didn't talk about how the men escaped, or the powerful depth charges, or the Momsen lungs, or how they had to swim in the freezing water for eight hours. Grandpa said the women-folk might not find it good dinner conversation. He did talk about how the hot summer was hard on the crops, and how Mr. Stanley down the road didn't bring in a good yield of corn. Mom also talked about real estate and how the market was slow and how this one realtor nabbed a client out from underneath her and closed on the house she had worked so hard to sell. She said she was perturbed about it. I could tell she was. She often tells Grandma and Grandpa about her problems. They always seem to know just what to say to her to make her feel better.

Right after lunch, while Grandpa was in the bathroom, and Grandma and Mom were cleaning the dishes, talking about life, I received a text from Uncle Brock. It said,

Dr. Richards is a go! I repeat. Dr. Richards is a go! Interview Wednesday. Her office. Better ask your Mom. Tell her I'll take you ;-)

I asked Mom, and she said I could.

"What are you interviewing her about?" Mom asked, drying a plate with a towel.

"Biology stuff. She's a very smart biologist."

"Oh. Well good. How did you find out about her?"

"Uncle Brock helped me. We looked on the internet."

She nodded slowly with a look, "Where's she at?"

"I think it was the University of Illinois. Or something like that."

"So he wants to take you?"

I nodded.

"What's her name?"

I looked at my phone, "Dr. Richards. It was Lisa Richards. But I don't remember her middle initial."

"Can I see the text?"

I handed Mom the phone, "Sure."

"Tell her I'll take you," Mom repeated, looking at Grandma. "With a little wink at the end."

Mom hit the home button and then started tapping the screen. "What are you looking for?" I asked. She didn't say anything. After a moment she stopped and looked like she found something humorous. She held the phone for Grandma to see. "Oh, dear, she is *very* smart looking," Grandma said, looking through the bottom of her glasses. Mom cracked up a little, and I asked what was so funny, and she just said that it was nothing, even though I knew it wasn't nothing.

Mom and I didn't stay too long at Grandma and Grandpa's house. After lunch, and after Grandpa took a short nap, which seems to hit him like a powerful sleeping spell cast by a mighty wizard, we played a game of Aggravation. Grandma didn't roll a one or a six for eight turns. Which is super unlucky. She just chuckled each time she rolled though like it didn't bother her in the least. Grandpa would try to talk me into hitting Mom's pieces instead of his, but Grandma shooed at him like she was swatting at a fly, which made him laugh with a deep, bouncing laugh.

Mom and I drove back home in the evening. I ate a bowl of cereal and thought about what to do. Since I only had a few days to prepare for the interview, and since the video about abortion made me realize that I had a lot to meditate on, especially since I didn't want to be a dork nugget with dumb questions, I spent Sunday evening searching Google for answers.

## Chapter Nine



The moon hung pale in the night sky as Roger drove through the city, half-mad and senseless, the billboards and street lamps flaring strangely to his eyes. He kept blinking uncontrollably and sweating and checking his rearview mirror. While he knew he could not return home, he instinctively angled that direction, but with each familiar turn towards his apartment, something like paranoia overcame him, and he would cast off along another road.

He came to rest at a stoplight and sat staring forward, afraid to look at the random night wanderers and idling cars. Three figures passed right in front of him, crossing silently by, and Roger felt sure they glanced suspiciously, casting knowing looks his way. The light turned green and Roger followed the shoreline of the Hudson, desperately trying to come up with a plan. In the distance he could barely make out the top of his apartment building, and he again debated whether to go home to pack, but recognized the foolishness of it, knowing the police would look there first. As he kept driving, the thought of the authorities hunting him felt strangely impossible, foreign beyond reckoning, even dream-like in its quality.

Jamison called only once more. After that nothing. Roger imagined him stumbling upon Karl's body, gasping in horror, eyes wide behind his gold spectacles. Then he wondered if he would find him in the stairwell at all.

Dr. Larsen sloped down into the mouth of Lincoln tunnel trailing a bus in the right lane. The first cylindrical camera mounted on the wall he passed made him wonder how many others had recorded him already. He tried to recall if the laboratory had any. In his mind's eye, he could picture the small black domes on the ceiling but wondered if it was a false memory. He felt confident some were scattered throughout the hallways, and he was nearly certain the lobby had a few. For a moment he envisioned footage of his struggle with the security guard.

Their flailing, awkward fighting. Eventual banging into the stairwell door. Was there a camera in the stairwell?

Roger drove for close to an hour and pulled into a Walmart parking lot, edging along the outer rim before settling on the far side near an embankment of hedges. He glanced at the clock. 3:14 AM. He searched for police cars. Only a smattering of vehicles in dim repose. Above the store entrance, positioned at intervals along the roofing, he could see the faint outline of cameras. He felt safe where he sat.

Roger opened a map on his phone and pinched the screen, expanding the image to show greater distances. He eyed Indiana then Missouri. Not satisfied he shifted further west to Texas and then New Mexico. He sighed and surveyed his surroundings again. A large woman wearing tight shorts was waddling out the front entrance pushing a cart. He set the destination for central New Mexico. A blue line veined across the country. Nearly thirty hours. He gazed off at a distant overpass silently regarding the fading pinpoints of red taillights. His attention returned to the front entrance. Roger weighed his options. For now he felt an overwhelming urge to run, to simply get as far away as possible. He knew he would have to face his accusers eventually, but with the guilt still burning in his mind like a glowing ember, no other action seemed reasonable. More time was needed for self-justification to adequately craft an explanation.

He tapped the start navigation button and propped the phone on a rubber tray near the gear shift and waited for the familiar voice. Remembering the petri dish still tucked away in his pocket, he shifted in his seat, trying to pull it out from the awkward angle. He could tell immediately that the lid had been damaged and that it was not fully seated. Straightening his back in a panic, he slid the dish out cautiously and turned the overhead light on and studied it. A crack ran along the lid fingering to a jagged break with several small pieces of plastic strewn inside. Roger searched frantically for signs of the zygote, holding it near the dome light. He looked through the bottom, and from the top, and then carefully removed the lid. In the poor light, he couldn't find it.

He looked down despairingly at his front pocket, imagining the tiny thing lost among the fibers near the seam. Unbuckling his pants, Roger slid his khakis off in the cramped space, bending and turning as inconspicuously as possible. He studied the opening to the pocket and then reached in slowly, pulling gingerly at the white fabric until it was

fully inside out. He searched meticulously like a surgeon bent over a patient, the cloth folds presenting monumental challenges. He found nothing. He squinted frightfully at his thumb and forefinger and then returned to his pants, spending the better part of twenty minutes probing before sobbing bitterly. With shuddering breaths he gathered himself and wiped his eyes and slid on his pants and left, driving along Interstate 95 for 78 west through Pennsylvania.

Orange peels of gray-stained firmament formed in the east lighting distant trees on vast stretches of sloping earth. Roger exited the lonely interstate and curved to a stop light. In the haze of early morning, he could see a Days Inn sign up the road. Further beyond a Bob Evans and a gas station.

Roger rolled up to a pump at the filling station and watched a stout man with tattoos on his calf unload crates from a semi. Two gas stalls down, a stringy-haired teenager stood leaning against his impala, phone in hand, a young girl sitting in the passenger seat slouching with her feet on the dash.

The terminal outside Roger's window detailed payment options. He opened his wallet and thumbed through his cash. Sixty-two dollars. He clicked his thumbnail against the edge of his debit card and looked at the main building, noting an ATM sign in one of the windows near a Red Box. Roger sat and then exited and fueled his car, eyes averted. He paid the attendant and walked to the back of the store near an aisle full of chips and candy. He eyed the ATM uncertainly and then pulled out his phone and Googled how much a person could withdraw at one time. Like a man resigned to fate, he inserted his card and tapped the keypad and slid the five hundred dollars into his wallet, knowing that his pursuers would be tipped.

In the car outside, Roger sat looking at the map on his phone. He charted a more northerly course through Pennsylvania toward Cleveland and then west.

He drove all through the morning and day, stopping only once to eat at a food stop nestled in some rural cleft at the end of the world where vast expanses of corn peeled off to infinity. In the drive-through, he sat gazing out across the lonely canvas. An old barn, broken and red, a speck far beyond. He ate his cold burger without pleasure and pressed westward through Indiana into Illinois, angling



south to the edge of Missouri. Along open fields of untamed grass, the sun dipped into the earth igniting the underbelly of clouds like heated metal.

That night Roger slept uneasily in his car beside two empty semi-trailers on a gravel pull-off several miles from the interstate. The occasional car passing along the dark county road cast twisting patterns of light through the trees causing Roger to rear up from his reclined position and peer uncertainly. In the morning, he woke confused from a dream he could not recall and sat staring at the unfamiliar surroundings. He tilted his watch and rubbed his face and slowly committed to starting the car. He looked like a man weighing the sign of some portentous omen.

He drove across what seemed endless stretches of green nothingness. The dull sights lulled his thoughts into an interminable dialogue between doubtful ideas. He thought of contacting someone but couldn't think of who or what to say. Then he wondered about the donor who fertilized the egg, and whether the man was unique, or if the event was purely the product of chance. He tried to think how he could reach the donor but knew it would be impossible. These thoughts and few others were interrupted only by the disquieting realization that he had no idea what he was going to do, nor where he was really going.

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What is abortion?

What does fetus mean?

How old is the fetus when it gets tiny feet?

What is manual vacuum aspiration?

What other animals abort their own babies?

Why do birds push baby chicks from their nests?

Why do mother bears eat their cubs?

Can you blame animals for doing bad things?

Are humans animals?

Why do humans do bad things?

What is evolutionary psychology?

Where does badness come from?

What is depravity?

What is the Council of Dort?

What are Dort's third and fourth heads of doctrine?

What is sin?  
 What is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?  
 What is ethics?  
 Where does morality come from?  
 Who is Plato?  
 Who is Socrates?  
 Is Socrates mortal?  
 Who is Kant?  
 Who is Nietzsche?  
 What is nihilism?  
 What is utilitarianism?  
 Should you push the fat man?  
 Why are the brakes on trolleys so bad?  
 Who is Peter Singer?  
 What is a moral non-naturalist?  
 Is a healthy monkey better than a broken baby?  
 What is self-consciousness?  
 What are animal rights?  
 Is eating a chicken murder? [BLOCKED]  
 Is eating a chicken bad?  
 What is salmonella?  
 How do we know how to do the right thing?  
 Who is Sam Harris?  
 Do Muslim women live in bags?  
 Do humans have free will?  
 Are there tumors all the way down?  
 If humans don't have free will what does it mean to be pro-choice?  
 Is abortion legal?  
 Who is Roe?  
 Who is Norma Leah McCorvey Nelson?  
 Why did Norma Leah McCorvey Nelson become pro-life?  
 Where do human rights come from?  
 Where can I read a Letter from Birmingham Jail?  
 Why were black people mistreated?  
 What was the Transatlantic slave trade?  
 Why was slavery legal?  
 Why did people think slavery was right?  
 Can a person be another person's property?  
 Are the laws of a nation always right?

What is a person?  
 What is the imago Dei?  
 Does God exist?  
 What is the transcendental argument?  
 Who is Cornelius Van Til?  
 What is the flying spaghetti monster?  
 Is the flying spaghetti monster a real creature?  
 Where can I read The Lord of Noncontradiction: An Argument for  
 God from Logic, *Philosophia Christi*?  
 How can someone super simple know if God exists?  
 Who is Jonathan Edwards?  
 Where can I read On Religious Affections?  
 Who are the Houssatunnuck Indians?  
 Who is Alvin Plantinga?  
 What is a properly basic belief?  
 What is warrant and proper function?  
 Where can I find Alvin Plantinga for dummies?  
 How many abortions have happened?  
 What is Planned Parenthood?  
 Who is Margaret Sanger?  
 How is abortion safe for the baby?  
 What is ectopic pregnancy?  
 What is rape? [BLOCKED]  
 What does the word rape mean? [BLOCKED]  
 What words have rape in them? [BLOCKED]  
 What does R A P E spell? [BLOCKED]  
 What is raped? [BLOCKED]  
 What is raping? [BLOCKED]  
 Is abortion safe for moms?  
 What is emotional damage?  
 Why do some women have abortion is freedom T-shirts?  
 What is bodily autonomy?  
 Do most people think abortion is ok?  
 What is truth?  
 Who is Pilate?  
 Why did Pilate wash his hands?  
 Who is Jesus Christ?

I was just getting ready to ask what Psalm 2 means, but Olivia texted me with a panicky message. She said that Celia went to Abigail's birthday party that afternoon, and that Molly and some of her friends were there as well, and that she thinks Molly must have said something to Abigail, since Celia is friends with her and she is friends with me, because none of the pictures on Abigail's Snapchat show Celia. Not one. I asked her if it could have just been an accident and Olivia said, "No way," and that I could sometimes be thick.

I said, "I dunno. Seems possible."

And she said, "Look at Ava's Instagram."

I looked. "What am I looking for?"

"What do you not see?"

"I don't know. I see a cake. And some presents. And some people."

"Adam. Seriously!!!"

"..."

"Celia is not in any of those pictures."

"Ok."

"This is serious. VERY serious."

"Ok."

"Getting a call from Samantha. Talk more soon."

Since girls can be super melodramatic, I made my own Wong-Baker pain scale (though not for pain but for looniness), which I know about because when I broke my wrist trying to ride my bike with no hands, the doctor in the ER showed me a bunch of pictures and asked me which I most felt like. The last one showed a red smiley face except that the smiley face was screaming with tons of tears. It had a 10 by it and said: "Unimaginable. Unspeakable." I said mine was a 7, which was "Very Intense," though if I moved my wrist it felt more like an 8. I suppose if someone really fat sat on my broken wrist, or shut the car door on it, it would have felt like a 10, but then it would have been unspeakably painful, so I don't how I could have told the doctor how bad it felt. Anyway, since girls sometimes get upset about what others are doing, or not doing, or what they imagine others are doing, or what they imagine others think they should be doing, which can get all very complicated, like with Abigail's birthday party, I try to figure out, like a detective, how serious the situation really is. Then I give it a number. Like on the scale. Which also has a picture. A 10 being someone who is shattering windows with a supersonic scream, which girls are really good at.

Since Olivia wasn't crying that made it immediately less than an 8. But since she all capped the word "VERY" that made it over a 4. And since there were already several people involved that added +3. So I figured the situation was at least a 7, which was pretty serious. And since Molly was involved it was probably more like an 8. An 8 is "Prepared to claw your eyes out."

Which was pretty much right. Because the next day at school, Celia and Molly yelled at each other during lunch. Celia told Molly she was being rude, and that her dad, who was very important, would tell the principal to kick Molly out of school. Molly crossed her arms and said, "Do your parents ever ask you to run away from home?" When Celia didn't know what to say, Molly acted like she threw a stick and said, "I just threw a stick. Now you should feel like you want to go get it," which made some people laugh, and which made Celia start crying.

Other than that though Monday was pretty boring.

## Chapter Ten



He jugged around Springfield just north of Dogwood Canyon to IUS-60 pressing westward. Late evening was coming on and dark clouds gathering in the north snuffed out the last rays of light. Roger pulled into a Phillips 66 and fueled as the rain began to fall. The air smelled like fresh earth. He reseated the nozzle and screwed on the gas cap and walked briskly through the growing wind to pay inside. A short, fat man with a round jovial face greeted him from behind a register. “Starting to come down,” the man said, looking out the window with childlike excitement. “Looks to be something for sure.”

Roger withdrew his wallet and pulled out two twenties and slid them across the glass enclosure, only thinly acknowledging the comment. He glanced behind him. They were the only two in the store.

“I dunno. I've just always liked storms. There's something about'em that makes me feel alive.” Roger watched him slowly work the change from the curved slots, then he regarded the small black camera fastened in the ceiling corner. “What about you?” the man asked.

Roger seemed not to hear.

“You like storms?” the man said again with the same enthusiasm.

Roger shifted, “I'm sorry, what?”

“Do you like storms?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah, it's hard not to,” the attendant said, fingering the bills. “Though my aunt is terrified of them. Won't ever go near a window during one. Not no matter what.”

A flash of lightning punctured the night unleashing a rolling concussion of thunder. The attendant whooped and turned to look out the window. Roger followed his gaze outside where the rain was coming down in sheets. Emerging from the gloom, a police car crept into view, rolling slowly into the light of the shelter. It passed near Roger's car and came to a stop. It sat motionless and then turned slightly, wheeling around gradually to the rear of the vehicle, resting at a slight angle.

Roger froze, staring.

The fat man was smiling heartily with an extended hand, "Here's your change."

"Where's your restroom?" Roger asked with sudden intensity.

The man pointed, "Oh, it's back there."

"Does it have a window?"

"A window?"

"Yes."

"Um, no. I don't think so."

"Is there a backdoor?"

"A backdoor?"

"Yes, backdoor."

The fat man looked confused and mumbled. Outside the police car was sitting in the same spot. Headlights on. Windshield wipers going.

Roger drew closer, eyes feral, "Where's your backdoor?"

The attendant pointed nervously to his right at a door to the side of the counter. Roger bolted through the employee entrance into a small hallway flanked by two cubicle offices. He ran past a yellow mop bucket and exited a metal door into howling rain and scrambled across a small asphalt lot up a slope and through the backyard of a rundown house, struggling awkwardly through evergreen bushes entangled in a chain link fence. Lightning broke the darkness momentarily orienting his way. As he climbed the fence, his foot slipped and his pants caught and he fell into weeds and mud. From somewhere nearby, a dog on a chain started barking wildly. Roger rose and ran, slipping in the blustery confusion of night and storm, passing through another backyard where a floodlight flicked on revealing a lawn littered with riding toys. Running wildly, he came to a side street and sprinted in front of a passing car and ran up a narrow alley lined with trashcans, emerging near the rear of a General Dollar store. He crouched along the side of the building, gasping for air, peering out across the parking lot. The cold rain blew against his face, and he frantically wiped at his hair and eyes, trying to better see. Four cars were parked at intervals in the lot. Roger peered behind him. In the deep murk, his eyes seemed to catch the sight of figures crouching, but he knew it was not so. Thunder peeled overhead shaking ground and heart and Roger returned to surveying the parking lot.

A lone woman leaving the store was walking with a bag and umbrella in hand. She was bent and elderly. Roger watched her near a

Toyota and fumble through her purse for a pair of keys. He looked about anxiously and then ran toward her, feet splashing with each step. When he neared, she looked up frightfully and made a startled sound and did not move. "I'm sorry," he said, grabbing the keys. She backed away without protest, her small wrinkled face etched with alarm. Roger slammed the car door shut, fumbled for the right key, then inserted it in the ignition. She stood frozen in the rain as he peeled away, speeding up the street and running a stop sign before turning down a residential lane. The small engine screamed as Roger pushed its limits and nearly lost control in a flooded dip in the road.

In the thick gloom of the pelting rain, the streetlamps drew out the night in meager patches of solemn light, and the headlights of Roger's car shone weakly on the road, illuminating only a ghostly fraction of the unfamiliar world. Something on Roger's head burned and he felt nauseous and his soaked clothes clung wet and cold. As he drove in one general direction for several miles, no longer steering off side streets, the sight of homes became more and more infrequent, until at last Roger found himself traveling on a lonely highway in dark obscurity. He dared not stop for fear of being trapped by roadblocks.

Picking his way along storm-shrouded county roads, Roger took a southwesterly path through the rolling plains of Oklahoma toward Texas. Near midnight he slowed and rolled to a stop along a gravel turnoff densely covered with trees and brush. He sat listening for a moment, looking over his shoulder into the consuming darkness behind him. Then he looked forward into the same. Roger searched for the switch to the overhead light and flipped it on, studying his forehead in the rearview mirror. Blood covered the left side of his face. It was streaked with water and running onto his neck and collar. An angry cut ran above his left eye to the edge of his hairline near his ear. Roger touched it gingerly, moving the mirror to better see. Probably from the evergreen, he thought. Or while falling over the chain link fence.

Roger regarded his mud-stained pants and the single tear near his knee. He was still very wet. He looked at the passenger seat and the floor and then at the backseat and the space behind his seat. Only a few wrappers, an old plastic window scraper, a coffee maker box, and a



stained throw pillow. Nothing of interest in the glove box. He noted the half tank of gas and lamented silently the absence of his laptop.

Roger drove for several more hours along quiet stretches of highway seeing nothing of concern. Only once did he make out what he thought to be a police car traveling in the opposite direction. He refueled at a remote gas station north of Dallas, standing oddly erect and staring uncertainly at a blinking light at a nearby intersection.

Miles more of dark road. Spitting rain. Roger wondered how it could be that the police happened upon him, and whether it was pure chance or the product of a tip. It had to be chance, he reasoned. But then again the simple admission of the highly improbable tested the edges of credulity. Whatever the coincidence, Roger knew that the authorities were operating on a nationwide scale, thereby signaling the scope and severity of his actions.

Roger held his phone and tested it. The battery had long since died. He tossed it in the passenger's seat, drove blankly for a moment, and then regarded it again with a strange look. Pressing the inside of his knee against the steering wheel, he picked up the phone and removed the outer casing and pried open the back panel. Using his fingernail he dislodged the battery and set it on the passenger's seat. He picked at the sim chip until it popped free and held the phone, severe in expression.

Signs of morning broke in the east with scorched light slicing across desolate plains. Like a world being emptied of life, lush greenery gave way to endless expanses of dry scrub and sun-bleached dirt. The highway Roger traveled snaked westward through regions so forgotten and silent they threatened sanity. Hours passed slowly in the small car, and distant mesas shimmered in the heat as he headed south of Timberon into the jagged teeth of the Organ Mountains, and then down again into endless flats, where he rode in search of a stopping point.

By evening Roger came upon a disconsolate community littered with trailers and soulless storefronts combining to form something like a downtown. In the distance among the rocks, a rusted water tower rose like an abandoned memory. Roger pulled up to two older men sitting on a bench in the shade of an overhang. Both wore wide hats

and were reclining casually as if eternally fixed in that posture. Roger rolled down his window and asked where he might find a hotel. They regarded him silently as if weighing a mystery. Roger waited and thought to ask again, but one of them leaned forward, pointing, resting a leathery arm on a knee, "About a half mile up the road."

"That way?" Roger said, following his direction.

"Los Milogros," the old man advised.

"Is that a hotel?"

The man nodded slowly.

So Los Milogros?" Roger repeated.

He nodded again.

About a half mile beyond, Roger found the hotel set back off the road. A long stretch of valley curved beyond it to barren hills staining the horizon. It was flanked by several stucco houses surrounded by cinder-block walls stained with years of dirt and a small convenience store with two silver ice machines out front. A faded, red hatchback and rusted pickup were parked at the hotel. The driveway was packed dirt. Tire tracks ran the distance.

Roger parked and got out and brushed his pants and tucked in his shirt and went into the office. A man was sitting watching television. He got up and went around behind the desk.

"Might you have a room?"

"I do. Several in fact."

"I'd like to get one."

"How many nights?"

"Let's start with one night."

"Ok. That will be \$61.72"

The lean man watched Roger pull out his wallet, noticing his cut and blood-stained collar. "I know I look like hell," Roger said. The man didn't say anything. "Can I be honest with you?" Roger asked, feigning embarrassment. "Have you ever had lady troubles?" The lean man listened. "Let's just say that I've learned that it isn't smart to get involved with a woman—even a good woman—who is already taken. Come to find out, I'm a lover, not a fighter, and I got my ass kicked." The man grinned and rocked knowingly, "You gotta watch what hornet nests you put yer hands in." "Hard lesson to learn," Roger agreed, handing him the money. The lean man grunted with understanding and turned to a wooden plaque with keys dangling from golden hooks.

“You don't suppose I could get a room around back. The view isn't half bad, and it just might just soothe my wounded ego.”

Roger drove around the building and surveyed his surroundings and went in and shut the door and locked it. He closed the curtains and peered through a crack at the stolen car in the squalid little court. Roger sat on the bed and slumped with weariness. He could see his ragged face in a mirror across the room.

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At a sports bar, sitting at a corner table under a collage of football memorabilia, Brock took a sip from his beer and sat back, listening to his friend with a firm grin.

“I'm telling you, man, drawing the string on a ten-point buck is the shit. At that moment it's you versus your nerves, and your body is jacked with adrenaline. You hear me? Jacked. Like it's coursing through every fiber of your being. And when you're standing there, trying to slowly pull back the string, bearing down the sight, like you've done a hundred times before—but now with your arms trembling and heart pounding inside you—like everything in the universe is waiting to see if you can pull off the shot.” Ron stopped and exhaled as if catching his breath. “I'm telling you, man, there's nothing like it.”

Brock laughed and leaned forward, “But sitting in a tree for hours? I don't know, man.”

“No. No, no. That's where you're wrong. It's cleansing. Like meditation, only better. It's like you and nature are one. Like you're—you're—meant to be there somehow. Like its tapping into some primal instinct embedded deep within your DNA. Caveman shit. You know? It's like it's unleashing something old and bottled up. Something we need with all this sitting around and doing jack squat, never dragging home our own food. You know. To provide. To look down at the elk lying at your feet, 'Me kill and eat.' It makes your balls bigger too.”

Brock laughed and drank again from his beer.

“I guarantee the meat will taste better than anything you've ever tasted. There's a difference when you hunt it yourself instead of relying on some fat dork with a hair net to slice it up at the grocery for you.”

“I'm getting out of this, am I?”

“Nope.”

“So what do I have to say to shut you up?”

“Say, I want to become a man, Ron. Teach me. Show me the right path.”

Brock waved in humorous submission, “Alright, I'm in. Let's go sit in a tree in the freezing cold and become one with nature.”

Ron nodded agreeably, “Yeah, not gonna lie. You'll freeze your shillelagh off if you're not careful.” They both snorted with laughter and fell to sipping their drinks, casually looking around the bustling bar.

“Hey, there he is,” Brock said, gesturing. Ron looked. A tall, lean man wearing Patagonia shorts and a tight T-shirt strode their direction matching their enthusiastic smiles. They stood and hugged, smacking each others' backs.

“Sorry, I'm late,” Steve said, situating himself in one of the chairs. “I thought I could swing by Target and pick up something real quick. Turned out to be not so quick.”

“What were you buying at Target?” Ron asked, looking mildly confused.

“I need a new pillow.”

“A pillow?”

“Yeah, my old one's a piece of trash.”

“You need to get one of those ergonomic memory foam pillows.”

“You have one?”

“Hell, no. Too expensive.”

“Of course,” Steve said, looking at Brock with an obvious expression. “Actually, it's funny how many different options there are now. Here I thought I would just walk in and look at a couple pillows and grab the cheapest one and move on. But there's this whole spectrum of firmness. And sizes. With charts and numbers. Some are even made for different sleeping postures.”

“Like back sleepers or side sleepers?” Brock asked.

“Yeah. I looked at one that said it was made for stomach sleepers.”

“Oh, man, I can't sleep on my stomach,” Ron said. “Totally screws up my back. You sleep on your stomach?”

“No, but I've always wanted to.”

Ron looked incredulous. They all laughed.

“Yeah, I had a goose down pillow once,” Ron said, wiping his mouth. “Easily the most comfortable pillow I've ever had, except that the stupid feathers would poke out and jab me in the face.”

“The feathers would poke through?”

“Yeah. It's like you need to wrap the pillow in duct tape. Saddest day of my life throwing that thing away. It was great except for that.”

“Sounds terrible.”

“It was.”

“So what about you, Brock. Any new pillows?” Steve asked.

“Nope. Same old, same old.”

“Hey, how's the little man doing?” Ron asked, finishing off his drink.

“Really well. He was just over the other night. Watched Predator for the first time.”

“That's what I'm talking about,” Steve said, nodding with approval. “What did he think?”

“Loved it.”

“How could you not?” Ron said.

“Exactly.”

Ron waved at the waitress and asked for another drink, “Let me get another one of those Green Houses. Thanks.” The waitress said, “You bet,” and then asked Steve what he would like before leaving.

“How did that trip to New York go?” Ron asked, looking more serious. “I heard some freak in the crowd started yelling shit.”

“Yeah,” sighed Brock. “Some guy decided it was time to pop his mouth off. Guess he was looking for a little jail time.”

“Did you see it, Steve?” Ron asked.

He nodded.

“That happen to Adam much?”

“Not at lot, thankfully.”

“Crazy, freakin' people. You've got to worry about him.”

“I do.”

“All that attention all the time. Just think what it's going to be like when he starts dating. You ever think about all the women assassins that will be on him?”

Brock grinned, waiting for Ron's antics to blossom.

Ron continued, punctuating his opening volley, “He's going to be the most sought after bachelor in the history of the world. Think about it. Not even Don Juan could imagine such a scenario. Adam will not only have his pick of the litter, but women will be so desirous of him, so falling all over themselves to get at him, just begging him for a date, many will be tempted to hire female assassins to pick off whoever he's

with. Or they'll train themselves. Ninja dojos will open up all across the country. It's going to be huge."

Steve started to say something but Ron quickly added, "I mean you're training him now, right? How to spot female assassins?"

Brock smiled, "It's on the to-do list."

"No, but seriously," Ron said, dropping the humor. "I mean it's got to screw with your head. How do you prepare someone for that? I wouldn't have the slightest where to begin."

"I don't either, really," Brock said. "I just try to be a friend and a brother and father all in one."

Ron leaned back, eyes turned looking elsewhere, "Yeah, I guess you just love the hell out of him and hope for the best."

"Not sure what else to do," Brock said.

Steve asked, "What's your gut tell you about the future? Either of you. You think this is going to go on and on, world without end? Will the people in white coats fix it? Or do you think he could be the one?"

"You mean he'll have boys?" Ron asked.

"Yeah."

Ron shrugged and looked at Brock.

"I don't know," Brock said with a contemplative look. "I have a hard time imagining any of them happening. It seems like once you're stuck in a strange spot, with the unexpected pulsing all around you, anything like normalcy, or predictability, is hard to envision—but then again, I can't imagine this going on forever either."

"You think he'll have a boy?" Steve asked.

"For his sake, I hope not."

"Yeah, what a crazy thing that would be. Talk about being the center of attention."

"And carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders," Brock added. "I just want him to have a normal life."

After a pause, Ron leaned forward and said, "Say he doesn't and that things just keep going, generation after generation, for hundreds of years—thousands of years even! No men at all. No whitey tighties. No monster trucks. No lunk alarms. Nothing but women. You ever think how it will look at the end when the sperm banks start running dry, like when there's only one or two dudes' contributions left—two complete dorks, of course, if they're last—but still, they'd be prized horses. Who's going to get the last few drops?"

Steve shook his head, “You're messed up in the head, you know that?”

“No, seriously,” Ron said, getting more animated, “think about it. Suppose they're down to just one or two sperm sealed up in some vault stored deep underground with women assassins guarding it day and night. Who gets it?”

Brock shrugged, “It would seem pretty bleak at that point. Hard to imagine anyone wanting it.”

“You think so?” Ron said, looking doubtful. “I think there would be all out war.”

“You really think they would fight for it?” Steve asked, scrunching his face.

“Absolutely. With all those biological clocks ticking—nukes would be totally flying.”

“Ah, come on, man. Women launching nukes?”

“You kidding me? For sure. Shoot my ex would nuke this entire continent just to take me out.”

They laughed, and Steve said, “I could see that.”

“But imagine this,” Ron said, looking suddenly conspiratorial. “Suppose they're down to the last golden sperm and some really hot leader gets her hands on it and gets pregnant and has a boy. Think about that. Complete bizarro world for that dude. Poor guy would have a billion women nagging him all day, telling him to pick up his crap—and how to do his hair—and what to wear—and then when he's older, and he starts getting that strange, inexplicable longing to create a man cave, which of course he's never seen or heard of, he'll probably feel completely befuddled.” Ron stared off in thought for a moment and then added, “I don't know. You think his manstincts would be strong enough to push him to explore the idea? Like a Neil Armstrong? Or a Lewis and Clark? Because you know as well as I do that the women aren't going to go for some man cave. Nuh-uh. They'll figure out a way to keep that under wraps. It'll take an extraordinary act of will and courage—lots of courage—for him to see it through.”

“You done yet?” Steve said, grinning.

“I'm just saying,” Ron said. “Maybe we should bury a time capsule or something for him. Put a bunch of man cave floor plans in there. With pictures. And brewery options.”

“And how's he going to find it?”

“Oh... Yeah, that's a problem. Well, guess he's screwed then,” Ron said with a look. “But you never know, maybe he'll find a way to escape to the mountains of China or something—find some old crumbling Shaolin temple and convert it into a man cave.”

Ron paused again, tapping the table. “How's that one Thorough quote go? Something about men living helpless lives.”

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” Steve said.

“That's the one! Yup, that's the one. Well, I don't know about you guys, but I'm rooting for the poor chap.”

“To the poor chap,” Steve said, raising his beer. All three bumped their drinks and went to sipping again, looking around the bar, noting internally the various beautiful women.



## Chapter Eleven

It would be weird if humans had a hundred legs instead of two, kind of like centipedes, except that most centipedes don't have exactly a hundred legs. Dancing with a partner would be super difficult. So would balancing on one leg. It would be amazing for karate contests though. The announcer guy would be like, "What a beautiful 37<sup>th</sup> left roundhouse kick!" Schools would probably have to be miles long too, so that when kids line up at the classroom door everybody could fit. The teacher would also need a pair of binoculars to see who is at the back of the line, and cutting would be a very big deal, since it would take so long for people to file out.

Thankfully we only have two legs, because when the last bell at school rings, like when it did on Wednesday, we can all leave very quickly. Since Uncle Brock was outside waiting for me, and since I was going to go interview Dr. Richards, I ran as fast as I could down the hallway. Mr. Wilson saw me and said, "Slow down, Adam," but I only slowed down until I turned the corner and then started sprinting again. When I burst outside, Uncle Brock beeped his horn twice and lifted a hand out the window, so that I couldn't miss him. When I jumped inside, he gave me a fist bump and asked if I was ready to rock n' roll.

I said, "Oh, yeah."

And he said, "Excellent."

I said, "What's that smell? It smells really good."

He said, "Cologne."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Smell good stuff?"

"In case a person is gassy?"

He smiled, "Nah, sometimes a man just needs to smell good."

I sniffed myself, "Do I need to smell good?"

"Someday," he said. "But you're good for now. Hey, you hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Thinking McDonald's?"

I shrugged, "Sure."

“What? Not in the mood for that?”

“It's good.”

“Ok. Because we can do something else.”

“Think I could get a Big Mac?”

“You want a Big Mac?”

“Yeah.”

“Done.”

The University felt really big and clean with lots of grass and trees. There were tons of people walking around with backpacks, and some were riding bikes, which made the place feel good, like it was how things are supposed to be. The stone buildings somehow looked smart, or made me think that a person going inside should be really smart. Some of them had large pillars like Rome, though I didn't see anything like a gladiatorial Colosseum.

Uncle Brock was leaning forward, squinting, not quite sure where to go. He had to turn around once, which didn't make him happy. A group of girls saw us and pointed and waved. I waved back.

When we made it to the department of biology, the buildings looked new and sharp with smooth silver windows reflecting the sun. The buildings were curved too like a giant arch around a patch of stone and grass. A pond in the middle had a huge statue of the world with something like streams of fabric, or wisps of clouds, flying all around it. Water bubbled and squirted in neat arcs.

Several women watched us enter the building. One looked up from her phone with a surprised look and said, “Oh....” Uncle Brock nodded, and I said, “Hi.”

We walked down a long hallway where the floors were so shiny that I could see a dim reflection of myself underneath the lights. I couldn't keep my footsteps silent no matter how hard I tried.

“Alrighty,” Uncle Brock said, when we turned down the final hallway. “This should be the spot.” Several of the doors had name tags with gold numbers under them. Dr. Richard's was 306. Her door was partly open, and she was sitting at her desk. Uncle Brock knocked softly, “Hello.” She looked up and immediately stood, smiling warmly, “Hello! Please come in.”

She and Uncle Brock shook hands, and then she shook mine, saying, “It's such an honor to meet you.” Her hand felt soft and warm

and her eyes sparkled like green jewels. I smiled and said that it was an honor to meet her.

“Please come in and make yourself comfortable,” she said, gesturing toward two leather chairs. “Do forgive my office. It’s not the most spacious.”

“No, it’s great,” Uncle Brock said, examining the books and pictures in the room. “Looks like you love to travel.”

“Oh, I very much do.”

He stood looking at a picture of two elephants moving up a jungle stream with Dr. Richards wading waist deep alongside them, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, a light brown hat pulled low shading her eyes. An older man with dark skin was sitting atop one of the elephants. In her hand, she held the strap to the other elephant.

“Indonesia. Probably my all-time favorite trip,” she said, her voice bright and happy. “Like nothing else.”

Uncle Brock looked at her and then back at the picture, “That’s amazing. I’m so jealous.”

“It really was something special.” She paused and then said, “May I get either of you something to drink?”

“Oh, no, thank you. I think we’re fine,” Uncle Brock said. “Actually, I’m going to step out so that the two of you can talk.”

“Don’t feel like you must,” she said.

“No, no, it’s fine. I think I saw a bench just up the hallway. I’ll be good there.” Uncle Brock put his hand on my back, “Don’t feel like you need to rush for my sake, alright?”

I said, “Ok.”

He smiled and stepped out.

Dr. Richards shut the door and sat at her desk, pulling a strand of hair behind an ear, “So I hear this is for English class.”

I nodded, “Mrs. Jordan assigned it.”

“What a fascinating project.”

“She’s a cool teacher,” I said, slipping off my backpack and setting it on the chair next to me. “She makes even poetry seem really important.”

I unzipped my backpack and pulled out the crystal dish with flowers carved into it and set it on her desk. “I just have to set up a couple things.”

“Oh, ok,” she said, watching me.

I took out a bag of M&Ms and asked her if she was allergic to peanuts. She said that she wasn't, so I poured the bag into the dish and scooted it closer to her so that she wouldn't have to reach very far.

"Are these for me?" she asked.

"Yes. Or both of us."

"Well, thank you."

"You're welcome."

Her smile was beautiful.

I took out my notebook, and then I took out my phone and played a relaxing ocean soundtrack, which I found on YouTube, and set it on the chair next to me. After that, I pulled out my tape recorder and placed it on her desk. "Mrs. Jordan said that we need to record the person we're interviewing. It's going to be part of the class presentation." She looked very interested in what I was doing.

I pressed the record button and looked at the tape to make sure it was moving and then introduced myself, even though we had already greeted each other earlier, "Hello, I'm Adam."

"Hi, Adam. It's so very nice to meet you."

I flipped open my notebook and held it with both hands, "What do you like most about biology?"

Dr. Richards glowed with enthusiasm, "Oh, that's a tough question since there are so many things I enjoy about it." She paused and thought for a moment, "But if I had to narrow it down to just one thing, I suppose I would have to say the wonder of it all. The grandeur. Or maybe the complexity, which is another aspect of its wonder. It would have to be a toss-up between those two."

"How old were you when you said, 'When I grow up I want to be a biologist?'"

"While it wasn't until college when I thought seriously about pursuing a career in biology, I always felt a deep love for the discipline. Even as a little girl, I loved exploring nature and thinking about how it works. I can remember going to the library and leaving with as many books as I could carry. It didn't matter if it was about flowers, or insects, or amphibians, or the ocean. It was all amazing to me. I couldn't get enough."

"I like insects," I said, knowing what she meant about it being amazing. "I want to be an Entomologist."

“That would be a very interesting field of study. Remind me afterward, and I'll tell you about Dr. Williams. He is quite knowledgeable about insects.”

I said, “Cool,” and then asked, “What is your favorite color?”

“Definitely green.”

I turned the page in my notebook, “If baby boy eggs are so important, and we would go bonkers if we found one, why do you think we don't care as much about baby girl eggs? Because if there were a bunch of baby boy eggs and the baby girl eggs were super rare, we would go bonkers over finding a baby girl egg.”

Dr. Richards paused, and even though she was still smiling, she looked more serious. Her head was turned slightly as well. After a moment, she asked, “So, um... Yeah, that's a big question.” She paused again. “When you say that we don't care as much about the baby girl eggs, what do you have in mind?”

“Abortion.”

“Abortion?”

“Yes.”

I see.”

Dr. Richards leaned forward and held a finger over the stop button on the tape recorder, “Do you mind if I stop this for a moment?”

“Ok.”

“Ok,” she said, stopping it. She took a breath and straightened. “Adam,” she began, “that is a very weighty question. Can I ask you why it is important to you?”

“Because I don't know why the baby girls' eggs aren't as important as the baby boy eggs and are thrown away.”

“Right... Well... So can I ask you why you want to ask me this question?”

“Because you're a biologist.”

She nodded slowly. “Because you think I will have an answer?”

“Yes.”

“Because I'm a biologist?” she asked again.

“Uh-huh.”

Dr. Richards touched her face and looked towards the door and then back at me. “Have you talked to your mom about this?”

“Um, yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

She looked at me.

“What about your Uncle?”

“He totally wants me to talk to you about it.”

The way she looked at me made me think she was trying to guess my weight. “Adam, this is a very sensitive subject, and I wouldn't want to upset your mother.”

“My mom is very supportive of my questions,” I said, looking confident. “Even the really weird ones. So is Uncle Brock.”

We sat quietly across from one another. After what seemed forever, with her looking at me and my dish of M&Ms, as well as the electric blue notebook I had in my hands, she said, “Ok. A few questions. But there might come a point where I think we should stop. Is that fair?”

I nodded enthusiastically.

“And let's hold off on the recorder for now.”

I nodded less enthusiastically.

Dr. Richards repositioned in her chair and said, “So back to this question of yours. You're concerned about the baby girl eggs?”

“Yes.”

“Because they're being thrown away?”

“I know the answer is probably obvious since I am not a scientist, or a calendrical savant, but I can't help but think that if only boys were being born, then the baby girl eggs would be super precious. Like gold. Or diamonds. But since they're not rare, then people feel like they can throw them away. That seems weird. Because shouldn't they be important simply because they are baby girl eggs, like the baby boy eggs?”

“That's very perceptive, Adam. Did you think of that on your own?”

“Uh-huh.”

Dr. Richards nodded slowly, “Well, let me begin by saying that this is a very complicated issue. But part of the answer turns on what constitutes, or, uh, what makes up a so-called baby girl egg. It might help to think about what it is.” Dr. Richards pulled out a piece of paper and set it on the desk and slid it towards me. She picked up a pen and drew a very tiny dot in the middle of the paper. “A three-day-old embryo is about this big. Almost too small for us to see with the naked eye.”

I leaned and looked.

“You see it.”

“Yeah. Barely.”

“At this stage of development, it is a collection of about 150 cells. It's called a blastocyst. There's no brain yet. No heart. No body. It is a very small group of cells. And if we were to compare it to, say, the brain of a fly, there are more than 100,000 cells found there. So from the standpoint of complexity, we're dealing with something far less than a developed baby girl.”

“So it's not a girl?”

“Well, it is. It's just not fully developed.”

“So really small girls aren't important?”

“Oh, no, I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that we're not dealing with a developed individual. This collection of cells isn't able to think, or feel, or talk, or anything like that. So it's not a person.”

“But it is a girl, right?”

“In terms of DNA, yes.”

“I thought a girl was a person?”

“Yes, developed ones are. But at this stage things are different.”

“Why?”

Dr. Richards paused. When an idea seemed to come to her, she said, “Let me ask you a question. When you look at this tiny little dot on the paper—this little collection of cells—do you feel like you're looking at a person?”

I looked down at the dot. Then I bent over, getting as close as I could, with my nose nearly touching the paper, until all I could see was the dot hovering in a white world.

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It did seem really small and insignificant and not like a person—like a fleck of dust that could be blown into the air and never thought of again. But the more I looked at it, the more it reminded me of the dot on an “i,” which made me think about Mrs. Jordan, and how when I write a word and forget to dot one of the “i”s, she circles it with a red pen. She says the dot is very important. The same is true with periods. She often tells us that the little things matter and that we shouldn't forget them, which made me think about other small things in life, and how they're important, and also how something can seem small in comparison to something really big, like a deer next to a mountain, or a basketball next to a blue whale. Then I thought about how Carl Sagan said the Earth looked like a pale blue dot from really far away, and how the sun, if it was a giant gumball machine, could hold over 1,000,000 planet Earths, and how our sun is like a grain of sand compared to VY Canis Majoris. Then I thought about chihuahuas, and the C1ST Swissminigun revolver, and Tiny Ted, and Aditya “Romeo” Dev, and hummingbirds, and Wu Ruishen's teapot, and quarks, and the tiny feet, and dimes, and fairyflies, and the little rocking chair at Grandma's house, and blueberries, and lawn gnomes.

I looked up at Dr. Richards and said, “I'm pretty small too.”

Dr. Richards smiled with a smile that looked like it was mixed with sadness and reached across the table and touched my hand. “That's true. But when it comes to this little cluster of cells, it isn't so much its size that makes it different, but the fact that it doesn't feel or think like you do. You're very different.”

“But weren't we both like this dot at one time?”

Dr. Richards nodded slowly, “Yes, that's true.”

“So were we non-persons then?”

Dr. Richards didn't say anything even though she looked like she was thinking about saying something.

“Because if someone decided they didn't want us, then it would mean that we wouldn't be here now. And I like being here now.”

Dr. Richards looked down and then back at me, “It is a very complicated subject.”

“Or what if scientists designed a special scanner, or super advanced X-ray, that would let them look inside the little dot to see what kind of a person it would become?” Kind of like a Facebook personality test but for cells. That way they could stand in front of the X-ray monitor and be all surprised, ‘Hey, Bob, look at this! We have another Michael

Buble' in the making!' Or, 'Hey, John, you won't believe it. This cluster of cells looks like it's going to be another Martin Luther King Jr!' Would that make a difference?"

Dr. Richards cleared her throat, "You mean with respect to whether or not the cluster of cells is a person?"

"Yes," I said, adding, "because it seems like stopping them from becoming what they would become would be weird."

She nodded slowly again.

"Like with Jesus."

She looked unsure.

"Well, Jesus and Mary. I read that she was told she was going to have a baby and that she was to call his name Jesus. But what if Mary decided to abort Jesus? Would that have been bad? Because it seems weird if she did."

Dr. Richards folded her hands on her desk and leaned back, "Adam, you are a very smart young man, and the questions you're asking are good questions. Really good questions. But I'm just feeling a little uncomfortable at the moment."

"Would you like me to find you a cushion?"

"A cushion?"

"So you can get more comfortable."

She laughed and looked more comfortable again. "What I mean is that I'm not sure I can help you navigate these tough issues."

"But why?"

"Because they're sensitive. And lots of people have different opinions."

"But don't people have a lot of opinions about a lot of different things?"

"Yes... But some issues are more—well, they're more upsetting, or turbulent?"

"What does turbulent mean?"

"In this context, I am saying that some issues can make people mad."

"So you think I'll get mad?"

"No. I don't. But others might."

Since it was just the two of us talking, I couldn't think why it would matter how imaginary people might feel, but I didn't say anything more about it and looked around the room. I hadn't noticed before how the bookshelves were stuffed with so many different colored books, and

how some of them were really thick and old looking, and how some were even stacked on top of the bookshelves. A small plant in a purple pot was sitting on top of one of the stacks. It seemed happy up there.

“Can I show you something?” I asked, reaching for my phone.

“Of course.”

I picked up my phone and turned off the ocean music soundtrack and looked in my YouTube bookmarks for a video that I found Tuesday night while doing more detective research. It was about a woman who had two abortions. She was sitting on the edge of her bed in front of a camera telling her story. She seemed very confident about what she was saying. She also flicked her hair often. She said she had an abortion when she was sad and depressed and didn't know who the father was. Later she said she had two children. One was three years old now. The other was four. But when she was living with a man who didn't sound like a nice person, she decided to have another abortion because she didn't feel like she could handle the extra challenges. She also said she didn't have a lot of money and that the world can be a dark place. After telling her story, she said that abortions are normal and that women shouldn't feel shame and fear. She said that we need to think differently about them and “to not allow false stereotypes to control the narrative.” She said women don't need grand excuses or traumatic stories and that they have complete control over their own bodies. She said, “This is how it really is, abortion: You do things you regret or don't understand and then you make other choices because life keeps going forward. Or you do whatever you do, however you do it, for whatever reason, because that's your experience. We have to stop categorizing abortions as justified or unjustified. They are normal and can be totally boring, and that's perfectly fine.”

I played the video for Dr. Richards, holding it at an angle where I could see it with her. While it was going, I could tell she glanced at me a couple times. She didn't say anything though.

When it was finished, I told Dr. Richards that I didn't understand some of the things the woman in the video was saying, and that it seemed like she was very concerned about what moms could do with their own bodies. I asked Dr. Richards why this was so, and why some moms could feel incredibly excited about having a baby, while others seemed really sad about it, and how in their sadness they could view the baby like it was a fingernail, or a non-person person, that could be thrown away in a totally boring way.

Dr. Richards looked at me with a gentle expression, almost as if something heavy was pressing down on the part of her brain that creates compassion. “I’m sorry, Adam. As much as I might want to help you think through this, I believe it would be best if you talked with your mom or uncle about it.”

Since I could tell she meant what she said, and since I didn't want to be a rude interviewer, stomping forward with more questions like a herd of rhinos, I nodded and said that I understood.

“But if you have some other questions like the ones you started out with,” she added in a cheerful voice, “I’d love to answer them.”

I turned the page in my notebook and sat up straight and asked, “If you had to choose between having eyes that could see like a microscope or eyes that could see like a telescope, which one would you choose?”

If someone asks you how old you are and you say that you're 62 years old when you're actually 14 years old, that is 100% liar liar pants on fire, obviously. But if someone asks if you like their new outfit, and you think it fits nicely but is a horrible color, and you say that you like it, that doesn't seem like a big fat lie. It seems more like 40% true. Or maybe 15% if the color makes you want to puke until your eyeballs fall out. So when Uncle Brock asked me how the interview went, and I said, “Awesome!” it was only about 38% true, which made me feel kind of bad. That was because I still had zilcho answers to my question, which seemed really strange since it was obviously an important topic. I also didn't like telling Uncle Brock anything less than 100% truth. But since I didn't want him to feel all weird, since the question was clearly making other people feel weird, and since I wanted to be as objectively as possible, I didn't tell him the full-full truth. He didn't seem to mind though, because when we were done, he was totally distracted by Dr. Richards. He was hoping to set up a time when they could get to know each other better. She didn't seem too interested though.

Anyway.

Later that night, after Uncle Brock drove me home, and after I told Mom a 38% truth about the interview, which was tough because Mom seemed to know I was holding something back, I spent some time in my room thinking about what Dr. Richards said. I pulled out my notebook and opened it up so that there were two blank pages on my

desk. Instead of writing peas and carrots at the top, I wrote peas and bananas, since my brain was still having a hard time understanding how all the different things I was learning could go together. It felt like a math problem that I didn't understand, but which the teacher said that I should understand. Because when I watched the video of the tiny feet, and the dark hole with the metal clamps, and the bloody pan, which looked like a surgery that had gone terribly wrong—like on those ER shows that Mom sometimes watches—I couldn't help but think I was watching something that should never happen. But since it does happen, and since there are a lot of moms who think it should happen, and our supreme judges say it is fine, it must be alright. Otherwise, why would it be allowed?

Since dumb people often think they're actually smart, which isn't very smart, of course, and which is called the Dunning-Kruger effect, which I know about because I subscribe to Psychology Today on YouTube, I reminded myself that I had better stay humble. I told myself that I probably didn't even know enough to know how much I didn't know, which would explain why I was having a hard time understanding this. And just to make sure that I wasn't too dumb to accurately remember the Dunning-Kruger effect, I watched the video about it again. Once I felt sure I was good to go, I wrote down some of the things that were still very confusing to me.

A cluster-of-cells baby is not a person because a cluster-of-cells baby isn't able to act like a person. It can't feel, or think, or jump rope.

But isn't a cluster-of-cells baby a cluster of cells *baby* because that is what it is? Shouldn't we care a lot about that kind of life?

Mothers get to do what they want to the cluster-of-cells baby  
because the cluster-of-cells baby is part of their body.



But is the cluster-of-cells baby different from her body and just living inside her body, like someone in need of a place to stay for a while?

If a mom can't take good care of a baby, they shouldn't feel like they have to keep the cluster-of-cells baby.

But is aborting the cluster-of-cells baby worse than having to live with just a couple toys?

Some women celebrate the right to choose to have an abortion.

What if a mom knew she was pregnant with a cluster-of-cells boy and wanted to have an abortion? Would the pro-choice women celebrate that?

It is a mother's right to have an abortion.

What if a crazy, serial killer mom slowly stretched her belly out, like those tribal people with big earrings and long necks, until she had enough loose skin to make tentacles to capture people and wrap them up so that they were technically inside her? Like a cocoon made out of flesh. Or like the mouth of a great monster. Would the police be like, “Um... I guess we can't stop her from killing people. It's part of her body...”?

# Chapter Twelve

## α

Since the presentation wasn't too far away, and since I still needed to talk to someone who could answer my questions, and let me record them, I was starting to feel a little panicky, because I didn't know who else to contact. In order to come up with something, I figured I would need to do some yoga with Mom in order to properly clear my brain, but when I was sitting at my desk drawing circles around one of the holes in my notebook and adding little curly lines to it, my brain said, "I wonder who the world's smartest fertility expert is? If anyone would have the answer it would be that person." I said, "Good idea" to my brain and opened my laptop and typed: Who is the world's smartest fertility expert?

A bunch of different names popped up. Barkus was lying next to me, and I told him that the search results looked promising. He must have thought I wanted to pet him or wrestle because he jumped up with an excited expression. I rubbed his neck and told him that we would wrestle later. He seemed alright with that and sat watching me and the computer screen.

I clicked on several of the articles and pictures and Wikipedia links. I didn't understand a lot of what they were saying, but one of the individuals that kept popping up was a man by the name of Dr. Roger W. Larsen. One of the websites had a big black and white picture of him. It showed him standing beside a table full of books and papers. He had a hand in one pocket, and was wearing a suit, and he was looking straight at the camera, or maybe through it, not smiling. While he wasn't very tall, there was something about the way he stood that made me think he was a leader, or a captain, and quite strong, though not strong merely in his arms or legs, but deep inside him, like a lion or raging storm could suddenly burst out.

I opened a new tab and searched his name. Tons of articles about him appeared. Some were papers he had written. There were even a few video lectures by him, though they were done a long time ago. One was



called, “Scientific Materialism, Human Reproduction, and the Search for the AI Singularity: A Bold Link to the Future.” I watched it for a minute but it didn't make a lot of sense. It sounded like he was interested in what humans could become. The people in the crowd seemed to love what he was saying though.

In the Wikipedia article, it said that he worked at a place called Zygote Solutions, which sounded familiar to me for some reason. I looked at Barkus and asked him if he had heard of it, but he just tilted his head, which meant that he wasn't sure. I tried to think hard, tapping my forehead with two fingers like a stick-man running in place. “Oh, I remember!” I exclaimed to Barkus. Barkus stood again, looking excited.

I jumped up and ran to my bed and crouched down. I looked around underneath, pushing toys and clothes out of the way until I found the metal box I put Dr. O' Brian's card in, the one he said to use if I ever wanted to ask him a question. I opened the lid and picked up the card. At the bottom in black letters, with the same emblem as the one on the internet: Zygote Solutions.

“Hey, Barkus. It's the same place.” I stared at the card and wondered if I could call Dr. Larsen. I went back to the computer and searched for Dr. Larsen's contact information at Zygote Solutions. At first, nothing came up, but then after clicking around a while, I found a number that matched the one on my card, except that it had extra numbers. I figured it was a code or secret password since he was so important, and when I Googled it, it looked like it was something like that. In order to contact him specifically, a person needed to have his extension number.

“I think we have it,” I said to Barkus.

I was starting to feel like a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill.

I asked Barkus, “Should I call him?”

Barkus didn't tilt his head.

“I agree. I think I should call him.”

The problem was that I needed a way to record our conversation. So returning to the computer, I went to the Google Play Store and looked up phone recording apps. There were lots of free ones. I looked at Barkus, “Boo-yah! We're good to go.”

After installing the app and testing it and setting it on auto record, I sat at my desk and thought about what questions I should ask, and how I could create a friendly, inviting environment. Music wasn't really possible. Neither were treats. I thought about reading a poem at the

beginning to maybe set a nature mood but changed my mind once I started looking up poems.

“I’ll just be extra friendly,” I told Barkus, unable to think of anything else.

I slowly entered his number into my contact list with the extension number, making sure I had it right. I saved it and pressed the call button. It rang several times. An electronic-sounding voice said that I had reached the voicemail of Dr. Roger Larsen, and that I could leave a message after the beep. Even though I was bummed, I figured he was super busy with science experiments. He was probably deep in thought, like in the picture I saw, trying to save the world.

Once it beeped, I left him a message.

.....

When he woke it was dark and still. Light from the street lamps seeped through the curtains onto the worn carpet. The clock on the laminate stand read 2:47. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat staring at his feet for a long time. Then he took off his shoes one by one, letting them drop to the floor. He rubbed the arch of his foot and regarded the small flat-screen television and cheap wall lamps.

In the bathroom he stood close to the mirror, leaning in, examining his forehead. The wound had crusted over with dried blood. A mark of Cain. He touched it gently. After showering he went about cleaning his shirt and pants, using a towel and hand soap to scrub at the stains. He held up the wet clothes in the bathroom light. Both the collar and pants bore the memory of his flight. There was nothing he could do about the tear. He hung them over the shower rod and returned to the bed with a towel wrapped around his waist. Before turning on the lamp, he rose and glanced out the window, pulling back the curtain slightly. Desert solitude. No cars save his own. He turned a lamp on.

Roger sat on the bed feeling his growing beard. His cell phone lay in parts on a round table. He regarded it with a measured expression and then scolded himself for even considering such a thing. He looked at the landline phone on the nightstand and leaned across the bed and grabbed it with one hand, bringing it near. Roger checked the dial tone and then sat weighing outcomes. When the inner debate resolved, he picked up the receiver and punched numbers and waited. He mechanically entered the password for his voicemail.

“You have four unheard messages.”

The first two concerned his mother who was not fairing well. A side effect from a new medication caused respiratory problems severe enough to warrant a trip to the hospital. Pamela asked Roger to call him back. Both times. Roger tried to discern a note of ease or fear in Pamela's tone, but her professionalism masked all clues, leaving Roger to imagine both the worst and trivial.

With the third message came the unexpected voice of a child, one seemingly male in its quality, and one Roger thought he had heard before. Roger listened with stunned bewilderment as Adam asked to interview him, saying:

Hi. My name is Adam. I was hoping that I could interview you. It is for my English class assignment. Which I'm very excited about. It is about science stuff. The internet says you are a leading scientist. Which is awesome. I might be a scientist when I grow up. Maybe an Entomologist. But maybe not. I think Dr. O' Brian is your friend. He gave me a card. He said I could call about anything. So it would be my distinguished happiness to interview you about science stuff. Well, not just science stuff. But yeah, mostly science stuff. My phone number is 217-555-0195. I go to bed at 9 PM and wake up around 7 AM. Feel free to call me when I am awake. Thank you.

Roger squinted like a man confronted with the ineffable, turning his head and listening, entirely unsure what to make of the unexpected message. His first impulse was to regard it as trickery, but there was something about its simple quality that signified its authenticity. He didn't delete it. But neither did he focus on it any longer.

The last message was a recording of Jamison pleading with Roger to call him on the fateful night.

When he decided that it was necessary to get food and risk picking up a few items, Roger hung his wet clothes over the AC unit near the window and set the fan speed to high. Then he counted his remaining money and made a mental list of everything he needed.

He walked over to the convenience store in the crisp morning air and bought bread and peanut butter and an assortment of chips. When he asked where he might find the nearest place to buy a Chromebook, the middle-aged woman at the register told him that she didn't know anything about a Chromebook. When he explained that it was like a laptop, she said he might find one at a Walmart about 35 miles north.

“Could you draw me a map? My phone isn't working.”

“Sure can.”

Roger sandwiched his car in the Walmart parking lot between two SUVs, surveyed the place for police, and entered through the front doors, walking swiftly. The brightly lit aisles felt stark and strangely claustrophobic making him feel slightly dizzy. In the men's clothing section, he grabbed a pair of khaki pants and two button-ups and draped them in an empty cart left near the T-shirts. Later he picked up deodorant and toothpaste and a toothbrush. A young woman pushing a cart with a curly-haired little girl stopped near him, examining a white box of facial cleanser. The child watched Roger and smiled bashfully when he met her gaze, burying her face in her mother's side. The mother glanced at Roger and smiled kindly.

Roger stood hovering over a display of Chromebooks and tablets trying to quickly decipher function to price. A tall, gangly employee wearing a blue vest ornamented with buttons asked if Roger needed any help.

“I just need something basic for writing documents. One that connects to the internet.”

“So nothing graphic intensive?”

“Just the basics. Maybe around a hundred or hundred and fifty.”

The employee pointed to a few choices, “Those should suit you just fine then.”

“Everything I need comes with it?”

“That's right.”

“Do you have any prepaid phones?”

“Sure. Over here.”

When Roger returned to his room, he changed his clothes and tidied up, brushing his teeth and applying deodorant. The beard he left unshaven. He opened the Chromebook and plugged it into the wall near a round table and sat in a swivel chair as the machine booted up

for the first time. Roger unscrewed the lid to the peanut butter and peeled off the thin seal and prepared a sandwich using his finger to spread it across the bread. He wiped off his finger with a tissue and pulled open a bag of chips and made himself comfortable, leaning back and chewing slowly as he began to inquire into avoiding cellular detection.

The afternoon burned long and hot and the sun came to rest in the evening beyond the rocks. Nothing moved in the valley save the birds trailing across the darkening sky. Roger shut the chromebook and tore off a roughly drawn map of the area that he had sketched on a notepad. He folded the paper and put it in his shirt pocket and waited until it was fully dark before leaving in his car. He drove north and then west along remote roads merging finally with Interstate 10.

The Petro Stopping Center shone in the desert barrier like an oasis of light with rows of semis stationed at great fueling stalls, the high floodlights burning brightly across the expansive lot. Several cars were fueling under an adjacent canopy. Others were parked at a convenience store and restaurant named Desert Sky Cafe. Bold advertisements filled the windows, Sunday buffet prices featuring prominently.

Roger pulled alongside the far edge of the building parking by a pickup with Arizona plates. Behind him, two semi-trailers blocked his rearview. He picked up the prepaid phone from the passenger's seat and activated it. He surveyed his surroundings as it chimed with life. Two men leaving the restaurant were laughing loudly, the larger of the two gesturing enthusiastically, apparently recounting a story.

Roger tapped the keypad and then held it to his ear, waiting. It rang several times before Jamison picked up, clearly woken from sleep, "Hello."

"It's me."

There was a pause and new life to his voice, "Roger?"

"Yes."

Roger could hear shuffling. "I'm- uh- it's good- good to hear from you. Are you alright?"

"Can you tell me what is going on?"

Jamison stammered at the question, "Can I? I was hoping you could illuminate me."

"That's why I'm calling you. To shed light on this misunderstanding."

"Ok... Yeah, ok... You know that I will help any way I can."

"I know. I trust you."

"Good. Because I want to help."

"So can you tell me what you think happened?"

Jamison paused, "I don't follow."

"How does it look from your vantage point?"

"Isn't it fairly obvious how it looks?"

"Just humor me. How does it look?"

Jamison chuckled with astonishment, "Well, it doesn't look great."

"How so?"

Roger could feel Jamison weighing the odd direction of the conversation, "I'm confused, Roger. You want to know how your taking a male zygote and fleeing the state looks?"

"Yes."

"It looks bad, Roger. Very bad."

"But why do you think I left with it?"

Jamison turned apprehensive, "I'm not sure where you're going with this, but it's making me feel very uncomfortable."

"Because you'll have to debrief the authorities? Or share with them the recording of our conversation?"

"Roger, you're not being recorded."

"But you know as well as I do that our conversation isn't going to remain private."

"I don't have a lot of say at this point, but to the degree that I can help you, I will. I want to understand what happened."

"So then answer me this one question. Why do you think I left with it?"

Jamison hesitated and then reluctantly said with a touch of exasperation, "To sell it or give it to the Chinese for some inexplicable reason."

Roger straightened, "Wait. What? What makes you say that?"

"Roger, I'm not comfortable—"

"Jamison, listen. Listen! Why in the world would you think I'm working in tandem with the Chinese?"

Jamison didn't answer. Roger asked again with more urgency, "Why would you say that? Jamison. Why would you think such a thing?"

"Because you've been in connection with them."

Roger's tone changed, "I have certainly not."

"Roger, please. Why don't you just turn yourself in and work these things out?"

“Who thinks I'm working with the Chinese?”

“I don't know.”

“Jamison, you do know. Is it the police? Is that their theory? Please. It's important.”

“The FBI knows about Dr. Tianshi,” Jamison said evenly. “We know. Ok. We know.”

Roger sat stunned, his mind trying to piece fragments together.

“The best thing you can do, Roger, is to stop running and turn yourself in. As your friend, I'm urging you to do the right thing.”

“Let me be absolutely clear. This has zero to do with the Chinese or any other country—or institution—or individual for that matter. Do you understand?”

“Ok. Fine.”

“No, it's not fine. This is wrong.”

“Maybe it is.”

“No, it certainly is. You understand? Certainly.”

“Roger, I'm not your judge.”

Roger cursed under his breath and shifted in his seat, poking an extended finger against the dash, “What do the FBI want?”

“Roger.”

“Listen, Jamison. I'm being wrongly accused. It's false information.”

“Roger...”

“Don't you believe me?”

Jamison's voice dropped to a hush, “Dr. Larsen.” Roger stopped talking, and Jamison asked in a new, more serene tone, “What was it like seeing it?”

The simple question arrested Roger, and he grabbed the back of his head and looked painfully across the parking lot, his voice caught in his throat. “I mean after all these years. After all the struggle and disappointment. You witnessed the miracle. Your eyes beheld it.”

Roger could say nothing but only make small crackling sounds.

Silence fell between them.

“Tell me what it was like,” Jamison said after a time.

Roger suddenly looked much older and weaker, like a frail man who just learned of the death of someone very special. He leaned heavily against the steering wheel, his head in his hand. “It was everything and nothing at the same time,” Roger admitted flatly.

“Can I see it?”

Roger looked up, more resolute, "Please hear me when I say this. I don't have it, and I don't know how to duplicate it."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

"Then—"

Roger interrupted, "Trust me when I say that this is a big misunderstanding. Ok. Just tell them that. I have to go."

"Roger, don't go."

"I have to."

"Will you call me again?"

"I don't know."

"Please, Roger..."

"I have to go."

Roger hung up the phone and sat holding it in his lap. Outside in the cool desert air, beyond the parking lot where the light faded into blackness, cars ran along the interstate like flickering specks on a wire. For a moment he wondered about those traveling along the highway and where they were going and whether he would ever know peace fully again.

"Ok," he said, stirring himself to action. Holding the power button down with his thumb, Roger turned off the phone and double wrapped it in two Walmart shopping bags and opened the door and stood, glancing around casually, as if merely stretching after a long drive. Confident no one was looking, he dropped the phone in the bed of the Arizona pickup truck while walking to the rear of his car. He opened the trunk and looked in at nothing and then shut it. Returning to the front seat he started the car and drove along the frontage road to the interstate heading east back to his hotel.

Roger spent the night in a state of severe agitation, pacing and debating aloud, pressing his knuckles against the cheap laminate dresser with each pass. As the hours bled by, he stopped pacing and sat staring off in thought, his face dark as cave water. By subtle degrees all sense of his own wrongdoing became subsumed under the unjust extrapolations of his accusers, and as the indignation swelled within his tired mind, resulting in self-dispensed absolution, whereby everything he had done could be viewed through a pragmatic lens, he fixed on a



course of action and felt measurably better, eventually drifting off to sleep.

At the first signs of morning, he woke and made a sandwich and ate it silently at the table before his computer, bouncing his foot and scrolling through contact channels of major newspapers. After creating a new email account, he sent a brief message to a notable journalist working with the Wall Street Journal, inquiring how one with critical information should submit it. He did the same for the New York Times, utilizing their encrypted system through SecureDrop.

Afterward, he pulled out his notepad and pen and began to scribble thoughts in jumbled clumps. Resting back in the chair he wiped his forehead and reached and lowered the dial on the AC. Then he straightened and fixed the small computer before him, adjusting it with fastidious precision, thinking how to begin. The words came in slow bursts, stilted and uneven, and he deleted everything he had written twice. He sat staring off in thought with only the sound of the wall unit blowing steadily. An ease fell upon him and the words came.

Whether I regard human beings with a good or with an evil eye, I always find them engaged in a single task, each and every one of them: to do what benefits the preservation of the human race. Not from a feeling of love for the race, but simply because within them nothing is older, stronger, more inexorable and invincible than this instinct—because this instinct constitutes *the essence* of our species and herd. Without it we would have long since faded away, having been driven into extinction and left a mere fossil with our disintegrating jawbones silently mouthing the foolish notion that romanticism triumphs over utility.

The idea of ethics, therefore, however it is construed, must bow to this singular point. If we perish, or if we descend into a state of abject displeasure, or merely remain shackled to mediocrity, having no more purpose than to reproduce and eat like the lower animals, we will have failed. If we have learned anything at all, we know that evolution will march on with or without us. It is ascending to greater and higher ideals, and if we do not see, and see clearly, that it has set before us a remarkable gift, we of all people are to be most pitied. We have been granted rationality and autonomy and the scientific method, and it

beckons us to embrace ultimate progress by laying hold of the reigns that steers it all. If we do not, it will discard us and find another suitor, one more capable and willing.

I am convinced that as a collective organism we instinctively know this to be so. But in the face of pressing trials, we inevitably feel tempted to veer off towards those seemingly grandiose visions of human flourishing that ultimately shackle and imprison us, precisely because they seek to lay hold of “The Good”—that purportedly external reality that is supposed to govern and constrain us. But this is the old error, and one the scientific mind has long discarded as myth and fantasy. *We* are The Good. *We* are the ones who affix value to nature. *We* name it. *We* mold it. *We* imbue it with purpose and meaning beyond the merely descriptive. This activity is the pronouncement of the noble man, the truly free spirit, the one who regards himself as the determiner of values. He does not require to be approved of. He passes the judgment. “What is injurious to me is injurious in itself.” He is the creator of values, and it is he who honors whatever he deems sacrosanct.

Our age has begun to recognize this fact in the area of sexual ethics and gender. Biology is not a restrictive, static construct hermetically sealed off from all outside determinations. That is the old way of thinking. Mind rises above all and fixes its own definition. That determination is the deeper truth. That determination establishes the bounds of what is so. Physical reality is but a playground for the mind. It presents us with rules and systems, laws and functions, but all of these bend to the scientific method in the hands of mankind. The so-called “laws” tell us how things work, but they do not tell us how things ought to be, nor how they must remain. With enough patience and due diligence, we believe human ingenuity can marshal the needed resources to effectively reorder base reality, either actually or functionally, controlling it with unimaginable precision.

But none of this will be if we do not pass the test; if we do not see that evolution has gloriously fitted us to see this fact, and in so doing, has extended to us the right to take over; if we do not see that the seeds of this glorious vision have already taken root, thereby allowing

for reproductive autonomy, marriage equality, transgenderism, and the transcendence of self itself through the eventual assimilation of man and machine. This is man's chief end.

It is in this light that my actions must be viewed. I discarded the zygote because it served no purpose in the context of our greater purpose. One random, positive outcome, produced through no determination of our own, is in one crucial sense utterly irrelevant. Once the reaction had been successfully recorded, the mere presence of such an object would simply distract us, or embroil us in international controversy. It is hard to comprehend the lengths to which outside parties, or even those within, would go to investigate the situation. To the degree that you will no doubt be tempted to doubt my claim as a lone individual in possession of the facts, to that same degree the situation will compound as more people become involved. Conspiracy is ever alluring to the human mind.

In the face of the highly improbable, therefore, as well as the highly unanticipated, an exceedingly difficult choice was pressed upon me, one that I did not feel I had the luxury of cradling for too long. A swift decision had to be made. And I made it. Whether and to what extent others will find my course of action judicious, I cannot say; though I would like to think that those who reflect on the matter with a sober mind will recognize the deeper issues at play, along with the

Roger stopped typing and stiffened, flicking towards the window like a disturbed wasp. A form passed outside. Close. Winking the sunlight through the gaps of the thick drapes. There followed the sound of small wheels rolling along the stone walkway, and then silence. Roger rose quickly, arms rigid as he stood listening. A knock sounded on the door. A female voice said, "Housekeeping." Roger moved to the window and lightly drew back a drape. A short Latino wearing maid's attire stood cycling through a series of keys on a ring. Roger cracked the door, and the woman looked up. Her hair was bundled in a messy ball behind her head and she said, "Housekeeping, sir."

"No, thank you."

"Yes, sir. When would you like the room service?"

“I'm fine today. Thank you.”

“Yes, sir. Have a good day.”

Roger shut the door and breathed deeply, blood pumping hard in his neck. He shook his head disagreeably, muttering sounds that were nearly like words and stepped away. He unbuttoned his cuffs and slowly rolled his sleeves, regarding the computer without emotion. Leaning with one hand on the table, he bent and read what he had written from the beginning. He touched his wound as he read. He stood and rubbed his face and then looked about. The room felt dingy and small. It was as if he saw the cheap bedding and fraying carpet aright for the first time. Nothing seemed right.

Roger closed the Chromebook and walked over to the phone and sat on the bed, resting his hand on the receiver. He dialed the number to his voicemail and sat listening. Nothing new. He listened again to previous messages. The sound of the child's voice rang pure and innocent, and Roger felt something like anguish and hope stir within him, like the last days of a hard winter giving way to spring. To his own surprise, he found himself writing down Adam's number on the complimentary notepad lying on the nightstand.

When he hung up, Roger took out his wallet and thumbed through the remaining cash, weighing the amount with a severe expression. He folded the wallet and slid it back and returned to the computer, minimizing the text and opening up the browser. He searched his name and watched news clips detailing his features and last known location. A police chief explained that he was to be deemed armed and dangerous, and that if anyone knew of his whereabouts, they should call the authorities.

Roger sat staring off for a long time before settling on a decision. Picking up one of the red boxes containing a prepaid phone, he picked at the clear sticker and lifted the cardboard flap and slid out the plastic clamshell package. Working at the thin flaps he pried open the container and held the phone as if judging its weight. Walking over to the notepad, he held the power button down. The screen flickered and flashed to life, booting to an icon and eventually to the main screen. Roger activated the phone and dialed the number with his thumb.

## Chapter Thirteen



School on Thursday wasn't *too* boring, though still pretty boring. Maybe like a 6.2 out of 10. Math class was the worst. We had to do story problems. Which are not cool. At all. There is always someone with a name like Sally or Susie selling lemonade or cupcakes, and they need to know how much change to give people. Or maybe there are a bunch of girls wearing different colored shirts and you have to figure out how many toys all the yellow and pink ones have. I asked Mr. Alfred why the girls with the cupcakes didn't have a calculator, and he said that I was missing the point.

Music class was totally amazing. After practicing our Lollipop Guild dance routine, where we have to look grumpy and flick our feet along with the song, we worked on the house which would be dropped on the Wicked Witch of the East. Mr. Baker was incredibly proud of the house he made. Using huge pink sheets of foam board from Home Depot, he cut the windows out with a carpenter's knife, which we weren't allowed to touch, no matter how much we asked. And then using normal screws and Elmer's glue, we connected the walls and roof by tightening the pieces together with a screwdriver. Next we painted it white just like the house in the movie. And then using a rope that was connected to a hidden ring on the roof, Mr. Baker made it so that the house could fly through the air like it was twirling in a tornado. Huge fans blowing strips of black trash bags made everything feel crazy too, so much so that this one really quiet girl named Caroline freaked out. But when Mr. Baker lowered the house, it landed on Celia, who couldn't hear anything because of all the fans blowing. She cried out when it hit her. Molly thought it was hilarious, of course, and said that Celia was the Wicked Witch of the East, which made some of us laugh. Mr. Baker heard her and told her to knock it off, but he didn't do anything else. Later Celia said that Molly was so fat that when she goes

bungee jumping the bridge breaks. That made Molly very upset. I think they're going to fight to the death soon.

In science class, Mrs. Blanche showed us slides of animals and taught us about the different types. We focused on amphibians and birds. When she came to the picture of an eagle, which was standing high atop a mountain with a mighty gaze, like he was daring some other bird to start something, Mrs. Blanche asked the class what was special about this particular animal. She said, "I'll give you a hint. It has something to do with our nation."

Lucy Parker raised her hand and blurted out, "The Bald Eagle is the National Bird."

"That's right, Lucy."

"It was chosen on June 20, 1782, as the emblem of the United States of America, because of its great strength and majestic stare."

"Yes, that's right, Lucy. Thank you."

"And because it was then believed to have only existed on this continent, which wasn't true, because—"

"Thank you, Lucy," interrupted Mrs. Blanche, nodding in a way that said it was time to stop. Mrs. Blanche then moved from behind her desk and held her hands in front of her, which made her appear very orderly and proper. "This might be a good time to talk about endangered species. Who can tell me what an endangered species is?"

Lucy raised her hand, but Mrs. Blanche picked Stella. "Yes, Stella."

"An endangered species is something that is endangered."

"Yes, but what does endangered mean?"

Stella looked uncertain. Lucy wiggled her hand in the air, but Stella brightened, saying, "Like when lots of them are—well, when they are like in danger or something... and dying a lot."

"Very good, Stella. That is close. So, yes, class, an endangered species is when a certain species is so few in number that it is nearly extinct. And extinct means that there are no more left. They're all dead. With no more to reproduce. Yes, that's right, Amanda. It is very sad but perhaps not worthy of so many tears in this context." After a pause, she continued, "Extinction is something we should work hard against, and feel bad about, because you can never get the species back once it's gone. But remember endangered does not mean that it is extinct. It just means that it is in danger of becoming extinct because there are so few. Now let me ask you a question. What are some endangered species? Yes, Lucy, that's right. The giant panda. And the snow leopard—two is

enough, thank you. There is a long list of endangered species around the globe, many of which would almost certainly go extinct if they weren't protected. The Bald Eagle is a good example of this. Only 40 or 50 years ago it was an endangered species, seriously threatened by different factors, like DDT, which is a kind of poison, and hunters, and loss of habitat. The situation was not good, but thankfully the government protected the eagle by passing laws that made it illegal to hunt, or capture, or sell the bird."

I raised my hand.

"Yes, Adam."

"So people would get thrown in jail if they shot the bird?"

"I believe the penalty could be that severe, but I'm not sure. At the very least they would be fined dearly."

"But what if a rock climber was climbing a mountain and found an eagle's nest full of eagle eggs, could he take the eggs, or toss them down the mountain on the rocks below?"

A few girls snickered.

"That is a very good question, Adam. And no. The eggs are protected as well."

"So it was illegal to hurt the eggs?"

"Not only *was* it illegal, but it is *still* illegal."

"Because they're eagles?"

"That's right. They're the national bird and very special."

"So it is wrong to hurt those eggs?"

"It is wrong to hurt those eggs."

"Each and every one of them?"

"Yes."

I said, "Oh."

While I was getting ready for bed Thursday night, Mom knocked softly on my bedroom door. Since I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom, I couldn't tell her to come in very clearly, but she could tell what I meant. When I came out, she smiled as softly as she knocked and with a look that made me think something was wrong.

"Hey, hun," she said, sitting on the edge of my bed.

"Hi."

She patted the bed wanting me to sit by her. "I'd like to talk."

"Ok," I said, plopping down next to her.

She pulled out her phone and sat reading it. When she spoke her voice didn't sound upset in the angry kind of way, but concerned, like in the heart kind of way. "Adam, I got an email alert from Pure Eyes that is pretty concerning." She looked at me, "Now I want you to be honest. Can you be honest with me?"

My stomach tightened, and I nodded.

"You're not going to get in trouble if you're honest, alright?"

I nodded.

"Ok?"

"Ok."

"One of the notifications said that you typed in the word rape. Do you remember typing that?"

I nodded.

"Can you tell me why you tried searching that?"

"Because I didn't know what it means."

Mom searched my eyes. It felt like she was looking inside me. She said, "Ok," and then waited. "Can you tell me why you wanted to know what it means?"

"It was part of my research."

"What kind of research?"

"For my presentation."

"The interview one?"

I nodded.

"But why do you need to know about that word for your presentation?"

I shrugged, "I don't know."

"I'm sure you must have had a reason."

"Is that a bad word? Because I didn't know it was a bad word."

She put her hand on my back, "It's not quite a bad word, but it means something terrible."

I waited.

"It's ok. You didn't know. But can you tell me why you wanted to know what it means?"

I tried to think of what to say but felt unsure, especially since it was all a sticky tangle of ideas stuck in a big web, where each thing I searched seemed connected to all the others, but not. I also felt embarrassed for some reason, like I was changing clothes in front of a stranger. "I don't know," I said, feeling worried.

Mom kissed the top of my head, "It's ok, hun."



I looked at the light still on in my bathroom. Mom sat stroking my hair. After sitting quietly for a few seconds, she said, "You know you can talk to me about anything."

I nodded.

"And you know that sometimes I need to be able to talk to you about things that frighten me."

I looked at her, not understanding.

She took a breath and then said, "You know how a person can feel scared because they feel insecure? Or unsure? Well, sometimes I feel that way. And this is one of those times." She paused. "I'm really not upset with you. I just want to know what's going on in your heart, because when I don't, I start to feel scared. So can you tell me what's going on in your heart?"

"I've been thinking a lot about baby girl eggs. Blastocysts, actually."

"For your presentation?"

I nodded.

"Like the question you asked Dr. O' Brian?"

I nodded again.

"And is that why you wanted to talk to Dr. Richards?"

"Yeah."

"Did talking to her help?"

"Not really."

"Because she didn't have the answers you were hoping to find?"

"Yeah."

Mom's eyes searched the far wall like she was looking for something hard to see. "What answers are you hoping to find?" she asked, turning to me again.

"I don't know... Well... Maybe I want to know why some people think the baby girl blastocysts aren't super important."

Mom listened.

I looked up, "Do you know why, Mom?"

She tilted her head, "I do, but I don't. I suppose it's complicated."

"That's what Dr. Richards said. She said it was complicated."

"What do you think?"

"Part of me thinks it is complicated. But another part of me thinks it isn't at all."

Mom thought about that. She asked, "But how is your heart?"

"I guess it feels like it's connected to one of those answers."

"What do you mean?"

“Like it all depends on what is actually right or wrong.”

“I see. Can I help in some way?”

“I don't know.”

“Have you talked to Uncle Brock about this?”

I shook my head.

“Do you want to talk to Uncle Brock about it?”

“Maybe later.”

Mom nodded, “Ok. Because I'm sure he could help.”

I nodded. We both sat in silence again.

“Hey, Mom?”

“Yeah, hun.”

“Do you believe in God?”

“I do.”

“What do you know about him?”

She inhaled, “Well, not much, I'm sorry to say.”

“Because you don't pray very often?”

“I suppose that's part of it. But I also haven't been to church in a long time. What makes you ask?”

“When I was doing my research it seemed like God kept coming up a lot. For some people, God is super important. For others, not at all. I remember one guy saying, 'If God's nonexistence affects every area of life, then his existence would affect every area of life.' I've been thinking about that.”

“I can't say I've thought about it that way before.”

“Yeah,” I said. “If God exists do you think he wants us to know about him?”

“I would think so.”

“Because it would be a bummer if he didn't want us to know about him, or if he was so big that we seemed like nothing in comparison—just little nothings that he didn't care about.”

Mom nodded, “That would be a bummer for sure. But what do you think?”

“Whether he cares?”

“Yeah.”

“I think so. I care a lot about my ants. And I didn't make them.”

Mom kissed the top of my head again. “You know what?” Mom asked.

“What?”

“I'm really looking forward to seeing what you grow up to be.”

I didn't say anything.

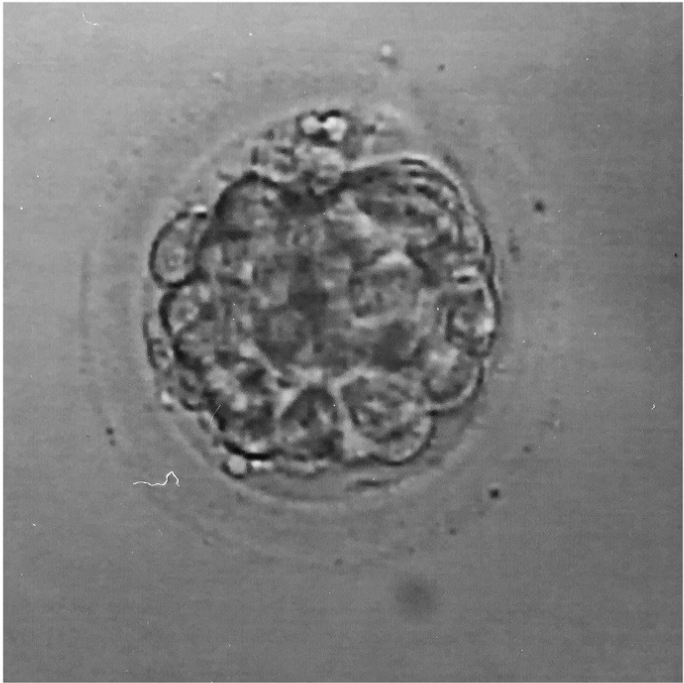
“And I want you to know that I'm really proud of you. And that I want you to feel like you can talk to me about anything. Even words that you're curious about but suspect might be bad. Alright?”

I nodded.

She paused, as if weighing an extremely heavy thought, then she said, “But I don't want to explain what rape is because some things are best left unknown for as long as possible. You'll learn about the awful things of this world soon enough. There's no need to hurry it along. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so... Kind of...” I thought for a moment. Then when I pictured it again in my brain, I said, “Actually, I do understand.”

Since Uncle Brock was out of town for business over the weekend, and since Mom was trying to work out a kink with some Realtor stuff, I spent most of my free time Friday and Saturday doing detective work for my presentation. I didn't study the *whole* time though. When my legs started to feel ultra spazy, Barkus and I wrestled on the couch. I pretended that the floor was lava and that if I touched it I would instantly die. Barkus could touch it though since dogs can't pretend like humans. But other than wrestling with him, and eating, which is important, of course, and watching some cartoons, which is also important, of course, I searched the internet, being careful not to trigger any more notifications.





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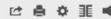
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## 1 Samuel 1

New International Version (NIV)



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### 1 Samuel 1 New International Version (NIV)

#### The Birth of Samuel

**1** There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite<sup>[a]</sup> from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. **2** He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

**3** Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. **4** Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. **5** But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. **6** Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. **7** This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. **8** Her husband Elkanah would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

**9** Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorway of

especially change in something that for centuries has been spoken of in such hushed tones that to question it is automatically to commit sacrilege. There is little evidence, however, to support the application of the slippery slope argument in this context. Cultures that have practiced forms of infanticide or euthanasia—Ancient Greece, the Eskimos—have been able to hold the line around those categories of beings that could be killed, so that the lives of other members of these societies were at least as well protected as the lives of citizens of the United States, where the culture officially accepts no limits to the sanctity of human life.

Whatever the future holds, it is likely to prove impossible to restore in full the sanctity-of-life view. The philosophical foundations of this view have been knocked asunder. We can no longer base our ethics on the idea that human beings are a special form of creation, made in the image of God, singled out from all other animals, and alone possessing an immortal soul. Our better understanding of our own nature has bridged the gulf that was once thought to lie between ourselves and other species, so why should we believe that the mere fact that a being is a member of the species *Homo sapiens* endows its life with some unique, almost infinite, value?

Once the religious mumbo-jumbo surrounding the term "human" has been stripped away, we may continue to see normal members of our species as possessing greater capacities of rationality, self-consciousness, communication, and so on, than members of any other species; but we will not regard as sacrosanct the life of each and every member of our species, no matter how limited its capacity for intelligent or even conscious life may be. If we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman animal, a dog or a pig, for example, we will often find the nonhuman to have superior capacities, both actual and potential, for rationality, self-consciousness, communication, and anything else that can plausibly be considered morally significant. Only the fact that the defective infant is a member of the species *Homo sapiens* leads it to be treated differently from the dog or pig. Species membership alone, however, is not morally relevant. Humans who bestow superior value on the lives of all human beings, solely because they are members of our own species, are judging along lines strikingly similar to those used by white racists who bestow superior value on the lives of other whites,

merely because they are members of their own race.

Ironically, the sanctity with which we endow all human life often works to the detriment of those unfortunate humans whose lives hold no prospect except suffering. A dog or a pig, dying slowly and painfully, will be mercifully released from its misery. A human being with inferior mental capacities in similarly painful circumstances will have to endure its hopeless condition until the end—and may even have that end postponed by the latest advances in medicine.

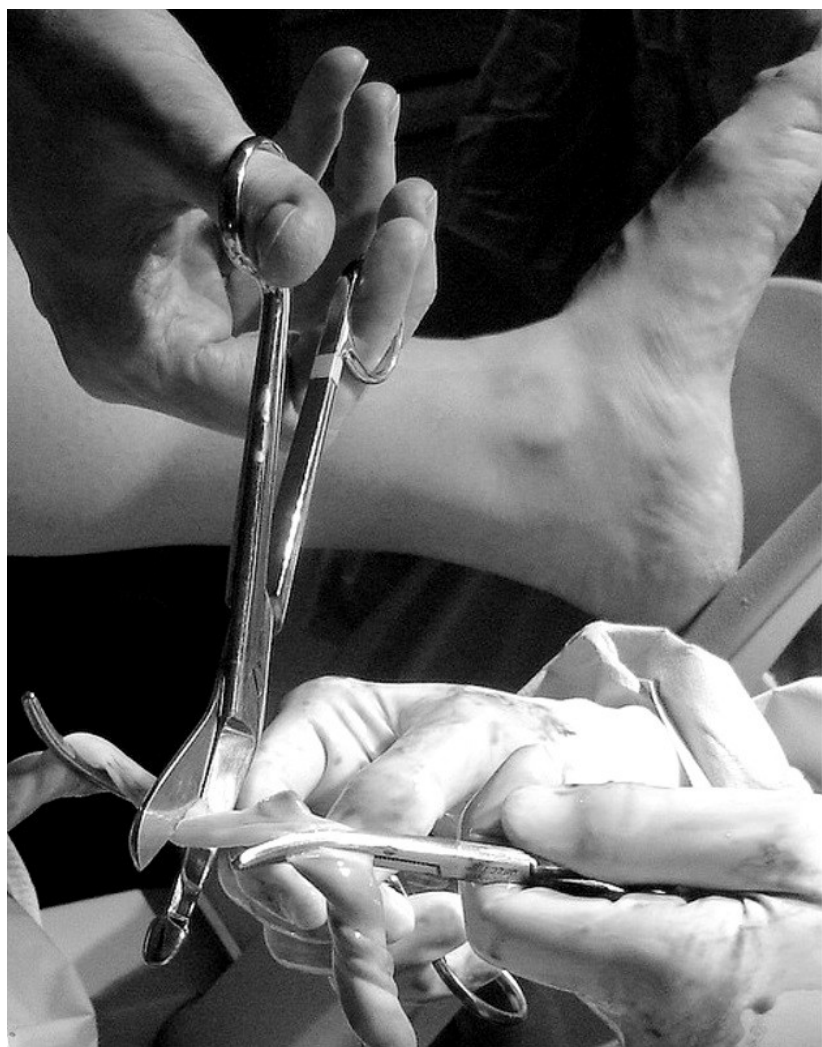
One difference between humans and other animals that is relevant irrespective of any defect is that humans have families who can intelligently take part in decisions about their offspring. This does not affect the intrinsic value of human life, but it often should affect our treatment of humans who are incapable of expressing their own wishes about their future. Any such effect will not, however, always be in the direction of prolonging life—as the wishes of the parents in the Bloomington case, and in several other recent court cases, illustrate.

If we can put aside the obsolete and erroneous notion of the sanctity of all human life, we may start to look at human life as it really is: at the quality of life that each human being has or can achieve. Then it will be possible to approach these difficult questions of life and death with the ethical sensitivity that each case demands, rather than with the blindness to individual differences that is embodied in the Department of Health and Human Services' rigid instruction to disregard all handicaps when deciding whether to keep a child alive.

PETER SINGER, MA, BPHIL, FAHA  
Centre for Human Bioethics  
Monash University  
Wellington Road  
Clayton, Victoria, Australia 3168

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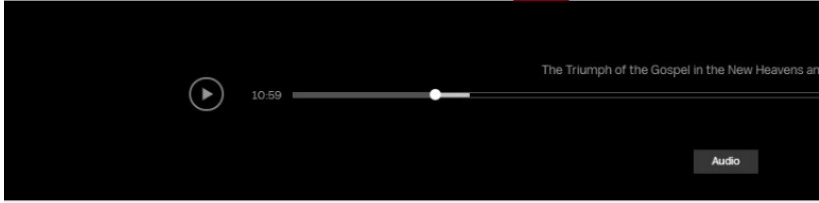












## The Horror of Sin Pictured in Creation's Futility

Why did God subject the natural order to such futility because of the sin of human beings? The natural order did not sin. Humans sinned. But Paul said, "The *creation* was subjected to futility." The *creation* was put in "bondage to corruption." Why? God said, "Cursed be the ground *because of you*" ([Genesis 3:17](#)). But why? Why are there natural disasters in creation in response to moral failures in man? Why not just simple death for all the guilty offspring of Adam? Why this bloody kaleidoscope of horrific suffering century after century? Why so many children with heart-wrenching disabilities?










My answer is that God put the natural world under a curse so that the physical horrors we see around us in diseases and calamities would become vivid pictures of how horrible sin is. In other words, natural evil is a signpost pointing to the unspeakable horror of moral evil.

God disordered the natural world because of the disorder of the moral and spiritual world — that is, because of sin. In our present fallen condition, with our hearts so blinded to the exceeding wickedness of sin, we cannot see or feel how repugnant sin is. Hardly anyone in the world feels the abhorrent evil that our sin is. Almost no one is incensed or nauseated at the way they belittle the glory of God. But let their bodies be touched with pain, and God is called to give an account of himself. We are not upset at the way we injure his glory, but let him injure our little pinky finger and all our moral outrage is aroused. Which shows how self-exalting and God-dethroning we are.

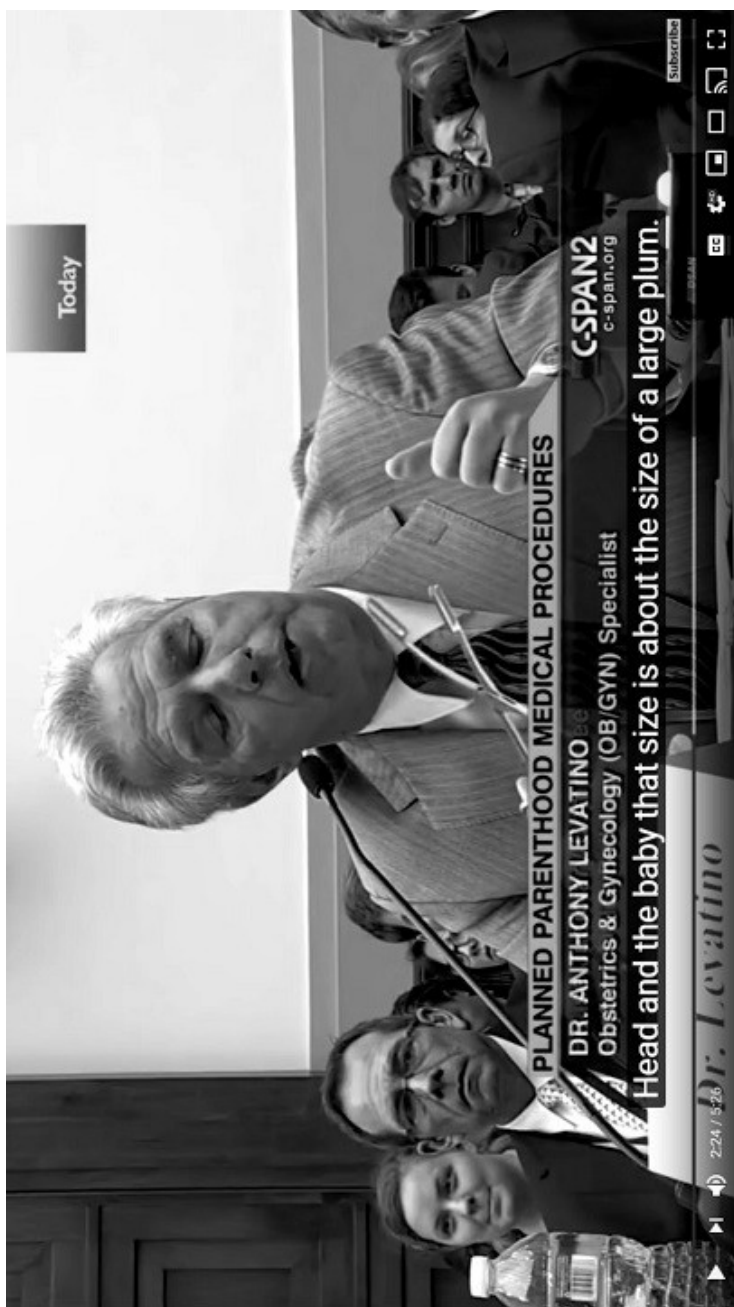
## The Trumpet Blast of Physical Pain

Physical pain is God's blast with a physical trumpet to tell us that something is dreadfully wrong morally and spiritually. Diseases and deformities are



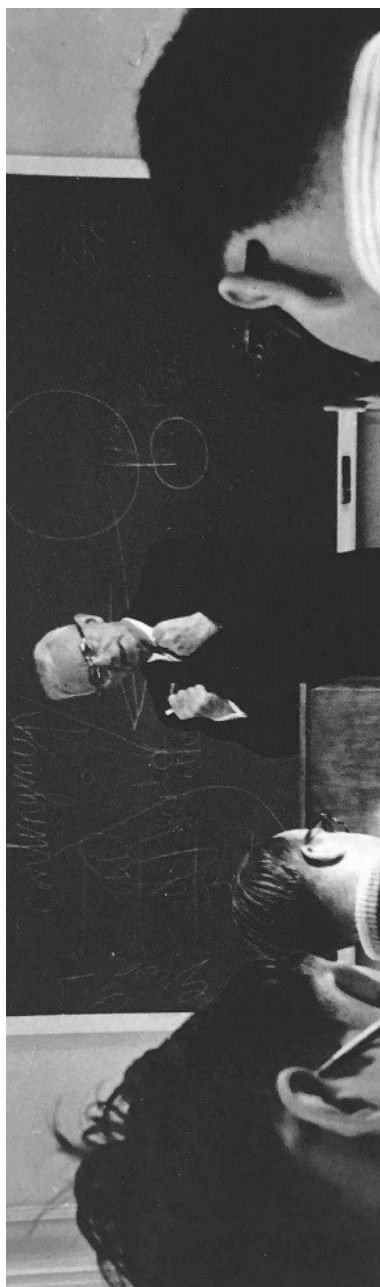
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-  This is an actual Planned Parenthood ad for abortion that shows a sweet baby girl then implies she's better.  
r/The\_Donald · Posted by u/Lack-of-Focus 9 days ago  
11 Comments · Share · Save · Give Gold · Hide · Report
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-  I can't understand the purpose of the recent philosophy stuff.  
r/Destiny · Posted by u/Tristran 3 months ago  
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-  Abortion is wrong.  
r/unpopularopinion · Posted by u/notadoctorbutilllook 26 days ago  
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-  It is morally wrong to NOT have an abortion if you can't support a child or you would be a bad parent.  
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-  What he did is clearly wrong, but a 22 year sentence for attempted murder seems like it implies abortion:  
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-  Theist tells me circumcision is OK because "at 8 days old nobody is suffering." Later says abortion is wrong ability to suffer after birth in order to be circumcised. Double standard? [Title-Only Post](#) [r/all](#)  
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-  I think abortion is wrong under all circumstances  
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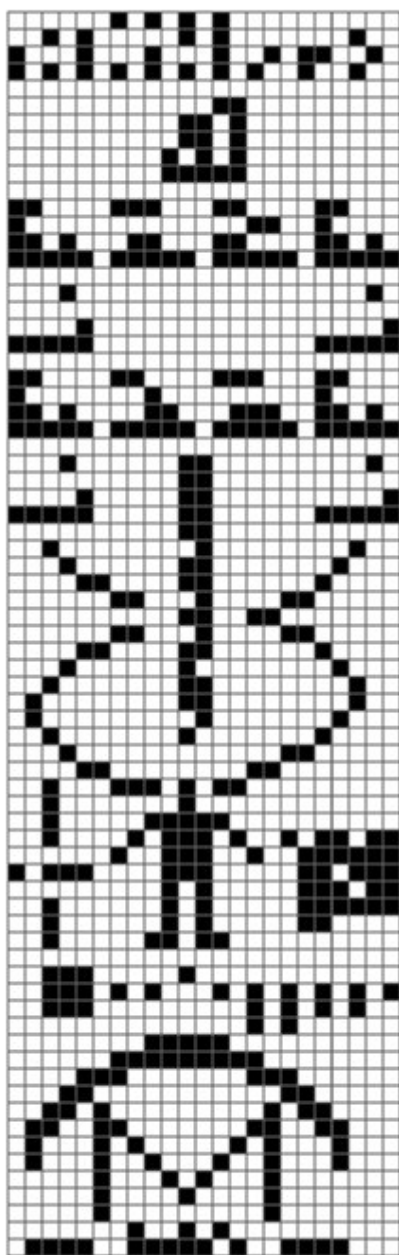


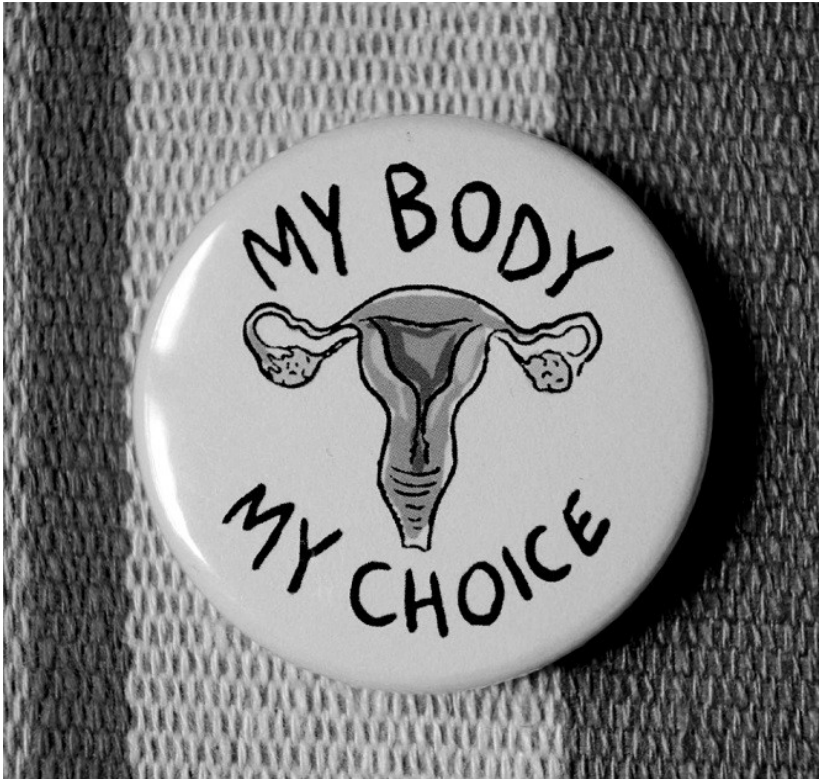




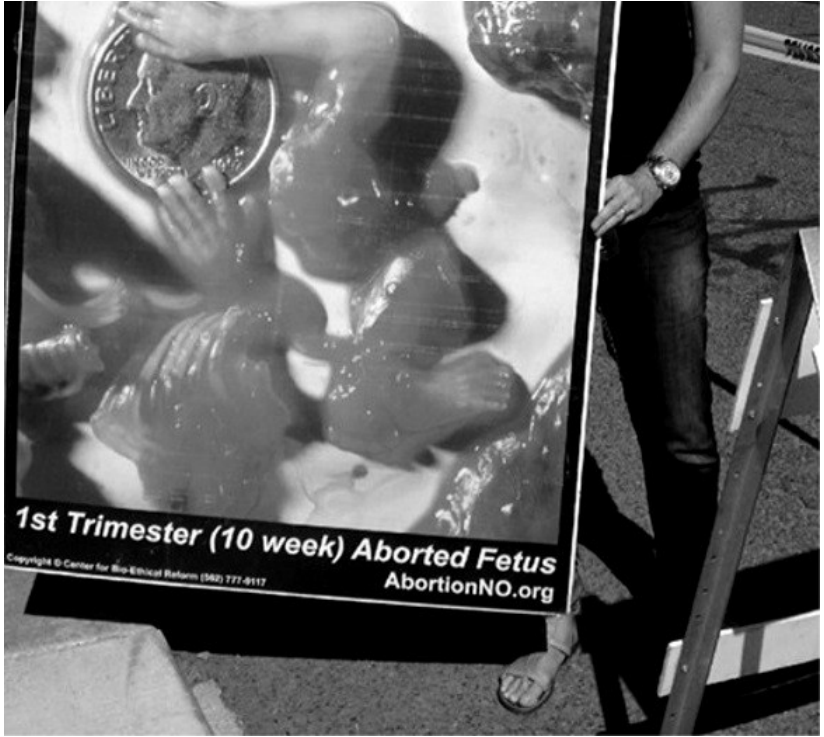






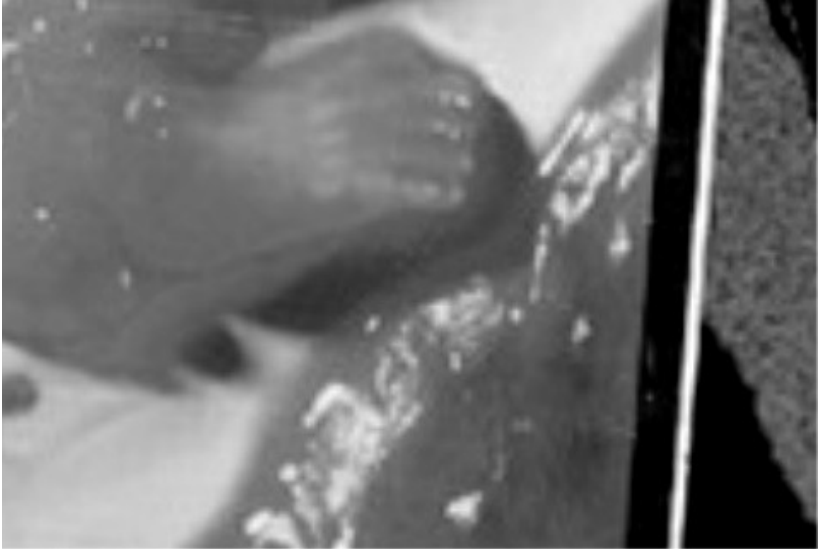




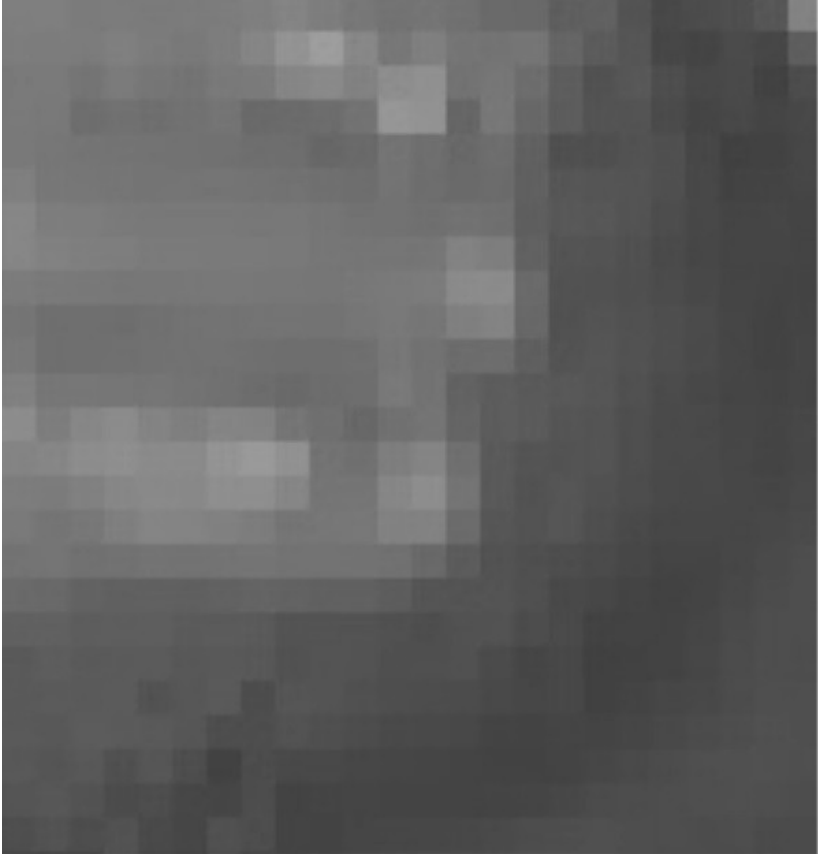














## Chapter Fourteen

### Ω

When my phone rang early Sunday morning, and my caller ID showed that it was Dr. Larsen, I was like “What the!” because I had started to think he was too busy to talk to someone like me. When I answered, saying, “Hello, this is Adam,” no one said anything for a few seconds, even though I could tell someone was there. I said, “Hello” again, but louder, just in case Dr. Larsen had bad ears, or if he accidentally butt-dialed me. He still didn't respond right away, which was good, because while waiting I remembered to hit the red button on my recording app.

Since I had heard him speak on YouTube, I felt like I had a pretty good idea what he sounded like, but when he spoke on the phone he didn't sound at all the same. In the video his voice rang out strong and clear like he knew exactly what he wanted to say, and that he believed his words were like elven oracles that should be written down. But when he spoke on the phone, his voice sounded tense, with maybe a spoonful of sadness, though somehow also angry, but not in a yelling kind of way. I figured he wasn't a morning person.

“What is the real reason why you are calling me?” Dr. Larsen said at last.

“To interview you about biology stuff. For my English presentation. Which is due very soon.”

There was silence again. Then he said, “Who put you up to this?”

“Mrs. Jordan.”

“Who is Mrs. Jordan?”

“My English teacher. She is the one who told us to interview someone.”

There was silence again. “Did she tell you to contact me?”

“No.”

“Did anyone tell you to contact me?”

“No.”

“Then why did you call me?”

"I have a question no one seems to be able to answer. It's about blastocysts."

He didn't respond, so I explained further, "I talked to Anthony at the ice cream store, but he couldn't help me. Neither could Dr. Richards. And she's a biologist. So I searched the internet and found you."

"How do you know Dr. O' Brian?"

"From the Ms. Perry Show."

He fell silent again. Since I was starting to feel like he was the one interviewing me, like maybe he misunderstood my assignment, I said, "Can I ask you my question?"

He exhaled like he was tired, "What is it?"

"I don't know why the baby girl blastocysts aren't as important as baby boy blastocysts. Because if baby girl blastocysts were super rare, like the boy ones, wouldn't we jump up and down with joy if we found one? So why do we get rid of them like they aren't as important? Because aren't they the same thing, just girl ones?"

Dr. Larsen's tone changed suddenly. With a venomous voice, he said, "Who told you to ask me this question?"

"Just my brain."

"Your what?" he asked, irritably.

"My brain. Just me. I thought of the question. And it has been bothering me for a long time now because I can't figure out why the—"

"You really expect me to believe this- this- insanity?" he interrupted, like he was talking more to himself than me. "Just pure coincidence, right?" Then he broke off and laughed, though not in a nice way, and I could hear him breathing oddly. "You just happened to call *me* to ask *me* *this* question? Is that what I'm hearing you say?"

"Yes."

He laughed oddly again, and I could tell his mouth wasn't near the phone, like he was holding it down by his waist.

I didn't say anything. He swore bitterly. I still didn't say anything.

Since things were starting to feel a little awkward, I said, "I can call back later, if this isn't a good time."

"No... No, this is the perfect time. Let's talk about your question," Dr. Larsen said, sounding more confident.

"Ok."

"You want an answer? The right answer?"

"I do."

“And you want to know why the so-called baby girl blastocysts or baby boy blastocysts aren't equally important? Is that right? Is that your question that you have for *me*?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well here's your answer It's not complicated We decide what is important and what isn't in the face of competing interests ”

“I don't understand.”

“What don't you understand? It's so very simple ”

“Well...” I said, my brain feeling like a 32-bit system trying to run 64-bit software. “Who is the 'we'? Because no matter how many videos I watch, or how many really smart people I try to read, I can't help but think that the baby girl blastocysts are important. It's like I just somehow know.”

He laughed a little and then said, “There are lots of things that we think we know Lots of things that trigger our disgust reflex Lots of things that strike us as immoral But which are not It's just the programming It's all a matter of programming And once we see it for what it really is, then we become the programmer, and we make the proper adjustments ”

“So do you think God is the programmer? Or us?”

“There is no Programmer There is only Us ”

“So we are the Programmers?”

“We are the only ones ”

“But what if two Programmers disagree?”

“Then they work it out ”

“How?”

“With reason With science ”

“Like with our thoughts and experiments?”

“Yes ”

I don't understand.”

“Why not? You've just laid it out It's simple ”

I tried to think how it was simple but couldn't, especially when everything I had been reading online seemed to show how far apart everyone was; and how everyone seemed to be their own Programmer, deciding what is it right in their own eyes, and how when they argue and use reason, the people use the reason differently, coming to all kinds of different conclusions; and when they do disagree, they sometimes fight; and when enough want to fight it leads to war, or when just two powerful Programmers want to fight, it leads to war; and

then lots of people become sad; and die; and life everywhere starts to feel like plastic spoons; or fingernails; or tissue paper; or like the tiny feet.

I asked, "But what happens if the two Programmers disagree about how the science should work? Or like what it should try to do?"

"Then one of them gets left behind "

"How?"

"One falls behind Like a runner who can't keep up Or like an organism that is too weak and sick "

"I don't understand."

"Most do but don't They don't want to admit that they know—that they do understand, preferring rather to cling to their myths But yes, sometimes there is real disagreement In those instances the better idea has to win out It's the dance It's part of the game Struggle and progress Advancement and ideas There is no other way forward "

"So one of the Programmers loses the race?"

"Yes "

"And it means that the Programmer who won the race is better?"

"Yes "

"But what if he is bad?"

"Bad? No Remember that in the face of competing interests, *we* determine what is important and what is not The 'we' who kept running is the Programmer He determines what is important He sets the rules He crafts the new standard "

"So if a Programmer decides that baby girl blastocysts aren't important, then they aren't important?"

"In the balance of competing interests, the blastocyst is deemed secondary "

"I don't understand."

"It means that a scientist, or a woman, or an organization, or a country, or an entire world of people can make a decision to value the blastocyst less than something else they value We call this ethics "

"Oh," I said. "But what if a Programmer decided that nothing was important?"

"Then he would not get very far in the race "

"So if there were a lot of baby boy blastocysts, and baby girl ones were super rare, and valuable like gold, would it be alright for the Programmer to get rid of the baby boy blastocysts?"

He hesitated and then said, "Yes "



“What if he found one of the super rare baby girl ones and decided to get rid of it? Would it be alright for him to do that?”

There was deep silence.

“Would he get very far in the race, Dr. Larsen?”

There was still only silence, the kind that doesn't sound like silence at all.

“Dr. Larsen? Are you there, Dr. Larsen? Dr. Larsen?”

After what seemed a long time, he said, “Yes,” slowly and quietly.

I thought about that.

“What are the odds that you of all people would ask me this question?” Dr. Larsen said, his voice nearly a whisper.

“I don't know. I'm not very good at math.”

“I need to go now ”

“Can I ask you one more question?”

Since Dr. Larsen didn't respond, I figured he wanted me to ask, so I said, “Would you rather find a baby boy blastocyst or find alien life on another planet?”

.....

Roger did not answer the child's question, but stood in the stillness of the cheap hotel room, a man conflicted in his inmost being. Turning toward the door, he flicked off the phone and tossed it on the bed and walked outside into the bright morning light. He moved slowly to the edge of the asphalt and gazed off across the lonely stretch. The sun felt hot against his skin, and the rocks in the distance rose like broken teeth. He stood squinting off, breathing slowly, a soul tethered to broken flesh. His head ached and the wound he suffered throbbed. Touching it involuntarily he found fresh blood on his finger and unceremoniously wiped it on his pants.

He peered off to his right and then at the stolen car and ground his shoe against the loose grit.

He drove the nearly thirty-two hours straight back to Martindale's Assisted Living Complex and parked his car in a handicap spot near the front door. He exited the vehicle and strode into the building and punched numbers on the keypad. The woman behind the desk straightened with a flash of fear when she saw Roger pass along the far

side of the room toward the hallway. There was no one in the lonely corridor save an elderly man advancing slowly with an aluminum cane. Neither spoke to the other.

He turned down another hallway and came to her room. A small metal plate fixed to her door bore his mother's name. He regarded it momentarily.

Inside he found her sitting in a recliner, small and bent and staring blankly at the television. A game show was playing loudly. Roger walked over to the TV and turned it down and crouched before his mother, squaring directly before her. She seemed to know he was there but said nothing. Roger tried to perceive some spark of life in her eyes. Her head tottered slightly as if held by a tremor. She did not meet his gaze.

“Mother, I'm here,” he said, gently.

She did not respond, her mind broken.

“I heard you were not well,” he said, waiting and watching. “I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Mother. I'm very sorry. Please forgive me.”

His mother slowly lifted her hand and touched the side of his face and spoke words that Roger could not understand. Roger looked the picture of grief. His composure began to crack but he held it in check. Tightening his jaw, he said, “I want you to know that I will be going away. There are matters that must be dealt with—things much larger than me. I don't know if I will see you again. I don't know if I will ever see you again. Thank you for giving me everything I needed.” Roger paused, glancing toward the door. “The rest is my fault. I'm sorry I failed.”

His mother's head trembled, and her hand shook, but she did not say anything.

Roger glanced at his watch and rose and looked one last time at his mother and left her room. The hall outside was empty. He made his way back the way he came until a group of men in police uniforms appeared, shouting instructions and pointing their weapons at him. Lacing his fingers together behind his head, he dropped to his knees and slid to the ground, and the police descended upon him with strength and fury.

.....

When Samantha concluded her presentation, the class clapped and Mrs. Jordan said, “Thank you for that, Samantha. That was very nice.

Your Aunt sounds like a wonderful woman.” Samantha's face beamed, and Mrs. Jordan looked down at a paper on her desk, “Let's see here. Adam, I believe you are next.”

I stood and walked to the front of the class and set down my backpack on the floor. I unzipped it and pulled out my tape recorder and set it on Mrs. Jordan's desk. She smiled when she saw it.

“This is my mom's. It was in our closet. It's vintage.”

Mrs. Jordan nodded knowingly.

“Actually, I used a phone to record our conversation, but I was able to put it on the tape recorder by setting it in front of my speaker while it played.”

“Oh, good thinking. That adds a nice touch.”

“Thank you.”

“So who did you interview, Adam?”

“I interviewed Dr. Roger W. Larsen.”

When I said Dr. Larsen's name, Mrs. Jordan made a funny look, almost as if what I had said didn't make sense. She looked at me and asked, “The biologist?”

I nodded, “Uh-huh.”

She gave me a strange look again.

“We talked a couple days ago.”

Mrs. Jordan started to say something but stopped, like her thought was a sweater caught on a branch. Her expression changed too. Then she said, “Feel free to start when you are ready.”

I turned to face the class. “I chose to interview Dr. Larsen because he's a really smart biologist. We talked about a lot of interesting things.”

I turned and pressed the play button and stood back and listened with the class. While it played, Mrs. Jordan sat leaning forward, listening carefully, like she was thinking hard about every single word. I felt a little concerned about my grade since she looked so serious. Molly made stupid eyes at me at one point but I didn't do anything back.

When it was over, Mrs. Jordan looked like she had just finished riding a fast roller coaster, or that she had just tasted something incredibly surprising. Even when I smiled at her, her expression didn't change.

I walked over to my backpack and pulled out my notebook, so that I could remember the two things I wanted to say. Then I cleared my throat and explained that I had been thinking about the question of the baby girl eggs for a long time, and that the subject could be confusing,

and that a lot of people disagree about it, and that they get really upset sometimes, which makes sense. I told them about some of the things I had tried to read, and some of the videos I tried to watch (though I didn't say anything about the tiny feet), and how God kept coming up. I told them how I wasn't sure Dr. Larsen was right, even though I could kind of see what he was trying to say, and how his view kind of made sense if you were looking at things from another direction. I told them that a lot of people say that the issue of abortion comes down to what a fetus actually is, and that the correct answer makes one side win. But then I said that I wasn't so sure, because people don't play by the same rules, and that people make up rules for the kind of game they want to play, and that people have tons of preferences, and are very good at making their preferences most important, and that they are good at not valuing the things that they should value, and come up with all kinds of weird reasons for doing what they do, which makes sense if they are the Programmer. So then I told them how I thought the issue all seems to come down to who is in charge, and how if there are a billion Programmers there would always be a battle to find out who should be the Super Programmer, and how history is one super long story of Programmers trying to get all the power, and how we are not very good at saying what should be and what should not be, and how we have a really hard time doing what we think should be and avoiding what we think should not be. I told them how some mothers believed in bodily autonomy, and how they didn't think the cluster-of-cells baby was a person, and that they couldn't agree when a person becomes a person, and that some just didn't care. I told them how many cluster-of-cells babies are aborted each year, and how that didn't matter if Dr. Larsen was correct. I told them how a cluster-of-cells baby would want to have a vote, and how we would all surely want to be here, and how our feelings now should tell us how the votes should be counted back then, unless of course we are very sad and don't want to live. I told them how humans look at the meanness of the world with all its death and sadness and is tempted to think that life is not worth much, and that this causes some to question God, and to think that this means they can do what they want with science, not knowing that the meanness and rated-M-for-mature stuff in this world is supposed to tell us something about the terribleness of sin, and its horrible effects, and how it would be weird if the Earth blamed the Sun for getting really cold for running far away from its light, and how this tells us that our

big questions depend on what is super true in order to get the right answer. I told them how language was important, and how certain words make us see things differently, and how pro-choice and fetus and ending a pregnancy tell one Programmer's story, while words like pro-life and baby and dismemberment tell another, and how this all goes back to what is good, and what is right, and who can say what is so. I then told them that I was just a kid, and that I had a lot to learn, and how for now I couldn't help but think that the baby girl eggs were just as important as the baby boy eggs.

## Epilogue



When the men in black suits questioned Roger in the interrogation room, pressing him for answers with tireless inquiry, time without end, their faces crude and distrustful and close, with Roger answering in an oddly serene fashion, bordering on absurdity, they did not believe his candid admission to destroying the zygote out of mere spite. A lawyer with a blue tie and a black briefcase came to Roger and told him to say nothing, but he would not listen.

In his holding cell, Roger could hear the muffled sounds of others grunting and talking through the night, men of the world who had done terrible things, or so he wondered. Light seeped under the door and mingled with the darkness, fading to walls of unending space. He lay thinking, desperately tired, and sometime near morning he reflected on his actions, and the now dissipating sorrow, noting with growing irritation the absence of any real repentance. If only fate had sent him repentance—burning repentance, that breaks the heart, such repentance as torments one into dreaming of the noose or the watery depths. But he felt no such thing, and by degrees he came to not regret his crime. He could not think how what he had done was deserving of his present treatment, nor his forthcoming condemnation—and how if one took a broad, completely independent view of the matter, free from all common influences, his decision wouldn't be viewed as rational.

When news of what Roger had done spread to the masses, circling the globe several times over, with both the great and the small crying out bitterly for justice, Roger receded into silence, choosing to say nothing and accept whatever would befall him. The world raged at what he had done, and lawyers amassed in gleeful preparation for the legal battle to come.

As the news cycle shifted, enlivening and capturing the public's attention with fresh events, most forgot about Roger. Only those committed to the details of the unfolding legal procedure remained

interested, especially as the days bore on into weeks and eventual months, with only sporadic reprisals of the situation making front page news.

Then it all changed when a couple from Northern Ireland announced to the world that they were pregnant with a baby boy, and that it happened in the most usual way after a good dinner and a good drink. The world stood captivated, knowing nothing else but the happenings surrounding the momentous occasion. Shortly thereafter a lab in Japan fertilized two eggs with an unmodified XY sperm. More boys appeared around the globe until people began to feel confident that the problem was releasing its grip. Something akin to normalcy bled into life again, and people everywhere tried to have children, and like tiny blue sparks flashing in the night, boys kept being created, wondrously and mysteriously.

Roger was charged with involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to serve a term of no less than eight years at a prison outside Siberia, Indiana. No one cared any longer about his other past deed, and with a quiet dismissal from a judge, of which no one took notice, the act was deemed inconsequential. No crime nor punishment.

Some would wonder if there was a lesson to be learned through the whole strange affair; if God had tested man, or had orchestrated the entire event so as to teach humanity a crucial truth. Few figured this could be so, and most meandered on through life, demonstrating again how fickle mankind can be, and how easily the interests of men course with the currents of what would-be-gods judge salient and sacrosanct, until they lose power and bark and churn in their turmoil—since man is not a creature that enjoys losing control.





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