

X XX ZERO

a novel by
Robert Locke and William Roy Harp III

PART ONE of THREE

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rev. and 1999

NOTE 2015: I used to write on my title pages something like: “All Rights Reserved: Nobody can use this unless they contact me or my agent in writing.” But I just turned 70; so screw that. This is a good play. If you want to do some scenes from it, go ahead and be my guest. But I hope that you will at least tell me about it, and give me the writing credit for it. If I am still alive—and that’s growing more and more doubtful—contact me at boblocke@csus.edu

Chapter One

RISKS and BENEFITS (cont., p. 7)

8. We understand eggs which do not fertilize become the property of Life, Inc. to be used for practice by employees of Life, Inc.

(initials)

9. Neither Life, Inc. nor its employees or consultants are to be held liable for any damage resulting from any failure of equipment or utilities, strike or other labor disturbance, any war, acts of public enemy, fire, wind, flood, mud, earthquake or any other act of nature or God, foreseeable or unforeseeable at this time.

(initials)

By signing this consent document, we declare that we have read and discussed each clause with a Life, Inc. physician, and that, despite the known risks, and possible risks not yet known, we wish to undergo In Vitro Fertilization - Embryo Transfer (IVF-ET).

May 20, 1998

Audra Irene Rand / Cully Rand

(DATE)

These various propositions and so many more, to which we had already acceded and given our written consent, seemed designed to continue to remove me from my real and understood world. The clinic itself was almost featureless, with long corridors painted violet-gray and lined with unmarked closed doors. On some there was a sign from the world I'd left behind: 'men', 'women', 'utility'; and more than once during the last month I'd felt like a passenger on a starship, with no knowledge of what was behind a door or what my destination might be. In this place, and during the last thirty days, I'd been more isolated and disoriented than at any time in my life. My wife was on a wild ride without

me. We had mortgaged our house and our privacy, and all my intellectual capacity had been consumed by legal and biological imperatives.

New clinic people kept turning up, seemingly important people like the woman in the white lab coat presently on the other side of the curtain in the pre-op room where I now sat by Audra, doped and prone on her gurney. I recognized the woman immediately, even though I had caught only a glimpse of her before the husband of the other patient in the pre-op room had snapped the curtain shut between us. A hot and spicy argument ensued among them which, no matter how hard I concentrated on the papers and no matter how much the trio on the other side of the curtain tried to mute their voices, I could not shut out. Audra put her knuckles to her eyes and worried her head back and forth on the pillow.

I recognized the woman in the white lab coat as the unlikely woman who had so amused Audra and me on the first day of our star journey at Life, Inc. It was a Monday morning and, from our vista down the hallway from the chairs in the lobby, we had watched her approach in some disbelief, a cup of coffee aslant in one of her hands threatening to spill each time she bumped against the wall as she stumbled along squinting at the papers she held in her other hand. I remember her a smear of scarlets: silky blouse and scarf of two different scarlets, slacks of a third tending toward burgundy, two-toned shoes of a fourth and fifth, dangly earrings glittering ruby and carmine, crimson lipstick, and fingernails—surely more numerous than ten—that were flat-out red.

"She probably put that outfit on Friday night and hasn't been home yet," Audra whispered to me.

To top the confection was a streak of white through her raven hair, dyed so black it was almost blue and the streak bleached so white and pulled back so perfectly, just to the right of center, that it looked painted on like an unbroken line on a new asphalt highway disappearing over a hill.

But what was most extraordinary, I saw as she got closer, was that the white streak in her hair was mimicked in her right eyebrow and eyelashes. At a distance it was barely noticeable, a slight asymmetry which confused the image of her face. But as she neared us, the pure white whiteness of the tiny hairs stood out starkly against the burnt copper of her skin giving her the appearance of a lopsided mime in negative and rivetting my stare.

When she arrived at the lobby she stopped as though suddenly remembering something. She snuck a peek around the corner of the wall at the receptionist—Margarita, as she had already introduced herself to us—who was working on some papers at a back counter and had her back to the hallway. The stripe-headed woman began a very comic tip-toeing toward Margarita, noticing Audra and me and including us with a wink of white eyelashes and a varnished fingernail to her lips. She was as tall as any woman I've ever seen and lank—a word that seems coined for her—with legs so long that each tip-toe step covered a good foot and a half. She skirted the front counter, quietly setting her coffee cup and papers down on it so as to free up both hands as she crept up on Margarita, leaned close-in over her shoulder and blew into her ear as she fastened a tickle-hold onto her armpits which caused Margarita to shriek and jump so high that her bottom nearly didn't find the chair again.

"¡Ay, Margarita! ¡Ya son tres!" the woman cried in a triumphant trumpet. And then, laughing a splashy laugh she began backing her way out from behind the reception desk, bent double with fun as she pointed one taunting fingernail at Margarita who, for her part, shared the fun with a shrill giggle that verged on hysteria.

"Vera!" Margarita cried and machine-gunned a fire of Spanish so rapid that my two years of high school Spanish could not keep up.

Vera turned, grabbed up her coffee cup and papers, and trotted and waltzed a meandering way across the lobby laughing back at Margarita over her shoulder. As she

passed our chairs she glanced down at me from the heights of her glinting black eyes—so black it didn't seem possible she could really see out of them—winked at me again with the white eyelashes, and danced out of sight up the hallway, sending back to us peals of laughter. She was spectacular, really, and Audra shared with me the look she reserved for such spectacle. Margarita, still laughing, caught Audra's glance and grew quickly somber, making a little moue of embarrassment and saying something I didn't quite catch but which sounded like a little regretful, "Well, that's Vera."

And so it was with surprise that I now saw this very same Vera appear in our pre-op room. Audra and I had laughed together often over her and Audra even took to performing a very funny and expert impersonation of her at parties, dubbing herself Vera The Clown, and tip-toeing like a high-stepping horse in dressage. We had decided that the woman must be an accountant or bookkeeper or some other backroom-type employee since this severe and sterile clinic, dealing with such a nervous and high-strung clientele, would surely never hire such a motley, ribald character to deal with their public. But here she was now addressing the couple on the other side of the curtain, a vision of orderliness in her starched white lab coat and with a voice that was not at all the raucous voice I remembered laughing with Margarita. I doubt I would even have recognized the woman except for those sport eyelashes and eyebrow and the white streak in her hair. I wondered, in fact, if she could possibly have a twin, sharing a genetic deviation and reverse mirror-image personalities.

I could hear her on the other side of the curtain, after the man snapped it shut, attempting a soft and confidential tone with him. Even when their discussion began to grow shrill on the man's part, she managed an admirable calm. Finally the man exploded. "Okay, all right, give me the goddamned cup!" he said, and the curtain billowed as he pulled a section of it open with a harsh swish of rings on the rod. "I know where the

goddamned room is!" I could hear his progress down the hall and could feel that he took with him most of the palpable tension. There followed a few soft murmurs between Vera and the woman on the other gurney and then the curtain billowed again and Vera let herself into our sanctuary.

Judging from the expression that came over her face, my own face must have worn some sort of pained expression as it looked up from the consent forms. "Cully?" she said, the question mark soft and invitational.

"I didn't know you knew my name."

"I do. Your picture's in your chart and—guess what?—your name's right next to it." She laughed that same splashy laugh, which seemed to fit better on the smear in scarlet than on this starch of white, then turned to Audra on her gurney and waggled her foot playfully. "Audra? I thought you should be introduced to the woman who's going to be working with your eggs. I'm loose Vera; I'll be your embryologist today." She laughed again.

"Sorry?" I said at the same time as Audra said, "You're *what*?!!? *What* did she say?!!?" swivelling her head to me with a shock that threatened to burst into laughter.

The woman's smile faded as she looked from one to the other of us. "I'll be your embryolo—it's like 'I'm loose; I'll be your waiter today'. Like a joke? Nevermind, it's not very funny."

From my chair near the foot of the gurney I had the advantage over Audra of being able to read the name on the woman's badge: Luz Rivera.

Audra persisted. "She's *what*; she'll be our waiter today?!!?"

"L-U-Z, Audra," I lurched into the morass. "Her name is Luz Rivera, L-U-Z. That's Spanish for light," I said, turning back to the woman as I said it, with the unfortunate consequence that it appeared I was instructing her in her own language.

"Yes," she said, only a little off balance and even managing a smile. "Very good."

"Her name is *what?*"

"L-U-Z!"

"Her name is *Luzz?!?*"

"Audra, catch up!" I admit to yelling just a little. "Her name is pronounced like it's spelled L-O-O-S-E, like loose, but it's L-U-Z, Luz. Not luzz but loose." I turned back to Luz with a grin that—I'm positive in hindsight and was pretty sure then—must have looked utterly foolish. "Whatever you've got plugged into her, Luz," I said, gesturing to the plastic bag of clear fluid dangling from the pole beside Audra's gurney with its tube leading into a needle in Audra's arm, "must be great stuff; she's really very smart; she's a lawyer."

"Just a mild calmativе," Luz replied with a smile. "Maybe I should have Joan run a line to you too, Cully?"

"Not yet!" Audra said. "He's still got his job to do! Uh, Luz."

"You're right," Luz laughed and turned to me, her black eyes glinting again, so that for the first time during these laughable, private processes I found myself flushing as she added, "So Cully, if we can get that semen specimen now? In the E.R. I *know* we've got visuals more conducive to collecting than those consent forms."

E.R.: not Emergency Room but Ejaculation Room.

"Sure, yeah, well, but first..." I said, wresting my eyes away from her right eye and trying to focus them on the papers in my hand, "I was just reading these paragraphs, you know, through again, these here, and I can't get past this part where you throw the eggs away."

"Well, just the unfertilized ones," she said, and I gave myself cautious permission to look again on her face. Other than the pair of eyelashes, their brow and the streak in her hair, she was actually almost normal looking. The blue-black hair was not dyed after all, I

guessed. And the white hairs—all of them—could not possibly be bleached: they were too white and too perfect. And now that her hair was down and the streak fell softly about her right temple, lending a legitimacy to the extravagance of the brow and lashes, her face was lovely and somehow vulnerable. She wore no makeup at all. The black brow and lashes were already as black as they could possibly be, and the white begged to be left natural. I saw too that I had been mistaken about her crimson lipstick: the lips themselves were crimson, and so full that they presented themselves as extremely, I thought even sensationally, kissable. I glanced back up at the white-lashed eye, then the black-lashed eye, trying to decide which one to address when I realized that both eyes were watching me, the glint of good humor fading into an expression of pique and daring. They had read my thought and their owner didn't like it. I was shaken. It was only some time later, when I allowed myself to revisit this moment in all its details again—and again and again and again—that I remembered when and where I had felt so shaken only once before: when I was a fifteen year old kid in the backseat of Audra's father's Cadillac and Audra pinned me down and dared me—to kiss or not to kiss—and any and all the rest of it. This dare from Luz was different, not invitational but threatening.

"But, but..." I worked to control the stammer, "...but isn't there any way to save the unfertilized eggs too?" I asked her, putting my eyes back onto the papers. "I mean, they just seem so valuable. This whole thing costs so much. Can't you just ICSI them?"

ICSI: they pronounce it ick-see, short for IntraCytoplasmic Sperm Injection. They had already explained this in detail, even though they assured us ICSI did not pertain to Audra and me because my sperm was, in the encouraging and I thought perhaps even self-consciously flattering words of Dr. Gage, "excellent, abundant and highly motile". With ICSI, the embryologist injects a single sperm into a single egg using micro-manipulation of an incomprehensibly tiny needle.

"We could try ICSI," Luz replied, "if we did it right away. But we don't really want to do that with Audra's eggs. You've got good sperm, Cully—good concentration, great swimmers—so there isn't a reason to do it. Most of Audra's eggs will fertilize just being in the dish with your sperm. And the eggs that don't, well they probably just aren't meant to survive."

"That's a little fatalistic, isn't it?" I wasn't intending to be antagonistic but it was, after all, my wife's DNA we were talking about.

"The eggs that don't fertilize are immature maybe, or not genetically right." Luz's matter-of-fact tone didn't show offense at my question, but as she turned now to include Audra in our conversation I felt I had just been segregated, into the male pile. "Remember, Audra, we've stimulated your ovaries to produce this whole group of eggs to grow simultaneously. In a natural cycle, they would have given up their existence to a single dominant follicle with a single egg. So it's no surprise that a few of these lesser eggs just can't make it."

"So what do you do with them?" I asked.

"Well, they go into a little red biohazard bag."

"And that's a euphemism for a little red trash bag."

"You're right."

"But what about this 'practice' part? You've had us initial this clause in the consent form that says you can use them in the lab 'for practice'. What does that mean?"

"Well, it doesn't mean experiment, if that's what you're getting at," she said, "or anything so Frankensteinian." She laughed the splashy laugh. "It's just that all of these techniques, like ICSI, take a long time to learn. You can sort of get it by practicing on hamster eggs or mouse embryos, but there's nothing like the real thing. It takes expert hand-eye coordination just to move them from place to place without losing them."

"So most people do initial that clause?"

"Oh, Cully, come on!" Audra squeezed my hand: her exasperation. "Don't fuss."

"They do," Luz said. "I think people realize that it's in their own best interests not to have a bunch of clumsy embryologists in the lab. If they don't get pregnant on this cycle, they may go through it all again. Most of them do. *You and Audra* might go through all this again, and you're going to want to benefit from our practice." She gazed at me levelly a moment, the blackness of her eyes confounding me because I could not distinguish where the pupil ended and the iris began. "What are you worried about, Cully, really?"

"And why the hell are you worrying about it now?" Audra said. "We've had those consent forms for over a month."

"It seems like it's just now sinking in. You're the attorney. I've been thinking it's all okay if you think it's okay. Are these consent forms okay?"

"Of course they're okay. All medical consents are like that. Did you read your appendectomy consent? It was just as apocalyptic. They have to be like this; that's what makes it 'informed' consent. And here they're going to account for every egg, every embryo, every step of the way. Don't fuss."

"I'd like to have you for my lawyer," Luz said. "You sound careful. And that's what we like to be here in the clinic."

Audra squeezed my hand again, aggravated, I'm sure, by what she felt was condescension. "I am careful. Why? You need a lawyer, Luz?"

Luz laughed.

"I thought your name was Vera," Audra added.

"Nope. Luz. Or at least I'm pretty sure." She checked her badge. "Yep, Luz." She laughed, and so did I, but Audra gazed at her skeptically.

Just then Margarita put her head in through the curtain. "Oh, Rivera, there you are.

I've been ringing you in the lab. Holly's on the line."

"Okay, be right there." Luz turned back to us. "Gotta go. Any other questions about the egg retrieval, or about those consent forms?"

"No," I said.

"Audra?"

"No. I think" Audra paused. "Actually, I'm looped."

I touched Luz's sleeve as she started to pull back the curtain to leave. "Is that guy back?" I lowered my voice and nodded toward the other side of the curtain.

"No, I don't think so."

"We couldn't help overhearing. This is not good, with the pre-op and post-op patients lying here in this one room side by side."

"Well, that's what the curtain is for. And we don't usually have two surgeries so close together. And this sort of ... volatility."

"But it can happen. It's not good. I heard every word her husband said, and so did Audra."

"I'm sorry. But meanwhile, she can probably hear you too." She smiled. "I'll see you again in three days. Good luck this morning!" she added as she slipped past the curtain and pulled it closed behind her. In a moment I heard the murmur of her voice as she spoke quietly to—into the ear of?—the woman behind the curtain. The woman's words were a little slurred from sedation, but I could make them out: "Thank you. He'll do the smart thing, he always does, even if ..." Her voice trailed off, and after a moment I heard Luz's footsteps receding towards the lab.

The sound of the footsteps elicited a sudden and confused mental image of her figure moving away in her white lab coat, in stark contradiction to the woman in scarlets bent double in play with Margarita. And a sudden pang struck me as I remembered my

father's eyes and the way they would follow just such a woman—the woman in scarlets, I mean: Loose Vera the Clown. I used to love to watch my father watch women. I would sit opposite him in restaurant booths and, as my mother and Audra chattered on, watch him gaze happily about at everything that walked. Then I would see that expression come into his eyes and I would turn to see who the woman was. It was always someone very much like Loose Vera: "big and brassy and dark-complected," as my dad put it to me once, with a wink that let me know there was no betrayal of Mom in it, only a reaffirmation of her hold on him. Mom was anything but big and brassy and certainly not "dark-complected", working hard to maintain a creamy skin that always impressed me as being sickly. But she was the woman he had married: these other women of Dad's were for dreaming about. These were the exotic Mexican and Cherokee women of the street whom he had seen as a country kid visiting the big city of Tulsa in Dust Bowl Oklahoma, lurking in their doorways and gesturing to him to come into their lairs, big women with big bosoms and big bottoms whom he saw but never knew, fantasized about but never even spoke a word to as he ran hard away. Why it was the darker women of the street that struck this fancy in him and not the lighter-skinned women, I always wondered, always meant to ask him, but never did.

But this Luz in the white lab coat... she wasn't Dad's type at all and I remarked to myself how strange it was that the thought had even come into my head. The boisterous woman in scarlets, now—she would certainly have caught his eye. Though lank and lacking the voluptuous meat of his usual fantasy women, she did have the requisite stature and length of leg, like a Roller Derby star or gladiatrix mud wrestler. And he would have delighted in her robust, bent-double, trotty-waltzy sense of fun—which replayed for me now in my mind's eye again and again as Luz in scarlets danced by me, looked down at me, winked at me again and again, black eye encircled in its white lashes—and winking and

winking and winking. Enjoying the image enormously, I turned to find Audra's bright blue eyes fixed upon me.

"She's nice," I said.

"I think she's flippant."

I lowered my voice. "I thought she handled all that very well." At Audra's blank look, I nodded toward our neighbors on the other side of the curtain.

We had already met them before their argument with Luz ensued. They had been installed in the room when the nurse—Joan—brought Audra there and hooked her up to her calmativ. The double duty pre-op/recovery room was hardly more than an alcove at the end of the clinic's mauve hallway, facing one blank door leading to the surgery and another further to the right to the lab. Joan had begun to pull the curtain between the two gurneys but stopped when the woman immediately engaged Audra in a groggy conversation. To my surprise, Audra seemed glad of the company and kept asking the woman questions about the procedures she had just undergone. Her husband sat quietly, looking at the floor, ignoring their conversation and my presence.

"I don't think I felt anything," the woman assured Audra. "I think I fell asleep."

"How many eggs did they get?" Audra meant well, but her irrepressible courtroom manner was invasive and I saw the man throw her a look. "Do you know yet?"

The woman rolled her head toward Audra, a sudden look of panic in her eyes. "There were only two on the ultrasound. I don't know if they got them both. Did they tell you, honey?" She reached for her husband's hand, but his attention had turned to the lab door. He got quickly to his feet as Luz entered the alcove, and that's when he snapped the curtain the rest of the way shut between us.

"Good news," I could hear Luz saying, "we got both eggs and they look very nice."

There was a gleeful little gasp from the woman, and Audra smiled up at me. Luz's

voice grew more confidential, and I could tell that she was talking directly to the husband, perhaps pulling him aside. "But you and I need to talk for just a second." I couldn't hear the rest, just low murmurs of properly private lines from down the hallway.

I looked back at Audra. She had tears in her eyes, and it moved me unexpectedly to see her so moved. In the expression on Audra's face there was hope and desperation; it was a look I'd seen often on patients in the halls and waiting room of Life, Inc. but never yet on Audra Rand, Esq.

Friends who know about our efforts at pregnancy have told me it's ironic that I've made a career in journalism writing about reproductive urges. My interest started, I guess, when I was twenty-four and undertook an early spring backpacking trip into the Trinity Alps to report on salmon finding their ancestral ways home to spawn. I got some pretty pictures, wrote a naive and unconventional and inspired narrative, and sold the package to *Atlantic* for \$1700.00, every aught and digit of which I spent on surgery to repair big-toenail beds ruined by a new pair of boots bought expressly for the hike. And I found myself utterly fixated on reproduction. I've written articles on spiders and penguins and mantids, their fertility and sex and parenthood down to the last connubial decapitation and cannibalism for the sake of the spawn. All of this was before I became involved in my own practical applications of the science of human infertility. Now my resume and my own experience with In Vitro Fertilization got me an editor's promise to publish an insider's look at the business and technology of IVF. It has been very difficult for me to be objective this time through—to keep theory and emotion and medicine and practical matters in their places—and as I watched Audra's futile concern over a stranger in a desperate moment on the other side of a thin curtain, the sense of a human community beyond objectivity became pretty overwhelming to me. What is altruism? It certainly must spring from understanding one's own needs. What does preservation of a species have to do with

personal gain? What is the dimension beyond the hormonal? And does it have anything to do with defining humanness?

This moment with Audra and the unknown woman behind the curtain was tender and complex and was exploded by the husband, returning from his quiet head to head with Luz, his voice an ugly, hissy whisper.

"I'm so pissed! She says my sperm's not good enough. 'Borderline!' She says she wants another specimen. Like another one's going to be any better! I held off for three days, like they told me. This is the best they're going to get. I'm so pissed! She says they're probably going to do ICSI, and it's going to cost thousands more. You know how much we're paying for this baby? Shit!"

The woman started speaking at his first whispers, "Honey, shh," and now ended in hiccupping sobs. "We just want to get pregnant, that's what we want. If it takes more money, if it takes another sample, that's what we want, that's why we're doing this. If it takes ICSI, we'll do ICSI. We've talked about it."

Luz's voice remained calm as she rejoined them in the room. "I can't talk to you about money. I don't even know about that. Talk to Carol again. I just need to know from you both right now whether you want me to do ICSI or not. If I'm going to do it, I have to peel the eggs and get them ready for the injections. And once I do that, I can't really go back to conventional IVF. This isn't really a surprise: I know you've had this conversation before with one of the doctors—"

"How do you know that? Were you there?"

"It's standard procedure with an ejaculate like yours. They would have talked with you. It will be in your records. Shall I check?"

"They told us, honey," the woman said.

"Okay, yeah, they talked to us about ICSI."

"And they told you we might need a second ejaculate on the day of the retrieval?"

"They told us, honey."

"Yeah they told us."

"And they told you why, I'm sure, but let me explain it again so it's quite clear right at this moment... we need about twenty thousand sperm to inseminate each egg, but we need millions to start with; they have to be washed, and capacitated, and we'll lose most of them in the process. You don't have millions, which is why we need a second specimen."

"Okay, all right, give me the goddamned cup! I know where the goddamned room is!"

It was right after this that Luz stepped through the curtain to talk to us. And now that Luz had left us, I could hear the woman on the other side of the curtain still weeping, but much more softly. The nurses came for Audra and wheeled her into surgery, and Joan came back to escort me to the E.R. I had already visited the E.R. at the beginning of the process more than a month ago and found it quite the amusing center for ejaculative success with its lounge, TV/VCR and panoply of erotica. In most clinics you just use the bathroom. The doctors at Life, Inc. had requested a sperm sample at the very start to see if our infertility might be a male factor. It wasn't, which I already knew from previous sperm tests, but I didn't balk at their request and duly visited their E.R. and duly retrieved and submitted my semen sample, the very sample that inspired Dr. Gage's very repeatable description of my sperm as "excellent, abundant and highly motile", which affirmation caused me a private, thoroughly unaccountable surge of pride.

But Joan did not take me to the E.R. this time. We went past the room, and she showed me instead to the door of the bathroom. "Sorry, there's someone in there now," Joan said with lowered voice, nodding back to the door of the E.R. It was the hissy husband, I already knew. "You could wait, if you want, but..." Joan lowered her voice still

further, "there's no telling how long it might be. You might prefer to use the bathroom?"

I had found it very refreshing how frank everybody becomes during the IVF process. The talk is usually scientific, and seemingly without embarrassment. But we are, after all, only human, and I appreciated Joan's solicitousness over the difficulties the man was having behind the door of the E.R. as he worked to provide his second ejaculate of the day. For my earlier semen samples we had been assured quietly that if we found it necessary, Audra could join me in the E.R. and they explained that we could capture the sample in a condom during normal intercourse, if we would find that more advantageous, but there would be a dramatic loss of sperm that way. At this point now, however, with his wife recovering from her retrieval, this man with the poor ejaculate was on his own in there with nothing but his hand and imagination.

I had sympathy for him. Through the past several years as Audra and I had seen first one doctor then another in our efforts to get pregnant, I had been called upon to give several semen specimens. At Life, Inc. with its unlikely location of the E.R. right off the reception area, at my first collection I had sat befuddled on the lounge in the E.R. pondering a fundamental question: just how long was I supposed to take? The entire staff of the clinic knew I was in there, and probably most of the patients waiting in the lobby also knew. I could hear footsteps outside the door, so they would all be certain to hear any escaped moans or perhaps even heavy breathing, gasps or sighs during the "ecstatic gush", as that clever author of *Fanny Hill* was so prone to call it. They had given me a ridiculously small cup, the tiniest of targets for something as renegade as an ejaculation. Or at least in my own experience. I browsed the selections of magazines in the rack, *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Cosmo*, a *Victoria's Secret Catalog*, and even an old *Wards Mail Order* with the lingerie pages surprisingly dog-eared and crinkled. The blue movies lying on the VCR looked purposefully well-handled. I wondered who had made the selections.

The question of how long I was expected to take continued to occupy me as I enjoyed the visuals. Two minutes or less would certainly be cause for ridicule among the good folk outside, but so on the other hand would thirty minutes. I wondered whether or not the staff took bets or had ongoing pools based upon the appearance or temperaments of the men who walked down the hallway and into this room. More likely, I supposed, they took coffee breaks and couldn't care. In the end that first time, I turned my watch face down.

Now, as Joan walked me past the E.R. and to the bathroom instead, I lowered my voice to match hers and said with a wink that in retrospect must have seemed to her conspiratorial, or at least odd, "This is fine, thanks." I suppressed the sudden desire to add what I had not until now even unconsciously suspected: I didn't need the movies or magazines; I had big Luz Rivera and her winking eye nicely tucked away in a lurid corner of my fantasy, and I would use her. And surprised, aggravated and guilty at the thought, yet agog, I proceeded to collect sperm.

Chapter Two

Three days later, the day of the transfer, was the next time I saw Luz, in person. The embryologist would be there, of course, when the transfer was performed, and I found myself despite myself looking forward to seeing her again, guessing at what colors she might be wearing. The preoccupation with the woman bothered me if I allowed it, and so I made every effort not to allow it, but joked with myself privately about it instead.

Out of the fourteen eggs from Audra's retrieval we had twelve embryos. Four of them were Grade I, three were Grade II, and five were Grade III, viable but with fragments and unevenly divided cells which, in the inelegant locution of Dr. Gage, didn't "look good". Two of the fourteen eggs did not fertilize.

I had thought Audra and I had a plan, that it was a good plan, and that we would proceed with the plan, but at the last moment when Luz presented us with a form detailing the distribution of all the embryos and eggs, Audra seemed to lose her focus, and a desperate emotionality overtook her. Always the soul of pragmatism and a fierce antagonist to men who characterize women as hysterical, Audra now took me completely by surprise.

She and I were far from ignorant about the procedures. Though this was our first time taking the In Vitro Fertilization route, we had been trying to get pregnant for years, and we knew reproductive science intimately for lay people. Still, this moment before the transfer was the closest we had ever come to getting pregnant, and there were considerations suddenly, physical, ethical, moral, literally life and death considerations which for the first time were facing us like quickly hardening concrete.

We wanted the best chance at pregnancy with not too great a chance for a multiple

pregnancy: obviously a precarious equation with so many medical variables. The best chance, we knew already, was to take the four Grade I and the three Grade II embryos and transfer all seven. The five Grade III embryos, according to our plan, would be cryopreserved if they developed well during culturing. Freezing some embryos, we had learned, is common so that if none of the original embryos implant after the first transfer, the frozen embryos can be transferred some time in the future to avoid going through the entire fertility cycle again. Since the cycle costs many thousands of dollars (the tab for this one so far was \$7,411.91) in addition to the huge emotional costs, this disposition of embryos made simple sense. At the last moment before signing the form, however, this simple sense suddenly made no sense to Audra and she froze, staring down at the paper. Somehow the equation had changed.

"They're babies." She started weeping. Weeping, Audra! This so shocked me that I didn't even think to go to her for a few moments. Luz did. She sat down beside Audra and took her in her arms. I felt utterly helpless. Except for a few tiny very becoming tears at our wedding, I had never seen Audra cry actual tears down her face. Oh, mood swings of all sorts, yes. I had been at her side throughout her law studies, when she passed the bar, and now as she built her practice in which she was fast gaining the reputation of one of the toughest prosecuting attorneys in San Francisco. Emotions hot and cold were stock-in-trade for her, but if Audra ever cried, Audra never showed it. I sat on the other side of her and coaxed her away from Luz so that now she could weep into my shoulder. Luz smiled at me over Audra's head, but her white-haired eye up so close disarmed me, and I had to look away.

"They numbered them!" Audra mumbled.

I bent my head closer. "What?"

"They didn't tell us they were going to number them!" She kept on about the

numbers, repeating it like a chant through her sobs. Finally I thought I understood. Each had identity. Each was a life. Audra who had tried so many ways to get a baby now suddenly had twelve. And she must choose among them.

I didn't have to ask Luz and the doctor to leave us alone: they left the room so quietly I didn't know they were gone until I looked for them. I let Audra weep until she exhausted herself and was still.

"Audra," I said finally. "We knew we would come to this point. If we were lucky." And one by one, I brought out the reasons that she already knew so well, presented her with the sense and logic which she always demanded of her life and everyone in it: yes, beyond the wall in the lab were our twelve embryos; they were waiting for our decision, but they could not wait long; we had to decide this morning; all twelve could not be transferred, or we might have so many fetuses we would have to "selectively reduce"—Audra and I had laughed at this euphemism when we first heard the doctors use it, but now it had poignant personal significance as selective reduction could be dangerous both for Audra and for the fetuses—we would have to freeze a number of the embryos because we had no other good choice; if we didn't freeze them, they would die; freezing would not damage them, but preserve them; we would choose among them because we had to choose; we would choose most wisely.

As I repeated all this, Audra listened quietly. Or perhaps she didn't listen. There was no need. She knew it all. Finally she pulled herself away from me, took a tissue from the container on the desk, and wiped her face fiercely.

"Number one, three, nine and thirteen," she said. "That's who we're going with."

"Those are the Grade I's. You don't want any of the Grade II's?"

"No, I can't bear it. I can't make a decision to abort anybody."

"Okay. I'll tell Luz. She can change the form. You're sure?"

"Yes, but I want to write all the numbers down myself." She took up a pen and rewrote all the numbers on the form. "Numbers four, five and eleven, those are the Grade II's. Am I right, those are the right numbers?"

"Yes, those are right."

"Those are to be frozen today, immediately. And then numbers two, six, seven, twelve and fourteen, those are the Grade III's, right? Those are the right numbers? check them over, Cully."

"Yes."

"We culture them, and in a couple of days, if they look good, those will be frozen, too. There. I'm ready." Her face was compressed, squinted up into thin, horizontal lines of eyes and brows and lips.

"Are you all right?" I asked her. I had never seen her like this before and I was afraid to see her like this again.

"No. Here. Sign next to me."

Audra lay back on the gurney staring upward. I signed the form and took it with me to the door. Luz and Doctor Gage were not far away down the hall, talking in low voices together. They were both wearing white jackets, Luz's over a gray blouse and dark pants; she was pretty and neat against the sterile mauve wall. They came back in the room and both of them looked over the form carefully.

Luz said, "I'll just rewrite this into the computer."

"Why?" Audra challenged. "That's my handwriting. I want it in my handwriting."

"You've scribbled and crossed things out. We need to have all the instructions very clean, very clear. Then you can both sign it again."

"Oh, all right. But I want to keep those papers there. I want them. Is that all right?"

"That's fine." Luz started for the door but stopped as she looked more closely at the paper. I was reminded of Vera the Clown and her myopic squinting and blinking and stumbling into walls. She must have bad eyes, I thought. She must wear contacts or something. Do they make black contacts? Luz said, "You've made no mention of the two eggs that didn't fertilize?"

"Do what you want with them."

"Shall I say, 'Discard them'?"

"Whatever."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Dr. Gage busied himself with paperwork of his own at the little desk nearby, and before long Luz was back with the very clean, very clear print-out which Audra and I signed and dated. Luz took her copy of the form with her as she started for the door, saying, "I won't be long. Oh," she said, and turned back, "do you want some music, Audra? It might relax you a little during the transfer. Joan told me you don't want the valium."

"Yes, I brought my own tape," Audra said, reaching into her purse for a cassette which she handed to Luz. "Could you put it on for me?" Luz put the cassette into the machine, turned it on and was about to leave the room when the sound of Audra's voice came out of the speakers. I recognized the tape at once: it was Audra's summation speech before the jury in her favorite court case, a fraud case in which, Audra claimed, her work was brilliant.

Luz turned back to Audra, "Is that the right tape?"

"Yes," Audra said, and Luz smiled at her, without apparent amazement. "I cued it up already. You said fifteen minutes, right?"

"About fifteen. Sixteen, seventeen. The timing is critical, you understand. Dr.

Gage explained all this to you?"

"Of course, Rivera!" Dr. Gage was sharp.

"Yes, of course, Dr. Gage, I knew that you would have," Luz smiled at him, without apparent offense. "I was just making sure Audra and Cully remembered. And I know that Dr. Gage always takes this time—while I'm in the lab preparing the embryos—to run you through all the steps again. And if you have any questions, Dr. Gage is very good at answering them. So I'll see you in fifteen minutes."

Luz went out the door, leaving the doctor behind quite pinned to the wall. "Well," he stumbled, "I'll just go out and fetch Joan, shall I? And I'll be right back, shall I?" At the door he turned. "And Audra, you brought the socks we recommended, did you?"

"In my purse."

"Good, and I see you're wearing a sweat shirt, good, we don't want you to get cold now, do we? And this drape here..." he came back into the room and opened a cabinet and took a cloth off a pile of cloths. "And if you could slip out of your slacks and cover yourself with this, and I'll be back in a few moments with Joan, shall I?"

The room was quiet without him. Audra took off her shoes and slipped out of her pants and took from her purse a pair of wool socks and lay back on the table, covering her legs with the drape. It slipped off her right leg, and I straightened it for her, then sat on a stool at her side. Audra's voice on the cassette player was crisp. We were toward the beginning of her summation which was—I remembered—deceptively simple: "The defendant, Mr. Gimme, as he has told you several times, is a simple man..."

Then a knock on the door. Joan came in, all sweet grins, with the doctor following. At Audra's voice on the cassette, Joan was brought up for a moment but she identified it quickly as a tape recording and recovered smoothly and without comment. They scrubbed up in the sink and Joan, finishing first and donning rubber gloves, came to the side of the

table and raised the stirrups at either side of the table. Dr. Gage followed right after and took his seat on a stool at the end of the table, pulling on his rubber gloves in expert impersonation of a TV caricature.

"Audra, we're getting ready now," he said with an admirable effort at the really fine bedside manner that his reading had informed him was extremely important, especially with repeatable paying customers. "If you could just scoot down towards me now?" Audra scooted her butt down the table, bending her knees as she scooted. "A little bit more now, please. Yes, good, a little bit more. Yes. And now your heels up and into the heel cups please?"

Audra fitted her heels into the stirrups, and I moved down to a position behind Dr. Gage. He wheeled his head to look up at me as I passed. "Ah?" he asked.

"You said I could watch? If Audra agreed?"

"Ah?" he looked at Audra.

"Oh, he's seen it before, doctor!"

"Oh, yes, of course, fine, fine," Dr. Gage said. "And now, could you please scoot even a little farther, Audra? Yes, yes, thank you. Yes, that's exactly so. Speculum, Joan?"

Joan unfolded a heating pad on the counter and took from it a gleaming metal implement that was unthinkably huge. As Luz had said he would, Dr. Gage prefaced his every move with a description or explanation. "And now, Audra, a little push." He inserted the speculum. "Good. A little pressure." He began dialing it open. Having so often used so many of my own appendages to get at these same secret treasures, I was fascinated. But this was so neat, so clinical, like some movie version of the parting of the Red Sea. At the base of the gleaming metal walls of the speculum was the rosy flesh of the insides of my wife, and in the middle was the entrance to her womb, a little neck-like cervix with an opening in its tip like a little mouth.

Dr. Gage looked up at me. "Yes, do you want to sit down?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. Joan wheeled a stool over for me and I sat rather weakly and pushed myself a little back.

"I'm aware, Audra, that this is not comfortable for you, but can you remain as you are for a few moments? We must be completely ready, as you already know, for the embryos when Luz brings them in. They cannot be out of their medium for more than two, perhaps three minutes. You remember that I did tell you this?"

"Yes."

"And everything's just right, everything's lovely, we're almost ready. And you remember I showed you the canula?" he said as he held his hand out to Joan, and she put into it a rigid tube about the diameter of a thin pencil.

"Yes."

"And you recall that I use the canula to guide the catheter. When it arrives, of course. Joan, will you check on Luz, please?"

I saw Joan all but roll her eyes, but she said, "Certainly, Dr. Gage." She shucked her rubber gloves, dropped them into the trash, and left the room.

"And you recall, Audra, that I thought we would have to dilate the os to your cervix? that it was too narrow? that I would have to insert a dilator? you recall?"

"Yes."

"As soon as Joan returns, yes. But it's all just right, yes. Lovely, yes."

I snuck a look to Audra's face. She had her eyes closed, shaking her head from side to side.

Joan came back in, rather hurrying, I thought. "Two minutes," she said with a smile that looked harried as she went to the sink and began scrubbing up again.

"Dilator!" Dr. Gage said.

"I'll be just a minute, doctor," Joan said. "I wonder if you hadn't better save a moment here and get it yourself?"

Dr. Gage wheeled his stool to the counter and took from the implements in the heating pad a metal tool about the size of a crochet hook, but thinner at the tip. He wheeled himself back into place at Audra's bottom and inserted it into the speculum pointing it directly at the little mouth of the cervix. I had to turn away now.

"Audra," his voice kept on, "as I explained to you, I'm now about to insert the dilator. A little pressure."

A little gasp from Audra. I grabbed at a corner of a counter which presented itself to me. Audra's voice on the cassette player had been growing in power and tempo and—just as Luz came into the room carrying in her hands a piece of flexible tubing about two feet long—Audra's voice began its ascent into the tornado of her prosecution: "Oh, yes, Mr. Gimme would have you believe he is a simple, simple man. But let's look, shall we? at the simple, simple facts!"

"Ah!" Dr. Gage said as Luz arrived, lifting his voice to rise above Audra's. "Here come your four little Rands!"

"Oh, Dr. Gage, please, no!" Audra cried. "That is highly inappropriate! There are eight more little Rands in the lab! I've just had to make a choice among them based on how quote good unquote some of them looked at the age of sixteen cells!" Her voice, loud and bellicose, was so like the recorded voice that I began to lose track of the moment. I turned on my stool to look at my wife, to fix her in sight and memory, but I was distracted by her fingers which were gripping the edge of the table until her knuckles were white.

"Oh, sorry, yes, sorry," Dr. Gage said, perspiring. He took from Luz one end of the catheter, which had a wet-noodle consistency, and inserted it into the canula which he inserted into the speculum, aimed at the opening to the cervix. I stood up and moved to

Audra's side and took her hand.

"A little pressure now, Audra."

"Mr. Gimme protests that his intentions are only honorable!"

"I am inserting the catheter into the canula and... but... but..." The catheter bent in his hand, as though butting against a dead end. "Audra, you need to relax here for a minute because you're very tense. As I told you, your cervix has a little kink to the left, and I'm trying to snake the catheter through the os, but—"

"Dr. Gage, please!" Audra rolled her head from side to side and beat her fists against the padded table. "Good God man, don't say 'snake', good God!"

"Thread, Dr. Gage, thread," Luz offered.

Dr. Gage began to sweat in earnest. After a few more attempts with the catheter, he turned to Joan. "I'm going to need the tenaculum after all, Joan. Rivera, how much time do we have?"

Luz referred to her watch. "Less than a minute. Fifty-five seconds."

Meanwhile Joan brought from the heating pad a glittering stainless steel pliers-like instrument with two very sharp prongs. The doctor took it from her, careful not to let Audra see it, but I had to stifle a gasp and take a seat again.

"Audra," Dr. Gage said, peering over his glasses up toward Audra's face, her knees framing his face and the drape giving his head a disembodied look, "I'm going to use this straightening device, as I told you I might, in order to straighten your cervix. This will make it much easier to sna... thread, I mean, the catheter, in, I mean, the os, I mean, and pass it through, and into the uterus. As I said." Now, with a brow so wet Joan had to mop it, Dr. Gage added, "A little pinch now," and clamped the device in place. I twitched just as Audra did. Dr. Gage pulled the device toward him, and suddenly the catheter in his other hand slid easily a couple of inches into Audra's body.

"Okay, Rivera, transfer," Dr. Gage said, his voice raised against the tumult of the courtroom drama which was fast reaching its climax. Luz slowly pushed the plunger on a small syringe, and it was done.

I looked at Audra's face, expecting to see pain but recognizing only rapture as she began to recite at full volume with her tape: "A simple man, ladies and gentlemen? An honorable ambition? A noble mission? Do not allow the defendant's simple, noble, honorability to deceive you. To run a pet hospital by one name on one side of town, a pet cemetery by a different name on the other side of town and, under yet a third name, a pet-sitting service midtown? Conflict of interest? Not at all. All of the interest is Mr. Gimme's, is it not?"

I looked up at Luz. Her eyes were on me, and she was smiling. I squeezed Audra's hand and brought it to my lips and kissed it.

Some time later, perhaps many minutes, I was aware that Audra was asleep. Perhaps I had been also. Luz had left the room immediately after the transfer to make sure, she informed us, that all four embryos had been discharged from the catheter, and Dr. Gage had sped out after her while Joan quietly lowered the stirrups and rearranged Audra's drape before going out the door and shutting it softly behind her. In the calm that descended after the legal-medical storm, I had felt exhausted and elated, and Audra and I both must have drifted off to sleep. But at my next awareness, I was no longer sleeping but found myself with my eyes open watching Audra closely, my head resting on her breast, her chin just in front of my eyes. I lifted my head off her body and looked down at her face as she slept. It was as though nothing had just happened.

And yet everything had just happened. Everything we had worked toward for so many years. We had finally taken that final step. And it terrified me, suddenly. And I realized that I was not ready. And I suddenly felt anger for Audra, who had step by step

driven me to this moment for which I was not ready, anything but ready. I stood up, and Audra's hand slipped out of mine onto her breast. She didn't wake. Now I stood, looking down at her, suddenly afraid and trying to trace my way back to the beginning of this journey. I was not so naive and self-deceived as to believe that I had not participated but now, as I looked at my participation, I could not find myself in it. It was one of those moments of truth that they write about in pop-psychology texts, and fiction, which last only a moment and have no ultimate substance. And then it was gone, and what did it matter, after all? I had been an accomplice, the accomplice, and my wife might now be pregnant with the child or children that would determine a large measure of my future.

At that moment, I took small comfort in the sixty or seventy percent failure rate for IVF as it seemed suddenly shrunk by the enormity of the thirty or even forty percent success rate. I walked out of the room to find... someone. I walked out to find—of course—Luz Rivera. I think now, however, that I did not admit that to myself at that moment. I was not exploring what that meant. I was allowing myself to think of nothing.

The clinic was absolutely quiet, as it was a Saturday and ours seemed to be the only transfer scheduled. The woman with the brute husband should have been there. That she wasn't could mean only one thing—neither of her two eggs had fertilized. I imagined her at home in tears and pain, her husband off playing golf.

The weekend receptionist whose name was Melanie—I remembered just as I approached her—looked up from her work to greet me. "Oh, Melanie," I said. "I was wondering if the doctor is still here? Or the embryologist?"

"Dr. Gage has gone home for the day, but Luz is in the lab, I think. You can knock and see. Don't go in though. It's sterile."

I walked down the hallway past the recovery room and knocked on the door of the lab. In a moment, Luz opened the door.

"Oh," she said, "fancy meeting you here." With her mask and cap on, I could see only her eyes, glinting. The right eye, the white-lashed one, winked. As I reflect back, I know now that she had been expecting me.

"I was just wondering ... " I said, not completely sure what I had been wondering or what I was preparing myself to say, deeply distracted by her odd-eyed aspect intensified in its severe, narrow frame between mask and gown. I worked to control an insipient stammer, "... if ... I could see the lab?"

Luz considered a moment, pulling the door closed as much as she could while still talking to me through the breach. "Sorry, no admission to the public."

"Even the paying customers?"

"It's sterile in here, you know. Or at least real real real clean."

I pointed to the cabinet marked "sterile apparel" beside the lab door. "I could wear those? That's what you're wearing. What's good for the goose, you know?"

"You could, yes, of course."

"I mean, people do, right?"

"Yes, you could."

"Well then, but what?" She hesitated, and I inserted a wedge. "You know, I'm writing an article about all this—did they tell you that?—and I'll give you a mention."

"Oh, well, that's persuasive!" she laughed. I laughed, too.

"What am I going to hurt in there?" I asked. "Come on. Big Brother Gage has gone home. Come on."

It was a long hesitation in which she was obviously kicking herself over either course she might take. "Oh, all right," she said. "Put on the scrubs and don't forget the booties, mask and cap. And knock again when you're ready."

"Do I put it on over my regular clothes?"

"Please!" she said, closing the door.

It was an innocent question—though one of my stupidest utterings, among so many—and I regretted immediately that I could not take it back. I got quickly into the scrubs, afraid she would open the door again and say, "Maybe not after all." But when I knocked and she did open the door, it was wide enough this time to enter.

"Make sure you step on the sticky mat as you come in."

"That catches the germs?"

"So they tell me."

She went to a counter and resumed her work. The lab seemed too small for such important work, and her nearness in it was powerful. I looked around. There was a window which opened into the operating room where the foot of the operating table faced me squarely. Quite a view I thought to myself, and an utterly unconjured vision of a *Playboy* centerfold opened up on the operating table, her knees up and legs spread open to my pornographic imagination. I put my eyes elsewhere, back on Luz, but as my porn imagination tends to do, it went in for a close-up before I could stop it, revealing a jagged streak of white among the curly hairs. Furious with myself, I wiped the vision out of my head and focussed my concentration on what Luz was doing to make sure the image neither returned nor convolved further.

She had taken a jar out of the incubator and taken from it a petri dish which she now put on the microscope stage, glancing over at me, cocking her black brow. "You're being awfully quiet. That's not what I heard about you. Where are these questions you're so full of?" she said without looking up.

"What makes you say that?"

"Ah, your first question," she glanced at me and the black eyes above the mask reflected the bright light of the microscope.

I laughed. "Are those embryos there? Doesn't the light hurt their little eyes?"

"Second and third questions."

"Have I been bugging people in the clinic too much? Is that what you're getting at?"

"They've talked about it. Not really complaints. They think you're charming, but then you want them to think that, don't you? So you say this is an *article* you're working on? What kind of *article*?"

"Don't sound so skeptical."

"Well, you are *the* Cully Rand, aren't you?"

"*The* Cully Rand? Sure, like you're *the* Luz Rivera, right?"

She laughed, "Yes, *The* Luz Rivera. The one and only. But what I mean is, you're that novelist, the none-other-than-Cully-Rand, right?"

"Ah, my reputation precedes me?"

"But you say you're writing an *article*? Come on!"

"So? I can't do both?"

"I mean, how am I going to take you seriously? You write potboilers, right?"

I laughed out loud, expecting her to laugh with me. But she didn't, which I found aggravating. I said, "Have you read anything I've written?"

She said, "Look, I'm not good at this, okay?"

"Good at what?"

"You come into my lab, you're a big celebrity, and I'm supposed to be all, like, fawning over you and no, I'm sorry, I've never read any of your books. You know, that's not a mark of illiteracy."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I'm so sorry if you thought I was... no, please. It's just that no one's ever called my books potboilers before."

"Not to your face, maybe."

"Is that what they're saying here in the clinic? I didn't know I had *that* kind of reputation. But really, that's fine, if they are. I didn't mean to offend you. You're very gracious to let me come into your domain here, and I'm very grateful. I'll just watch. Okay?"

"Okay, you just watch, but I'm telling you this right now, unlike some of the other people you might have talked to here, I don't want to be a character in your book."

"I'm writing an article, not a book."

"Sure." She put her eye to the microscope, and we were both quiet for a moment as she moved the stage holding the petri dish. "So if you're so full of questions, ask."

"What are you looking at there?"

"Embryos. Yours and Audra's—the ones we're culturing. But listen," she said, "you're not going to have a mad doctor, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"In this book you're writing?"

"I'm writing an article. It's for *Atlantic*. It's already commissioned. I can bring you the correspondence with the editor for proof if you demand it."

"So then, really, huh?"

"You seem to know all about Cully Rand, or at least you've gathered up a lot of prejudices about him, but what you evidently do not know is that Cully Rand also writes serious articles under another name."

"Yeah? What name?"

"Well, I'm sure not going to tell *you*! Why do you think I write under a pseudonym? Who's going to take Cully Rand the novelist seriously? Certainly not someone who calls my work potboilers."

"That really bothers you, huh? I thought it was some sort of compliment. Don't

you make a lot of money?"

"I take my work seriously. My novels are... each one different. They're like my children. I don't classify them. And I don't want other people to."

She sat on her stool watching me soberly. "Okay," she said and turned back to her microscope, picking up a pipette whose tip she inserted into the petri dish containing the embryos. "But tell me this, then, Cully Rand... what were you imagining the other day when you asked me about the unfertilized eggs? Let me guess, okay. A story where an unwitting couple go to an IVF clinic and their spare eggs are used for cloning the mad doctor, right?"

"Not even close."

"What then?"

"Ha!" I said. "You think I'm going to tell you my plot? So you can steal it and make my million instead of me? Ha!"

"Aha!" she said and took the point of the pipette out of the first petri dish and put it into another one nearby, the movement of my tiny, tiny living offspring. "Yet you want me to keep telling you *my* secrets." She put the newly assembled petri dish back in a glass jar, hooked it up to a gas line for a few seconds, then closed the lid and put it back in the incubator. Then she put another petri dish onto the microscope stage.

"So those are our Grade II's?"

"What deduction!" she said and looked at me with what appeared to be genuine amazement. "How did you know that?"

"We transferred the four Grade I's. There were three Grade II's and five Grade III's. You just moved three things from that petri dish to the other. Seems logical."

"Very good. I'm impressed."

"Why are you moving them?"

"These other plates over here contain the freezing media. It's very time intensive at this stage because we have to move them through these gradient cryoprotectant solutions before they go into the freezer. It's liquid nitrogen." The tension between us began to evaporate as she began to speak at more length about her processes. She told me every move she made as she was making it, explaining the science in both very plain and very colorful terms. I liked her even more with every passing moment.

"And where are the two unfertilized eggs?" I asked. "Have you trashed them already?"

"No, they're still in their original culture plates. Sometimes we keep an eye on them for a while, watching for a late change. But embryos that divide this late are probably not good, so it's sort of academic. You're probably wise to ask to discard them today."

"Audra made that choice, not me." She turned that forthright gaze on me but made no comment. "So no practice with those two?" I asked.

"Oh, we get plenty of practice. My next patients might be a little more... well..."

"Well what?"

"Oh, I don't know. A lot of things were going through my mind. But I don't know you well enough to put them into words."

"And you never will know me better if you clam up. A lot of things like what? Nouns, please, preferably with adjectives."

She got up and removed another glass jar from the incubator. "Totally inappropriate adjectives. But I like you, Cully Rand. And I like your wife. You're not... usual. Excuse me! I always get like this in my lab—a lot of time to think—but mostly there's no one around to hear me if I talk out loud. You want to see these eggs that didn't make it?"

She slid another dish onto the stage of the microscope and flipped a switch on the

video monitor above. On the screen I could see two spherical, grainy eggs, each surrounded with a little halo of dead sperm.

"Well, all my valiant little troopers!" I said, and managed a laugh. "But these two gals were just too much woman for my guys," I added, hoping for a laugh from her but not achieving it. "You know, you're right," I said, fleeing from the cold silence, "aside from the article I do see some pretty intriguing plots here."

"But you're not, are you, going to have a mad doctor?"

"Can you suggest something better?" I might have been a bit snappish because in fact a book idea was indeed forming in some tiny cluster of brain cells in the back of my head and a mad doctor did indeed figure in. That doctor back east somewhere, for example, who used his own sperm instead of donor sperm for all those children who all turned up with bad eyesight and looking like siblings. It was irritating that Luz seemed to think it already a cliché.

"Well, where's your story going? Are you really wanting to use the unfertilized eggs idea, or ..."

"Or what?"

"Well... I shouldn't tell you this."

"I'm breathless with anticipation. Go on."

"Well, no one looks over my shoulder here. I mean, an embryologist *could* make off with a few eggs and embryos. What I want to tell you is off the record and you can't use it, right?"

"I can't promise that; I don't even know what you're going to tell me. I won't use names and I can change the gender. But ideas are ideas. What's this one?"

"Well..." she hesitated, thinking about it hard, "the day I came to work here was the day that the last embryologist left. They didn't give him any warning but just told him,

'You're fired. Pack up and leave.' And they watched every move he made until he was out of here and then changed the locks and all the passwords."

"Can they do that? They don't have to give him notice?"

"This is life and death here, Cully; you can't give a disgruntled employee notice, or he might—well, you can figure it out for yourself. Anyway, this guy I replaced, I just thought he was incompetent, but on my first afternoon here I looked at the petri dishes he had prepared that morning, and they were all wrong."

"How wrong? Was he using the wrong media, or what?"

"He undercounted the eggs. Seriously undercounted. One woman had seven eggs, but he reported four. One had ten but he reported seven. One woman had twenty-two, but he reported eleven. That's one hundred percent off. With the first woman I thought he was just careless, but then when all three were undercounted I started thinking that maybe he knew that he was so lame with his IVF techniques that he gave himself a buffer of extra eggs so he wouldn't appear so incompetent if he came up with low embryo results."

"But he could have been stashing some eggs away and selling them on the black market."

"More probably embryos since those could be frozen and saved, and eggs can't. But, come on, the black market? That's a little theatrical, isn't it?"

"Well, that's my business: fiction from reality. And it's possible, right?"

"Like I say, nobody looks over my shoulder." She regarded me thoughtfully for a few seconds, the eyes above the mask profound and provocative, the white hairs of the brow and lashes so perfectly at odds with yet in balance to the black hairs. "But listen," she said finally, "this story of yours. Where *are* you going with it? I mean, it should be honest. All the science is right here and believe me, you could take a story anywhere."

"What I find is that usually it takes me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean I get an idea and before I know it, the idea gets me. It starts leading me. And the story just evolves, somehow, as though with a life of its own."

"And you're just an innocent bystander, I suppose."

"Not innocent," I laughed. "Hardly innocent, but... Onlooker is more right."

"And you're not, like, God then?"

"Hardly."

"Of course. So in your story you've got an egg, you've got a sperm, you're probably going to bring ICSI into it, aren't you? I mean ICSI's 'sexy', right?"

"Oh, yes, ICSI's sexy."

"You've got a married couple? Not unlike yourself and Audra?"

"Sounds promising. And a mad embryologist?"

"No!" She laughed. "I told you. I'll sue you for everything you've got and your baby will grow up with malnutrition." I laughed with her. As she moved the dish from the microscope, she knocked her hand against a jar containing glass pipettes, and a little oil slopped onto the counter top. "Oh, there's a nice little demonstration you can include in your potboiler. That's one reason we put mineral oil in these dishes. When you're clumsy, the business stays in the dish, and you just spill oil. A mad, clumsy embryologist, maybe?"

"Maybe a little mad, maybe a little clumsy, I haven't decided. Most certainly lovely
"

I had meant to be playful, not flirtatious. But it sounded flirtatious, and I could see with embarrassment that she took it as flirtation, and she too was embarrassed. The already dark skin of her throat and forehead deepened its color with a flush, and the eyes above the mask glanced away with a look of peeve.

"But seriously," I said, an effort to rescue both of us, "I *would* like to get together

with you." Worse. "Maybe some interviews. A consultant, with a consultant's fee? You could help with the terminology and science, ideas?"

"I'm sure you have plenty of ideas."

"I mean for the article. I'm not writing a book, really."

She had tidied up the oilslick with a paper towel, and now she caught my eye as she held the petri dish with the two unfertilized eggs over a red trash bag, and let it drop to the bottom. "Duly discarded."

"And witnessed," I said.

"Well, let's see, about those interviews," she said, turning straight on to me and examining me with a gaze that was at once amused and solemn. "I know. Why don't you, and Audra, plan an overnight with me. I live with a friend who runs a bed and breakfast in Bolinas. You can be our guests if you choose a non-weekend night."

A friend. Of course, there would be a friend. Probably very handsome, very strong and robust, with one of those hearty, self-assured handshakes that tell you in no uncertain terms, "I own this woman." Yes, she would be amused introducing me to this friend.

"I've never been to Bolinas," I said. "I've always wanted to go."

"It's beautiful. The air is fresh and clean. You can see the City across the water out beyond the Golden Gate. And we'll talk science. You, me, and Audra. And my friend."

"Yes. I shall look forward to meeting your friend," I said, careful not to put the word in quotation marks or to show any other outward signs of disappointment. After all, I might have reminded myself, why should I be disappointed?

Chapter Three

"Every day I create life, and some days I take it away, human life. And you can't really talk ethics with me: I'm god."

"Goddess, really. Worship the goddess." I toasted her with my empty glass. What had started out as a technical discussion of the rather routine science of In Vitro Fertilization had moved easily into another dimension, under the influence of a cloudless blue sky and a little whisky. Luz was certainly tipsy, and I suppose I was too, to be so bold.

"Nobody ever accused God of being unethical," she said.

"Well, I think people have, but they're nihilists or lapsed republicans. That's not really me. I'm just a little worried about the technology. Aren't we just perpetuating infertility?"

"Sure we are. I'm not a geneticist, and even I can figure out that one. Your children, if any, are going to be just like you, and like Audra, unless I've made some big mistakes in the lab and mixed the wrong sperm with the wrong eggs which, trust me, I didn't."

"So in the real world, my lineage would just come to an end, just die a natural death."

"Heck no, I'd have no job. Job security, Cully." She poured us both another tumbler of whisky—this one a little lighter, I noticed—and relaxed into her canvas chair, the alcohol beginning to color her nicely. "My profession, the treatment of the infertile rich, would die out."

"So in twenty years Audra's and my children—if any, as you say—will need your

help too, I suppose."

"Oh, I'll be retired by then. Maybe my daughter will become an embryologist."

"You have a daughter?"

She shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun on the Pacific and moved her center of gravity toward the edge of her sling chair; the archness in her face levelled somewhat. "No. No children: childless."

"Well, you're in the right field, I guess."

I had booked this weekend at Luz's "friend's" bed and breakfast before we knew one way or the other about the pregnancy, either as a celebration or as a wake. I decided not to accept Luz's rather cavalier, I thought, offer of her friend's generosity of a weeknight on the house but would instead pay our own way for an entire weekend. I decided, further, not to make the booking immediately—although I did want Luz's input on the article—because I wanted to expunge from Luz's mind her obvious notion—though wrong—that I was somehow pursuing her. And further I decided not to tell Audra until the very last moment about this premature booking of our celebration (or wake) because she had developed a pathological fear of jinxing the pregnancy even to talk about it, let alone anticipate it.

It was an escalating drama of suspense as to whether or not we really and truly were pregnant. Scheduled on Day 8 and Day 10 after the transfer were Audra's first blood draws looking for the first indicator of pregnancy: the Beta Human Chorionic Gonadotropic hormone, as they called it and I duly noted it down, produced by the developing placenta. Day 8 the level was 20, Day 10 the level was 44. A good sign, they told us. Not so high that it looked like a multiple pregnancy, but it did double in two days, which strongly favored a prognosis of pregnancy. Audra and I were cautiously ecstatic, but when we found from the ultrasound on Day 25 that the gestational sac was in place,

Audra even allowed a celebratory drink. For me, of course, not for her: she had mineral water. Then on Day 35 when we saw, actually saw our baby's heartbeat on the screen, the final proof that we were indeed pregnant, we both whooped. It was on our way home in the car that I told Audra I had booked the following weekend at the bed and breakfast in celebration. She frowned at my betrayal, but then allowed herself to be very, very happy.

In fact, we needed the getaway. Audra had been completely finished by the rigors of the last two months—the emotional swings, the discomfort of the twice-daily injections which I had had to administer, the sense of mobilizing every resource in our eschatological war against infertility. Then by contrast, there came the several days after the transfer when she lay flat on her back. They had told us "limited activity for three days" but to Audra, who tends to the strictest possible interpretation of any rule, that meant total bedrest.

The entire dire and expensive IVF approach had begun as her idea. I had first been happy to continue forever our childless, connubial bliss, but when Audra made it clear that life would not be complete for her without a child, I decided to be happy adopting and adapting a variety of anti-infertility techniques to combat our childlessness. But after many months of following rigid scheduled sex without so much as a late period from Audra, I proposed that, if babies were the object, we should seek further help. Audra's family doctor had been content to prescribe years worth of conservative and also expensive treatments for our infertility, but when Audra finally insisted upon a laparoscopy to really look and see what was going on inside her, he referred us to Life, Inc. and we were able to put two years of failed intrauterine inseminations into perspective: her fallopian tubes were blocked on both sides and we had inked off years from our fertility calendar.

At our last appointment at Life, Inc.—our graduation—things had in fact gone well: the sac was the right size; the fetus was there, little budlike arms and legs and head; and there was a sound heartbeat. My initial fears and revulsions, during that long moment after

the transfer of the four embryos when I doubted the future and blamed Audra for pushing me into a potential fatherhood, seemed totally absent now, and I was ashamed of them. There was new life inside Audra's body, my child and hers, and it was precious and to be protected at all costs, even or perhaps especially from my black psyche. And it was with those beneficent thoughts that I made the booking at Luz's friend's bed and breakfast, particularly since I hate bed and breakfasts. The bed part is fine, but at breakfast I've always found that people expect the cordiality and intimacy of an instant family. I have trouble enough with the vagaries of my own family and find it exhausting to play pretend with strangers over continental-style breakfasts and well-presented tables.

But China House had only two rooms, and a cubby hole which brought the bedroom count to two and a half, if a real family should materialize. Luz had told me, however, that the other room was booked for this same weekend by Joan, whom we already knew from the clinic, on a honeymoon with her new husband Mike. "Since Mike is newly retired..." Luz paused with enough hint that I leaped to the inference she intended: that he would consequently be an energetic bridegroom with the happy result that we would see very little of our breakfast cohorts this time out.

The house was rather new for a B&B and for Bolinas: maybe 1975, a neo Cape Cod salt box, austere but for a Chinese red trim and a somewhat rakish relationship to its square lot. Its few diagonal faces looked southerly across Duxbury Reef and the edge of the Pacific Ocean to the City beyond, a view almost as elegant as that from San Quentin prison. Though the property was fifty feet above the bay, its long sloping lawn gave a feeling of immediacy to the water. A straight New Englandish brick walk extended through a flat, green grass lawn toward the Reef. But there New England ended. A fantastic Edwardian style double border of perennials paralleled the brick walk for fifty yards, and here in late June the riot of flowers to be cut and pinched and scythed to keep the

view cleared and bouquets on the breakfast table was breathtaking.

Upon catching first sight of the building and grounds with only a glimpse of the ocean beyond as I came through the trees from behind, I was stunned. Luz had sold me very nicely on China House but she had given me no inkling what a fabulous site it was. In fact, I was momentarily ravaged with jealousy that Luz's friend had not only Luz but this paradise as well.

But the jealousy eased when Luz introduced me to her friend, a young woman by the name of Holly Youngquist, entirely wholesome and as angular and irregular in her way as Luz. She thrust her hand into mine, excusing the dirt all over it as coming from the garden and therefore, by extenuation, as wholesome as she. While Holly gave Audra the rounds of the house, Luz took me through the gardens.

"So does Holly do all the gardening here?"

"Well, we both do it. I'm a recent convert but Holly's been painting from her gardens for years, and I caught the bug from her. Now I'm just her garden slave and do what I'm told. She's the aesthete, or that's what she calls herself anyway."

"You don't feel like you have a creative streak?"

"Oh, I guess I do. I get it out of my system at work though. Weird science."

"I wouldn't have thought you could be too creative in embryology. I mean the parents are the creators, aren't they?"

"I have to be creative to solve people's medical problems. Other times I have to stifle my creativity. For instance with you and Audra—" she stopped and blushed.

"Well now, what?" I said, suddenly alarmed.

"Well, that was stupid, Luz," she said to herself. "Don't worry, Cully, it's nothing that went wrong. Well, God! Haven't I made a mess of this. Now you're going to think I'm holding something back from you, and I'm not, it's just—" She stopped herself again.

"You can't stop there."

"Oh, it's nothing. Gage is conservative. He only does what everyone else does, until everyone else has changed and then he finally changes. He's still doing Day Three transfers in spite of the fact that a lot of other clinics are seeing better results with Day 5 transfers. That's when the embryo reaches blastocyst stage, and they've developed this new medium that makes it possible to wait that long. It's also the best time to cryopreserve."

"Which is when our Grade III's were frozen."

"Right."

"But you froze our Grade II's on Day Three."

"Right. That's what I mean. If it was up to me, I'd have advised you to wait, and I shouldn't be telling you this now, but it slipped. But since you're pregnant, I guess it doesn't matter."

"Actually, it does matter, and I'm rather pissed. Not at you, it wasn't your decision. But someone might have told us earlier."

"Cully, Audra's pregnant. That's what you're after. You're not going to make waves about this now, are you? It's all just speculation, you know? No one knows for sure anything. You and Audra beat the odds, so just smile and be happy."

We were at the bottom of the path, near the water's edge, and the waves were mind-soothing. I leaned against a tall rock and looked back up at China House.

"When you told me about this place, you said your friend 'runs it'."

"Yes."

"And who owns it?"

"We do."

"You're partners?"

"Well, yes."

"How long?"

"We bought the house in 1984, together."

"How did you meet?"

"Oh, it's a long story. Did you see these wild impatiens? Or 'wildly impatiens', as Holly calls them," she laughed, and gestured to a healthy looking clump of dancing leaves and pretty little pink blossoms. "The seeds came from a friend on the Brittany coast of France, where they grow in the forests and shady places."

"Well, they're a distance from home!"

"Holly did a painting of them in bloom that you'll see in the house. Very different for her, so much green with such tiny flowers. She usually does huge, pink, vaginal types of flowers."

"Like Georgia O'Keeffe?"

"Some people say that. I hope you don't. Not in front of Holly."

"Oh? Why? She doesn't like O'Keeffe?"

"Oh, no, she loves her. But no one wants to be thought of as derivative. I mean, do you?"

"Absolutely right. And... how did you say you met?"

"I told you it's a long story."

"Gee, we've got all weekend."

She turned to walk along the rocky beach, and I fell in beside her. "When my grandmother died she left me a little wood frame house up through those trees—see up there?" She pointed to a glade of windswept spruce. "It was her summer house that she hadn't used much, but she knew I loved it, or loved Bolinas. So when she died, the money went to my aunt and uncle but my inheritance was that dilapidated cottage, that I loved so much. I immediately moved here from the Mission District in the City, even though my

commute was an hour each way. But it was nice. Two hours on the road each day gave me time to think about my life, and the clinic wasn't so ... pushed in those days. So I had weekends to relax and enjoy this strange little hybrid town. Holly's marriage was rocky. She would go down into town at night to get away from her husband, and there was this bar called The Seagull, you know, atmosphere, local color, noise, a sense of life. I met Holly there, and then we got into the routine of meeting for a drink two or three times a week. We talked about country life and about careers and art. It was nice. Well, she and Wayne finally agreed to split up—they were never really together in any sense—and she wanted to buy the house from him but couldn't really swing it on her own. I helped. I sold my little cottage, my inheritance, to become her partner, and I moved in here too. And that's it. That's the short version."

"The weekend is still before us. What's the long version?"

"The long version is we became lovers."

I was stunned to silence. I did try, after a too-long moment, to make some sort of utterance that would show I was no prude and certainly no bigot and even more certainly held no prejudices about women who love women, but I know I failed dismally. "How nice!" I said, truly meaning it, but recognizing it as woefully inadequate to the occasion. And then I turned the conversation back to China House and its many endowments. "This would be a good setting for a book," I tried.

"We rent it out sometimes as a movie set."

"Really! How exciting."

"Pretty boring, really. Have you ever been on a movie set? It's all, 'Hurry up and wait!' Good pay, though. But actually..." she hesitated. "I thought you had something very much like China House in mind in *The Absent Rib*."

I gasped. "You're right!" I said. Then I gasped again. "You read it? When?"

"After that day in the lab."

"No kidding," I said, extremely pleased and immediately trying not to show it.

"Actually, it's *An Absent Rib* not *The Absent Rib*."

"Oh. I thought it didn't make any difference."

"To librarians evidently it doesn't, but to authors it makes the huge difference."

She laughed, then said thoughtfully, "Yes. I never thought of it, but I see what you mean. And in this case especially. You know the scene where Mona is sitting on the floor just out of reach of the pillows...?"

"Intimately." I considered it among the finest scenes I've written and have always borne a big grudge that it was unanimously overlooked by critics.

"I never knew a man could know those kinds of things about a woman."

"Oh. Hm." I said, knowing even then that this was a comment I would treasure forever.

"But then at the end, when you killed her... that was just so cruel, Cully. I couldn't believe how cruel you were."

"I didn't kill her. She killed herself."

"Oh, bullshit!"

"I was out of my mind for a month afterward! But there was no way I could stop her."

"Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!"

"Luz, I tried everything! Didn't you see that? I thought that was so plain! I couldn't stop her! There was nothing left for her! And she knew it! Don't you know how that broke my heart?"

We had stopped at the edge of a tumble of rocks at the north end of the beach where the cliff had given way years, or even decades or centuries earlier. Luz looked searchingly

in my eyes, disbelieving, distrusting, openly fearing I was trying to make a fool of her.

"It's true," I said. "I couldn't stop it. I couldn't. It had nothing to do with me."

She turned and started up a steep path that led toward China House in the distance. "I don't believe that, Cully. But I'll tell you this..." She climbed several feet before she turned back to me. "It's not a potboiler."

Her nearness—just above me in this wild place, with the waves crashing below us—was dizzying. She turned and continued climbing up the path, her firm bottom in off-white jeans never farther than a couple of feet above my eyes. My pornographic imagination whirled out of control, and I had to force my eyes to the ground to give the woman the respect I wanted to pay her. It was not until we reached the top of the path and Holly and Audra came down the lawn to the edge of the wild to meet us, that I dared look again at Luz. She was a ravishing creature. As she put her arm around Holly's waist and the two of them started up the lawn toward China House, I dropped in beside Audra, and put my arm around her waist.

"They're gay," I whispered.

"Duh!" she whispered back.

I allowed my hand to drift around her waist and caress her belly where our child was growing. Here and now, with this protection, I could look up and admire the two women walking ahead of us. I even allowed myself to open the door to, and even for a moment dwell inside of this Luz and this Holly and their life together, as lovers.

And handsome lovers they were, too. Later in the afternoon as I continued to watch them together, more than once I found myself writing a pornographic script involving the two of them and then, without guilt and with only a little delicious embarrassment, including myself. Now it was all just fun. They were both tall and fit and darkhaired, both tan from their pre-season garden projects. Luz, in the off-white jeans which had so

distracted me on the path, and an off-yellow cotton shirt which showed off the lines of her athleticism, all but vanished among the myriad blooms of the white and yellow climbing rose she was working on. Only her single braid of black hair down her back, with its white streak weaving in and out of the plait, gave her away as non-rose. Holly, cultivating the ground at the foot of the rose, turned up to her and said something too soft to hear. Luz leaned down and Holly whispered into her ear and they both laughed. Holly's hair was long too, but pulled into a tight, functional knot which allowed her to work at her chores unimpeded, wisps of it dragging wetly about her neck. The two women at that moment would have made a sensational photograph.

Late in the afternoon Holly said she was taking the truck into Bolinas for a load of soil amendments, and I volunteered a little manpower. Luz and Audra drifted off into the kitchen to shell and vein six pounds of shrimp for our gumbo, and I jumped into the pickup with Holly. I immediately found myself being silly and making odd gestures in the presence of this beautiful woman who had no earthly use for me. I held the door for her as we went into the garden supply lot.

"Ladies first," I laughed. Giggled, really, I thought as I heard the sound of it echo back at me.

"Well, if that makes you happy."

She was severe and I was noodlish but I was determined to forge ahead. I decided on a course of silent, helpful activity, and before long felt her gratitude, probably for silence as much as for shoveling well rotted manure into the bed of her pickup.

My somewhat Darwinian instincts got the best of me on the short trip home. As the sun was setting I formulated this cumbersome sentence which I recognized as unfit for survival as soon as I spoke it. "I think writers and gardeners have much in common: um, they both need long periods of introspection and inactivity."

"You know I just couldn't agree with you more."

Oh, a thaw. An unexpected kindness.

"Do you know Kipling's line about England's gardens?" she said. "How such gardens are not made by singing 'Oh how beautiful and sitting in the shade'?"

"I don't know it. But it sounds like Kipling. Keeping on and working hard and not much time left to think."

"I guess that's why he's such a bad novelist. No introspection."

"Oh, he's not so bad. There are some nice stories about cats and rhinoceroses."

"You're right." Another kindness. "Do you know the story about his sending his son off to war at sixteen—I think he even lied about his son's age to get him into the army. The son was killed in France and Kipling spent the rest of his life grieving and searching for his bones. That story always makes me think he would have been a better writer if he thought a little harder, and pitched in a little less."

"Maybe he felt like the sacrifice was worth it. England won the war. Maybe it was worth it for him."

"Maybe," she said, "but think about your own baby. Would it be for you?"

"I don't know. Probably not. England did win the war though."

"It's got to be a Y-chromosome kind of thing."

"That's your second anti-gentleman remark."

"You're right. Sorry. Luz tells me I'm on a campaign. But don't you think nurturing can be fierce? Everyone seems to divide gender tendencies into the loveliness virtues for women and the bellicose virtues for men."

"I don't."

"Of course you don't. Sorry for being so categorical. Luz wouldn't like you so much if you did."

"Oh, she likes me? She's told you that?"

Holly turned to look at me. "Well, she told me you're exactly like you are. She said 'weird duck'."

"Oh."

"But come on, Cully. She did invite you here."

Despite her remark about the black and white gender virtues, I found Holly ready to take sides and dig in. We moved from one pitched battle to another throughout the evening. Joan and Mike, as forecast, stayed shut tight and muffled in their rooms, and Luz and Audra found ways to join but more often escape our battles, outside and in, over dinner and wine, over dessert and wine, and more wine. Audra's uncharacteristic neutrality was particularly noteworthy as she sipped at a number of non-alcoholic beverages through the night, beaming at us two aesthete-combatants as though we were in the arena for her benefit.

I watched Luz throughout the evening, removing a course and moving the next, being a kitchen slave really, unobtrusive and efficient. How could she survive her schedule during the week, and then wait tables so energetically? Love makes people work hard, I supposed. She would sneak out for a cigarette, and I saw her top off her bourbon and slip outside and drink in the cool quiet. But she always seemed present, and when she spoke she wasn't just facilitating the feelings of comfort we all felt. She was a human presence, and her style—her forwardness, her invisbleness, her eye, her attention—seemed professional in two very different professions.

Finally, just before the night ended, sitting in the common room in front of the hearth and its glowing embers, surrounded by Holly's voluptuous paintings of voluptuous flowers, Holly's and my warlike approach to conversation seemed to find common ground.

"I take it that in your pseudonymous persona," Holly stabbed, "—the article-writer I

mean, not the storyteller—you like to write about controversies. Just a hunch."

"Oh, Luz told you about John Doe, did she?" I laughed. "As a matter of fact I do: John Doe even won me a prize."

"The Jack Dempsey? For pugilist prose?"

"Close I guess. But it's a technique. Conflict—as Luz can tell you—keeps a story on the boil, but it's also the essence of any good scientific article."

"Sure, Cully, like your drop-seed article," Audra supplied, slyly I thought. "That aroused conflict, didn't it?" It appeared she feared the battle might be winding down.

"No," I said, "No conflict there."

"It was attacked, as I remember, roundly attacked. Or do I misremember?"

"It received criticism, of course, there's always criticism. But it wasn't pugilistic, Holly, and it wasn't roundly attacked, Audra." I smiled at Audra, a smile intended to convey a *cul de sac* on the theme while offering a graceful turnaround.

"So you're going to leave it there?" Holly asked. "You're not going to tell us about this big dropsy controversy?"

"Drop-Seed," Audra said. "That's my name for it. It was Cully's contention that the reason for all our single mothers and deadbeat dads in this country is fundamental to nature and that all guys want is to reproduce themselves as many times and in as many women as they can."

"You wrote that?" Holly turned to me.

"Well, that wasn't exactly my point and those weren't exactly my words, but yes, that was the gist."

"The gist and the gism," Audra said with a snort.

"Audra!" I said. "There *are*, you know, ladies present."

"I am so sorry, I can't apologize enough," Audra smarmed. "It was a terrible pun, a

tawdry pun, unworthy of the company."

"Doesn't bother me," Holly said, "and Luz looks at the stuff through a microscope."
Audra snorted again. Luz sank deeper into her chair and shrugged.

"It's a living," Luz shrugged.

"But Cully," Audra retrieved the careening ball of conversation and tossed it back to my court, "you don't really believe that shit. Men want one thing. And it's not kids."

"Men don't want to raise kids—or shall we say, '*some men*', is it fair to say that, in this room among the four of us, with everything I've been through with this woman, my wife, in order to achieve this offspring which I am committed to take care of until the grave do us part, is it fair to say '*some men*'?—no *some men* don't want to raise kids, Audra, but they want their kids to be out there, they want their genes going on down the line to eternity. That's nature, and that's every species, and if that drive is not there, then the species dies."

I was aware that my ironic tone had a bit of an edge to it, and I warned myself away from it. But Luz and Holly were smiling, and Audra was wearing a twisted grin that looked a little too victorious and so I went on.

"But you should really read the article, Holly, instead of getting it piecemeal and distorted from my wife the lawyer here, who will argue anything, she doesn't care what, and who gives new and refined definition to the term 'devil's advocate'. The article takes a reproductive look at literature through the ages and reveals the trend of paternity at the core of all the great stories and conflicts, pointing out their parallels in nature. Right from Helen of Troy straight down to the movie that's playing around the corner, paternity versus adultery."

"Tell about the cuckoos and cuckolds," Audra urged, bobbing her head to Holly.
"This is good."

I waited for resistance or insistence. There was neither, just gazes of mild expectancy from the three women. "If you insist," I said. "Do you know anything about Restoration Comedy?" More gazes, slight shakes of heads. "Well, in England after the Puritans closed down the theatres and then royalty was reestablished and the Cromwell experiment failed and the theatres reopened, there was what's called the Restoration, and the plays were very bawdy."

"Lots of fun," Audra tipped in. "Lots of sex."

"And this theme of cuckoldry ran through all the plays where every time the boring husband leaves the stage, he is cuckolded. The handsome rogue hero gets alone with the man's wife, the wife opens her legs, and a new cuckold is made."

"This actually happens right on the stage?" Holly asked.

"No, of course not, the rogue and wife go offstage and then they come back, but we all know what they were doing off in the other room."

"They were cuckolding!" Audra winked at Holly.

"And what's that got to do with cuckoo clocks?" Holly asked.

I couldn't suppress the laugh. Neither could Audra. But Luz looked dubious, and Holly looked offended, so I rushed on. "Not cuckoo clocks," I said, "cuckoo birds. You know about the cuckoos, right?"

"Plainly not," Holly said.

"Well, it's an interesting story, really, and not very many people know about this," I breezed on, hoping to blow away the gaff, "but the cuckoos, which we don't have out here in the west, but they've got them on the east coast and in Europe, the cuckoos don't make their own nests. They lay their eggs in another bird's nest and the other bird hatches and raises the cuckoo chick."

"That's nasty!" Holly cried.

"What's even nastier," Audra went on, "is that the cuckoo chick hatches a day or two before the other eggs and tosses them all out of the nest, just heaves the eggs up on its back between its wings and pushes them over the side. That poor little mother bird comes back, bringing food, and here's this murdering little cuckoo. And she doesn't know. Huh, where are my eggs? And she keeps going out and getting more food because this cuckoo is huge, and in just a few days it's twice as big as the mother and she has to spend all her time going off and getting food for it. And they try to tell me there's a God."

Audra had her hand on her belly. She had begun all this as a joke but now had grown quite bitter. I reached over and put my hand on hers. There was a bit of a pause. Then Holly said, "But I don't get it, Cully. The cuckoo that lays the egg is female, right? So what's this got to do with the male drop-seed?"

"No, the cuckoo's not in the article. That's all Audra. My article sticks with sexual freedom among animals without marriage and adultery in animals with marriage, and the way literature reflects that."

"I read this article about adultery...?" Luz began then paused. She had been very quiet, and I had wondered if it was her drinking or her wont. Now the three of us waited while the pause lengthened. "It was one of the IVF quarterlies we get at the clinic, and it had this article about adultery. Do you know how much adultery there is in this country?"

"How would they be able to tell that?" Holly asked.

"Right, like who's going to confess?" Audra added.

"These studies in these hospitals where they're checking the blood types of the mothers and fathers against the babies to find out something else entirely, but what they turn up is that almost twenty percent of the babies can't possibly be the children of the fathers."

"You're kidding!" I said.

"No. I mean, with Audra, trust me, Cully, you're the father. But with these other guys, doing it the regular way with their wives, someone else got there first. And these guys are raising someone else's kid."

"Wow," I said, more to myself than out loud.

Then Audra turned everyone to me. "Look at Cully. He's thinking up a story. God, he's always doing that!"

In fact I think I was. But I'd drunk too much to really stick with it, so I just grinned back at everyone and said, "So what if I am?"

"See, that's why I prefer painting," Holly said. "You do your art and you don't have to worry about adultery and nasty boys and their drop-seed."

"Yes, your flowers just do it the old fashioned clean way, don't they, babe?" Luz said to Holly. And I allowed a little pang of jealousy to escape my net. "Birds and the bees."

"Yes, give me a flower painting any day. None of this tumult shit."

"I find a lot of art extremely tumultuous," I said.

"For me, art is a refuge; fighting is for real life, right, Audra? Courtroom stuff. And that's why, incidentally, Cully, I had no use for *Absent Rib*. I despised that Mona character of yours."

"Really?" I said. The shift was so abrupt and the attack so cutting that I didn't have time to prepare.

"I told you, Cully," Audra agreed readily. "Mona's got no balls."

"Exactly," Holly went on. "And, Cully, damn it, I think you completely ignored the very essence you were trying to get at. Is the question the absence of the rib from its normal place? or is it the presence of the absent rib in an abnormal place, a place where a man resents its being?"

"You're absolutely right," Audra said. "Didn't I tell you, Cully?"

"What made both you and Luz," I said with a toe-in-the-water sort of drawl, intent on detouring the conversation without appearing to flee, "choose *An Absent Rib* instead of one of my others?"

"It was the only one of your books in our lesbian bookstore," Holly said. "We try to buy gay."

"Oh," I said. "Interesting. They must have caught onto the attraction of Mona to Jane; I thought it was only subliminal. And you know, Holly, your paintings..." I said, detouring farther, "they remind me of the very first time I ever saw Luz, did she tell you about that?"

"I don't think so."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Audra start forward in her overstuffed chair in front of the hearth. She feared, I knew, that I was drunk enough to suggest that she perform her famous party impersonation of Vera the Clown. "She was all in scarlets," I continued, "all of the colors in that painting there." I pointed to a huge acrylic painting over the mantle of two red roses of different varieties which were intertwined, both roses exposing inner and outer petals of an intricate spectrum of scarlets, rubies, pinks and roses.

Holly sat forward in her chair, too. "You saw that outfit! Luz, he saw that outfit!"

"Oh, God!" Luz said.

"It was a Monday morning—" I began but Holly took it away from me.

"That Monday morning, remember Luz? We stopped by the clinic, coming home from Louise's, remember? It was an all-nighter, and you had to go in and check whether those eggs got fertilized?"

"Oh, God, that was you two in the lobby?" Luz squinted over her drink at me across the room. "Oh, yes, God, yes, it *was* you. How did I look?"

"You were ... spectacular," I said. "Wasn't she Audra?"

"Spectacular!" Audra contributed.

"Holly likes to dress me up like her paintings. And I have this thing about reds, can't really see them. How did I look, really?"

"Stunning," I said. "What do you mean you can't see red?"

"It's hard to explain, I just can't see them. I mean I can see them. I can see that they're different. But I don't care. I like them all, and I like them all at once, and Holly likes to dress me up like her flowers, she says I look great, what do I know? It's a matter of trust." She sipped at her drink again. There was a tiny silence that seemed to ricochet among the four of us before Luz herself broke it. "I looked okay then?"

"You looked just like those roses," I said, pointing up to the painting again.

"Oh, yeah?" Luz said, looking up at the painting and appearing to admire it for the first time. I wondered what she saw. She ran her fingers through her loose hair and tossed her head and the white streak fell into a perfect lock. Holly sat back in her chair and looked very pleased. Audra sat back in hers and looked relieved. These, I thought, were very lovely women, and I was lucky to be among them. I took advantage of the moment, while no one was watching, to admire Luz's beauty, the contours of her jaw and cheekbones and the smooth, taut line of her skin leading to her fabulous black eyes, the eyebrows and lashes setting them off perfectly, each hair perfect, the black and white effect so clean and startling. I wished I could be closer. I wished I could touch those tiny white hairs with my fingertips, ruffle them softly and let them fall back into place.

Luz turned her head and caught me watching her. I moved forward in my chair, glancing down and up again as though I had been intending to say something, as though that was why I had been looking in her direction, as though what I was about to say had a certain significance, and I opened my mouth, hoping something appropriate would come

out of it. "Do you pluck your eyebrows, Luz?" I asked.

She sputtered her entire mouthful of whisky onto the hearth, reached for her napkin to hold over her mouth, stood up and bent over and choked so hard with laughter that I thought she might pass out. Or die. I've heard that people have—literally—died laughing and I'd never seen anyone closer to it. Holly and Audra looked at me with their mouths open. As Luz stumbled about the hearth I rushed to her side and held her up by one elbow as I tried to wipe up before and after her with my own napkin.

"What?" I kept saying. "What? What?"

Luz sat down on the edge of the hearth and put her head between her knees and coughed and hacked and kept laughing. "Most people just ask..." she started to say but was overtaken by a new paroxysm. "Most people just ask," she repeated when she got her wind back, "what the hell happened to you!" She laughed and wiped tears from her eyes. "Oh, Cully, you really are too funny."

I looked to Holly and Audra who were looking at each other, Holly grinning broadly and Audra wagging her head. It's the kind of condescension from women that I both resent and, I'm afraid, rather enjoy. It's the darling-little-boy and clumsy-oaf syndromes mingled which allow women to embrace men even as they say, "Boy, you stink!"

"We do humbly beg pardon," Audra said. "That's what's known in my family as a Cullyism."

"Well, I would never say anything as rude as 'What the hell happened to you!'" I made an effort at dignity which I was sure wouldn't pass. "But anyway, now that you bring it up, what did?"

"Vitiligo."

"Oh, yeah, I had a personal injury case with vitiligo!" Audra said. "This kid whose

head went through the windshield. But he was huge blotches on his face."

"Yeah, skin first, loss of pigmentation. Mine came on when I was fifteen. I was diving—and I was pretty good, you know, not an Olympian, or at least I didn't have what it takes to go for it, but pretty good, my coaches said I was pretty good—and one day I was doing a forward triple with a twist, one that I always worried about, I went into the tuck early and nicked the corner of the board with my forehead. Blood in the pool like shark-kill, and I almost blacked out under the water. I had a scab for a couple of weeks and when it started coming off, the skin underneath was white, this white like milk white, this really ugly white, and then the white started spreading, and kept spreading until it was all around my right eye and down my cheek and up my forehead. I couldn't stand looking in the mirror. I couldn't stand seeing people's eyes. The kids at school made jokes, funny names, ha ha. Snow White, Blotches, Raccoon, Skunk-Head, ha ha."

"Tell them about the people staring in Safeway."

"Oh, that was just one incident. People always stared. They'd just stand stock still and stare when they met me, in the supermarket, in line at the movies, walking along the street. If they had a camera, 'Can I take your picture?' They didn't mean anything. After about six months, it started going away. For some reason—the doctors say it just happens sometimes, nobody knows anything about it, really—the skin started repigmenting and the blotches started shrinking. Gracias a Dios! But about that same time the hairs started coming in white. Pigmentation for hair is deeper than for skin, you know, so it takes longer. And then, finally, this." She waved up at the right side of her head, and took another sip from her drink. "This is the way it ended up. For now."

"But people do ask about it?" I said. "I mean, it was okay for me to ask? I mean, you expect that, don't you?"

"Oh sure, they can't help themselves, people come up all the time, you know, 'Do

you mind if I ask you a personal question...?' like that. Most of them at least try to be delicate, but no one's ever asked if I pluck my eyebrows!" She started laughing again.

"Tell them about the punks," Holly said, "and the old people."

"Oh, punk was just starting up in England, you know the spike hair and purple and yellow mohawks and leopard spots, and people couldn't stand it, you know, old people, and they looked at me like some kind of contagion on this side of the Atlantic. They'd stop me on the street, 'Why do you make yourself a freak!' 'Didn't your mother teach you anything!' God, I hated them." She sighed and sipped her drink. "I'd say to them, 'My mother's dead!' Then I'd say, 'I killed her!' and I'd start moving towards them, looking mean. Scared the shit out of them." She laughed. "I'm a stronger person for it."

"She was going to commit suicide," Holly said.

"Oh, I don't think so," Luz said. "Not really."

"Well, look what she was facing!" Holly persevered. "No wonder she wanted to kill herself. She was just a teenager and she had this horrible disfiguration on her face."

"It wasn't that horrible. It was just white skin."

"Tell them about that day on the bus."

"They don't want to hear about this, Holly," Luz said.

"Of course we do," I said.

"Careful, Luz," Audra said. "He'll put it in a book. He always does."

Luz looked from Audra to me, took another sip of her whisky and watched me over the rim of her glass. "I was riding the bus downtown one day. I was looking out the window but my reflection kept showing up when we'd go from shade to sunlight and back, and I kept looking at the white, and the join where it met my regular skin. Then I saw through the glass this kid about my age on the sidewalk, and he was on braces, those kind of aluminum crutches that clamp around your forearm, and his legs all banged up and at

wrong angles and skimpy and twisted, and he was galumphing up Market Street, headed somewhere in a hurry and really making time, putting his all into it, and he was wearing this big smile on his face, like he was going to his birthday party, or to get laid for the first time. So happy. And I thought, well fuck me. And that was that. I never thought about suicide again. And then the blotches finally went away. And yes, Cully, I do pluck my eyebrows. And in fact, now I even think they're kind of pretty. And so do other people, don't you, babe?" She turned to Holly.

"I do," Holly smiled. "Oh, I do indeed."

Again that pang. "Well, so do I," I said and regretted immediately that it sounded defensive. "I think they're very pretty. And your eyelashes, too. Your eyelashes are even prettier than your eyebrows." I stole a glance at Audra, who was watching me with her usual wry twist of lip.

"And I'll bet Cully's not the first man who's told you that, is he, Luz?" Audra turned to Luz.

"Oh, no."

"I'll bet that's the first line of their drop-seed come-on, isn't it? Cully, I think you've had a little too much to drink."

"No, I haven't." What she meant was that Luz had had too much to drink, and I balked at her trying to make me the goat. "I haven't had anything in the last hour. And drop-seed is out of the question, isn't it, Luz, isn't it, Holly?"

"I think we should go to bed now and let Holly and Luz get some sleep."

"I am not drunk, Audra. You're just pissed because you can't drink."

"Come on, dear," Audra said, pulling on my hand. "Come on up."

"I was enjoying the conversation. Luz and Holly don't want to go to bed yet." Luz rolled her eyes to Holly.

"It's okay, Audra," Holly said.

"He's going to be a father; he's got to start practicing responsible behavior. Come on, dear," Audra pulled on my hand harder. Unless I cared to make a scene, there was nothing else to do.

"Mañana then," I said, allowing myself to be pulled up. "Mañana, and we'll talk about my own physiological irregularities. You didn't know, for instance, that I'm double-jointed?"

"Which joint?" Luz laughed.

"Luz," Holly cautioned, pulling her out of the depths of the sofa. And the night came too soon to a bittersweet end, the ladies pulling their rogues off to bed. I slept well.

Chapter Four

Sunday morning's breakfast went fine, though it felt like work. It *was* work for weary hung-over party-goers, considering how much vino had been imbibed and how much veritas spewed or corked the night before. Joan and Mike left their connubial bliss to join us, and we found ourselves talking about relationships and family. Mike had already had one family and definitely did not want another. Joan, much younger than Mike, but not so young that her biological timeclock could not be heard ticking, had a wistful and not quite resigned attitude. Terrible to be in love and at odds immediately on an absolutely irresolvable issue. One of them would have to give up a huge chunk of life's dream.

Meanwhile, Audra seemed to glow, and it was obviously more than abstemiousness and a good night's sleep. She was pregnant at last, and two of the women who had helped make her so were breaking bread with her. Luz and Joan seemed as happy for her as she was for herself, and I had never seen her so content and satisfied. Her pre-pregnancy hormones were behind her, she had only about a month more of the progesterone, her body seemed to be functioning as it should, and though there was nothing there yet to feel, her hands continually went to her belly to remind her of what was inside.

Holly, I noticed, was particularly attentive to her. She had not had Luz's and Joan's earlier acquaintance with this—I can't but admit it—bizarre woman, and she seemed enchanted. I wondered if Luz had told Holly about Audra's playing her court victory tape during the embryo transfer: that could certainly account for some of Holly's interest. As breakfast wound down, I began to see a certain sisterly courtship being lit, each woman sensing and answering the other's need. Audra wanted to talk on forever about her

pregnancy, and Holly wanted, very clearly, to be pregnant. It was in her eyes, in every smile. Holly had a crush on Audra's pregnancy and Audra had a crush on Holly's crush.

It was a warm, still day, and after breakfast we all began to drift outside and nobody seemed to want to do anything. Luz talked about cleaning up, but in fact only stacked dishes. Holly said she might do a little weeding, but only wandered through the garden, stooping now and again to point out a favorite plant and chat about horticulture and botanical Latin. I thought I might write a little, but only managed to read at a *New Yorker* backwards so I wouldn't feel committed to it. When someone suggested naps, we all snapped to life and went purposefully back to our quarters.

I couldn't keep my hands off Audra. No sex, of course, as she reminded me. She had had some spotting and we had been warned by the clinic: "Limited activity. No heavy exercise. No coffee, alcohol or antihistamines. No vaginal penetration." But I was also in the mood for limited activity, and consequently limited myself to gazing at Audra's beautiful face, made even more beautiful by her happiness, and to running my fingers through her soft, blond hair and down to her belly, where my hands too kept returning.

She put her hand on my hand, held it there for a moment on her belly, then pulled it down into her panties. I was surprised and delighted. During the long stint with the hormone injections, her libido had been utterly nil and I had been privately going out of my mind. Now, I played with her clitoris with my fingers, then moved down so that I could please her with my tongue and lips. She always loved that and now, after so long with no sex at all, she came to orgasm quickly and began exploding climax upon climax so that she had to throw her arm over her face and bite her wrist to keep from screaming out. From my position between her legs, I could look over her still flat stomach through her breasts which, even though larger and fuller than they had ever been because of the hormones and pregnancy, had flattened and fallen to the sides, and I could see the deep imprint of her teeth

in the flesh of her forearm. I had no mercy but kept her in anguished ecstasy for several moments, using my free right hand on myself until I could bear it no longer. Always, it was Audra's rapture that excited me most and which brought on my own climax, and this one was massive and wracking, starting deep in my groin and burning up the length of my urethra until—at the last moment, to save Luz's comforter—I rolled onto my back and shot my semen all over my stomach and chest. I thrashed and started to cry out so that Audra put her other forearm over my mouth for me to bite down on. And I bit down on it hard, but with care, and came gradually back to my other senses.

We lay side by side on our backs, breathing hard, that moment too, a part of our ecstasy. Then Audra turned to me and with her hand smoothed the now cold semen over the skin of my chest and stomach. "Wow," she said, "so abundant and oh so highly motile!" She laughed. I was amazed. She had always loved our love-making—which had always been a major reason for my wanting her—but she had always been openly repelled by the nastiness of the juices, especially mine, and she would leave, too soon, to shower. In the old days when we were teenagers and I used condoms, it would make her gag when I would take off the condom and she would see through the clear rubber the heavy bulb of semen gathered in the tip. After I learned, I would not take off the condom until I was in the bathroom, even though I myself was fascinated by the look of it. Now for her to play in my semen thrilled me.

"It was one like any of these," she said and reached her face up to mine to kiss me. I kissed her back, softly, and after awhile, exhausted by ecstasy, she began to drift off to sleep. The last thing she murmured, just on the conscious edge of sleep, was "I want Holly and Luz to be good, good friends."

"And so they shall be, my love," I said and kissed her to sleep.

But sleep was not for me. Lying still as long as I could endure, I finally slipped off

the bed and out into the yard. I felt like a walk along the bay's edge and hoped that I could flush out Luz and Holly, both or either. I found Holly by the cottage where she and Luz had their own residence at the side of China House. She was digging up a bed, lacing it with the manure we had brought home the night before.

"Need some help?" I said.

"Yes. I desperately need someone to sit in that chair and chat while I work."

"Yes, well that's exactly the kind of limited activity prescribed for a pregnant man."

She laughed and kept digging. I found I felt like saying nothing much after all, so I said nothing much after all. It was enough to watch her dig. But presently she stopped digging, gave me an appraising look, decided better of the thought and with an embarrassed laugh started digging again.

"What?" I said. "Tell me. You're just like Luz: full of secrets."

She stopped again, looked at me again, then crossed her arms across her chest and leaned on her shovel handle which was up to its hilt in black manure. She was altogether the most fetching person I could ever remember seeing.

"Do you know what we're doing?" she said with a sly smile.

"Who? You and I right now?"

"Luz and I."

"Besides running a terrific bed and breakfast?"

"Then she hasn't told you? But of course she wouldn't."

"What?"

"But she did tell you we're partners?"

"She said lovers."

"Yes, she would say that. Then she told you that much."

"Of course. But I thought you knew that all last night. That's what all our

conversation was predicated upon, wasn't it?"

"Was it? I didn't notice."

"Didn't you? Hmm. That's funny. I guess we never came right out and talked about it, did we?"

"And did you tell Audra?"

"Well, sure."

"That's the kind of woman I like; it doesn't mean anything to her. Anyway, Luz didn't tell you what we're doing?"

In this new context, the question aroused a vivid variety of fleeting sexual images.

"No, I don't think so."

"We're going to do an IVF cycle, too."

I felt for a moment like I had awakened from a troubled sleep, with that amnesiac inability to identify anxiety. Why was I unhappy? I was just dreaming something... what? I couldn't really believe that what she was telling me was making me unhappy.

"She didn't tell me!" A civil instinct propelled me through the conversation. "How nice!" It sounded inadequate and I bolstered it with, "So you're going to be her patient?"

"Well, actually, we're both going to be her patients. We're doing side-by-side cycles. We know we both have pretty low chances for getting pregnant. I'm thirty-two and Luz is thirty-five, so we know our age is beginning to work against us. And I have endometriosis which is why, thank God, I never got pregnant by Wayne. But Luz gets a great discount because of working at the clinic and my insurance policy—well Wayne's policy originally, but I'm still on it—covers infertility. So we figure we can't afford not to!" She was gushing.

"But that's great! We're all going to be pregnant together!" It was jealousy; I recognized the flickering green eyes from the shade beyond. I was jealous. Of their

relationship? Of a competing pregnancy? Of this joy? "So who's the dad?"

"Why does there have to be a dad? She's the mom, I'm the mom, that's enough for any family."

I felt myself lengthening the distance between us and recognized the flickering red eyes of disapproval. How could I disapprove? I'm the world's most openminded person. I'm a writer. I mean, I *am* a writer, after all.

"Well, of course, in the sociological sense, but in the biological sense there's got to be a dad." I was sure of that.

"I'm aware," she said. "I've looked through the donor list. You can read their little histories. There's a big choice. I can take any of them, I can leave any of them."

She went back to her shovelling. I knew I hadn't said anything I didn't mean to say, and she probably hadn't either, but I think we both recognized discomfort over things unsaid, malevolence below expression. It wasn't long before she left off digging the bed, said she would be back in a bit, but didn't come back. I stayed in the chatting chair an appropriate period of time then wandered down towards the water.

I allowed self-doubt to keep me edgy for close to an hour, then returned to the house. In the kitchen I poured myself a tumbler of bourbon over ice and sat at the high counter and was happy to hide while I felt a little warmth of confidence wash back over me.

In the common room beyond the closed door, I could hear Audra and Holly talking. Audra said something about keeping her nails clean for the courtroom.

"But you have a garden. Don't you work in it?" Holly said.

"Oh, no. I just look at it. Pretty maids all in a row sort of thing, but I have these two great guys from Lebanon who do the hard stuff. Maintenance and hauling. I just cut flowers for the dining room table then throw them onto the compost when their time is up. That's about it. Lawyering takes too much energy."

"And I don't suppose Cully—?"

"No. Well, you had your horticultural excursion with Cully which must have betrayed all. No, no actual gardening for Cully. He tells me you got a lot of shit yesterday?"

Holly laughed. "Manure always gives me a feeling of hope. You know, Cully's adorable, though."

"Of course he's adorable. He's depressive. Depressed people are adored, they tend to give what they want back—approval, kindness. They're generous. They're adorable."

There was a long silence, and I hoped Holly might let the conversation die of neglect. "Is he seriously depressive?" she said.

"Well, he doesn't curl up into a ball and wet himself, but I will say that writing is perfectly right and perfectly wrong for him. He gets to be by himself and go with his lightest and darkest feelings whenever he needs to, but he's never really called into the world. Sometimes I think he'd do better with the 8-to-5 sort of battering most of us get, regular and scheduled abuse, and then he might take the evenings off and watch *Jeopardy* and relax or enjoy the manic moment. Writers are different, though. He would be an abbreviated form of himself if he had to survive a routine."

"Another soda?"

"Oh, why the hell not. Live it up."

I could hear Holly get up and collect glasses and start toward the kitchen; I prepared myself to be discovered. "That kind of absorption is probably true for most artists," she said, "but there's a hard, grinding, boring, trashable practice time that's routine, and that's something that you have to schedule. I'm sure he does." She started to push open the door to the kitchen but paused and added, "Doesn't he complain about putting in time when he doesn't feel inspired?"

"No, he doesn't really. Maybe he curls up into a ball and wets himself, behind closed doors, and doesn't tell me."

"Maybe," Holly said. "I'm sure it's why I escape from my painting into the garden. It's lots of work, but things happen here that are unimaginable, that are beyond me; and it's a gift, and my meagre work seems unrelated to the outcome. It just happens." Another silence. "California."

I heard the hall door close, and Holly left the kitchen door ajar. "Oh, Luz, what the hell is wrong with the sound?"

There were a few murmurs from Luz and then the sound of quite adequate sound from the sound system. I opened the kitchen door the rest of the way and walked into the room just as Luz said, "You pushed that button again. I told you don't push that button."

Luz looked nappish and underdressed in a white cotton smock, and her shoulder was creased, and her hair pressed on one side, the streak side. She twisted the radio dial and finally settled on *All Things Considered* and offered cocktails and a few cold menus from the refrigerator which all seemed very bed-and-breakfast and not dinner to me. Audra said something about cows and manure and a nice brisket that made Holly laugh, and though I felt inclined to be inactive, I suggested we all go out for a bite, Audra's and my treat, and could Holly and Luz suggest anything. There were places that were near and nice, Holly said, like dress up a little, and places far and terrific, nouvelle cuisine and dress up a lot, but nothing in between.

As I dressed I thought about my absorption. I had no suitable clothes, but Mike yelled that he had two pairs of trousers, and he was ironing. I thought about Luz and Holly's possible pregnancy and recognized a book possibility in a lesbian IVF baby, but I had no shirt. Joan said there would be no drinking for Audra tonight, only iced tea, or hot tea if the fog came in and she had a white silk shirt that once belonged to Errol Flynn that

she thought might fit me; but I didn't really want our little no-name baby to have to compete with those irritable dykes and I was in no mood for small talk. Once dressed, Joan and Mike hopped into their tiny, expensive sports car that I immediately coveted, and took off in an easterly direction while we remaining four were stranded together in my practical, four-door white Saturn heading north to Sea Rock Inn, several miles away on the Marin coast.

I was driving, and I waited only as long as it takes two pair of intimates to get comfortable in a small car with small talk before I said with what I believed was an utterly successful effort at nonchalance, "Oh, Audra, guess what. Holly and Luz are going to do their own IVF cycle. Side-by-side cycles."

Framed in my rear view mirror was most of the right side of Luz's face, the white-haired side. In the headlights of an oncoming car I caught the look of surprise in her eye and the way she turned her head to Holly, which told me I should be careful how I proceeded. I tilted my head to the left to see if I could see Holly's reaction to Luz, but the headlights passed and I missed it. "Really?" Audra said and swiveled in her seat so that she could look at them both. "The two of you?"

"Yes," Holly answered. Her tone gave away nothing. I thought I recognized an edge to the single word, however, the cutting edge of a defensive sword.

"Oh, Holly!" Audra wheeled all the way in her seat, knees into the bucket, so that she could grasp Holly's hand. "That is so fantastic! Luz!"

There was an enormous gush of giggling. There is a way that women get excited for each other that men simply have to stand off and listen to and wonder at. I wondered, too, how a bunch of men would react to the same caliber of news: victory paeans, howls and barks of congratulations, I imagined, though acknowledging this would surely classify as the the black-and-white gender categorization that Holly so despised. In the mirror, even

in the darkness I could see the arch of Luz's white brow and I tried to read it for her expressions: raised high in the center as though with a grin to accompany her gay thank you's, pulled down at the thick edge in a frown or moue when the conversation turned more serious to acknowledge the "big step", the "lifetime decision". Her voice was unreadable, steady and level, warm and—I noticed now in the darkness—with a regular smile or grin to the voice, a catch in the stream of the voice, like a rock in a stream of water that catches the water and sends it splashing and gurgling along its way. Not a refined voice at all, a thick voice with clumsy articulation, but charming. I wondered if she could sing and wondered whether I might safely ask her, or if that would fall into the "Do you pluck your eyebrows?" type of faux pas. A woman, I thought, could perhaps advise me on the propriety of the question, but none of these women.

It was Audra who kept the balloon of felicity up in the air for the entire ride, and she restrained herself very admirably until we were into the restaurant, with the meals ordered and the menus collected, from launching into her cross examination. "What exactly does that mean, you're doing side-by-side cycles?" she probed.

Luz seemed to recognize the approach—having been witness during the transfer to Audra's prosecution on the cassette—and answered softly, "We're doing our cycles at the same time."

"Well, I mean, two women sharing the same house, both stimulated at the same time?" Audra laughed. "Tell them about it, Cully"

"They know," I said. "Or Luz does anyway." I turned to Holly. "Luz has told you about the hormone injections?"

"Luz says that it's really only the first-timers who have it so hard because they don't know what's going on. You can't be married to an embryologist and not know about progesterone or peanut oil or allergic reactions or the weepies."

"And God knows I'm prepared," Luz added. "I've seen it all, women bawling over the flowers in the wallpaper, bawling at each other bawling. We'll be okay. It's not a forever thing."

"But to be pregnant at the same time? Nine months, together? It's pretty forever!" Audra pushed.

Luz smiled. "Well, we don't know yet, do we? You know? We need to see how many eggs we get. We need to see how many of them fertilize. We'll make whatever decisions we have to make then."

"Well, do you have some reason to think that Holly's not going to have enough eggs?"

"Or that I might not have enough?" Luz crossed.

"Or that you might not have enough. But let me get this straight, you can use either Holly's eggs or your eggs, right?"

"Or both."

"Yes, or both. A combination of both, for one of you or for both of you."

"Think of it like insurance, Audra. We don't know the number or state of the eggs, the number or grades of the embryos, the state of Holly's endometrium, the state of mine. You were lucky; you got pregnant. But the odds were against you. With Holly and me, we're evening out the odds. Gay women have that advantage over you straights."

"Oh," Audra smiled, and I grew wary. "How do you mean?"

"We've got twice the number of eggs and twice the number of wombs to transfer embryos into."

"Yes, sure, that would be an advantage, but if you *are* successful, there's going to be a child. There are going to be complications."

"What I'd like to know," I said, seeing where Audra was heading and pretending to

ignore that I was interrupting, "is how the two of you are going to get on the same cycle? I mean, the timing is critical."

Holly laughed. "Luz and I have been ovulating within hours of each other ever since we've lived together. Women in captivity, you know: they tend to synchronize."

"And besides," Luz added, "if it doesn't happen, birth control pills are the great equalizer."

"So when are you starting?" I asked.

"We've started!" Holly said, ready to burst. "Last week we got our first injections. And Friday after next, if everything goes right..."

"What's to go wrong?" Luz said. "I'm handling everything."

"Can you do that?" I asked.

"Well, not really. Gage and Arthur will be doing the biggest part. But I'll be there. I'll be standing guard."

"What I was saying..." Audra said, with just enough of a turn away from me to let me know that she had registered my objection, overruled it and would brook no further diversion from me, "...is that if you do use each other's eggs, and you do have a child, either of you, or both of you, then there are legal issues, of which I'm sure you're not unaware, and for which I'm sure you have prepared?"

Holly was the one who answered, "I believe we're totally prepared."

"You've drawn up papers? For all the possible scenarios? Your egg, Luz carries the baby? Luz's egg, you carry the baby? Your egg, you carry your own baby? Luz's egg, Luz carries her own baby? Joint parenting agreements? I mean, if something should happen, if there were some sort of separation... ? Down the line... ?" Audra let the cumulative questions sink into this pause, a rather purple stain, then added. "It's just that I think this might be more complicated than you imagine."

Holly nodded, then smiled. "I think we're covered."

Audra smiled back and looked to Luz, who was spinning a napkin ring on her finger in an absorbed manner. Audra took Holly's hand. "It's not enough that you love each other. I know that you think that now. But look at Cully and me. Look at most of the people who come into the clinic. They're already in a legal system, they've got a contract of marriage, or some other contract of parentage. But with the two of you, unmarried, unable even to *get* married—to each other—and contemplating a very unconventional biological parentage... you need to draw up a contract. You need to be prepared."

"Audra," Luz said with a tone that announced the approaching end of this conversation, "you know there are no contracts like that, not that mean anything. This is all new territory. The only similar contracts that have stood up in court are those about who owns what: who owns this embryo or that sperm. We're way beyond that. If a case like ours came to court, it would set precedents. Written contracts would be irrelevant and they'd be overturned. We're prepared for all of that."

It was Holly's turn to take control of Audra's hand. "We're prepared, Audra," she smiled.

Luz laughed out loud.

"You're prepared," Audra said. "Yet I notice you're smoking, Luz. ? You're drinking. ? We were told all drinking all smoking must stop. ?"

Luz regarded her a moment. "I stopped last night."

In fact I was the only one who had ordered a drink at the restaurant. Luz and Holly had ordered a mineral water with Audra. In fact, I did not see her smoking at all that day.

"Good for you!" I said, deciding that I would not finish my whisky. "Must be tough, huh?"

"If I survive I'll let you know." She raised her glass of mineral water. "Here's to

kids."

Lying in bed that night, in the bed that belonged to Luz and Holly, I couldn't sleep for thinking of them and their baby. Or babies. Then when I did finally drift into light dreams, they were of Luz, hugely pregnant. Audra and Holly were there, too, somewhere in the dream, both pregnant, but the dream was focussed on Luz, doing nothing in particular, saying nothing, simply standing pregnant, sometimes in a room of some sort and other times in a field, then a forest, naked, gazing in an aspect of wonder and delight.

I slept uneasily from then on, waking often, thinking I probably had to pee; then I had to concentrate on sleep to fall asleep and my dreams became less productive and representational and more abstract and brief and alarming. When I was younger I thought this kind of eventful sleeping and dreaming and waking contributed to the celebrated edgy quality in my writing. Lately it was beginning to seem simply like a pathology, one that interfered with even my easiest journalism. At dawn, I would spend eternities recalling things not done, or fixed, or things done badly—a crack in a teacup, a class not attended, a dead fish in the pond, pain filling a room. After my first cup of coffee in the morning, I could draw benevolence back into my life, and approval and productivity and routine. And for that moment I could tell myself that this kind of sleepless, worrying sympathy could be heroic or moving, could end war or help a child be born or convince a reader to turn a page.

Monday morning, I was first in the kitchen, and I was the one to make the coffee. Audra and I had both arranged to have the day off so that we could have a leisurely morning and stop and do some sightseeing, a long-overdue walk across the Golden Gate Bridge and shopping on Union Street for baby gear. Luz found me in the kitchen before I had finished my first quarter cup, pacing the room.

"I heard somebody down here before me? I smelled coffee?" She gazed at me in mock wonder, her head tilted to the left so that the white streak fell straight down and over

her heart.

"Do you have a donor?" I said. "I want to be your donor. Both yours and Holly's"

I was breathless. And so, for a moment I believe, was Luz. Then she moved into the room and picked up the coffee pot. "Donor," she said. "And from the expression on your face, I take it you're not meaning to our charitable institution."

"I couldn't sleep all night for thinking about it. You know already that my sperm is, physically, it's excellent."

"Motile and highly abundant."

"I don't know what kind of thought you've given to genetics, either you or Holly but, you know, I'm not bad, I'm not bad at all. Physically, I'm strong. Mentally, I'm strong. I have strong characteristics, attitude, humor. There's musicality in my family. Although I don't have any of it, I might be a carrier. I look, I look. I think..."

"Cully," she interrupted me. "Cully, Cully. You look ... fine. You're very handsome—as you very well know by the way—and as for the rest of your gene pool... well, you're a pig." She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen counter and looked at me. "Oh, Cully, I'm joking, for God's sake. Here, come and sit down, you make me nervous."

I myself was more nervous than I had ever been. I had never proposed anything so serious to anyone in my life. My proposal of marriage to Audra I can't even remember; in fact, I don't think I proposed; maybe it was Audra. We got married, I do remember, not too long after the publication of my first novel *Moment by Moment*. I remember because our honeymoon was short and intertwined with a book tour, Audra negotiating her airplane tickets and hotel bookings into the contract—the book contract, I mean, not the marriage contract. I remember that she wrote the vows—for the marriage contract I mean—and it was all fine with me. I never had plans for anything or anyone beyond Audra. I had been

with her since I was fifteen and she was sixteen and we broke our virginity in the backseat of her parents' Cad the night of the Sadie Hawkins Dance, chiffon lace all about my head making it hard to breathe, blood and semen and other new and exciting and terrifying body juices leaking everywhere while we frantically tried to save the upholstery using first my rented tuxedo shirt, too starched to absorb, and then my underwear, and God what a mess and terror! After that night I had loved Audra wholly, both as mad lover and as pal. She was fun, she was smart, she was going to be successful, and she was all I ever wanted or imagined I would ever want, so there was never any conscious decision on my part about commitment. So that now as I found myself making this offer of parentage to Luz, or to Holly, or to both, I saw that my hand was trembling.

"Cully," Luz said as she took my hand, "I'm so touched."

"Then you accept?"

"No. But I'm so very touched"

The pain was exquisite.

She rushed on. "It has nothing to do with you, Cully. It's lab policy. Outside donors are always kept strictly confidential. They're never a part of the process, except when it's the husband."

"But how do you know what you're getting then?"

"They're college students mostly, med school students. They fill out a questionnaire, physical aspects and medical histories. They write their goals in life. You feel like you really know them when you're finished reading the questionnaires."

"Well, then, why couldn't I just apply to become a donor and fill out one of those questionnaires, and you could choose me?"

"You could. But not with us. It has to be anonymous. For the reasons Audra was talking about last night. We don't want the father making any claims on us. Holly is—

well, Holly is pissed off that we even have to have a man at all, anywhere in the whole business."

"Yeah, well, good luck!" I was suddenly angry, the distress at being rejected for reasons utterly beyond me crystallizing into resentment at Holly's anti-male stance. "Holly may not want to admit it, but for this at least, a woman does need a man."

"Cully." Luz smiled. "It's not so much a man she objects to. She doesn't want any third party. It's our child, you see? Holly's and mine. That's what we want. I mean, think about it. With you and Audra, if you'd been forced to have some other man's sperm, or some other woman's egg, wouldn't that have made it... somehow different for you?"

"We'd still have gone ahead with it!"

"And Holly and I are going ahead with it, Cully. It's just that Holly wishes, and I do too, that we didn't have to have some strange man's sperm."

"I'm not a strange man!"

"Or yours. We just want to have a child. Of our own."

It truly was a pure and simple desire. I had no argument with it. But I said, "But you can't."

"Well, it will be half our own. One way or the other. And we'll pretend about the other half." She emitted a huge sigh. "Oh, my! What are we getting ourselves into?"

"Yeah," I said. "I know that feeling."

We both sipped at our coffee during a long moment of silence. Finally Luz said, "That was the sweetest offer, Cully. I will always treasure it."

I sipped again at the coffee, thinking about that "always". Finally I said, "We shouldn't tell Audra about this."

"Umhmm," Luz said. "Or Holly."

"Right."

Chapter Five

Audra and I did do our Golden Gate Bridge-walk on the trip back to the City, but she was preoccupied with baby clothes and an idea she had for bunny and rose stencilling in the nursery-to-be. We shopped at an expensive furniture store on Union Street and priced some Victorian cradles with inconvenient, pretty, gauze covers, and I was preoccupied with Luz. I wandered out looking for ice cream and found myself in a bookstore and guessed this sort of place wouldn't carry my sort of novel but checked the shelves anyway and found to my pleasure that I was wrong: they had *An Absent Rib* as well as *Titania uber Oberon*. I thought about autographing them on the sly but was, as always, too cowardly and bought a *Scientific American* instead which had a cover story on cloning which looked to be beyond me and drifted back along Union Street. When Audra and I bumped into each other I think we both felt the surprise of an accidental meeting of two estranged good friends.

This feeling of growing closer and closer apart increased during the following week. There was so much we didn't need to talk about that we didn't talk. Audra was working on a new case with a new partner in the firm and wanted to give him a lot of attention; I was determined to focus on the lives of the characters in a new book that was hatching.

I've never really suffered from writer's block: a much more poisonous talkativeness is the bigger danger, and rather than get stuck on a blank page I'm much more likely to find a clutter of people in my books chattering aimlessly and events rolling ahead of me out of control. I often scrap pages of babble so that what had seemed like progress in fact has gotten me only inches of real text ahead. My technique for checking myself has been to

base fictional people and events on the real things. Besides the science of IVF, this was what I hoped to get from Luz.

I had to acknowledge that my relationship to her was complicated. Physical attraction was the easiest to define, but it was also the least substantial of the many magnetisms I felt toward her. I also could tell that Luz and Holly's IVF cycles were growing into a reference for me in my work that my own experience wasn't providing. With Audra I had felt subterranean and dimmed for months and still felt it. The future was moving toward us, we were together, but it was as if we were standing back to back awaiting it. I felt invigorated by my outsider status with Luz and Holly. I wanted in, and the process of looking in was somehow erotic: I could watch, merely watch. It was fun. And I wanted more of it.

On Tuesday I spent a working morning at my computer. I started off making notes about embryo development for the *Atlantic* article. I kept picking up the *Scientific American* and thinking fictional thoughts and finally gave in to the allure of a couple of exotic lesbians waiting to be born into my novel, and ideas turned into words which began to form sentences that grew into paragraphs and those first terrifying pages of a brand new novel came into being. As usual when I write, I got up from my chair often and violently, to put on coffee, to pour coffee, to put on music, make a selection, browse the collection, returning again and again to the computer to spurt out words onto the screen, allowing some of them to stay. At last I chose Joan Baez, "Farewell Angelina", and listened to the tiny, tinny soprano voice as I stared down at the photo on the CD of that harshly beautiful young face. My gaze wandered from the photo over to the computer and out the window and over Dolores Park toward Potrero Hill and the San Francisco Bay to the east, a very California sight with palms and oleanders and spruces and an occasional green flash of feral parakeets on the wing in front of red tile and colonial architecture, and I decided my

main character would be Mexican-American.

I finally called Luz at 11:20. Margarita forwarded the call to the lab and Luz answered, obviating the canned speech I had prepared for her voice mail.

"Luz, I'm stuck," I squeaked. "Maybe we could have lunch and some facts?"

"Who is this?"

"Cully."

"Oh, Cully." There was a flatness in the note that did not augur well. "You're stuck?"

"Yeah, really stuck!" The squeak again.

"Cully, sorry, I'm busy now, but what do you need to know?"

"Oh, just stuff. Embryos and mitosis, and maybe some stories."

"I've got a good book on basic embryology; you can borrow it."

"Does it have people and their stories?"

"No, Cully, it doesn't have stories. I thought you were writing an article."

"Articles don't have stories?"

"I thought you were writing a scientific article. Cully, I'm busy."

"So lunch is out?"

"It's out today."

"Maybe tomorrow?"

No, and Wednesday was no good either, for a reason she didn't explain, but she did reluctantly agree to a late lunch on Thursday: late so that she would really be finished with patients and lab work and could really relax; reluctant because... well, but maybe that was merely my paranoia. Or maybe hers.

On Thursday she appeared to be tolerant of me and my questions but to regard this enterprise as one little extra demand from a difficult patient. She did have to agree that we

had had a very nice weekend together and included the surprising remark that I was not as pushy as she had supposed I would be, and she did acknowledge that her summaries of IVF science and procedures would be quicker and more colorful than textbooks and reprints; and so our first appointment was underway before she knew what hit her, and our next appointment was scheduled—if only in pencil—for the next day and meant to cover the brass tacks of assisted reproductive technologies.

I already had a good rough layout of a good rough draft of a battery of thoughts and impressions, but I had a thousand questions to ask and she had a wealth of material to share, if only she would. And to my great satisfaction this demand-and-supply led more easily than I had hoped and rather sooner than I expected to stories about clients she had worked with, some funny indeed, but many heartwrenching. One story that sticks in mind particularly was of the Nebraska woman, just past forty, who had come to the clinic and been more successful than she had imagined. Of seven embryos, she had two frozen and five transferred: all of them implanted, and she was pregnant with quintuplets. Odds against this are spectacular. Nevertheless...

The woman, fearing for her own health and the lives of all the babies, flew back to San Francisco for a selective reduction, aborting three of the five fetuses. Being a fundamentalist Christian, it was a monumental moral crisis for her, but she went through with it. She gave birth without any problem to the twins. There were still, however, the two frozen embryos, and the thought of them preyed upon her during her first years of motherhood. She now had two children when she had hoped for one. She was approaching forty-four and didn't feel she could handle any more in the future. She arranged with the clinic to dispose of the two embryos, but first she wanted to fly back to San Francisco a third time to have a funeral for them. The folks in the clinic, according to Luz, were atwitter at the idea, making little jokes about the Lady in Black. But when she

arrived and asked to be left alone with the embryos, her dignity and profound bereavement impressed everyone to silence, and these two embryonic lives, and deaths, came sharply into focus.

I wondered aloud to Luz why the woman had not donated the embryos to another woman, perhaps a woman who had gone through her cycle without achieving any embryos.

"Well, that was her decision," Luz said. "So many of these people who come into the clinic, they deal with life and death the only way they can. They make their decisions and you can't—or at least I can't—make any judgments about them."

I took this opportunity to ask her a question I had been dying to ask: "What did you think of Audra's cassette?"

Luz laughed outright. "Yup. That was one of the weirdest. But, you know, I liked you both so much at that moment. You should have seen the look on your face, Cully."

"Oh?" I said, suddenly intimidated. "What was I doing?"

"Just smiling. You were very much like a bashful, proud little boy. Before that, you were something of a turd."

"Oh, thank you." I smiled the way I imagined a bashful, proud little boy might smile, but from the expression on her face, it was more like the turd. And then I made a terrible mistake. I allowed my eyes to linger on her face. I allowed myself to remark to myself, while she was looking at me, how lovely she was. I knew to be more careful, but the moment was unguarded. She stood up, said she had to get back to work, collected money from her wallet before I understood what she was doing, slipped it under her plate, and was gone.

I called her the next morning at home—I knew she had the day off—and suggested a little science chat over coffee or maybe brunch in Bolinas?

"Cully, this is my day off."

"Yeah, I know, but we could still get together."

"Cully, I don't want to. I'm off."

"But I think this is just about it. I'm feeling very plump and educated and ready."

"And then you'll be on your way?"

"I'm well on my way."

"Cully, call me Monday. I'll be back at work. What do you want anyway?" Before I could think of an answer she added, "You remember I'm gay?"

"I'll call you Monday then," I said. "Bye." I didn't know how that might appear to her. I only knew that I was furious, but I didn't know with whom.

Audra was busy all next week. Her case, almost ready for trial, was a sexual harassment that looked like it might become a big story in the Bay Area, but she seemed gloomy and inward and suspicious. It was a frame of mind I always had trouble reading. In this stage of preparation she always managed to make me feel guilty. I perceived her distraction as much more than preoccupation. Something about the inadequacies of our lives together must force her to chill me like this. Something sexual? A lack of seriousness? Or a retirement plan?

I did call Luz on Monday and was on hold for many minutes while Margarita tried to track her down: she was busy, Margarita said, could I call later. I did call later, and then again, without getting any further. Again I was furious, and needy. Just before noon I decided to hang out at the clinic. Luz said she made it a point to go out for lunch on even a busy day, just to take some air and clear her head.

I was all the way downtown on the J Church streetcar in thirty-five minutes and took a seat on a bench in Union Square with a view of the clinic entrance. Shortly I saw her in her white lab coat come out the clinic double doors and head down Powell towards

Geary. I fell in behind her, matching her brisk, long strides with a little more pep than I was accustomed to. "Oh, what a surprise," I said as I pulled alongside. "I was just doing a little shopping."

She stopped and stared at me with a stormy look. "Cully, go home."

"I called you earlier. Margarita said you were busy."

"I *was* busy, and I *am* busy." She resumed walking and added, "Holly read me a story she liked by this guy John Cheever that you probably have lunch with all the time when you're not bugging me, and this story's about this little annoying girl who won't leave and people keep saying to her, 'Gertrude, go home.' Well, Gertrude go home."

"You know, Luz, I don't know what kind of hormone men have that strengthens us against this kind of abuse from women. Maybe you do?"

"The Can't-Take-a-Hint Hormone?" She stopped again. "Look! Do you know how many guys like you come on to me in any single week of my existence? I mean, don't you have any—? You're married. I know that. Your wife is pregnant. I know that. You know I know. You know I'm gay. My lover and I are trying to get pregnant here! You know that! Cully! What are you thinking about!"

"You're my friend. I just wanted to see how you were doing! You and Holly! I care! I figure you've got this great big goddam thing smack in front of you that I just endured with my beloved wife Audra, and I wanted to show you that I care what happens to you! Both!"

She stared at me a long moment, flushed and angry. People walked by us, pretending not to notice us until they were a few steps past us and could turn and look back, bumping into other people around them who were also turning to look back.

"I mean," I said, "the time's getting close. You're my friend, Luz."

"You're not my friend, Cully. I don't know you well enough for you to be my

friend."

"No, you don't know me. But I know you well enough. I want you to be my friend, but I don't know how to make you know that. You're like some animal, some feral animal that's been hurt by somebody. But not me! And you won't let me get near you! You won't trust me. But what have I done to you?"

"You're right, Cully. The time *is* getting close... and I'm in no mood." She turned and started walking again, but not so fast now, and there was something in the turn, something in the way her shoulders sat on her back that suggested to me that I could tag along now if I still wanted to, and so I fell in beside her again, and she didn't try to stop me. She looked over her shoulder at me, the white streak flipping out of the line of her eye, and she made a small sound that I took for a laugh. "Well, that's funny," she said, "because I seem to be all mood."

"Sure. Figures. Didn't I tell you?" We walked on a little. "Well, tell me. You can, you know. I've been through it all."

"Well, that's exactly it. All the usual stuff, except I didn't know how bad it really gets. Holly's having the hyperstimulation from hell. I mean really awful physical things like bloating and nausea and sick kidneys, and I'm trying to stay at work—I've got to! we've got patients all lined up on schedules of their own, and they need me to be there!—yet still try to be steady and comforting for Holly and not give in to every little hormonal snit that I myself am feeling, and I'm completely bottled up and I have too many things to do and think about, Cully, to continue to be the object of your—whatever it is."

"Feel like some lunch then?"

Her eyes filled with tears and she put her face in her hands and continued a few steps until she stopped and I took a chance and put my arm around her shoulders.

"Oh, God!" she said, but didn't pull away. "All right. I need to slow down a little.

I don't know why I'm in such a rage all the time. I know Holly's sick, but I just manage to stay pissed at her all the time. She seems completely helpless. We're going to have to close China House if she can't manage any better than this. It's all she can do to drive herself here once a day for the blood draws and ultrasounds."

"Couldn't you draw her blood at home and just bring it with you to the clinic? That's what I did with Audra."

"I did that until Thursday, but we have to be scanned every day now, and I can't take an ultrasound machine home."

We kept walking until we got to David's. It was late for the lunch crowd, so we got a table and could hear each other talk if we only raised our voices slightly.

"So tell me something to take my mind off myself. How's your article? I think it's about time to see some black on white, Cully, you know?"

"Well, I've gotten a little side-tracked. I'm working on a story, too, after all. You're not in it," I added quickly.

"Oh."

"It *is* about two lesbians who go through IVF with side-by-side cycles, but you're not in it. They give birth to a gigantic lesbian morph."

She laughed. "It'll never sell. People don't want to read about lesbians. Too nineties. What you want is a 21st Century theme. What are their names, your lesbians?"

"Deirdre and Daphne," I lied, but I liked the sound of the names as soon as I said them.

"What it really reminds me of is Velásquez. You've seen those pictures? Why don't you just go ahead and make them black lesbian dwarves? I mean, it's not going to be a lesbian book, LESBIAN in capital letters, is it? Because if so, Daphne wants out."

"You're Deirdre."

"Oh, God, I knew this was going to happen! And I hate that name!"

"Your mother named you. She's Irish. Your father's Mexican."

"You've been listening to Joan Baez, haven't you?"

"You're conflicted because you can't resolve your two crazy brands of Catholicism with your lesbianism."

"No, no, promise me, Cully, that it's not going to be a LESBIAN book because, okay, I've come to terms with you being a writer and all that and you using up the people in your lives and all that—I mean, Audra gave Holly an earful about you using her!—and I don't mind being gay in your novel, but I don't want to be a LESBIAN!"

The waitress approached skeptically and I fidgeted while Luz ordered hot pastrami with an extra pickle and extra potato salad. I had a knot in my stomach and felt suddenly aimless and worried and so ordered pastrami with no pickle and no potato salad.

"And it's not Irish. It's African. And both lines come through my mother. My father's anonymous. But don't put that in."

"It's not you. It's Deirdre. You're not in it."

"Oh, I got confused when you were talking about my confictions and all. I thought it was me, Deirdre."

"No. It's fiction, Luz."

"You're not going to kill me off too, are you?"

"It's not you."

"Oh."

I didn't say anything more. I felt lucky to be here at all. I waited for Luz to break the silence. It was a long wait. She didn't look up from the table but played with her fork, tipping it by its tines.

"Okay, we're made for each other," she said finally. "I'm a whore, and I love it that

you're putting me in your book, and maybe we can shoot the movie at China House and start a scrapbook for the kids. Now, what do you still need for your article?"

"Have you read the most recent *Scientific American*?"

"I have. Can you believe how many people are cloning stuff and how many other people think they'd like to try? I can't go to a meeting any more where someone doesn't bring it up: reproductive biologists, people doing tissue culture or PCR. Everybody seems to think it's the easiest thing in the world. Maybe it is. Look at the way they did the mice: transfer the nucleus of a cumulus cell to an enucleated egg, bathe it in stuff to make it divide, and there you have it—lots of mice who are the twin sisters of their grandmothers. What a world!"

The talk started to flow more easily now, segueing into DNA typing and the confirmation of the process and its commercial applications, and I took notes like mad. At 3:00 she said she had to go; if she didn't, Arthur would page her in a panic.

"Pastrami's on me," I said.

"Is this that famous remuneration you've talked about?"

"No!" I exclaimed. "This is just a little perk. We agreed on fifty dollars an hour right? So that's ..." I calculated it in my head more or less smoothly and trusted she was impressed. "...one hundred and twenty-five dollars. And lunch at David's. Pretty good?"

"Cash?" she asked.

"Trade?" I suggested.

"I'll take a check!" she said and stood up with a censoring, jokey grin from her heights above me.

I walked her back to the clinic, and she shook my hand. "Thanks, Cully. Sorry I've been so ferocious, but my wire's pulled a little tight right now. I'm happy about the consultant thing and fifty dollars an hour is very nice, but don't call me for a couple of

weeks. I really need to just get through this and get us back on track and have a baby or two. Okay?"

I trusted Luz's intuition, and for the next two days devoted myself to the article and worked like a man possessed, weaving into it all the science I had gleaned from Luz and beginning to tighten it up. But the lesbian novel kept sucking me back in, and I found myself clicking between windows, one text growing longer and more complex as the other shortened and simplified.

On Wednesday night I broke the faith and called Bolinas. Holly answered. "Hi. We're just doing injections."

"Good drugs?"

"No, just more hormones. But we're both going to have retrievals on Friday. Luz, it's Cully."

"How do you feel?"

"Like an invalid. I had to set an alarm clock to get an injection. I can't seem to do anything but sleep and pee. Luz got me a wheelchair."

"So you found a donor?"

"Luz, it's Cully!"

There was a plastic clatter in my ear as her phone was dropped more than placed onto some hard surface; I pictured her in the kitchen, using the countertop unceremoniously. A long silence followed.

"The paparazzo." Luz's tone gave nothing away.

"Sorry. I just wanted to see how you were."

"We were okay. Now it's eggs minus zero."

"Good prospects?"

"Well, for Holly probably. She's got fifteen to twenty follicles."

"Fucking fabulous! How about you?"

"Maybe six."

"Oh."

"No, that's okay. I'm older. I knew to expect it. But there are a couple of small ones, so maybe not six after all. But we're both elated and feel like shit, and we're just sorry that we're not fertile and heterosexual and doing it the real way, but it's just injections for us, poor Daphe and Deirdre, and now Gertrude, go home."

"So you must already have decided on a donor then?"

A moment. "Yes."

"Uh huh. What's he like?"

"Cully, don't."

"Come on! I'm in your life now, you know. I'm going to be meeting this child—or these children—of yours. Or yours and Holly's."

"Oh, you think so?"

"Well, you know, you can try to cut me out of your life, but I'd like to see you cut Audra out of Holly's at this point. I found out they're talking to each other every day on the phone. Did you know that?"

"I knew they talked."

"Every day. Audra dubs herself Holly's mentor. So what's he like? Your donor. What color is he?"

A moment. "White."

"Really? Didn't they have any latinos? Or what about that famous mysterious 'dusky heritage' of yours that you've only merely alluded mysteriously to...?" She laughed.

"They don't have any black donors?"

"Of course."

"Oh. And you chose a white guy. How interesting."

"Cully..."

"What about Holly?"

"Cully, we're both using the same donor."

"Really? Jesus!"

"Cully, this decision is so complex that I don't want to have to explain the smallest part of it to you. I don't want to have to justify anything about it. Is this clear? Now and forever? If you really are going to be a part of my life, and my child's life—"

"It's clear. It's clear. Of course. I was way out of line." There was a long pause.

"It's just... I do care, you know."

"Okay." Then a begrudging: "And I'm glad."

"Can I know what he's like though? Just so I know?"

"Sure. Just so you know. He's twenty-eight. Six foot one. Fair haired, blue eyes."

"Med student?"

"Yes."

"So he's got brains."

"Well, one assumes."

"Hobbies?"

"Baseball. Cello."

"Oh, sounds like a real catch. Married?"

"They don't tell us that. It's not relevant to our needs."

"Interesting."

"Cully, it's probably a hundred and fifty dollars a shot for the guy. Helps pay the rent. No strings attached. Any other questions?"

"Nope. I got the picture." In fact, I had seen a picture of Holly's quondam husband, Wayne: tall, fair haired, blue eyes, wearing a baseball cap. The cello didn't figure, but everything else was a match. "Well, thanks," I said. "Friday's the big day?"

"Yup."

"Can I come down to the clinic? To hold your hand?"

"I'll have Holly there to hold my hand."

"You'll be holding hers. But you'll need someone to hold yours."

"That's very sweet, Cully. Thank you, no."

I was on edge all day Thursday, thinking about the transfer the next day. Work on the novel was brilliant, or so it seemed by the moment, but it ended up all in the trash. I searched for Audra and found her at her desk with papers strewn about, her elbow on one pile holding up her chin resting in the palm of her hand, her face grimly arranged. I broached a diversion which was welcomed at once. "Have you talked to Holly recently?"

"Every day." Musical notes.

"Oh, yeah, you told me that. When's their retrieval again?"

"Tomorrow."

"Really? You know what I was thinking? Maybe we should send flowers or something?"

"Cully," Audra said, looking up from her brief, "you are one man in a million. Look, why don't I take the day off and we'll take the flowers down to the clinic ourselves and surprise them?"

"What a great idea!" I said.

Chapter Six

Margarita showed Audra and me to the post-op room with high-beams lit, giving me insight in her attitude towards me: Audra's presence gave me validation in Margarita's eyes. "Holly, look who's here! Audra!" Margarita said as she pulled back the curtain and let us into the room. Holly rolled her head to look up at us from her gurney.

"Oh, Audra, what beautiful flowers! Oh!" and Holly began to weep.

Audra handed me the flowers and swooped to Holly's side, grasping her hand and laughing and uttering soupy sagacities about the post-op experience so that soon Holly was laughing along with her. The O.R. door opened and Luz on her gurney was wheeled out and into the post-op arena.

"Rivera!" Margarita cried. "Mira quién esta aqui! Audra!"

Luz saw Audra and then me and broke into tears, too. There was a long moment of hysteria during which I was completely out of my element. I merely stood like a totem pole, multi-wooden-headed yet no brains, holding out the vase of flowers like an offering.

After a moment, Luz held out her hand to grasp Holly's. "How many?"

"Seventeen."

"That's good! That's good!"

Audra was in raptures, as was Margarita. Holly looked dazed. The lab door opened and Arthur, the clinic's second embryologist, came out and joined the crowd. Luz looked up at him without a word. "Just the four?" she asked, and he nodded.

"Well, that's what we expected." She rolled her head to look at Holly and squeezed her hand.

"We have dinner with us," Audra said. "All it takes is microwaving, and we

thought we'd chauffeur you home, unless you've got other plans."

"What time is it?" Luz asked, squinting around her. "Chris and Birdie are supposed to be here."

"Well, they're not here!" Holly snapped. "Surprise, surprise. I say we go with Audra and Cully."

"I think we should wait for them," Luz insisted.

"Do you have your car here?" Audra asked.

"Yes," Luz said. "I drove us in this morning."

"Well then we can drive both of them. I'll take Holly in our car, Cully, and you drive Luz in hers."

"Okay," Luz sighed. "Okay. Margarita..." and she said something in Spanish which went over my head, but I made out the names Chris and Birdie. Margarita nodded. I was instantly intrigued. Whoever Chris and Birdie were, they were a source of disharmony between Luz and Holly.

We were quiet for most of the trip, with Luz reclining in the passenger seat of her Volvo, seemingly asleep. I stole glances at her as I drove, the non-streak profile. After we crossed the Golden Gate and had travelled several miles on the curvy road to Bolinas, she put the seat up and said, "Pull over first turn out."

"Are you sick?"

She put the back of her hand to her mouth and swallowed several times quickly, breathing heavily through her nose. There was a left hand turnout to a vista point looking over the ocean, and I crossed the road into it and pulled to a stop. She opened her door, but did not get out. After a few moments, she seemed to gain control.

"I hate this," she said finally. "I hate being out of control of my body. I hate being sick. I hate being angry. God, I hate this!."

"Well, if you get pregnant, get used to it."

She didn't say anything. I looked out over the blinding silver surface of the ocean and turned to view the ever beautiful Golden Gate Bridge. I had never seen it from quite this vantage. Stunning. After a few minutes, Luz closed her door and said, "Sorry. I'm ready."

I drove in silence for a while. "Quite the commute," I said.

"You get used to it."

"Well, if ever you want to spend the night in the City, let us know." There was no audible response. I looked at her. She wore an expression of distasteful *deja vu* which pissed me off. "Of course," I added, "I'll have to tie up Audra. She does vampirize lesbians, unless restrained." I took my eyes off the road and looked at her again. She had a twist of a smile on her face, but she said nothing.

Audra had made cocoas all around by the time Luz and I arrived at China House. "What took you so long?" she asked me.

"Luz got sick."

"Get used to it," Audra said as she put a cup of cocoa in front of Luz.

"Yes," Luz said, "that seems to be conventional wisdom."

"Here's to the eggs!" I said, raising my cup in a toast. Luz and Holly smiled grimly as they clinked my cup, and Audra followed suit. "I guess Arthur is putting the fair-haired blue-eyed sperm in with them just about now, huh?"

"You told him about that?" Holly turned to Audra, which bewildered me for a moment.

"No," Luz said, evidently surprised too. "I did."

"Oh," Holly said, and all four of us fell into an uncomfortable silence. I decided to stretch the envelope just a bit. "You didn't want to mingle the sperm and eggs

yourself, Luz?"

"I thought I probably wouldn't be up to it. And I'm not. The sperm's got to be washed and capacitated. To simulate the great, forbidding drive up our uterine tracts. Believe me, Arthur's doing it better than I would right now."

"You're going in tomorrow morning then?" I asked. "You too, Holly."

"No. Shit goddamit."

"It's okay, Holly," Luz said with a sigh.

"Holly's got some film people coming tomorrow," Audra informed me. "You know that movie they're shooting all over the City? They're looking at China House for one of the scenes. I told Holly she could go in with Luz if she wants. I'll take care of the film people. Holly and Luz don't even have an agent for this place, can you believe it? I'm going to spend the night here and negotiate the contract for her."

"Really?" Luz said, surprised again, but no more surprised than I.

"So Holly, you can go in tomorrow with Luz if you want to," Audra finished.

"No, I'd better stay here."

"After all," Luz said, "it's not like the kids are going to miss you at one and a half cells old."

"Well, I wanted to see that meiosis thing. It only happens once."

"I'll bring home photos. Nobody else gets to see their embryos at this stage. It's just because you're with me that you could. So just forget it."

"Well, I just wanted to see it!"

"Well then come! Audra said she'll be here for the movie people! Or why didn't you just say no to them!"

"And lose all that money!"

"Well then postpone them!"

"You don't postpone movie people! They go someplace else!"

"Audra said she'll be here!"

"And so will I! It's okay! All right? Okay?"

"Fine. Jesus."

It was a dandy display of hormones, and Audra and I caught each other's eye before I cast mine out the window with a little whistling beneath my breath.

"And Audra, you don't have to stay," Holly finished. "I can handle it."

"Oh, no. I'm going to bump up the rent on this place. Just watch."

"Well, thank you."

"I think I'm going to just go to bed, if no one objects," Luz said and without further ado or adieux left for the cottage.

I left moments later in my car, leaving Audra hovering over Holly. I found with surprise that it was a great pleasure having the house all to myself that night. It was the first time since our marriage—except when I was on the road for a book tour—that I did not have Audra in bed beside me, and I slept like a drunken crux gammata.

I was at the clinic at seven-thirty the next morning so that I would be there when Luz arrived at eight. "Why, Gertrude," she said as she came out of the garage and saw me at the door of the clinic, "what a surprise."

"I came to see the children, dear."

She shook her head as she passed me, throwing me an obsidian glance which told me nothing. She fumbled as she brought out her keys, giving her plenty of time to tell me "Go home," but she said nothing. When she opened the door and went in, I stepped in after her noting that although she didn't exactly hold the door open for me, she also didn't allow it to close on me. She still said nothing as I followed her into the clinic. Melanie, the weekend receptionist, had her back to us, making coffee, and she didn't hear us pass

through the carpeted lobby, which meant Luz was spared explaining my presence. I took note, too, that Luz didn't call to her but continued quietly down the long hallway to the lab where, with her hand on the knob, she finally turned to me and whispered more than spoke: "Well then, damn it, get into the scrubs!"

We both slipped quickly and quietly into the sterile gear and Luz opened the lab door and, this time, did hold it open for me. I sat on the same stool as on the day of Audra's transfer and kept quiet and out of Luz's way as she made her preparations for the day's work. When everything was ready and in place, she sat down on the stool opposite me and finally looked me in the eye.

"You are a very sweet turd," she said. "Thank you for being here. Thank you for being here yesterday. You are a friend."

"Well, finally."

"And you can put this in your book if you want to."

"That's not why I'm here, though."

"Okay then, are you ready?" she said, standing again. She flipped a switch that turned on the monitor above the microscope. "You can watch. Take notes if you want."

She opened the incubator and took from it a petri dish labelled Youngquist. "This is the first dish of Holly's eggs," she said as she put it on the stage of the microscope. The screen on the monitor showed the movement as a blur. She zoomed out to the lowest power, then put her eye to the microscope and focussed until I could see the field beautifully on the monitor: a pretty picture of garbage, really nothing recognizable.

Luz took from a drawer an instrument that looked a bit like a hypodermic needle and slid a thin plastic sheath over the end. "What's that?" I asked her. "Tell me what you're doing as you do it."

"This is a sequencing pipetter," she said and put her eye back to the microscope and

with her right hand introduced the pipetter into the petri dish. "This egg you see here is the first of six, the one at twelve o'clock." The point of the pipetter come onto the monitor and approached a blob in a bubble. "The egg has been sitting in the incubator since yesterday in this bubble of media, covered with mineral oil. It looks very different now than when it was put into the petri dish because the sperm have been attacking it all through the night. See all the dead sperm? And see all these little cells all around the egg? There are thousands of these cells which surround the egg and protect and nourish it after it comes out of the ovary and starts its journey down the fallopian tubes. That layer of cells would have been much thicker yesterday, but the millions of sperm did their job last night and ate at the cells until only these are left. Now my job is to peel the rest of them off, so I put this pipetter just above the egg, and I let out on this spring and create a little suction, and... see, the egg gets sucked into the pipetter and now I push down on the spring again, and... see, out comes the egg again and... see, the cells are gone and, oh fucking fine, this one looks like it just might have fertilized. Fucking fine!"

Defly she moved the pipette to the egg at two o'clock. "Now only five more to go." She was very sure and quick. Some eggs did not peel the first time into the pipetter, and she would have to suck it up two or more times. She was very good at explaining each step in terms that were clear and succinct. When she got through with all six eggs, she moved the dish to another microscope and switched the monitor so that I saw the egg at twelve o'clock now in close-up.

"What power is that?" I asked.

"Four hundred," she said. "You can write 40 X."

"What power was it before?"

"That was a zoom lens. Keep up, Cully." She was clearly excited and hurried and I made a mental note to say as little as possible, bother her as little as possible, take notes,

shut up, and hope for fair weather. "Fucking fine!" she said and pulled her eye away from the microscope and turned to me and offered me a high-five. "Slap my hand, baby!"

I gave her the high five and then asked, "What? What are we seeing?"

She pointed to the monitor. "See these two little things in the egg that look like eyes? Those are the pro-nuclear bodies, PN's you can write them. That's exactly what we're looking for. The egg is fertilized. The chromosomes are dividing properly and in probably another twenty hours or so this zygote will divide completely into two cells."

"And then we call it an embryo."

"Right." She put her eye back to the microscope and began readjusting the dish until the egg at two o'clock came into view on the monitor.

"And after that we call it the blastocyst. Then fetus. Then pretty soon teenager, right?"

"Well, shit!" she said.

"What?"

She pulled her eye from the microscope and pointed to the screen again. "This one's polyspermic. It's got three PN's. See the three little eyes."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that two sperm got into the egg."

"I thought that was impossible."

"Oh, no, it happens. This zygote will die. It'll survive for some time, making its divisions and looking as normal as a healthy embryo, but at a certain point it will die. That's why it's so important that we examine the eggs right at this time. It's our only window of opportunity to see which eggs are polyspermic and discard them so we don't transfer them into the uterus." She picked up her charts and made a notation on the diagram for Egg #2: "Polyspermic." Then she adjusted the petri dish and focussed on the egg at

four o'clock. "Fuck and fuck again, this one's polyspermic too. Five PN's."

"Five sperms got in?"

"Four. One of the eyes is the egg's PN."

"Why is this happening? Audra didn't have any of these polyspermic ones did she?"

"No. We don't know for sure why it happens, but it's been my experience that some women do and some women don't get polyspermic zygotes. I think it's something to do with the hardness of the egg wall, or some egg factor that's kept the woman from getting pregnant. That might be why Holly never got pregnant with Wayne. He tried hard enough, she says."

She made the notation for Egg #3 and then went on through all the rest of the eggs in the three petri dishes labelled Youngquist. In the end, out of her seventeen eggs, Holly had seven viable zygotes, six polyspermic which would need to be discarded, and four eggs which showed no sign of fertilization. Luz put each dish back into the incubator.

Then she took from the incubator the single petri dish labelled Rivera. "Well, here goes nothing," she said. She peeled the four eggs quickly and examined them for the PN's. There were none. None of her four eggs had fertilized. She switched off the monitor, sat back and looked at me with a little smile full of disappointment. "And there goes that."

My own disappointment could have been nothing compared to hers, but it was immense and profound. "Couldn't you ICSI them?" I asked.

"Sure, we could try ICSI. I don't think it stands a chance now though."

"Why not?"

"We might get some fertilization. The chances aren't great for someone to get pregnant from a rescue ICSI, but I've heard of it. We'd probably have as much chance if we just took the four..." She stopped. There was a long moment in which nothing at all

happened. She didn't move. She appeared not to breathe. Her forehead and the strips of cheek above the mask grew pale. Still nothing happened.

"Are you all right?" I said, reaching out to her. She swiveled on her stool away from me but otherwise did not move. "Luz?" I said, growing panicky.

"I don't think it's anything I can do," she said at last.

"What?" I said.

"I can't tell you."

"What? You said, 'We'd probably have as much success if we just took the four...! what? What can't you do?'"

She didn't respond. She sat there looking at the floor. Seeing what? This idea... it had to be something unheard of... And an idea sprang into my head from some other universe. "Luz!" I said. I knew.

She stood up, turned to me, but not really to me. "Cully, could you leave?"

"Why should I leave now?"

"You shouldn't be in here."

"I've been in here."

"You should leave."

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to finish my work. You're bothering me. Please leave. Or I'll call Melanie."

"What will you tell her? That you're about to do something that you don't want me to see?" She picked up the phone. "Something unheard of. Something maybe even ungodly in Melanie's eyes... that's what you want to tell her?" She didn't dial. "Something no one has ever done before. They haven't done it before, have they?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes above the mask were inscrutable. The dial tone

changed to the off-the-hook noise. She hung up the phone.

"The egg," I said, recalling what I had learned in the Life, Inc. literature and what Luz had taught me, "is a haploid cell. It contains only half the genetic material to make a whole body. Sperm are also haploid cells, containing the other half. A sperm gets into an egg, and that's fertilization. But if you had another way of getting the other half of the genetic material into the egg, you wouldn't need the sperm. Would you? You could take the genetic material from one egg, in an ICSI needle, and insert it into another egg. Couldn't you?" Luz stayed silent. She didn't move. She didn't twitch. "What more would you need? One half, add one half. Two gametes make a zygote. Seems like it ought to work. Doesn't it?"

"I'd have to use a biopsy needle," Luz contributed finally. "It's got a larger bore. The egg nucleus is larger than sperm."

"Do you have a biopsy needle?"

"Of course." She opened a drawer and removed a little box full of corked tubes. "You're right, Cully, it's never been done. Not that anyone has ever published." She spoke calmly but her hand was trembling as she removed a tiny needle from one of the tubes and switched the monitor back on. "If you're not going to leave," she said, "you may as well watch."

And I watched as she spent several minutes preparing a new plate, first pipetting eight bubbles of media into it, then pouring over the bubbles a layer of mineral oil, then taking a smaller pipetter and pipetting all four of her unfertilized eggs one each into a bubble, then all four of Holly's unfertilized eggs, one each into their own bubbles.

I knew to keep quiet. She was disturbed and working hard to control the trembling of her hands. Several times she paused to take deep breaths and when she went back to work, her hands were steadier again. As she set up the ICSI apparatus, she seemed in

control once more. I watched on the monitor as Luz, handling the dials at her left and right while keeping her eye to the microscope, held the egg in place on the left side of the monitor with a tiny pipette while she punctured it on the right side with the sharply bevelled tip of the biopsy needle. The apparatus must have been geared way down through several gears to turn these macro-movements into such micro-manipulations. Positioning the tip of the needle beside the nucleus inside the egg, Luz made a tiny movement of her hand which sucked the nucleus into its bore. I watched the monitor with rapt attention as Luz retracted the needle out of the egg, carrying away its nucleus. The image on the monitor blurred and swirled as Luz moved the plate on the microscope stage to bring into focus the first of Holly's four eggs. The pipette came onto the monitor from the left and sucked the egg into place, then the biopsy needle with the nucleus visible in its bore came onto the screen from the right, moved slowly into place and punctured the egg. Another almost imperceptible movement from Luz's hand and the nucleus was ejected from the bore of the needle to mingle with the cytoplasm and nucleus of Holly's egg. The two nucleii looked like identical eyes in the egg. Luz withdrew the needle from the egg, dragging a little cytoplasm out with it, but the two nucleii stayed inside. The egg wall slowly resealed itself. And it was done.

I was breathless, but Luz didn't pause. She readjusted the plate and went on to her second egg without so much as a murmur. It was not until after she transferred the nucleus from her fourth egg into Holly's fourth egg and put the plate into the incubator that she finally sat back, sighed, and stretched her neck. But her head jerked up suddenly.

"What else?" I said.

She thought a moment, then turned back to the incubator, but stopped before opening it.

"Go out now," she said to me.

"Why?"

"Go out."

"No. Why?"

"I won't do anything wrong," she said.

"Then I'll stay."

She hesitated a moment, then turned back to the incubator, opened it and took a plate from a different shelf from the one that had held the plates labelled Youngquist and Rivera. She placed the plate on the microscope stage and examined several eggs.

"Okay, Cully, yes," she said, "yes, these are someone else's eggs. But they're unfertilized, and it's Day Four, and I was going to trash them today anyway. I'll just mark it down that I did."

"But what are you going to do with them?"

"I need to replace my eggs. Arthur will be checking on them and he'd see they're enucleated. I need these." I didn't say anything. "Cully, I was going to trash them today anyway. Look at them. They're no good."

"But whose are they?" I said.

"It doesn't matter. They signed the same consent you and Audra signed, Cully. It's no big deal. Do you want to go outside now, or not?"

"I'll stay," I said. "They were just going into the trash anyway."

Luz worked quickly, labelling a new plate Rivera, putting four bubbles of media into mineral oil, and pipetting four eggs from the strangers' plate into the bubbles.

"The rest of these did fertilize," Luz said and started to make up a new plate with new media. "They look very good. They have a very good chance." She transferred the embryos which remained on the strangers' plate into the new, freshened plate. Then she put both new plates into the incubator, the one labelled Rivera on the shelf with the three labelled Youngquist, the one labelled with the strangers' names on its own shelf. She

turned to her paperwork, made some erasures, puzzled over some wording, wrote down notes, then tidied the papers away. She dropped the used plates, along with the plate containing her own enucleated eggs, into the red biohazard bag, looked around the lab to see that everything was in place then turned to me at last. "I'll walk you to your car."

Melanie had left the clinic by this time so that Luz and I did not have to hide ourselves. As we entered the garage where her Volvo was parked beside my Saturn, she fished her keys out of her pocket. I said, "What are you going to tell Holly?"

"I'm not sure yet. I mean, what's the point? If the eggs don't fertilize, then why ... get her hopes up, or..."

"Or her fears."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I mean, is there? I mean, this is only an experiment. We're just going to see if we get embryos from an egg-to-egg ICSI. The unfertilized eggs were just going into the same garbage bag. What's the point of telling all this, or any of this, to Holly?"

"Yet."

"Or ever?"

"If they don't fertilize. But if they do? You have to tell her."

"Cully, the chances are next to nil. If they do fertilize... of course, I'll have to tell her. She will... she will have to make a decision, some decision. They'd be her embryos too. They'd be ours together." She stopped at her car and leaned against it, trembling again. "Madre de Dios!"

"So when do you need to check on the eggs?"

She looked at her watch. "About midnight."

"I'll be here."

"Uh, Cully, no."

"I'll be here."

"Cully, don't be dumb. I've got to make up a reason for being here for the security guard. That's easy enough, but not with you in tow."

"Let him think I'm your boyfriend, and we're on a date, and we're just stopping in to pick up something you left."

"Cully, it's been lots of fun, but you're not invited."

"Do you think I could possibly keep myself away?"

"You are such a fucking turd!"

"How are you going to get out of the house? What will you tell Holly?"

"That... I've left something on at the lab. I'll make up something." She put the key in the lock, paused. "Cully, you're not going to tell Audra about this?"

"God, no!" I said. I loved Audra, but her pragmatic sense of law and ethics—I knew—was as unbending as an obelisk. "She can't ever know!"

I drove home and fired up my computer, put my hands on the keys, but couldn't write. I went into the kitchen and looked for something I could make into a drink. There was an inch of tequila in the liquor cabinet and I mixed it with cranberry juice. I took it back to the computer. I couldn't write. I didn't know how I could wait until midnight. Not a moment passed that I didn't have in front of my mind the four eggs in the incubator. And every moment they grew larger in importance. It was immense. This had never been done before, not ever in history.

Why it had never been done, I couldn't imagine. ICSI had been around for several years. It's a simple technology. With the breakthrough idea of injecting eggs with sperm, why hadn't the next, very simple step occurred to anyone? Holly and Luz were not the first lesbian couple who had gone through the IVF process. Why hadn't any of them seen this possibility? To be able to mingle your DNA with the person you love is a biological drive

with no equivalent.

And what would this simple breakthrough mean for the generations to come? If it turned out to be true that eggs could fertilize eggs, then what did women need men for? On this fundamental reproductive level, there was no need at all. As often as I have heard men say in that contemptuous way, "Women! They're only good for one thing!" I've heard women say, "Men! What are they good for!" The single thing for which men are truly necessary would be removed. Single mothers with deadbeat dads are something of a standard in this country, so we know that it does not take a man to raise a child. And man's role in the sex act—if my mother is any indication—is a thing many women might gladly toss into the ocean of annoyances well lost.

My science fiction imagination rocketed a decade or so into the future to the point where egg-to-egg ICSI was being done on a regular basis by any woman who wanted a child but did not want the accompanying drag of a female-male relationship. All that would be lost would be the Y-chromosome. With both eggs supplying only X-chromosomes, all the babies would be female. How long, I wondered, would it be before there were no more men on the planet?

With that thought, it occurred to me that since IVF science is a male-dominated field it could well be true that the question of egg-to-egg ICSI had in fact already been imagined but squelched as soon as it reared its head. It was not in man's interest. Squelching science is one part of the business of government, another male-dominated field. Certainly when the successful cloning of higher animals became a fact instead of mere speculation, with the sheep Dolly in 1996, the idea and the practice of human cloning were both squelched by governments. The ethical questions are too profound for government to deal with, and so it is forbidden by government.

And with the addition of the fact that with hormone injections women often have an

abundance of eggs and a woman might well choose to cross her own eggs... my imagination reeled. No, not a clone of the woman but two different haploid cells each containing different factors of the single mother. The daughter would not be an exact duplicate of the mother. But where would the individuality of the child lie? What ethical considerations exist for parent, community, and government? I sat still at the keyboard until Audra collected me for bed. Only the blinking cursor was on the screen—no words.

I didn't worry about making excuses to Audra about my midnight rendezvous: when her head hits the pillow, it's deadtime for her until daylight. I've often left the bed to take a walk and work out a story idea during the early morning hours. Though I've always left her a note pinned to my pillow, I don't think she's ever even been aware of it. I pinned just such a note to my pillow this night: "Went for a walk. Working on novel. 11:30. xoxo"

Luz arrived at the back door of the clinic moments after I did. She let us in and we made our way quietly to the lab. There were night lights throughout the building, so there was no need to turn on lights. We kept an eye out for the security guard, but he didn't show. Luz went immediately to the incubator and took out the petri dish containing the four eggs. She put it on the microscope stage and turned on the monitor so that I could see too. She focussed in on the egg at twelve o'clock. There were two little eyes.

"My God!" she said. "My God, my God, my God!"

She took her eye from the microscope and looked at me, sitting back on her stool with an attitude of helplessness, almost of defeat. Certainly apprehension. I shared all those emotions.

"What about the other three?" I said.

She put her eye back to the microscope and turned the petri dish until the egg at three o'clock came onto the monitor. There were two little eyes in it also. The egg at six

o'clock and at nine o'clock also had two little eyes. All four of the egg-to-egg ICSI's had fertilized. She put the petri dish back into the incubator and made notes.

"So there they are," Luz sat limply back on her stool and leaned her head against the wall. "Nowhere else on the planet, but right here."

"What are you going to do now, Luz?" I asked.

"I don't know. Go home and talk to Holly."

"It's a long drive. What will you think about?"

"Well, shit, what do you think?"

"Will you tell her as soon as you get there, or will you wait for morning?"

"I think I'll tell her as soon as I ... no, I'll wait till morning."

"Are you going to tell her that I know?"

"Well, sure.. I mean, I suppose I have to, don't I? No, I don't suppose that I do have to." She thought a moment longer. "What do you think?"

"You could just take them as your embryos, transfer them into your own body. Not tell anyone. Just the two of us would know."

"What a terrible thought, Cully!"

"You're right, it's a terrible thought. Holly's the mother, too. She needs to know. For that reason she needs to know."

We both sat quietly for a long moment. I didn't want this moment to end. But of course it had to; that's the inevitable nature of moments. "You need to go home," I said. "You have the transfer Monday morning, and you need some good rest."

"No. We'd better reschedule for Tuesday now or Wednesday. These would be too premature."

"Will Gage agree to that?"

"Yeah. That should be easy. He's usually against waiting for the blastocyst stage,

as I told you before, but these are my embryos. And Holly's. He knows we know that other clinics do it routinely. Gage will agree."

"Will you call me tomorrow? After you've talked to Holly?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I should."

"I'll call *you* then."

"No. I'll call you."

Chapter Seven

All day Sunday I was obsessed with the possibilities. There were not only the very real possibilities for Luz and Holly that had to be resolved before the next morning, but there were all the farflung possibilities for my novel which sproinged out of my head in all directions. What had begun as a simple, realistic story of two women who loved each other trying to get a child through traditional IVF, would now move into a genre which smacked of science fiction and, in a Mary Shelley *2001* kind of way, horror. Where would Deirdre and Daphne end up? Once they had done this unthinkable thing, what could they not do? Where could they not go? A futuristic world without men kept opening itself up to me. What would such a world be like? Would there no longer be wars? Would the women who solely inhabited that world be mothers and daughters and sisters all, or would they begin filling the void left by men, with men's ancient tactics for domination? Or... ?

From the dire to the absurd and back again. I kept returning to Luz and Holly and what they must be talking about even as I sat or stood or walked from one room to another. They might divide the four egg-to-egg embryos evenly, two to be transferred to Luz and two to Holly. That would be fairest, but it would be foolish. The chances are so slim for pregnancy under the best of circumstances that to divide the four embryos would be practically to waste them.

Of course, either Luz or Holly could transfer the seven sperm-to-egg embryos from the fair-haired blue-eyed medical student, leaving the other to transfer all four of the egg-to-egg embryos. That made better sense for optimal pregnancy, but what were the long range implications? First, who would carry which? Then, what if both women ended up pregnant and both gave birth, one to a child who was half Holly and half stranger, and the

other to a child who was half Holly and half Luz? One likes to believe that there would be no favoritism. Holly and Luz seem above that. But...

But then this Luz-Holly child, this little girl, would be one of a kind in the world. How could she not be special?

It was two o'clock in the afternoon and I was chafing badly at not yet getting Luz's call, when Audra came to the door. "What *is* wrong with you?" she said. "Do you realize you're in here walking all around this room talking to yourself?"

"What have I been saying?" I asked in alarm.

"It's all under your breath, so I didn't catch any of the words. But what on earth is wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I've just got Deirdre and Daphne into this fix and they're battling it out with each other."

"Oh, them. Just kill them off. Or kill Deirdre anyway. I can't stand that bitch."

"You haven't been reading my notes!"

She laughed. "Of course not. I'm just teasing." She stretched. "Well, you know what I was thinking. Holly and Luz are doing their transfer tomorrow. I know what they're feeling at this very moment. What do you say we drive up to Bolinas? Let's take 'em out?"

It took me the briefest moment to collect myself. "Call them," I said. And as she walked to the phone, I added, "Make sure you tell them it was your idea."

"Why?"

"Oh, you know, I've been seeing Luz this week, cleaning up the science in the article. She's probably bored with me. You try Holly."

"You're not letting Luz read your notes?"

"Of course not. She just helps me with the minutiae."

Audra punched the number. "Luz, hi, it's Audra." I hung on every word, every pause. "You excited about tomorrow? (pause) Wednesday? (pause) Oh, really? Well, if you think that's best, but I got pregnant on Day 3. (pause) Well, you're the expert, I guess? Listen, Luz, why I called... Cully and I were just lazing around feeling like a bit of Luz and Holly. What if we come up and take you both out, toast the embryos? (pause) Oh, is she? (pause) Oh, really? Oh, well, I know, how well I know. Listen, could I talk to her? Sometimes that helps. Thanks."

Audra looked at me with a moue. "Holly's feeling bad. I know exactly what it is, depression."

"And fear and hope," I supplied, "and the feeling the world is caving in and blowing up at the same time, the time and space continuum squeezing through the eye of a needle."

"That's exactly right!. Did I tell you that? Holly? Hey, what's up? Oh, how well I know. I was just telling Cully, it's like being squeezed through the eye of the needle while the haystack burns around you.. Yes, I know. But listen, Holly, that's exactly why you need to find something to divert yourself. And Cully and I offer the perfect diversion. Sea Rock Inn, what do you say? Waves crashing, magnificent sunset over China, the smell of seagull shit? (laugh) Oh, good! Shall we meet you there? Yeah, better we'll pick you up."

On the trip to Bolinas, Audra and I got into an acrimonious, mean little fight. In the middle of her nonstop comments about the pressures on a woman between retrieval and transfer, only one one-hundredth of which could a man even begin to imagine, and how insensitive it was of Luz to delay hers and Holly's transfers, I proposed that Luz surely knew best and added, unfortunately, that Luz had done remarkably better than Holly during the hormone injections in keeping her emotions under control.

"Under control?" Audra said, and it was almost a spit. "Well, hail to Vera the

Clown and I'm sure the woman certainly does maintain control but how is control such an important feature of the process?"

"Well, Audra, I was hoping that the change to progesterone was going to make you easier to take, but you're still pretty shrill... Dear," I added. "I didn't say it was important. I said it was remarkable. And it is."

"Well, of course the last thing a man wants is for a woman to be out of control. You've made that abundantly clear."

"That is so unfair, Audra! That is low! Okay, I haven't physically been going through what you've been going through, but that doesn't mean I haven't been feeling it, too."

"Oh, you've felt it?"

"Yes, I've felt it. I've perceived it. I've witnessed you turning into a nut case in front of my eyes. Nerves and tantrums, and how is that going to be healthful, how is that going to do any good at all, but yes, I've been there for you and yes, I have urged control, I plead guilty, counselor. And I was just saying how refreshing it is to see Luz, taking the same damn hormones, and not flying to the moon like a witch on a broomstick every night."

The fight quieted after that, to one of those escalating whisper fights, where I remain quiet and Audra keeps on with a random rat-a-tat sniping between ominous caesurae. "That is such a despicable thing to say. (pause) You know, you and your male chauvinism are so ... antiquated, thank God! (pause) I'll tell you what's refreshing is not to hear that kind of talk at every turn, that's what's refreshing."

"I'm sorry. It was low. It was about as low as saying that a man can't possibly appreciate his wife's distress."

"As for Luz (rat-a-tat) she doesn't, you know, provide Holly with what she needs.

I don't know about on a regular basis, but certainly not lately."

"She told you that?"

"She didn't need to tell me. But yes. She's going through hell right now, and Luz is aloof. It's perfectly natural Holly would turn to me. I've just been through it myself. And I'm glad to be here for her."

"Well, Luz is going through it too, you know."

"Oh, Luz sees it at the clinic all the time, so she's inured to it. That's what Holly is feeling, a hard wall against her. That's why Holly's so upset. I could hear it in her voice tonight. They'd been fighting, I know it. You saw how fast she accepted when Luz put her on the phone. (rat-a-tat) Luz is more like a man than a woman. She's the butch, Holly's the fem."

"Oh, come on, Audra! Let's not ... let's not take this in that direction. That's a little intimate, don't you think?"

"Well, don't you wonder what they do? Luz must wear the dildo."

"That is ridiculous! We shouldn't be talking about something like that, we shouldn't even be thinking about it. You know, the penis is not the be all and end all. Lesbians do not have to strap on dildos to satisfy their partners."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, just ask Holly!" I stopped at the top of the hill above China House. "Now look, do you want to drive around and get this out of your system, or do you think you can control yourself?"

"Oh, I can control myself."

"I'm talking about the attitude."

"My attitude is fine."

I sat back and sighed and looked across the mouth of the Pacific to the City which

was beckoning, come home. "Do you think we can get through the night civilly?"

"Absolutely."

She stretched her hand across the back of the seat and massaged the piano-wire muscles in my neck. I certainly wasn't ready to believe the sincerity of that gesture, but I did not shake off her hand. "You know, Cully, you've been a gem, a dream of a husband. And you're turning out to be a wonderful father. You've just got a bitch lawyer for a wife." She laughed. How real was that? How real was anything any more?

For the sake of the evening ahead, which I knew would be an enormous one for me, I decided to play in the same key. I laughed too, and added, "And who will one day be a great judge, with the wisdom of Solomon." It was not until I put the car in gear and was starting down the hill toward China House that the irony of this last hit me: Solomon's division of the single child between the two women. How wise would Audra be?

The emotional edge Audra and I brought into China House helped, I suppose, cut through the amenities of greetings and before I could read anything on Luz's face we were back in the car and I was driving the curvy road to Sea Rock Inn. Audra and Holly were in the backseat and Luz was beside me; I couldn't quite piece together how that arrangement established itself. In the rear view mirror, I could see that Audra and Holly were cuddling shoulder to shoulder, laughing and talking so low to each other that I could not hear the words.

I glanced at Luz, "How've you been? How's today for you?"

"Well, it's been quite a day." She looked straight ahead at the road. I hoped for something forthcoming, but nothing forthcame. I clammed up too.

The sun was just going down when we arrived at the Sea Rock Inn, and it was spectacular, so spectacular that we each drifted to the rocks at the edge of the restaurant so that we could take it in unobstructed. The sun was halfway below the horizon of ocean,

sending its rays sprayed across ridges of high clouds. After a moment I found Audra beside me, and I took her hand.

"One day of so many," I heard Holly say, off to the left. I looked over and saw that she and Luz, too, were holding hands.

Audra said, "There's nothing like pregnancy to bring out a sunset."

Holly added, "And there's nothing like a sunset to bring out the immensity of pregnancy."

I looked at Luz, but she was looking at Holly. The red of the sunset lit their faces eerily. We watched until well after the sun had sunk below the horizon, the colors and rays changing dramatically moment by moment. I waited to see who would be the one to break which moment. It was Audra.

"God, I'm hungry! Let's eat."

Over dinner, one would have thought the natural subject of the conversation would be the transfers. Certainly it was the topic of conversation I would have chosen. But it was as if the tacit agreement among us all was to talk about everything but. Luz got Audra started on the status of her sexual harassment case which was "nearing a really exciting stage" and the rest of that tale carried us through the main course, at which time she had the politeness to ask Holly if she were painting anything new, which took us in that direction through dessert.

I was, I suppose, visibly chafing when Holly turned to me and said, "You're very quiet, Cully?"

"Am I? Well, I'm a very quiet person." From the general guffaws from the three women, I supposed I'm not. "Well, everything I'm doing is very boring. The novel's stubborn. It keeps making flip-flops and the characters just go wherever they want, say whatever they want. I don't think I'll ever get control of it again."

"Novel? Luz said you were working on an article, for *New Yorker* or somebody."

"*Atlantic*. Yes, that's done, or nearly. I've just sent a first draft to the editor, but only because she demanded to see something. I think she thinks that I don't really have anything. But what's really compelling me is this novel."

"He's got us as the main characters," Luz said to Holly, and Holly blanched.

"No, I don't. I've got lesbians, but they're not you. Daphne and Deirdre are not at all like you."

"They're lesbians going through IVF."

"There are lots of lesbians who go through IVF. These women are not you. They look nothing like you, they sound nothing like you, they're not you."

"Do they live in the San Francisco area?" Holly asked with a persistence which verged on challenge.

"Of course. San Francisco is what I know about. San Francisco is a fabulous city; it'll make for great location shots if I sell the movie rights."

"Do they live actually in the City, or do they live in, say, a picturesque coastal town just north of the City?"

"I picture, say, Sausalito, but I haven't decided yet."

"Do they own, say, a bed and breakfast?"

"These women are not you, Holly! Not either of you. I have barely begun to flesh them out."

"Are you going to have science fiction elements in it?" Holly asked. It was very flat, the way she said it. Much more like a statement than a question. And she turned to Luz as she said it, so that it almost appeared she was asking Luz and not me.

I had made up my mind, watching Holly's casual behavior all evening, particularly towards me, that whatever Luz had told Holly about the egg-to-egg embryos, she had not

yet told her about my involvement. But now with this last question, I began to wonder. Did Holly know how much I was seeing of Luz? Did she know about—or suspect—my visit to the lab? I responded cautiously, achieving what I thought must appear to be a rather good likeness of innocence.

"Oh, when the science itself is so interesting, I don't see any reason to go into science fiction. What I'm particularly intrigued by in this story is not the IVF process itself—which Audra and I have found to be pretty cut and dried once you're into it—it's what happens to these lesbians after the birth of the child: when the child starts to school, for instance; the PTA meetings could be sensational. You two must have given that a lot of speculation. What are your thoughts?"

Luz pushed some blueberries from her blueberry pie out of the crust and across the plate with her fork. Holly gazed at the blueberries. "Oh, Luz and I have talked a lot about that," she said finally. "We'll just have to wait and see. We'll handle whatever comes up in the smartest way possible."

"Tell that to your lesbians, Cully," Audra said, as if I were a foe. "And after all, isn't that what any parents do? There's no telling what's going to come up for our child; we'll just have to handle it."

"Of course," I said. "I'll just have to be imaginative, won't I? By the way, since I'm using it so much, about that word 'lesbian'... How do lesbians feel about it?"

"I don't like it," Holly volunteered instantly.

"I prefer gay," Luz said.

"You know, I thought so," I said. "I saw you both almost wince when I used the word."

"It sounds like you're some radical devotee of some cause," Holly said. "'I'm a lesbian.' I don't like the sound of it, I don't like it."

"But is that the way all gay women feel? I thought some lesbians are proud of the word and of the history of the word, like it's a standard to carry."

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Cully."

"See, Cully, that's the problem," Luz answered. "We're all individuals, with individual opinions. We just happen to be gay."

"How do straights feel about being called 'straight'?" Holly asked. "Answer for all of them, Cully."

"Why do I feel like I'm getting picked on?" I asked. "I'm just doing research for a novel. Who else am I going to ask?"

"Nobody's picking on you, Cully," Audra said. "You've just stepped into a realm which is uncomfortable, so step back out."

"And I'd like not to be condescended to, Audra."

"No one's condescending to you, Cully."

"Even as you speak those words, you are condescending to me. You know, you women are always complaining that men don't take you seriously, that men are not interested in you. And here you have a man who's interested, who's trying to understand you, and you gang up on him."

Both Audra and Holly opened their mouths to speak, eyes flashing with anger, but Luz's soft voice stopped them. "Could I say something here?" Everyone turned to her, each taking a deep breath and holding it. "I don't know what's going on between the two of you," Luz said, nodding to me and Audra, "but Holly and I are stressed to the ultimo-max. If we've been obnoxious, Cully—"

"We haven't!" Holly interjected.

"If we've been obnoxious, Cully, please forgive us. We've got this really really important thing ahead of us, we're sloshing up to our ears in injected hormones, and I think

we should call it a night now."

"I'm so sorry," I said, abashed to the core. "It was completely inappropriate of me to get angry."

"We're sorry, too," Luz said.

"Well, Holly," Audra said, letting out that breath, "I've got to go to the quote little girls' room unquote. Want to come?"

"Sure," Holly said, and they gathered up their purses and departed together to share the experience, a phenomenon I've never understood.

I turned to Luz who was looking at me with a vexed expression. "Sorry," I said, "I'm stressed too, you know. I expected a call."

"I said I'd call you when I knew what we were doing. Well, I don't know yet."

"Well, the transfer is going to happen you know!"

"Cully, as you know, I'm not unaware of that."

I followed her out to the lobby to wait for Audra and Holly. "So, what did you tell her?"

"Everything."

"Did you tell her about me?"

"No."

"Hmm. But did you pick up on that, what she said about the science fiction?"

"Yeah. She was fishing. She knows we've become close. I've told her that."

"Have we? Become close? I know I have."

"Cully, don't, please, get maudlin on me." To my surprise, she started to cry but turned quickly away. "I'm so tired."

I didn't know what to do. I decided she wouldn't want the usual, a hug around the shoulders. So I sat down in a far chair in the lobby, and that's how Holly and Audra found

us. Luz had tried to regain her composure meanwhile but was not wholly successful. It was apparent to Audra as well as Holly that Luz had been crying. Holly went to her and put her arm around her waist.

"Fucking hormones!" Luz muttered, and the two of them went out.

"What happened?" Audra said to me as we followed.

I shrugged. "Fucking hormones. You know."

The next two days dragged by. I did not go to the clinic. With every last drop of restraint, I tied myself to my computer and wrote nonsense until the telephone rang in mid-afternoon. It was Luz.

"I knew if I didn't call you, you'd call me and make life miserable."

"So what happened?"

"Nothing yet."

"What!"

"Cully, would you back off? I'll tell you what's going on, but back off, all right?"

"Sure, of course, I'm backed off, you know me."

"Well, maybe we're doing something terrible, maybe not. See, we've decided to go with the egg-to-egg embryos, all four of them."

"You're kidding!"

"Cully, I don't want any attitude from you. This is Holly's and my decision."

"No, I'm happy, I'm happy, that's what I wanted you to do." I wasn't at all sure that was true, but I was afraid she would hang up on me. "So, are you going to divide them two and two?"

"No. We're transferring all four to Holly."

"You're kidding!"

There was a small silence. "That's happy, right?"

"Well..." I said. And that was all. My emotions were too mixed to sort out.

"We're freezing the other seven. If these four don't result in pregnancy, we'll transfer all seven of them in a future cycle."

"To Holly?"

"Yes."

"But what about you?"

"Oh, Cully, you know..." She sounded tired. "I can't deal with all this pregnancy shit, you know? It's a relief. I can smoke again. I can drink. This is for Holly. I mean I finally realized that."

"Really, Luz?"

"Yeah, really."

"You don't sound so sure."

"Yeah? Well, I am."

"So Holly didn't freak over the egg-to-egg thing? I thought she might."

"No, she loved it. She loved every aspect of it. The only problem was how to divide them, and how many of the regular embryos to transfer with them. That's what we were going around about on Sunday and why we were both so crazy. But when I finally convinced her that I didn't want any of them, it was easy."

"You're sure?"

"Sure." There was a long pause. "But Cully, I need to tell you something. And you're the only fucking person in the world who might understand, if you can believe that. I did something today maybe I shouldn't have. Well, something else maybe I shouldn't have." There was a little pause. "Aren't you going to ask me what, you turd?"

"Luz, you're going to tell me something so bad that I'm the only one you can tell it to? And I'm supposed to ask what?"

"Holly couldn't possibly understand. And nobody else knows what you know."

"Well, what, then?"

"It's a matter of timing. You know that the four egg-to-egg embryos are a day later than the other seven. Well, they weren't ready today. They looked good, nice morulas, all four of them, but I think they need one more day. So I told Gage we were going to hold off until Day Six, which of course is Day Five for our kids."

"But that's okay, isn't it?"

"Well, not really. A couple of the other seven are already blastocysts, one of them very advanced. They could hatch in the night."

"What happens then?"

"Well, all dressed up and nowhere to go."

"They die?"

"If they're not transferred immediately."

"Couldn't you freeze them today?"

"Sure, but Arthur's right there. Gage is right there. They'll say, 'You've got these ready for transfer, but you want to wait for the late four? Why those four particularly?' And I don't have an answer for them."

"So what are you going to do?"

"First thing tomorrow morning, I go in and I freeze whatever's freezable. And hope that none of them hatch meanwhile."

It was a sleepless night for me. In the morning, I made breakfast for Audra and sent her off then waited by the telephone until it rang, late in the morning. It was Luz.

"They were fabulous!" she said. "Gorgeous little blastocysts, all four of them!"

"The transfer went okay?"

"Perfect. Gage dropped the tenaculum, but other than that, perfect."

"Great."

"Perfect."

There was a pause. I didn't want to ask. But there was a pause. I said, "What about the others? They froze okay?"

"Five of them. They looked great."

"Oh. What about the other two?"

"One of them just didn't make it. And one of them... well, it hatched in the night."

"Oh."

A long pause. "Cully, I feel like I've offered up a human sacrifice."

I waited for more, unable to offer her anything. "Holly's first Beta's Saturday after next then?"

"Probably, second one on the Monday after."

"You'll call me with the results?"

"Sure. You understand, though, that we won't really know what those results mean until the second one. And even then... well, you remember."

"Of course. When will I see you again?"

"I'm going to take the next few days off. I want to be with Holly."

"Sure. When are you coming back?"

"Monday probably. No retrievals or transfers this weekend."

"Seems a long way off. Will I see you then?"

"Well, there's always lunch."

"Sure. Look forward to it."

"Well, okay then."

"Okay."

"Bye." She hung up.

I was suddenly desolate. Funny, I thought, and I said it out loud, "Funny." I now had everything to live for. More than anyone had ever had. Not only was I going to be a father to my own child but—if Holly's pregnancy took—I would be a father, too, to the first child ever born of two women. After all, I was there at her conception. And this the daughter of a new generation.

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