

X XX ZERO

a novel by
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PART THREE 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 Nineteen

By Thanksgiving, Audra finally felt ready to tell the families about our pregnancy. I had been ready for some time but had demurred to her increasingly pathological fear of jinxing the birth by announcing the pregnancy. In her seventh month she was now so big, however, that there was no hiding the fact any longer. She had thought herself successful for many months now at the office, where she had worn looser and looser blouses and jackets. Everyone knew but no one said anything. She had made arrangements already to take off all of January and most of the spring, but nobody was calling it "maternity" leave.

We invited members of both families to our house for the Thanksgiving celebration. Though they all live around the Bay Area, in Fremont and San Jose, we had not seen any of them since our traditional Labor Day picnic at my family's cabin in the foothills. Audra had it planned that she would meet each arrival at the door and let her maternity smock tell the happy tale. She bought one especially for the day, a purple velvet job which she felt advertised the pregnancy richly and in no uncertain terms. By Thanksgiving morning she was actually aglow with the thrill of our surprise party, which glow was immediately somewhat dimmed by the obtuseness of my sister Gloria who arrived first thing in the morning. Since Gloria never remembers any particulars of any invitation, she always arrives two to three hours early or late. Thanksgiving she rang the bell just as I had finished stuffing the turkey and was putting it into the oven. Audra went to let her in the front door and I listened for the screams of surprise and congratulations, but none forthcame. After a few moments when Audra brought Gloria into the kitchen, Audra's glance to me was full of the usual disappointment and ennui at Gloria's density and self-absorption.

This morning Gloria was particularly full of herself as she was delivering all her Christmas gifts to the family, a full month early as usual, each requiring a lengthy history of conception, purchase, and choice of wrapping paper. These tales consumed the next hour while Audra and I busied ourselves with dinner preparations and Gloria sipped from and emptied innumerable cups of coffee without diminishment of her loquacity. Once I saw her give a small start as she noticed Audra's girth, but her recognition manifested itself in an empathetic glance at me in the transparently smug notion that Audra the bulimic neatfreak was putting on a whole lot of weight and not masking it so very well. I simply smiled and gave a little extra punch to the dough I was kneading.

Audra's mother and father, Lana and Jean-Gabriel, were the next to arrive, and those screams more than made up for Gloria's lack: screams, giggles, tears of joy and near falling-down-on-the-floor lack of bodily function to the point that I had to lay out Lana on the couch in the den with an ice pack on her forehead. Jean-Gabriel, with a reserve I've always associated with his French heritage, smiled and smoked an even greater number of cigarettes than usual as he perched himself on the high barstool beside the kitchen counter on which he tapped his fingernails in an even more than usually vigorous tattoo. He seemed pleased, but one could never tell with Jean-Gabriel.

When Gloria finally understood that the uproar was at Audra's so long awaited pregnancy, she made sure she was no one's second in the screaming competition. Since my own mother Bess with my gay brother Spud in tow arrived within moments of Lana and Jean-Gabriel, the competition soon became fierce indeed, and Audra was over her head in jubilation.

The roof did not reattach for several hours, at which time I called everybody to the table, which I had unaccountably set for eight instead of seven. It wasn't until Audra took away the extra setting, with a little glance of

awkwardness at my mother, that I realized I had set the extra place for my father. Since his death was three years past, it was a truly remarkable mistake to make, and suddenly I missed my father more hopelessly than I had since the early days after his death. This would have been his first grandchild, and his happiness would have been so great on this day that the room could not have contained him.

My gay brother Spud came up at this moment and clapped me on the back, just the way my father would have done, but on Spud it fit uncomfortably. I gave him a clap back, and we grinned dumbly into each other's face. I call him my gay brother Spud in spite of the fact that he hasn't allowed anyone but me to call him by the name Spud since he was eight and without any evidence whatsoever that he is in fact gay. I just can't believe that he's not. Except for the requisite prom dates in high school, he has never had a girlfriend, and the guys he pals around with are uniformly neat, trim and goodlooking with a love of ballet and grand opera. I had been intending to have Spud over alone some time so as to give him an opportunity to come out of the closet to me safely outside the glare of Gloria and Mom, but it was always far easier to simply let it slide a little longer. I made a mental note, as we grinned into each other's face, to make a New Year's resolution to not let another year go by without making that appointment. After all, I thought, a single year after so many was not too very long.

I thought suddenly of introducing Spud to Chris Christian, maybe have them both over to dinner. They were about the same age, both attractive and engaging, sure. Even more suddenly—in fact unstoppably sudden—my pornographic imagination conjured an image of Chris and Spud naked in each other's arms, Chris on top dripping sweat onto Spud below, whose head was thrown back and his eyes squeezed shut in rapture and agony. I blinked the

image away but evidently it had somehow registered in my face because Spud flushed and turned away quickly, his grin dissolving into shock. I had nowhere to go but to the head of the table where I took my dad's old responsibility of carving and serving up the turkey.

I didn't eat much dinner but gazed more and more contentedly around the table at the genes there which Audra and I were passing down to Gertrude-Bartholomew. Lana and Jean-Gabriel sat at either side of Audra who was at the foot of the table. Jean-Gabriel's dark good looks were somewhat spoiled, in my estimation, by his pouting scarlet lips which I always associated with his pouting French-Canadian accent and his little "uh, uh, uh" repetitions placed firmly between teeth and lips far in front of the rest of his handsome, angular French-Canadian face. Lana, with her high anglo forehead and long nose set above thin lips in a rather flattish face, counted much more for Audra's looks. Even the way the two women sat in their chairs and held their heads to listen was identical. They also had exactly the same blond hair, though since that came out of a bottle I couldn't lay it to genetics. In fact I always found it ironic that these two women, so much in competition with each other, should take such pains to look so alike, yet there it was. The traditional warning to young men to look closely at the mother of your bride-to-be because there will be your wife after twenty or so years, was well applied to Lana and Audra, and I congratulated myself again over my original and still extant admiration for my mother-in-law. Yes, these were terrific Franco-Anglo genes to pass on to Balthazar-Drusilla.

I turned my attention to my own brood and found myself as always perplexed by the muddy gene pool in which we have swum since our birth. Spud and Gloria have no physical, mental or emotional traits in common that I've ever been able to detect, and neither have I found any of my own traits in either of them. The carelessness of every facet of Gloria's being and the

fastidiousness of Spud's might both descend directly from our mother, who can't abide an ant, germ or other speck in her kitchen but whose cabinets and drawers are a miracle of disorderliness. The comparison with our dad's workshed, with every tool in its place and every screw, nut and bolt in its proper jar, along with his utter lack of hygiene and a die-hard insistence that a shower and change of clothes were necessary only every other day and no oftener no matter what the occasion or how much the dirt or odor, has always made me wonder whatever drew these two people together in the first place, to procreate and to love.

"Well, Destry," I mentally addressed my spawn, "we'll just adopt a wait-and-see policy, shall we, on your paternal genetic inheritance?"

Spud and I found ourselves alone in the kitchen, cleaning up after the dinner. I asked him, "Spuddy, do you remember a song Dad always used to sing? Something about the water's being wide and how you can't get over to the other side?"

Without hesitation, Spud began to sing in a soft high baritone that immediately choked me:

The water is wide, I cannot cross o'er.
Nor have I wings nor can I fly.
I'll build a boat that carries two,
And we both shall row, my love and I.

I stood mute and unmoving, my hands in the dishwater gripping some fragile piece of china, pain and beauty knifing me. My mother stumbled into the room, and I turned to see her grasping the door frame, her face full of anguished disbelief. It was clear to me when she laid eyes on Spud, who was facing me so that he did not see her, that she had imagined briefly from the other room that it was my father singing.

Spud had trouble finding the second verse. But now Gloria was beside

my mother, and she provided the lyrics for him:

There is a ship that sails the sea.
She's loaded deep as deep can be,
But not so deep as the love I'm in;
I cannot tell if I sink or I swim.

Spud joined her contralto, contributing a harmony which was at once simple yet complex to my untrained ear, enriching the melody which now I did remember vividly. I wished I could sing with them, but I wiped my hands on a dishcloth and quietly helped my tear-drenched mother to a seat at the table, where we both listened to the rest of the song which Spud and Gloria sang as if they had practiced it together.

Now love is handsome, love is fair,
And love is true when love is new,
But love grows cold as love grows old.
When the tale is told, love fades from you.

When they ended, I got a box of tissues for my mother. Spud and Gloria came forward and plucked their own tissues, and all of us stood around blowing our noses. I looked up to find Audra and Lana standing in the doorway, wiping eyes and noses with tissues of their own. I felt the sudden need to flee and as I headed down the hall toward the bathroom, I glanced into the living room to find that Jean-Gabriel, too, was wiping his eyes with his handkerchief. He had become great friends with my father during the years of Audra's and my courtship and marriage, but I never imagined I would ever see him cry.

I sat on the toilet with the lid down and wept hard into the toilet paper I had bunched up to my face, trying to stifle the sobs and stanch the gushing tears, then finally yielding to them and feeling better for it. Sitting there with the porcelain gleaming all about me, doing this human thing beyond my control, crying for my father and family, I thought of the Neandertal family in the cave in

the Yugoslav Alps with the body of their boy lying frozen on the floor of the cave. I was obsessed with the image, and it added to my grief at the same time as it somehow gave me relief from it.

After a time I heard laughter from down the hall which, too, deepened and lightened my grief. And after several moments, I grew restless and went to find out why there was laughter in the other end of the cave.

After the folks had left and Audra and I were cleaning up the dessert dishes, I saw that she was very pleased with herself and us. Our pregnancy seemed a success in every respect. She was in fact quite lovely in her quiet joy. So I decided to take this opportunity to broach a question which had been playing on the periphery of my imagination for the past week after I found out that Luz and Chris were planning a trip to Ecuador over the Christmas and New Year holidays.

I said to Audra as we were finishing up, "You know what I've been thinking? Playing around with on the periphery of my imagination?"

"Well, let's see, let me think," she said, as she found imaginary spots on the countertop to swipe at. "Could it have something to do with Ecuador?"

I was astonished. "How did you know about that?"

"As soon as Holly told me I've been waiting for this lead up. It makes sense, doesn't it? You hate Christmas..."

"I don't hate Christmas."

"You don't enjoy it. You've always pretended to like it for my sake."

"I like it okay."

"You love Luz."

"I like Luz very much, yes."

"You hate Christmas, you love Luz, Luz is going to Ecuador with her 'friend'. 'Honey, can I go, too?' I think it's a great idea. Go."

"It was just an idea. I was just floating an idea."

"No, I'm serious. I think it's a great idea, go."

"I don't have to go. It's no big deal."

"Go."

"Well, what would you do?"

"Holly and I have already made plans. She's going to have Christmas here with me. She's closing China House for the holidays, and I'm going to treat her to bed and breakfast."

"When were you going to tell me this?"

"As soon as you told me that you were toying on the periphery of an idea for toying around with Luz in Ecuador."

"Chris is going to be there, too, you know. We're not going to be toying alone."

"Yes, I know. Your fidelity will not be at risk. Unless..." she paused. "No! You are not to indulge in any three-ways, do you hear me?" She laughed, and I joined her in the laugh but made no other comment on that suggestion. Through these months I had maintained a rigid censor of my pornographic imagination—until that moment with Spud and Chris—and I forbid any thought or fantasy along that line and certainly harbored no anticipation of anything remotely sexual in this trip to Ecuador.

"And you're not going to climb any volcanoes while you're there either, is that clear? And neither is Luz. She's four months pregnant, for God's sake. Tell Chris to grow up."

Yes, Luz was pregnant, though it was a word I hated applying to this cultivation of the monster in her womb. Audra was pregnant; Holly was pregnant; Luz was growing a clone. When Luz had broken the news of "our queer parentage"—as she called it—I found myself curiously unprepared. I think

the thought was so repellent to me that my psyche had kept it shelled up in a dark corner, as though by denying the thought illumination I could etiolate the seed and it would die. "Well, it stuck," was the way Luz announced it to me after she had heard the first heartbeat on the ultrasound. I remember being puzzled. Why had she done this thing to begin with if she was so resentful now? It made no sense, and it so infuriated me that I couldn't bring myself to discuss it. For her part, she seemed no more eager to talk about it and give it a reality than I.

Holly, too, appeared almost indifferent or even—I thought once or twice—antagonistic to Luz's pregnancy. "Well, you didn't have to do it!" I heard her say with deliberate hurtfulness early on when Luz was experiencing morning sickness. I was visiting them at China House and was just returning from the bathroom and Holly couldn't have known that I overheard. "We had one on the way! Wasn't that enough for you?" From this I surmised the answer to the question I had frequently asked myself, that Holly indeed did not know what kind of baby this was that Luz was carrying. No doubt she supposed it to be the product of some anonymous donor at Life, Inc., perhaps even the fair-haired, blue-eyed fellow. So Luz was keeping the secret.

Only Chris was excited about the pregnancy. And Birdie, who loved Luz uncompromisingly. He too did not know what kind of baby this was; all he knew was that Luz had tried to get pregnant a second time and had succeeded. Of course he would be happy for her, and I more than once watched him following her around the room with his eyes, content for her.

Chris tried several times to engage me in conversation about Luz's pregnancy, calling me at home when he knew Audra wouldn't be there, but I always aborted the call. I couldn't bear to think of it; it made me sick to my stomach. Now I look back at that time and I wonder why the repulsion for the clone was so great inside me. I had such tenderness for the boy himself, and my

dreams were ravaged with images of him and his family in the cave on the night of his death, and the thirty thousand years of dark icy stillness which had passed since that night. The making of the embryo had charged me with a kind of comfort. Why then was this "pregnancy" so abhorrent to me? I think now it must have had something to do with the contamination of Luz, but at that time I was not exploring the thought.

And this was fine with me, this curious but welcome ability to simply put the monster fully out of mind. I had Audra's pregnancy always before me, and I doted on it. And we both had visitation rights at Holly's pregnancy. Audra and Holly drew even tighter during this time, always choosing to sit together in as close proximity as possible. The love seat in the bay window at China House was their special favorite, and often I watched them with acute fondness as they tickled each other in the soft autumnal sunlight that dappled that love seat in the late afternoons. And though Luz might come into the room, bringing with her the monster fetus, I could simply turn back to Audra and Holly and laugh.

"So you don't mind about Ecuador?" I asked Audra now as she swiped viciously and expertly at imagined specks on the countertop. I had taken a long gauge of just how angry she really was.

"No! Not at all! For once I'm going to have a good time at Christmas instead of worrying about you hating every second of it. Holly feels the same way. She says Luz and Chris go out of town every year, which to my mind is very anti-marriage, but Holly claims she's adjusted. Well, at least this year Holly and I have each other, so do go play with the boys. I don't mind."

"So, okay, you don't mind, but you *are* mad?"

"How can I be mad?"

"Well, you are."

"Don't be silly. That's like being mad because your husband doesn't like

rutabagas. You and Luz and Chris go off and have pigmeat, or whatever you're going to have, and Holly and I will have all the rutabagas we can eat."

"So, then you're not mad?"

"Yes, I'm mad. All right? But I'm not mad at you. All right?"

"Okay." I waited a long moment. All the dishes were done and put away, the countertops had been swiped dozens of times. She wasn't going anywhere, and she leaned up against the cabinets with her elbows on the countertop and her belly jutting out at me. I got out the cleanser and tackled the porcelain of the sink, which seemed to me used to be whiter. "I mean, all this is way up in the air still. I haven't even brought the idea up to Luz and Chris."

"They'll be delighted. They'll be charmed. Who wouldn't be charmed by Cully Rand?" She leaned over the sink to examine my job more closely at the same time presenting her pregnant body to me more temptingly, and I took the bait.

"Hey," I said, rinsing off my hands and putting my arms around her from the back, to reach her belly with my hands. "Let's go lie down on the bed together and feel the baby squirm." She always loved that.

Chapter Twenty

I was surprised and pleased by the alacrity and grace with which Luz and Chris accepted my intrusion into their vacation. "What about my horning in on Ecuador?" I said exploratorially. "That would be such fun," Luz said in the flat, noncommittal tone I had come to expect from her. "Sure," was all Chris said. I'd found him a man of few words, but most of those were of the agreeable sort like "sure".

The only problem was that I was buying my airplane ticket so late that I couldn't get onto their more direct flight from San Francisco through Houston to Quito. Luz and Chris always made their reservations for the next Christmas in January, agreeing upon the next year's destination during the old year's trip and acting on it with the timeliness that was Luz's style. My flight, leaving late-night on Christmas Eve, a day later than Luz and Chris, took me on a five-stop tour of the airports of Central America: Guatemala City, San Salvador, San Jose, Guayaquil, and finally Quito.

I didn't realize until I had boarded the plane in San Francisco that I had a menacing tickle in my throat. During the twenty-seven hours of flight and layovers, the tickle worsened to a sneezing, drippy cold, so that during the last two ups and downs my Eustachian tubes were so swollen that the pain on the descents was excruciating. It was as though someone had taken screwdrivers and plunged them into each eardrum, twisting them a turn or two every eternal minute of the landing. By the time I met Luz and Chris at the Quito Airport, I was practically deaf and blind with agony and fatigue.

I was stunned at Luz's appearance. First she had cut her hair quite short. I might have suspected that. For the past few months I had seen that the white

streak in her hair was widening. It was peculiar how it happened. As hairs would fall out, it seemed, the new hairs started growing in white. The narrow streak went throughout her long hair, but all around its base was a much broader streak of short hair. It was more than obvious, it struck the eye, and I had asked her about it as soon as I noticed it. "The vitiligo is stress-related, they tell me. So I guess it's another by-product of the fucking hormones."

Now with her hair cut short, the long narrow streak was gone and a large part of the right side of her head was pure white, and all the same length. That effect was stunning enough, but the vitiligo did not end there. The last time I had seen Luz, in early December, I had seen that the vitiligo had moved more or less symmetrically out from her eyelids. The previous ring of white skin at the base of her eyelashes had begun expanding and was perhaps a quarter to a half an inch wide. Because the white almost matched the white of her eye, from a distance it looked as if her right eye was twice as large as her left eye. Now, at the airport in Ecuador, the white ring had expanded to above the brow and out to the side until it nearly met her white hairline, and down her cheek and onto the side of her nose.

"My God!" I said when I saw her.

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "Raccoon again, yeah."

"What does your doctor say?"

"I haven't been to see her. She can't do anything. There's nothing to be done. Do me a favor and just get used to it as quick as you can, all right? And don't bring it up again. There's nothing to be done," she repeated.

As we collected my bags she added, "What the hell is wrong with you."

"Bad cold. Keep your distance."

"Don't worry!"

They loaded me into the backseat of the rented car and drove me to the

hotel, in which Luz and Chris shared a double room while I was in a room by myself. Lonely. Though it was past midnight and I had not slept for more than forty-four hours, I couldn't sleep. I had an assault of nerves that caused my legs to jitter through the long night.

The next day was Friday and Chris and Luz had planned to drive north to be ready for the big market day on Saturday in Otobaló. I was stuffed with our luggage into the the backseat of the tiny car and saw the PanAmerican Highway through a blur of speed and dizziness. Chris drove the car, a cheap and gutless brand of 4X4 Chevrolet made in Ecuador for Ecuador and surely illegal in any of the United States, taking the downhill mountain curves at a sickening speed. I didn't have the strength or sense of purpose to try to get him to slow down. Luz, her neck straight and strong in front of me, didn't seem to find the speed excessive. Adding to the sense of danger, the Ecuadoran drivers passed three abreast on the single lane PanAmericana, on curves and hills alike, for there were few straightaways.

A phenomenon which surprised us was that the PanAmericana was lined with children, bunched up five to ten in a group, the groups spread out sometimes three or four groups visible from curve to curve. As the cars would pass, the children would fall to their knees and stretch out their arms to the cars, their hands gripped together in a gesture of pleading. In my feverish state it was like a nightmare. Since we saw none of the Ecuadoran drivers stop, we didn't stop either but just looked at their pleading hands and postures as we flew by. It did seem heartless in the face of such earnest and heartbreaking supplication, but there were so many hundreds of them.

We did stop the car where the PanAmericana crossed over the Equator. There was a dotted yellow line to indicate it. Chris straddled it while Luz walked on it like a tightrope, holding her arms out to keep balance, both waving

cheerfully to me where I watched insipidly from the backseat of the car.

We reached a hacienda turned hostería just beyond Otovalo in which Luz had booked a single room with three beds. I napped while Luz and Chris toured the large and, I saw later, very beautiful grounds of the hacienda, complete with a jungly creek running through it. All around were spectacular volcanoes. On the east side of the valley was Volcán Imbabura while on the west was the slightly smaller Volcán Cotopachi. Luz reported to me at dinner that the locals say, when they awake in the morning to find Cotopachi snow-covered and Imbabura still bald, that Imbabura has visited his wife across the valley in the night, a legend I found charming and even a little arousing. Clearly I was feeling much better. The food at the hacienda was fabulous and I ate ravenously.

Chris grinned at me throughout the meal and reached over and slapped my cheek once. "Glad you're here, Jocko." I don't know where he got this name for me, but he has called me by it ever since.

The next day we went to the market in Otovalo in the morning, a very nice, tidy, local crafts market, world-famous according to Luz. Wherever she walked in the crowd, people stopped what they were doing when they saw her face and drew back, sometimes crossing themselves. In the afternoon we drove halfway up Volcán Cotopachi where Chris had heard there was a crater lake with a path around the rim. It was a breathtaking hike, though at about 9000 feet in elevation, I had little breath to be taken. My cold, which still had me a little weak, was intensified by a kind of altitude sickness. Luz, however, had brought some sort of pills with her that dealt with altitude sickness so that by evening I was recovered.

Luz had also found out the story behind the children on the roadside. The custom in Ecuador is that between Christmas and New Years Day, Ecuadoran children, and some of the old women who call themselves widows of the Old

Year, would line the road to ask for gifts from passing cars, a sort of weeklong equivalent to our Hallowe'en. This knowledge was an enormous relief to me, since I had been haunted by those little pleading faces and postures. On the much smaller and less travelled road up to the crater, the children had woven thin ropes out of grass and strung them across the road as a toll gate. Now forewarned, we had bought bags of caramels, little puddings, and rolls of crackers in Otovalo, and we stopped happily at the first roadblock for Luz to pass the goodies out the window of the car. They rushed to her window with glee but as soon as they saw her face, they pulled away in fear and crossed themselves. They wouldn't accept the goodies, even though Luz invited them in a light patter of Spanish that was gentle and maternal.

"Pull off up there, Frenchy," Luz said, gesturing to the curve ahead where there was a turnout in the road. She took from her purse a bag of makeup and, while Chris pulled ahead and off the road, applied a thick coat of coppery pancake over the white skin. It wasn't a match for her own infinitely more subtle and varied burnt apricot tones, but it was far less shocking than the white. "Scaring the Goddam kids!" she muttered. "Goddam Halloween mask!" She brushed black mascara into her brow and onto her lashes, then she wrapped a scarf around her head and put on very dark sunglasses and got out of the car. "I'll drive, Frenchy. You hand out the candies."

Luz drove us to the next group of kids just around the curve. They dropped their woven-grass rope and ran to the passenger side of the jeep. "Feliz Navidad!" they cried in more and less understandable Spanish accents and accepted the candies Chris handed them with huge grins and giggles. As we pulled away, laughing, I heard Luz utter a little sob.

At the next toll, as we started pulling to the side of the road one delighted boy did scissors splits of excitement. This road did not seem well travelled. We

had not passed a single other car. I wondered how long this boy had been waiting here, hoping for a car to come along. After giving him and the other children a pudding apiece and a roll of crackers to share—"para compartir, tell them", Luz said, and Chris made an admirable stab at it in his Peetkeerner accent—we pulled out only to stop at the next group of children perhaps two hundred feet up the road. I was still watching the boy of the scissors splits through the rear window and saw him racing madly up the hill after us. Chris had finished handing out the candies and Luz was pulling back on to the road when the boy's voice called to us, "Por favor! Por favor, esperan!"

"Hold on," I said to Luz. "I think he's earned seconds on his Navidad." As we waited for him to reach us, I had a chance to observe the children. Their faces, swiped by dirty fingers, were filled with such joy over these paltry gifts that I found it almost as heartwrenching as the hopeless hope on the faces of the children the previous day on the wide, swift Panamericana where no one would stop. How few and how random were the stops in such heavy traffic on such a dangerous highway with so many children to stop for? And to stop for this group of children while the next group and last group watched—who could make such a choice? No matter how fervently the children prayed, they always met with this randomness of beneficence and reward, and yet they prayed and pled between these holidays, year after year after year. The boy reached us, puffing, and thrust his open palm into the window. Chris put into it another pudding. The rest of the children eyed it doubtfully.

"Give them all seconds, Frenchy," Luz said and added to the children, "¡Por causa de este pequeño hombre está muy fuerte y rápido, uno más para todos!" Cheers all around, and all the arms came snaking through the window again.

At one section of the road to the crater, on a high narrow mesa not more than sixty feet wide edged by deep barrancas on either side, a lone house was

built at the very verge of the cliff. A small band of children had stretched their braided grass rope across the road and when we stopped, they rushed the car from all sides. These children looked different from the black-haired black-eyed Indian children we had seen all along the way. Some of these had blue eyes in their dark faces, one had blondish hair, bushed out of his head like a feral mongrel. This one looked me right in the eye a long moment as he held out his hand for Chris to drop a candy into. Luz explained as we drove away that the desk clerk at the *hostería* had told her that some German men lived near the crater where there was mining, that they had lived here for many years and had taken Indian wives and these must be their progeny. Gazing into the solemn eyes of the feral boy inhabiting this narrow strip of high land in so rugged a terrain, I couldn't help but think of my own child so soon to be born into this so random world. And Luz's child in Holly's womb. Even the monster. Why should their chance in the pursuit of happiness be so much greater than these children on this backroad through the volcanoes of Ecuador? Or even was it greater? What lay ahead for them, all three? I couldn't bear to explore the thought further, but worked to drop it out of my mind.

The next day dawned clear, for a brilliant change, and for the first time we could see the snow-covered dome of Cayambe, a much higher volcano than Imbabura, looming behind Imbabura. We decided to drive there and find a road up the mountain. Volcán Cayambe, we discovered from our guide book, is the highest mountain in the world measured from the center of the earth. A geometrical fact that had escaped my grasp all these years, now cheerfully provided by Chris in Birdiesque detail, is that the earth is not round at all. Oh no, it is an "oblate spheroid" or rather a "geoid", flatter at the poles and thicker around the equator. Considering that the earth is fluid under its crust and that it rotates latitudinally on its pole-to-pole axis, it makes sense that it would bulge

around the Equator. So, in short, to drive up this mountain, the highest point along the entire length of the Equator, was a thing that Chris and Luz must do.

Luz applied her pancake and mascara and donned a different scarf and we loaded ourselves into the car and headed for the whitecapped dome in the distance. The road up the volcano took us on a long series of switchbacks as we ascended through eucalyptus then pine forests into a stretch of lovely long párama grass, then short mossy grasses covering a rugged landscape that looked like a different planet. The road ended at a creek that looked to be too deep to cross even with our Chevrolet's four-wheel drive. We saw other car tracks disappear into the creek and reappear on the other bank, but there was no telling when those tracks were made and by what kind of vehicle, perhaps one with a higher bed and certainly one with more horsepower than our little pretend automobile. I was all for turning around and going back down the mountain, but Luz and Chris walked up and down the creek looking for a more promising ford. Chris thought he found one. I argued that it was too dangerous, that we had not seen another car for hours, that we were all alone miles up an isolated volcano and that we would be fools to try to cross this creek simply to say that we had reached the top of the highest mountain in the world (measured from the center of the Earth).

The reminder that we were in fact so near the top of the highest mountain in the world (measured from the center of the Earth) was all that was necessary to convince Luz and Chris that at all risks we must indeed ford this creek. There was no stopping them, so I rejoined them in the Chevrolet and we started across the creek. We were nearly to the other side and pulling out of the creek, cheering over our success—myself particularly—when the little car's engine began to splutter and fail.

"Floor it!" I said to Chris.

"It's flooded!" he said back, and inch by inch the little car pulled itself out of the creek. On dry ground again, the engine continued to splutter for a few long, nerve-racking moments, then caught fire again and roared itself back to life.

"We must have got some water up the tailpipe," Chris said. "It'll be better going back."

I wasn't so sure. But we continued our ascent of the volcano, which now grew steeper. Soon we got into a dark brown-gray ashy soil without any vegetation or sign of animal life. There was no longer a sign of a road, although there were still car tracks ahead of us. It looked as though other drivers, more daring—I hoped—than we, had done some joy four-wheeling up here at the tip-top of the world. We continued to climb until we saw the bottom of the snowline above us. It was now too steep to drive further, and there was a car parked here, pointed downhill, its wheels blocked with large rocks.

"Good idea, Frenchy," Luz said. "Park facing downhill in case the car doesn't start when we get back."

There were several irksome elements in that sentence. First the verb "park". Second the "in case" clause had entirely too ominous a probability to it: the Chevrolet had already had trouble starting even at the much lower altitude of 9,000 feet, and we must now have been above 15,000 feet. Third, and most discomfitting, "get back" from where?

Chris swung the car in an arc so that we were facing downhill then braked. The cessation of movement after so long bouncing up the mountain, the sudden change of direction to face downhill, the steepness of the angle, and the terrific force of gravity made me grasp the hold-bar giddily. Chris put on the emergency brake and put it in reverse, but it didn't seem possible that those weak mechanical things could possibly keep the car from sliding down the face of the volcano.

"Keep your foot on the brake," Luz said, "while Cully and I get some rocks to block the wheels."

I climbed down from the car with little confidence that I could actually walk at this angle, let alone heft any of the big volcanic rocks lying about. I could barely breathe in the thin air. Seeing Luz carry a rock back to the car, however, I felt weak and pansylike and found a rock of my own, hefted, carried, and crammed it under the left rear wheel. Straightening up after this exertion, I thought I might vomit at the same time that I was trying desperately to breathe enough oxygen into my chest to keep from blacking out. But I did manage some big breaths and in a moment set myself after another rock so as to stop Luz, who had already blocked her two wheels, from doing three to my one. She was laboring for breath also but too macho to let it slow her down. When all four wheels were blocked, Chris took his foot off the brake and got out of the car. It was frightening to see it sitting there on such a tilt with no one in it.

Luz managed to puff out, "Shall we?" with a gesture up the volcano.

"This is fine right here," I said. "This is high enough. We can say we climbed it."

"But we haven't," Chris said.

"But we can say we did," I said.

"You can stay here," Chris said. "Come on, Frenchy, I'm with you."

"No!" I said.

Luz held back a moment but then said, "We've got to at least touch the snow, the highest snow along the Equator." And she started off stiffly up the slope with Chris beside her.

"Slow down!" I said as I followed them. "We're all going to have heart attacks! I don't want to have to carry you two down this fucking mountain! With a heart attack!"

When we reached the snow, we found that it was in fact ice. It didn't begin abruptly, as it appeared from so far below, but was in patches, thin at first then thicker until it was a solid sheet. We had been climbing slowly but steadily for perhaps a half hour when we were completely surrounded by white. Stopping to look back, we saw incredible vistas below us. The green valleys surrounding, dividing and connecting the brown and black volcanoes were like an ocean surrounding, dividing and connecting islands. The different colors of greens from the different crops planted by the people made a patchwork over the valleys, climbing up the slopes of the volcanoes higher than one would imagine someone might cultivate. The deep barrancas, evidence of millennia of erosion, could barely be discerned from this distance except by the darker green of their forests. As the mists of clouds began to form around us, obscuring little by little the serene countryside, I had a brief image of what this area must have looked like when the volcanoes were active and spewing the earth's red-hot innards far and wide, volcanoes within volcanoes, as yesterday's little crater lake on the side of Volcán Cotopachi evidenced.

I wondered what it looked like even as recently ago as our Neandertal boy walked the planet. I turned to Chris. "Is this anything like the mountains where you found the boy?"

"No. Nothing like. Not nearly so high as this, but with mountains all around, nothing but ice and rock. No trees, no grass, no green, no people."

The clouds around us were beginning to thicken and obscure the vista, and I was suddenly reminded of the fog that had enveloped us so quickly on the bluff above the beach. "What the hell are we doing up here?" I said. "Goddammit, we don't have any rescue teams up here. Let's get off this damn volcano while we can!"

I got no argument from either of them, and we all started down together.

We were all shivering when we reached the car, despite the effort of walking and breathing. With the thickening clouds, it had grown suddenly cold and there was a rising wind coming off the snowcap. Luz's fingers, when she wrapped them around the doorhandle, were an ashen blue. It was startling to see them. As she waited for Chris to unlock her door from the inside, she rested her head against the door frame.

"Cully," she said, "could you unblock the wheels for me? I don't think I can." Then she slumped against the car and slid to the ground. I caught her before she hit her head on the earth. Chris came quickly around the car and helped me open the door and get her into the car and laid out on the backseat.

"She's freezing," I said. "Look at her fingers."

"I'll get the engine going and warm up the car," he said as he ran around to the driver's seat. I knelt in the passenger's seat and reached for Luz's hands to chafe them and bring blood back into them. Chris turned the key in the ignition. The engine turned over once but did not fire up. "We're going to have to clutch-start it," Chris said. "Unblock the wheels."

I got out of the car and ran around to all four wheels, pulling the rocks from beneath them, then got back in, breathless and close to blacking out. The car was at such an incline that we got up to speed quick and with the car in second and the ignition on, Chris popped the clutch. The car lurched forward and the engine caught with a roar and we went careening down the side of the volcano, slewing in the volcanic ash.

"You're going to roll us! Take it slow!" I yelled. Chris braked carefully and got the car back under control, and we started the long road down the mountain, with the sky growing dark around us. I turned the heater up to high and in a few moments the car was warming up nicely. By the time we reached the creek, the car was toasty and some of the color was returning to Luz's hands.

She was awake and alert but quiet as she lay on the backseat. I asked how she felt.

"Not good," she said. "This was a stupid idea to come up here. Sorry."

"We're at the creek, Frenchy," Chris said, stopping the car and gunning the engine. "We're gonna go across. You ready?"

"Now or never," Luz said.

"Pray then," Chris said and let out on the clutch. The water splashing up over the fender, almost to the bottom of the windows, seemed deeper than earlier. We were pulling out of the water and up the opposite bank when the engine started to splutter. Our momentum carried us a short way further up the bank but the engine stalled altogether. Chris put on the brake to keep us from sliding back into the stream. He tried starting it up again, but the engine was wet and would not start.

I got out to investigate. The car was facing up the incline of the bank with the rear wheels still in the water. The incline was too steep for Chris and me to be able to push the car up and over the bank in order to attempt another clutch-start. I wondered if the tailpipe was underwater but knew better than to wade into the stream to the back of the car. Getting my feet wet in this freezing temperature would surely bring on frostbite, at the very least, if we had to spend the night in the car or try to walk down the mountain. I climbed up the hood of the car and over the top to look down at the tailpipe. It was a few inches out of the water, but only a few. On the return trip across the stream, the tailpipe was on the upstream side of the car, where the water must have been deeper. It must have taken in more water than the first time across, which is what stalled us.

I climbed off the top of the car and got back into the passenger's seat, closing the door quickly to keep as much heat as possible in the cabin. "We're

stuck here," I said, "unless we get the engine started again. The tailpipe's out of the water, so if we let it sit a few minutes, maybe the water will drain out of the engine, and maybe the engine's still hot enough to dry out. What do you think, Chris?"

Chris nodded and said, "We'll give it five and try it again."

"More than five it'll freeze up again."

"Let's try it again right now. Then if it doesn't start, give it five."

"Okay. Sounds like a plan."

He turned the key. The engine gave a weak grinding.

"Stop," I said. "Don't run down the battery."

No one said anything for several moments. I turned now to look at Luz in the backseat. I hadn't wanted to look before. Her eyes were closed, her face tight in a grimace. The pancake and mascara had smeared so that the white was showing through in streaks.

"There's that car up there," I said. "There must be people up there. They've got to come down this way."

"Hell, they could be frozen dead on the ice," Chris said. "That car might have been there a month. They could be camping for the week on the other side of the mountain. That car might not be coming down tonight. Don't worry. It'll start."

Chris put his hand on the key but withdrew it. "Think I'll give it just a minute more. Say, Frenchy, know what I was thinking? Next Christmas? How about Easter Island?"

Luz didn't say anything. I doubted she could possibly be asleep. Perhaps passed out.

"Hmmm," she said finally.

"I want to see those big heads."

"Yes," I said. "Those heads are something. I'd like to see those heads, too."

"Well, come on along, Jocko. This book I was reading, Frenchy? Says some of those heads are more than thirty feet high," he said. "Carved out of the rock at the top of the mountain, and then moved all the way across the island to the coastside. How about that, Frenchy?"

"Imagine that, Luz," I said. "That book say how on earth those people managed that, Chris?"

"They used their trees for rollers and levers. They used up all their trees, did you know that, Jocko?"

"No."

"Yeah. Used to be that island was covered with forest. Now there's not a tree on the whole island. Those fool people. On Peetkern, we never made that mistake. So whatcha say, Frenchy? Maybe we might stop on Peetkern while we're in the neighborhood?"

"I thought you never wanted to set foot on the rock again," I said.

"Never said that."

"Birdie said that."

"That was Birdy. This is me. Well, Frenchy," he said, turning back to Luz, "whatcha say? Next Christmas?"

"Next Christmas, I'm going to be dead, Chris."

With an extraordinary effort, she sat up in the backseat, reached through the gap between the front seats and took his right hand with her left as she put her right hand on my shoulder and leaned her head against the back of my seat. I sat unmoving, staring forward at the bank rising in front of us. Chris didn't move either.

"That disease that got your mother?" he asked finally.

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"It's not just an aspect of the vitiligo?"

"No. Not related, they think."

"When did you find out?"

"July, I first felt it coming on. You haven't noticed?"

"No. Yes, maybe. So you talked to your docs?"

"Yeah."

"How long do they think you have?"

"They don't know. They don't know anything. Sooner than I thought, I'm afraid. I feel it every day now. My mother went fast, Auntie says."

"What's it like?"

"Like I'm losing blood. Losing muscle. Losing brain cells. Losing everything. I think this baby is hurting me."

"We'll get rid of it then."

"No. I need it."

I hadn't said anything. I was too stunned. Stunned at the content, stunned at the calm in their voices, the near lackadaisical. The two of them had their own language together.

"Does Roz know?" I asked finally.

"She told you about it, Cully? That day at the cemetery? She told me she told you."

"Yes. But she said she hadn't gotten it. She was her twin. God, it didn't even occur to me that you might get it!"

"No. I haven't told Auntie. You're the only ones who know, except the doctors. I want you to keep it a secret. There's no reason to tell anyone yet."

"Was Roz right? Is it Huntington's?"

"No. And it's not Lou Gehrig's." She was breathing now in gasps between short bursts of speech. "As soon as they developed the tests... I got tested for both... I thought I didn't have it... what my mother had... but this is it... some sort of chorea... or palsy, they say... some gene on some chromosome... but they don't have a name for it... may name it after me... put my name in the books... Luz Rivera's Disease... how about that, Cully?" She took a sudden deep gasp and pushed her head so hard against the back of my seat that I was pushed forward.

"Is that pain?" I asked.

"Oh!" she said, breathing in deep shudders. "Yeah. Pain... and no control... spasms, Ah!" She cried out and rolled back into the backseat.

"Try it again, Chris!" I said. "We've got to get her down this mountain!"

Chris turned the key. There was a brief moment when there was no response, then the engine cranked over once, twice, then caught. It was weak, but it caught. Chris fed it gas carefully, and it gained strength until it finally fired up with a roar. Chris gunned it several times then shifted into low.

"Wait," I said. "The tailpipe is right above the water line. You can't slip back even an inch. Let me get out and make it lighter."

As I got out, I rolled down the window so that when the door was closed I could push against the window frame and help keep the car from sliding backwards in the mud of the bank. Chris smoothly coordinated the handbrake and clutch and the little car pulled itself over the hump of the bank. He whooped and I answered as I got back into the car and we started off down the darkening mountainside. I turned the heater back up to high again. No one said anything more on the return trip.

At the *hostería* that night, we each lay on our own bed with the lights off, alone in the dark with our thoughts.

"Whatever happens, Cully," Luz's voice came out of the darkness, "I want

you to write that book. You've got to promise that. My share of the money is to go into a trust fund for Holly's and my daughter. That's in the contract."

Luz had indeed drawn up a contract back before the cloning in August. It was brief and to the point and with language that seemed to me simplistic but all encompassing, that she and Chris and I were full partners in the venture and that any proceeds which might come out of it, any book or any subsidiary publications or films or monies of any kind from any other sources connected in any way to this venture, would be shared in three equal parts, and these rights were to be passed on to our descendants. I had thought it laughable, but all three of us did sign the contract.

"Now you've got to follow through, Cully. You've got to write that book. My daughter may have this God damned gene, too."

"I don't know how I can ever write anything ever again."

"You've got to promise me, Cully. That's why I'm doing this, for Christ's sake!. That's why this baby is killing me! You've got to promise!"

"I promise." I said it only to stop her. I couldn't imagine ever being able to keep the promise.

"I've got nothing else to leave her. A few thousand dollars in the bank. Who knows what's going to happen to China House when I'm gone. Promise me!"

"I promise! I said I promise!"

"And promise me you'll watch after her. And Holly. I hate to leave them alone. Promise."

"I promise."

"You, too, Frenchy."

"Holly hates me," Chris said.

"No, she doesn't. Promise."

"I promise."

There was a long pause in the dark. Then Chris said, "How could your daughter have the gene? You told me it was Holly's egg."

I waited breathlessly for Luz's response. I had always wondered if Luz had told Chris about the egg-to-egg ICSI. He had never mentioned it, even through all of what we had gone through with the cloning, but it was difficult to believe, from all their intimacy, that Luz would have kept this secret from him.

Luz's voice came out of the darkness. "Tell him, Cully. I don't have the strength."

I told Chris everything about the conception of Dos Equis. He remained silent throughout. When I finished, I could hear him on his bed sobbing softly. Luz got up from her bed and lay down with him. All grew quiet. Somehow I slept.

Day after day we postponed the rest of our original itinerary, but stayed instead at the hostería. It was not just Luz who was sick: Chris and I were sick at heart. On New Year's Eve we determined to stay up to midnight to greet the New Year. We were determined to laugh. But there was no TV, no movie theater, no entertainment of any kind but each other's company. We found a deck of cards in the desk drawer and played Hearts, watching the clock tick along toward midnight.

Out of nowhere Chris said, "But Frenchy, what about the millennium? You promised, you know."

"I can't hold out, Frenchy. You know I'll try, but..." Luz didn't finish but instead dropped the queen of spades on Chris's trick. I stifled a gloat since that 13-point she-devil kept me in terror. Chris collected the trick along with the fifty-second card in the kitty without comment but with a moue which I would remember later. He hesitated a moment then led his queen of hearts, which I

ducked neatly with my jack while Luz played a low heart. Chris led his ten of hearts and I smiled to myself as I dropped my nine and Luz played another low heart. When he led his eight, I now could duck with my seven; I was having great fun watching Chris sweat. Luz was out of hearts and played a black card. I caught her eye before she glanced away. There was an incredulity and, I thought, a tiny flit of warning, all of which was lost on me at the moment as I am—in Audra's words—"utterly without guile or strategem". And so my three of hearts fell to Chris's four and, when he finally played his king of hearts, my deuce fell, and I was out of hearts and, I thought, out of all danger.

When Chris tossed down the rest of his cards, remarking casually, "The ace was in the kitty," I thought he was admitting defeat, but when he added, "Shoulda saved that jack, Jocko," I began to be aware that more was going on than I understood.

Luz threw her cards on top of Chris's and asked flatly, "Do you want to subtract it from yours or add it to ours?"

Chris laughed. "What do you think?"

"It puts Cully out."

"So be it."

I was still sitting with the rest of my cards in my hand. "What happened?" I asked.

"Shot the moon, Jocko. Shoulda saved that jack."

"But I've got the ace and king of clubs."

"There aren't any hearts left, Cully, and he took the queen of spades," Luz explained and slipped the cards out of my hand and shuffled them into the rest. "You can take all the rest of the tricks if you want, but he's already shot the moon. Are we going to play another one?" she asked without enthusiasm.

"It's quarter to twelve," Chris said. "How about I see if I can find more

ice?" He took the bowl we were using for an ice bucket and headed out to the little bar across the interior patio of the hostería.

Luz shuffled the cards quietly, letting them fall into each other softly. "So I fucked up?" I asked.

"No. I shouldn't have passed the jack to you. I know the way Frenchy loves to go for it. I could have stopped him."

"Well, maybe I'll learn."

"Oh, I hope so, Cully." She smiled at me. There was such profound regret in the smile. "Frenchy loves cards."

"What was that about the millennium?"

"Oh, well... Frenchy and I have always promised each other that we would see in every New Year together, but especially the New Millennium."

"Success!" Chris said as he came through the door, the bowl full of fresh ice.

"Well, of course you'll see the New Millennium in together!" I said. "And if you'll have me, I'll be there, too. Easter Island. We decided already."

"We said Easter Island for next New Year, Jocko."

"Well, that's the end of the millennium."

"December 31, 2000, Jocko, not 1999."

"Yes, I've heard that argument before, Jocko," I retorted, "but the end is 1999, not 2000."

"2000, Jocko."

"Look," I said, "how old are you, how many years have you passed when you're one year old?"

"One."

"Right, and you begin your second year. Then how many years have you passed when you're fifty?"

"Fifty."

"Right, and you begin your fifty-first year. So by the same token when you start your two thousandth year, you've already passed nineteen hundred and ninety-nine, which means the end of the millennium is December 31, 1999, Jocko."

"Only if you start from zero. Which we didn't."

"Of course we did. Everyone starts from zero."

"Look it up."

"Of course we started from zero. Zero is the birth of Christ."

"Not us. We bypassed zero and went overnight from One B.C. to One A.D."

"Who did?"

"We did. The people who count time like that. The Gregorians, and all of us."

"Well that seems like a big mistake!"

Chris seemed to me a little drunk as he poured another round of Pisco over ice. Luz was sipping on her soda and watching us both with rueful amusement.

"But you know, Jocko, you gotta invent the concept of zero before you can have zero. Zero doesn't exist, you know, but in your concept of it."

"Bullshit."

"Look at the Mayas."

"Bullshit. Are you saying that Christ was born in an interstice?" I tried three times to get the words out correctly but never really succeeded, which elicited hoots from Chris each time.

"I'm not even Christian anymore," Luz said. "Why should I count time by Christ's birth? Every New Year is a New Millennium to me."

"Sure, Frenchy," Chris said. "The Mohammedans have their own calendar, the Jews have theirs, the Chinese."

"Do they begin with zero?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know. Ask Birdie. He knows all that. But I mean, why not, Frenchy? This is our zero year, right now. With a capital Z. The birth of you know who. Why not?"

Luz smiled sadly and rubbed her belly, as Audra did, as Holly did. This was the first time I had seen Luz do it. "Why not?" she said. "Zero. Is it midnight? Oh, who cares." She raised her glass of mineral water, and we raised our glasses. "Here's to Zero."

Chris made the countdown. "Five, four, three, two, one..."

"Happy New Millennium," we said in one voice.

Chapter Twenty-One

The rest of the Ecuador trip, the wait in the Quito airport for my flight the day after Luz and Chris caught their direct flight, the many stops and layovers, the hours and days and weeks afterwards were dark. There was such darkness I can't remember much during this time. It's like an amnesia. I remember standing in front of a supermarket one day with a bag of groceries in my arms, waiting for Audra who went back in to buy a couple of cantaloupes, looking around at the cars in the parking lot with the sun glinting off the chrome and glass, remarking to myself that it was as if there was a veil between me and the light. It was dark inside my head, and my eyes looked only inward. I could not conceive of life without Luz, of waking in the morning knowing that she was no longer in the world somewhere with me. Yet that morning was coming. Those mornings.

Even the birth of Holt—as Audra decided to name our boy, after her mother's maiden name—was in darkness. No matter how bright the hospital lights, how white the hospital walls and the bleached sheets on the bed, I couldn't see. I can't remember the details. I have only scattered, half images of what should have been one of the most important events of my life. Holt, my own boy, now in my arms, and I could not seem to see him. Those first months of his life, I have only the dimmest blur of memory. I remember an image of Audra, sitting with him in her arms by the French doors to the patio, Audra by turns watching him sleep and watching me, accusation clear in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" she said.

But I couldn't tell her what was wrong. Luz had forbidden me to talk about her disease, even though daily it was more apparent. Luz was trying to

make it through Holly's delivery before telling anyone. She thought the stress on Holly would be bad for Joy. Joy was the name that they had decided on, after all, for Dos Equis. Joy.

Holly was due with Joy a little over a month and a half after Holt was born, but she went long. Luz was deteriorating quickly. It was like the clone was eating up her body from the inside. She was emaciated in her face and arms while her pregnant belly grew enormous. Zero—as Luz, Chris and I were now calling the clone—was riding high in her abdomen, while Joy rode low in Holly's. The two women walking next to each other looked like pregnant animals of different species. The vitiligo intensified the effect, as it now had spread so that nearly all of the visible skin on Luz's right side was white from neck to hairline, and the hair sprouting from that side had no black in it any longer.

Chris and I spent as much time with Luz as we could. Only we knew how alone and frightened she must feel. She stopped going to work in late January, no longer able to stand the stares at Life, Inc. I was relieved at the decision because I no longer trusted her to make the commute. Her palsy was worse day by day, and when it struck her, she was incapacitated for several moments at a time.

After she stopped coming into the City, it was rare that we could see her outside the company of Holly at China House. Chris and I would drive there several times a week and take them food and cheer. They had closed China House to guests until after both of them delivered. These visits were usually short, since I had my own baby and wife to get back to. When Audra and Holt came along with us, we could stay longer but those visits were detestable. There had always been visible jealousy from Holly over Chris, and now Audra openly championed her resentment. Without Audra along, Holly's minority status weakened her jealousy; with Audra, Holly felt power and used it against Chris

and Luz's friendship in ways that became less and less subtle. Consequently I found less and less subtle ways of discouraging Audra from coming with Chris and me. This complicated matters for me at home, building Audra's resentment toward me. My thought—perhaps selfish, you judge—was that Chris and I had so little time left with Luz, while Audra's and Holly's friendship had years ahead in which to flourish, that I must devote every possible moment of these days to Luz, in the best not the worst circumstances. "Because you're both bitches when you get together!" I finally shouted at Audra one day, to stop her from coming along with Chris and me to China House.

Audra was furious. And in fact, I think somewhere she recognized it for the truth, which no doubt added to her fury. She had never liked Luz, she retorted, had never trusted Chris, and if I was going to take their side against hers and Holly's, she would see Holly alone, and Chris and I could see Luz alone. I welcomed that.

Holly was frankly disturbed over Luz's state of health, but Luz was evasive with her. The vitiligo, so flagrant and so simply explained, helped keep concealed the real threat—Luz Rivera's Disease. And Luz was unbelievably good at concealing most of her palsy symptoms. At first the twitching was only in her facial muscles, and she would turn her back to Holly so that Holly would not see them, which meant Chris and I got the full view. It was grotesque. By late January, the twitching was in her arms and legs and became an uncontrollable jerking which she could no longer hide from Holly. She told her that she had made appointments with her doctor for tests. She grew imaginative with her stalling tactics, fabricating tests and bloodwork and x-rays and bogus explanations that had the ring of truth. She would pass them off with a casual wave like so much nuisance.

When Holly was out of the room—or when we were lucky enough that

Holly was off with Audra, who began to take her out more and more when she knew that Chris and I were planning a visit to Luz—Chris and I would pump Luz at length about the progress of the disease, which was dramatic and relentless, with new symptoms every visit. But then a sort of dementia began creeping in, and communication became untrustworthy. I recognized it first, and in a few days Chris verified it. It frightened us both. We were losing touch with her, and Luz was losing touch with reality. The last day we visited her, Luz was slurring her words, losing words, losing thoughts in mid-sentence. Holly had gone to her bedroom in the cottage; so Chris and I could talk openly. Chris said flatly, "Frenchy, you've got to do a C-Section. You've got to get that baby out of you. He's killing you. Do it now. Call your doctor. Here." He gave her the phone.

"He'll be too premature! He won't make it!"

"We don't know that," Chris said. "We don't know what his gestation period should be."

"I can hold out until he comes naturally!"

Chris found the doctor's phone number in Luz's address book and put through the call himself as an emergency. Luz's doctor knew her intimately. She had been solicitous originally when Luz had requested her compliance in keeping Luz's secret from her family, but she too was alarmed by the disease's swift progress and told Chris that she was on the verge of suggesting Caesarean Section herself. Now, after a few words from Chris on the phone, she was persuaded to suggest it forcefully to Luz. Chris handed the phone to Luz, but she fell forward onto the glass coffee table, wracked with paroxysms. I jumped in to pull her away from the glass table, but she jerked so violently that her elbow smashed me in the face and knocked me backwards to the floor. I may have blacked out a moment. I remember having to shake my head to clear it,

and when I could see again I found that Chris had pulled the glass table away and Luz was on the floor, with Chris propping her up with cushions from the couch. The paroxysms had stopped but she was clutched now in a paralysis. Chris grabbed the phone from the floor and said into it, "She's had a seizure. I'm driving her in right now. Where should I take her?"

He listened a moment then responded, "It'll take too long for the paramedics to get here. We're in Bolinas. Where shall I take her?" He made some notes on a pad. "You'll meet me there? I'm leaving right now." Chris relayed to me the directions as I picked Luz up in my arms and carried her out to my car. She was nothing now but bones and skin and the huge belly. Chris opened the passenger's door and I set her onto the seat and let down the back so she was lying down almost flat. Chris got into the driver's seat. "Give me your keys," he said. "You bring Holly in her car."

As he drove off, I went to get Holly. She had said she was feeling punk and was going for a lie-down in the cottage, but when I knocked on the door I heard cries from within. She was starting her labor, and I found her on the bed, sweating and writhing. "I don't think it's time yet to call the midwife. Get Luz, will you?"

"She's gone to the hospital," I said, helpless to understand what must be done next. "She's had a seizure. They're going to give her a C-Section."

It took a moment for the thought to sink in, and in that moment she had a contraction which caused her to throw herself back in the bed and grab onto the iron rods of the bedstead. "Oh God!" she screamed. "Oh God! Oh, Luz!" After she got her breath back she said, "Call the midwife now, right now. Her number's in the address book. Margaret Cook. Oh God! Oh, Luz!" She lay back and rolled her head on the pillow.

I ran into China House and got Margaret Cook's number from the

address book. She had her midwife's case ready to go, she told me, and she was only ten minutes up the road.

I called Audra and told her what was happening. "I'll be there as soon as I can," she said. "I just have to pack a bag for Holt."

I went back out to the cottage and sat with Holly. She was a wild, lunatic, out-of-her-mind study in pain. I was a wild, lunatic, out-of-my-mind study in nerves. Margaret, when she arrived, was the essence of calm. "Well, here we go, Holly," Margaret said, making a little nest for herself on the side of the bed and settling in. She stroked back the hair from Holly's forehead lovingly and looked at her watch. "Now let's just time these contractions and see where we are. Breathe, breathe."

"Audra's coming, Holly," I said, breathing along with her, trying futilely to osmose some of Margaret's calm. "Audra's my wife," I explained to her. "She's going to be here to help."

"Oh, yes, I know all about Audra," Margaret said. "Now let's just all be quiet a moment, shall we?"

That moment was an eternity. The next contraction came and Holly arched her back and cried out. Margaret wrote down the time, calmly, then said, "Luz should be here."

"My friend just drove her in for a C Section. I really should go in, too. Luz is going to be expecting Holly."

"Oh, my!" Margaret smiled into Holly's face. "When it rains it pours. Yes, we're going to be fine here, aren't we, Holly? And Audra's coming. You run along, hon."

I bolted. I drove Luz's Volvo like a tornado along the turns to the freeway and across the Golden Gate and into the City. Chris was in the O.R. waiting room, his tall length folded into a bunch in a chair in one corner, his arms

wrapped around his feet tucked under him on the seat. He looked up at me when I came in but did not rise or speak. I sat in the chair next to him, and we waited together for word from the doctors.

Luz died during that operation. I never had a chance to say goodbye to her. I never had a chance to tell her that her daughter was on her way at China House.

The clone was strong despite his prematurity. He looked like any baby might at birth, any *Homo sapiens sapiens* baby boy. He was dark red, with thin strands of black hair, eyes blue. But a nurse there told me that the eye color could easily change, that it frequently does in humans. His forehead—which I had worried about every time the thought crept into my head of Luz giving birth to him—was not so large or prominent as I feared. As he squalled up at me from his crib, not so very different from Holt almost two months earlier, I thought he might very neatly pass for one of us.

Deep into the night, after Chris and I had talked with all the doctors and all the nurses, we left him in the incubator in the hospital, and Chris drove my Saturn and I drove Luz's Volvo back to China House. I was so blind with grief I couldn't seem to see the road, but somehow I managed the miles, following Chris's tail lights. When we arrived at China House, Holly was lying in the bed in the cottage with Joy in her arms and Audra was sitting in the rocking chair beside the bed, giving Holt a bottle. Both of them looked up at us expectantly. Chris told them. I couldn't talk. Holly wept and Joy started to cry. It was too terrible to watch, and I went into the kitchen in China House where Margaret was cleaning up. Chris came in too, and we sat together at the table. The night was long and wakeful, and the house and cottage were full of weeping.

It was less than a week later that Audra left me, after the reading of Luz's will. Luz had written three letters to accompany her will, one for Holly, one for

Chris, one for me. The lawyer was instructed to give the letters to each of us in three separate rooms of China House so that we could read them in privacy. My letter was brief:

Dear Cully,

Since you are reading this, I must no longer be alive. Please know that I love you very much. I have written a very difficult letter to Holly, explaining to her everything about our contract. Please honor your promises to me and take care of Holly and Joy. Please be good to Chris. I love you for your goodness.

Luz

I came back to the common room to find Audra's eyes fixed on me. "Can I read it?" she asked me.

I said, "Not yet. Later."

Chris came back from reading his letter with his eyes red. He sat on the arm of Birdie's chair as he had the night we were rescued from the fog by the rangers, his arm slung over Birdie's shoulders.

Holly was a long time returning to the common room, but when she did, she seemed composed. "Audra," she said, "could I see you in the cottage?"

Audra had been giving a bottle to Holt. She now put him in my arms and the bottle in my hand and followed Holly. As they left the common room, Holly checked on Joy in her cradle. "Look at her," Holly said to Audra. They were two beautiful mothers bending over the cradle. Then they went out to the cottage.

I looked at Chris. He shrugged. The secrets, I knew, were all now being revealed. There was nothing to be done but wait for the storm and hope for minimum wreckage. Holly would fare better, I thought, than Audra. Holly was already aware, at least, of our first great adventure into the forbidden: it resulted in Joy. It would probably be easier for her to accept the next leap, quantum though it was.

Audra, on the other hand, would be totally unprepared. It occurred to me that I should go into the cottage with them, so that I could give my wife support and help her understand what had taken place in the past ten months. In short, our universe had been tipped over.

I could not bring myself to do anything but sit on my chair and gaze down into Holt's eyes as he gummed the nipple of the bottle. I felt I had nothing to give anyone at this moment, not even or especially not Audra. The minutes dragged by. The lawyer made polite conversation with Roz, Chris and Birdie. I offered nothing.

After a time, Chris said to me from across the room where he still sat at Birdie's arm, "I stopped by the hospital, Jocko. On my way up."

"Oh. How was he?"

"Bigger, I thought. Stronger. He's going to be one big kid."

"Probably."

Roz asked, "When are they expecting him out of the incubator?" Dear Roz. She was grief-stricken, but she put on a game front. Paco had stayed home, which was in itself a game front. I remembered the way he had sat side by side with his niece in the Benicia cemetery. Now Luz was lying in the ground in that same cemetery, beside her mother.

"Next week, they think."

"Oh," she said. "That's good."

She didn't voice the next question, but it must have been on her mind. Where would the baby be released to? Holly would be the expected one, and I thought that probably Holly had already made up her mind to adopt Luz's baby boy as her own, to be raised with Joy, imagining probably that he would be the off-spring of the fair-haired blue-eyed med student so like her ex-husband Wayne. But that was before she had read Luz's letter. Now she would know the

truth. And what would happen to this little boy now, I wondered.

"Luz wanted me to take him, Jocko," Chris said, as though in answer to my silent question. "You're going to be hearing it in the will, I guess. But I thought I should tell you now."

"Oh," I said, unable to formulate a perspective on this news.

"Luz and I talked about it. That okay with you, Jocko?"

"Sure. That's fine. That seems right. How does Birdie feel about it?"

Birdie had been listening to all this with a puzzled disbelief. He had taken Luz's death harder, perhaps, than any of us. He was dull with grief, uncomprehending.

"I haven't told Birdie all the details yet," Chris said with a wry grin. "Luz said that's going to be up to you."

"Up to me?" I said.

"The book."

"Oh. Yes. The book."

"I don't understand," Birdie said.

"Later, baby," Chris said, and rubbed the back of Birdie's neck.

"Oh, are you working on a new book, Cully?" Roz asked.

Before I had time to think up a response, the door opened and Audra and Holly came back in, neither looking up to meet any eyes. They stopped again at Joy's cradle and took a long look down at the sleeping girl. Audra reached her hand down to Joy's cheek and stroked it softly, then she came to me and, still without meeting my eyes, held out her arms for Holt. "I'll take him," she said.

We listened together to the reading of the will. There wasn't much to it; it was very cleanly done. Luz's share of China House and all her possessions were to go to Holly. All her money in her various accounts were to go into a trust for Joy, with Holly as trustee. Her unnamed baby boy was to go to Chris for

adoption. There were just a few personal items of sentimental value that she wanted dispersed to Roz and Paco and Birdie. Roz and Birdie both cried at the sentiments. Nothing else.

I asked Audra on the way home about what had gone on in the cottage with Holly. Holly had let her read the letter, she said. She now knew everything. She could never forgive me. She would be packing her things as soon as we got home. She would move to China House with Holly.

"Shouldn't we talk about this?" I asked.

"No. I don't ever want to talk about it," she said. And nothing more was said.

The word divorce was not used, and has not been used. Questions of custody have not been discussed. At this moment, we are adrift and prefer not to steer any course. From the beginning I have visited Holt—and Joy—several times a week at China House. As Holt's father I am tolerated by the two women, but they will not allow Chris to visit. For his part, Chris wants only to be father to his boy, whom he named Rivera Rand Christian, and have nothing to do with the two women. From the beginning the women appeared to want nothing to do with Rivera: they did not visit him in the hospital; they did not ask about him; to them he seemed not to exist.

The two cribs at China House—one for Holt and one for Joy—were installed in Holly's bedroom in the cottage, and I was given cold admittance by either mother, or usually both. It was apparent almost immediately that Audra had taken Luz's place in Holly's bed. Probably from the first night. I don't know if they are lovers. I expect they are. They are fine mothers, full of love for the two children, and I wish them well.

In my cold, empty bed, Chris came to take Audra's place. It was the most natural thing: we had a child together; Chris came to stay with me so that we

could care for the child together; he came to my bed and I let him in and clung to him through the long, dark nights. He is patient with me as he waits for what might be our future, knowing that my nature is not his, respecting that, but nevertheless waiting for what might be between us, perhaps after the blinding specter of Luz fades and we find some peace. Until then this man and I hold onto each other in the blackness, Rivera's crib beside our bed, the planet with all its terrors upon it whirling outside our window. He is a good man and a fine father, full of love. And I do love him.

As for the child, it's surprising to me how quickly and how deeply I came to love that boy. He's charming and bright and not a monster at all. I am ashamed now that I could not have helped Luz during her pregnancy to find that wondrous sense of beauty and peace and hope that Audra had and that Holly had. Instead it was for Luz a time of torment, and I realize now that I contributed to her torment because of my abhorrence for what I now loved so deeply. I have so much regret surrounding Luz.

Chris and I did make that journey the next Christmas to Easter Island and Pitcairn, taking Rivera with us. The spirit of his mother was an almost tangible presence on the trip; she was everywhere with us. We stopped in Ecuador on the way and drove up Volcán Cayambe again. We got a bigger, stronger 4 by 4, and crossed that damn stream to climb up to the snow and stand on it, holding Rivera in our arms to look out over the volcanos and valleys.

On Easter Island we stood among the gigantic stone heads, gazing with sightless eyes out to the ocean, all around us.

On Pitcairn Chris visited with his family, all of them his family. They were lively and welcoming, and it was good to see Chris laughing with them so familiarly, chatting for hours about nothing but food and family. They weren't very interested in the United States or his life there, and he didn't give them

much to talk about regarding it. They shook my hand and were amused. They admired the newest member of the Christian family and took him up as one of their own, claiming he was the image of his father.

There were very few young people on Pitcairn and even fewer children. The early years of the island when the women gave birth to broods of ten or more were gone. Looking over Chris's family tree, which was exactly as Chris had outlined it to me, but here in much more detail so that the paper took up the entire table top, I counted that Mariah—Fletcher and Mi'Mitti's granddaughter who was born only fifteen years after the mutineers and their wives settled on Pitcairn—had twenty-five children by three husbands, almost exactly half the total population of Pitcairn today. The "hybrid vigor", as Chris called it, of the original mating of the English men with the Polynesian women had given way to near complete infertility. In recent years, no Pitcairn woman had given birth to more than two children. The old folks now shook their heads and talked to Chris of abandoning Pitcairn. It had been abandoned twice in the Nineteenth Century, the first exodus back to Tahiti and the second to Norfolk Island. But both times a number of the Pitcairners returned, preferring their homely, two square miles of rock in the middle of nowhere.

"We don't see hope here, Christy," Chris's uncle said to him. "We need to live, and we have too few of us left to help us live."

Chris and I climbed the hill to Fletcher Christian's Cave which faces northeast, ironically, toward Europe across the Americas. According to legend, Fletcher sat in this cave day after day for hours at a time watching the sea. Perhaps he was afraid of seeing a sail, which would mean that he and the other mutineers would be taken back to England and hanged. Perhaps he was thinking of the homeland he had left behind forever, because of the rashness of a single moment which began a mutiny that would live on in memory and

imagination for centuries. Or perhaps he was thinking of nothing but the day after day after day of existence.

Chris and I sat on the floor of the cave, Chris propping up the baby to look out at the ocean. I turned to gaze at the two profiles, complex emotions ripping at my heart. I remembered that Christmas Eve when I took Rivera with me for the first time to China House and put him in the playpen with Holt and Joy. The three babies were now at an age where they could sit and watch each other with recognition. They crawled over and around each other, Holt and Joy exploring the newcomer as he explored them. The two mothers sat nearby, glacial, but thawing, then finally: smiles. As I sat in Christian's Cave with Chris and Rivera, remembering this scene at the playpen, I resolved that when we returned to the United States, I would isolate myself from everything and write the book I had promised Luz. These three children, I knew, had already begun stories of their own: their lives. The way those lives played in and out of each other were stories still to come, stories I could not yet put down in a book. This story I resolved to write would be Luz's story. And here it is told.

As I write these final words, I am at the family cabin in the foothills. It's spring again, and the air is warming and the woods are greening. Chris and Rivera are on the veranda, watching a bobcat watching the deer watching all around for danger. The sun is slipping behind the hill across the canyon, the sky is reddening, the canyon is darkening, and night looms. Today will become yesterday, as yesterdays always have and tomorrows always will so long as this earth abides.

THE END

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