

X XX ZERO

a novel by
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PART TWO 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 Eight

In early August, Audra and I were invited to a pregnancy bash by Luz and Holly. We were to meet with the other guests tip-top of Mount Tamalpais just before dawn so that we could greet the first ray of the morning sun with a shout of the baby's name—Rainbow—if you can believe that. Audra was scandalized both at the name and the fact that Holly and Luz were making it so public so soon.

"Yes, they've got a heartbeat," she said, the phone receiver still hot from her hand, "but this is way too premature for a celebration!"

"We celebrated at our first heartbeat."

"We had a private little get-together with Holly and Luz and Joan and that guy. It was not a celebration. I'm telling you, Cully, this is hubris! And I don't like it."

Audra knew firsthand whereof she spoke. She had had blood spotting at the end of her second month and had to lie flat on her back for three weeks. She had to hand over her sexual harrassment case to the loathed junior partner, Grant Cochran, whose talents and emotional range were, Audra said, "even narrower than Charlton Heston's."

There are so many prenatal dangers, especially in the first months. It's terrifying to know how quickly a fetus's life can bleed away. Audra and I decided during her bed rest that we would not tell any of the family or other friends about our pregnancy. It would be hard enough to bear a miscarriage, but to see it ten thousand times in the pity in the eyes of our folks would be ten thousand more deaths.

"It's Luz, you know," Audra said. "This whole godawful idea, rushing out to bruit to the world that godawful Rainbow name. Do you know that she's already bought smocks for Holly, expects her to wear them? Smocks at one month, good God!"

Now here we were, crawling out of bed two hours pre-dawn, a dreadful hour to

wake up to the inane morning babble of the clock radio. I went blindly about my ablutions on automatic pilot, bumping into Audra as she went blindly about hers. As I was sitting on the bed, pulling on my socks, out of the blue Audra asked, "Are you having an affair with Luz?"

There is a split second, just after you register a question like that, when all possible replies run through your head in quick-step and you can merely sputter as you try to catch one and gauge its probability of being believed by the woman you have married and whom you have indeed, in certain senses, betrayed with another woman. Finally I chose, "What?" attaching as many exclamation points as I dared.

"You heard me. And you didn't need quite so many exclamation points."

So perhaps any of the other first responses might have been better. Or not.

Now I waited several moments to stare her down, if she would only look at me directly, but she was intent on doing her makeup, throwing me only quick, oblique glances in the mirror. For my part, I was sitting with a sock dangling from my hand hoping for a very caught-utterly-off-guard effect which—Audra made sure—was lost upon her. Finally I was reduced to mutter, with a little laugh that resonated a little too soap-operatically, "What on earth makes you ask that?"

"Because of the way she acts toward you. Because of the way you act toward her."

"I haven't seen her for weeks!" This was true, much to my chagrin. Right after Holly's transfer of the egg-to-egg embryos, we had seen each other almost every day. We were like guilty accomplices in a godawful crime where we needed to be in each other's company to ensure that we were not alone in our atrocity. We met at lunch. There wasn't much we said. We ate. We avoided each other's eyes and thoughts, but we were together and my heart strings intertwined somehow with hers. She no longer called me Gertrude. She no longer told me to go home. We were sick with each other, it seemed to me.

But then one day about two weeks before this Mount Tam party, she was suddenly inaccessible. At first she would call me ahead of time to say that she would not be available for lunch, day after day, each time a different reason, each one sounding more and more shallow. And then the calls stopped. And if she was at the clinic, I couldn't get past Margarita to find out. "I'll tell her you stopped by!" Margarita would grin. I felt warded away from her, guarded out of her life. It shook me terribly, but what could I do? I wasn't about to stalk her. But I was surprised to find how dependent upon her I had grown, how quickly, how deeply, how utterly wrapped up in her I was. Not so much in love—because of course I was in love with Audra—as besotted. Sick, as I said.

So I was very, very happy when we got the call from Holly inviting us to their pregnancy bash. Still, though, Luz had not called. And I missed her dreadfully.

"Whether you're with her or not," Audra persisted. "It's the way you act when you even think about her."

"Oh, and how can you tell when I'm thinking about her?"

"I can tell."

"Well, sorry to disappoint your insipient clairvoyance, but no, I'm not having an affair with Luz."

"Is it over then?"

"We have never had an affair."

The silence between us grew long. She was clearly unconvinced, and now I was growing angry. I was, after all, not having an affair with Luz, not even thinking about it except in a kind of daydreamy way. "I mean, what do you mean by 'affair'? Do you mean have we slept together?"

"Slept together, hardly. You sleep in my bed. I would know if you weren't there some night."

I knew this to be untrue, but I certainly did not want to correct her at the moment. "Made love then?" I said. "If that's what you mean by having an affair, having sex, kissing, making the animal with two backs, no."

"Beast," she laughed out loud.

"Beast with two backs, no! Enjoying each other's company, enjoying each other's mind, sharing things with each other that we don't necessarily share with you? Yes. If that's what you mean, then yes, Luz and I have been having an affair. I've been having the same kind of affair, by the way, with your mother for years. If that's what you mean."

"Do you have secrets with Luz? Secrets from me?"

It was like a screw turned, too tight.

"You know," I said, "we've got to leave here right now if we're going to get there in time. And I would like to arrive without carrying any of the nasty baggage you're trying to load on me. Can we make a deal here? Or do you want to go by yourself? Or shall I go by myself?"

"Okay, deal," she said. She had scored her first points in her first cross examination, but she would be back, I knew. But for now, she let it rest.

The hairpin turns up Mount Tam were too much for Audra. I had to pull over three times so she could hang her head out the door and throw up. She had had a couple of bouts with morning sickness, but nothing like this. When we got to the top, it was still dark with only a hint of dawn behind the hills across the bay. We met a bus and two cars in the otherwise deserted parking lot. One of the cars was Luz's Volvo while the other was a tiny, basalt-blue foreign job whose make I didn't recognize. The top was down on the basalt-blue car, though it was still rather cold, and a gray-haired man and gray-haired dog swiveled their heads synchronously to watch as we drove up. I parked our car along the edge of the parking lot so that Audra could take a quick toss into the bushes there if she

needed to. Then I walked to where Holly was talking to the bus driver. She greeted me with a nod, finished her conversation with the driver then turned to me.

"You're early! Hi!"

"Yeah, I'm not used to no traffic."

"We probably won't be leaving for another half hour."

"Where's Luz?"

"Playing with Chris."

As if conjured, Luz hove into sight from behind some bushes at the ell of the parking lot, making a breakneck turn on rollerblades. Hot on her heels was a young woman of perhaps twenty-five, far too close at that speed. If Luz were to fall in front of her, there would be a terrible collision.

"Jesus!" I said.

"Slow down!" Holly yelled as the two women streaked past us, the gray-haired dog barking its excitement. Luz weaved out wide to make the turn at the entrance to the parking lot and the young woman took the advantage and turned more sharply, risking a bad fall but succeeding in stealing the lead from Luz.

"No fair, Frenchy!" Luz shouted with a laugh, and with a few expert pumps of her legs closed the gap between her and the young woman. In another moment they disappeared again behind the bushes at the ell of the parking lot. They were out of one of my father's dreams.

"Who's Frenchy?" I asked Holly.

"They're both Frenchy. They call each other Frenchy. Ha ha! It's disgusting. The name's Chris."

"Oh, sorry. Who's Chris?"

"Luz's 'friend'. Some day that 'friend' is going to kill her."

I recognized the quotation marks around the word. Uttered and repeated with such hostility, they left me with no safe place to take the conversation.

"Who's in the car?"

"That's Chris's 'friend'. Birdie."

"Birdie!" I laughed, but Holly did not. "That's his name?"

"That's what everyone calls him. I guess because he looks and talks like a bird."

"They call him that to his face?"

"I've never heard him called anything else."

Chris and Luz rounded the bend again, Chris still in front, Luz close behind. Chris was skating a weave which slowed them both down while preventing Luz from passing. Both women were panting hard and flushed. I got a better look at Chris as she passed. Stunning. Even taller than Luz, slim and fit, with a bush of raven black hair standing out from her head in thick waves and reaching halfway down her back, startlingly white teeth bared in a brown face, she resembled nothing so much as an Amazon on speed. Both women were dressed in tight jeans and white shirts whose tails had pulled out of their waists and billowed in the wind. Chris took the turn tight at the parking lot entrance and then ran a few steps on her skates to put distance between her and Luz. But Luz was right behind, matching her step for step, and they were up to speed again.

Holly was frankly disgusted. "What's Audra doing in the car? Is she sick?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, God, me too. Sure, they told me about morning sickness, but they never told me this!" Holly started walking for our car. I noticed with a private smile that she was indeed wearing a maternity smock and that she even walked and stood with a practiced pregnant posture. Clearly not all of this rush to enjoy the pregnancy was Luz's alone.

I followed Holly a few steps but decided instead to go investigate Birdie. His head

swiveled from watching the skaters to watch my approach, distinctly birdlike. His nose was beakish and his eyes bright and buttony.

"Hi," he chirped.

"You must be Birdie."

"Guilty. And who must you be?"

"Cully."

"Oh, *THE* Cully! Oh, we meet!" He scooted himself out of the low seat in the tiny basalt-blue job and sat instead on the edge of the door, thrusting out his hand to me. "You're every bit as hampsun as Luz has claimed!"

"Oh?" I said, shaking his claw in a grip for which mine was no match. The gray-haired dog, meanwhile, was doing ecstatic whirls in the driver's seat, barking and laughing. "I didn't know Luz was making any such claims."

"Oh, yes, to anyone who will listen, 'Oh, Cully Rand, you know, the writer, very distinguished, blah blah blah, and oh so hampsun,' and Lorna behold, you are! and this, on the other hand, is Doggy who is very ugly, but who doesn't seem to mind in the least, so then pet Doggy now, or he will be severe with me."

Birdie, I would soon come to find, ended every sentence with a comma, "and", "but" or, worst of all, "therefore", speaking on whether or not anyone listened. But he was charming (most of the time). He had a very comical way of throwing back his head and grinning, or grimacing, broadly when he spoke, which was at once endearing and daunting. He peppered his speech liberally with childlike mispronunciations and inverted cliches, whether intentional or not I never decided. Through all his effusion, Birdie did not relinquish my hand, though he did stop pumping it, cupping his left hand over the grip as though to keep it warm, and wagging it back and forth. I took the introduction to Doggy as an opportunity to break the grip and pet the dog, who was indeed ugly but charming as

all get out.

"I'm happy to meet you, Doggy."

"And we're so happy to meet you finally, aren't we, Doggy? because you've taken our Luz quite by storm, and ah! there she is again."

Luz and Chris had stopped racing and were circling each other playfully in the corner of the ell, wrestling on skates. I could hear their giggles and soft laughs. I had the opportunity to survey Chris more closely. Actually, she wasn't a beauty at all. She was just big. Everything about her was big, long, and thin. Her nose was too prominent, her lips too full, her eyes too wide apart, her hands huge. Big, brassy and dark-complected but altogether too butch and horsey to be as beautiful as she first appeared to me. Nevertheless she looked like she could be great fun, and I was quite sure that she and Luz had had a good share of each other. No wonder, I thought, Holly disliked her so much.

"How do you know Luz?" I asked. "Through Chris?"

Birdie smiled. "Luz and Chris know each other through *me* as they were both my interns at Berkeley."

"Oh, you're a professor there? Embryology?" No wonder he was so goofy, I thought: he was an egghead.

"Anthropology, which is how Luz started out at Berkeley, you know, now an excapee, but Chris is still my captive."

"Still your 'friend'..." I wanted to say, supplying Holly's quotation marks around the word, but held my tongue.

I suppose I must have been watching Luz and Chris more intently than I imagined because Birdie said, too slyly, "Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Yes. Both of them."

"Yes."

Now I found myself continuing to gaze at the two women because I did not want to turn back to Birdie, who was quite unabashedly staring straight at me with his gleaming little birdie eyes—a typical pass by an older gay man at a younger straight man, a pass like many I've had before and which I've learned to ignore. To look at him would be foolhardy but to turn away would be rude and—he would think—telltale, so I simply gazed on at the two women, who were like kittens tumbling around each other.

"I had hoped for them to marry," Birdie said after a moment.

Shocked, I did turn to him. "Really?"

"Yes," he said, turning his eyes back to the two women. "Imagine that genetic admixture!"

Shocked even more, I had no response at all. I had no idea even what to think. My first thought was that Luz must have told Birdie about our egg-to-egg transfer. Why else would he be talking about an admixture of Luz's and Chris's genes?

"Chris," he went on, "is without doubt one of the one hundred or so most inbred individuals in the world while Luz is among the most outbred, calls herself a mongrel and is, genes handed down in recent generations from Africa, from Mexico, from Finland, from England, and then the Cortés and Malinche connection which she most undoubtedly has told you about, East meets West blah blah blah, and together, what offspring! but alas! along came Holly."

"No, Luz hasn't told me. What was that about Cortés?"

"Well, Cortés, but good God man, you don't know Cortés?"

"Of course I know Cortés, or at least I know there *was* a Cortés, I know there was an explorer Cortés, but is that—I mean that can't be the Cortés you're talking about?"

"And why not?"

"Well... that was a long time ago."

"Oh contrario, a mere moment! my soul, man! 1515! you know, of course, as does any schoolboy, 'In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue", but less than a generation later, 'In 1515, Cortés and Malinche made the scene.' You're blank? you didn't know that? East meets West, blah blah blah? Luz never told you?"

"I'm lost," I said, truly lost.

"East meets West? The two major forkings of modern man? The Chinese Trail? Across the Bering Straights to Alaska? Yellowskins, redskins, migrating through the Americas? The Caucasians? Whiteskins swarming out of the Caucasus and covering all of Europe, ending up in the tip of Spain at the ocean's edge? Three little ships, the Niño, the Pinto, the Santa María, you've never heard any of this, please tell me I'm wrong?"

"No, of course, I've heard of all of that. I just don't know why you're saying these words to me."

"Cortés! Malinche! I don't know how to make it any simpler. They fucked! East meets West, blah blah blah." He pointed to Luz. "Luz!"

"Luz is the descendant of Cortés and... who?"

"Malinche! the Maya princess! the translatrix of Cortés who learned his language and betrayed her entire people, her entire continent to the thug!"

"And Luz is their descendant?"

"Good heavens, Luz portrayed you as a man of letters!"

"I ... write ... stories," I said, realizing that a stammer was developing which I would have to work hard to choke off at its root.

"Yes, of course! That's why I'm very interested to have you meet Chris, because oh, you'll just love Chris! the stories! the exotica! from Pitcairn, but I can't believe Luz never told you! West meets East, blah blah blah?"

"Pitcairn!" I said. "That little island from *Mutiny on the Bounty*?"

"Well, it existed previous to that, of course, but yes, *that* Pitcairn, which is why Luz and Chris's offspring would be so delicious! just imagine! nine English men and nine Tahitian women and their descendants locked on a tiny island for more than ten generations! what a test tube!"

I looked again at Chris, awed. The people of Pitcairn Island had sparked my imagination when I was a kid and Ms. Crouch, the librarian at Lodi Public, shoved all three books of the Nordhoff and Hall trilogy in my greedy hands. All the movies about the sensational mutiny end with the landing on Pitcairn, but for me the most interesting story has never been told: what happened to those people in the two centuries that have passed since then? And this brown-skinned, gawky, bony beauty before me was the descendant of those descendants.

I had no chance for further thoughts because the parking lot had begun to fill with more and more raucous merrymakers, Luz and Chris skating up to first one group and then another, laughter ringing out in the pre-dawn clear mountain air. It appeared from the greetings that most of the guests were friends not of Holly but of Luz. Holly stayed in my Saturn with Audra until it was time to shout at the rising sun, and then she and Luz called us all together in a group facing east, most of us still not introduced to each other, and we all shouted on three, "Welcome, Rainbow!" And the sun's first ray pierced the sky. It was extremely silly and satisfying.

Privately I had already given the little fetus inside Holly a name of my own: "Double X", written *XX*, in caps and italics, for I was indeed beginning to incorporate her into my novel, in one aspect or another as yet undetermined, and now was even playing with the thought of titling the novel *XX*. "Rainbow" was hardly any less absurd but it was, after all, to be a living child who would have to bear the name until death or name-change did them part and so, like Audra, I was privately disapproving. Audra refused to even

consider naming our baby yet—the jinx—so I was forced to call it Bartholomew or Rapunzel, or the more unisex Destry, or whatever name came to the tongue, which irritated Audra but delighted me. I thought I should probably continue the practice after the baby's birth for his or her amusement and to create a unique father/child bond. I was sure it would be lots of fun for us both.

I sat with Birdie on the bus. I most certainly would have chosen differently if I'd had a choice but since he kept me behind to help him put up the top on his car, we were the last on the bus. I found to my dismay that everyone else was already cozied up on the seats in their own couplings, Holly with Audra and Luz with Chris. But as it turned out, upon my introduction to Chris I was most eager to sit with Birdie after all so that I could get the full low-down.

"Cully," Luz had reached over Chris to grab my hand as I passed their seat. "I want you to meet my best friend in all the world. Chris. Chris, this is Cully.

"Her new other best friend in all the world," I said with a laugh and extended my hand to Chris.

"Hello," Chris said and took my hand in a huge grip which was firm around the edges but very soft in the center. "Happy to meet you." The voice was also soft in the center but with a hard inflection and slightly nasal accent, so that it sounded more like "Heppy to mitcha."

"Same here. I've just been talking to Birdie all about you."

"Oh, not *all* about you," Birdie said, taking my arm and pulling me to the back of the bus. "Not *ALL* about you, now come along, Cully, Chris has his own fish to fry with Luz."

I allowed myself to be pulled away, the smile frozen on my face. Chris was a man. I quickly ran through my mind all the things I had asked or said about Chris to Holly and

Birdie to determine whether I might have let slip my ridiculous mistake. I could remember nothing.

During the trip as Birdie talked—and he never stopped—I watched the back of Chris's head, or his profile when he turned to Luz or to look out the window. I could not say, now, how it was that my original impression of him was that he was a woman. Next to the delicate profile of Luz, Chris's was clearly a man's face, rawboned and large but with apparently no beard at all unless it was masked by the deep brown of his skin.

"I would have thought," I said, interrupting Birdie mid-sentence on whatever subject he had been illuminating, "that Pitcairn Islanders would not be so dark-skinned. I mean, they're all half-blood white, aren't they? I mean, even today? What I'm trying to say," I sped on as I saw a look of predatory amusement flash in the little birdie eyes, "is that because all of the first children of the Englishmen and the Tahitian women were half-bloods, or hybrids I suppose we should call them so that we don't seem racist, I mean as an anthropologist can you *be* racist, I don't know, but what I mean is..." I found myself adopting Birdie's rapid-patter speech pattern for fear that he would interrupt me before I was finished with my thought—whatever it might turn out to be—and because Birdie had a very distracting habit of moving his lips at the same time as I spoke, forming the words I was saying almost as rapidly as I said them, with the result that I felt as though I was in danger of losing a race. "...If the first generation of hybrids reproduce with their own generation, then their children would also have the same number of genes from the white grandparents as from the Tahitian grandparents, isn't that so? So that the children would not be so white as the original whites but not so dark as the original Tahitians but all of them would still be half-blood, or hybrid, I mean, right?"

"Well," Birdie replied after a significant cock of the eyebrow to emphasize the approaching condescension, "there are all sorts of variables, of course, in skin color

especially, but in nose shape, and lip shape, ekcetra, ekcetra, and it is an eggma," he went on, relishing one of the juiciest of his mispronunciations with a reprise, "an *eggma* which would be well worth a detailed study by a geneticist, how the Pitcairners' genes have evolved, and though I've encouraged Chris to go back to Pitcairn and make such a study for his doctrate, he's oh too full of himself, never wants to go back to 'the rock', as he calls it, and I don't suppose I can blame him... did you know it's smaller than Central Park, the whole island? and thousands of miles from anywhere? which is undoubtably why there was such a bloody beginning to the colony, did you know that? oh yes, it was nearly twenty years after the mutiny that they were first discovered again by the outside world, and by that time there was only one of the nine Englishmen left and none of the Tahitian men, but there had been six Tahitian men, if you recall, who had sailed with the Bounty, leaving their homes of their free will, but then on the tiny rock, the nine Englishmen, of course, so English! parcelled out the land in nine parcels, splitting among them the nine women as well, and then there were eight! murder! and then seven, because you see, the brownskins who had never owned land on Tahiti, never even had the concept of it among their people who roamed and slept freely on their native island, did not much care for their sudden second-class citizenship but committed some stealthy murders of the whiteskins and then were themselves murdered by each other and then by the whiteskins who did indeed murder the other whiteskins as well, and then there was one! and all the women and children, and no one really knows the true story of it all, and where or where did Fletcher Christian's bones get buried, blah blah blah, but the simple fact is that no Tahitian-Tahitian children were brought forth on that continent and when the first ship arrived from the outside world, the captain was amazed to be greeted by a boatload of brownskin teenagers speaking perfect English, but I degress, you asked about skin color, it's true that Chris is much darker than most of the men of Pitcairn, although querulously not darker than most of

the women, don't you find that querulous? querulous that it is the women who seem to inherit the Tahitian traits while the men tend to inherit the English traits? which is the eggma I think Chris owes it to the world to go back there and make a scienterrific study of and complete his geneticisist's's's doctrate on, expecially since he is the only mahu in memory on that island and therefore must be a tenth-generation throwback to Tahiti, and his dark skin, to get back to your question of skin color, more like the women of Pitcairn and not the men, earned him the nickname, can you guess what they called him? in jest, but that kind of jest grows tedious, 'Nigger', 'Neeger', that's how they pronounce it, 'Neeger,' and then they laugh, no harm meant, blah blah blah, but strange, isn't it, that a word like that can survive for two hundred years in a place where the original object it named has never even existed, but don't get me started on words, Cully, oh, you are devilish! to start an old man talking, while the hampsun young men cast shy glances at each other."

The course of his patter, full-steam-ahead as it was, occupied my complete concentration so that I was a little shocked at this flirtatious ending, even a little intimidated. But when I looked up, I saw that Chris was indeed looking over his shoulder at me, smiling. Luz was whispering something to him, evidently something about me because he laughed out loud as he watched me. I remembered that laugh from the parking lot, a soft, womanish laugh. In fact, his face now nearly full on was somewhat womanish, the tapered eyebrows and long black eyelashes appearing like mascara around his hazel eyes.

"What about his eyes?" I asked. "They're surely not Tahitian?"

"The color of the eyes, no," Birdie answered, "hazel and right out of England, of course, but the *shape* of the eyes, show me an Englishman whose eyes are shaped like that! beautiful, aren't they?"

"Well, I suppose. Unusual in a man, I suppose."

"And beautiful?"

"Yes, I suppose. Um, Birdie," I said, deciding that I really must put a stop to the man's flirtation. "I don't know what Luz might have told you about me, but, that's my wife sitting up there with Holly."

"Yes, I figured that out, and pregnant, too, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"And you're the father?"

"Yes."

"Only you didn't do it the regular way, did you?"

There was no quashing him. I said, deliberately ponderous, "After many years of trying the regular way, Birdie, we did go the irregular way. But, we still very, very much like the regular way."

"Aha!"

Now, from his silence, I was afraid I might have offended him, when in fact I found myself rather liking him, despite his flirtation. My worry, however, appeared ungrounded after all as he added, "My wife and I, too, very, very much liked the regular way, which is how in fact we conceived our two children, one boy and one girl."

"Oh," I said.

"They were both extremely angry and jealous when I brought Chris home from Pitcairn, but my wife seemed not to mind at all, isn't life querulous?"

"Very," I said, and searched for a safer subject. "Then you yourself have been on Pitcairn?"

"Of course."

"How long ago was that?"

"Let's see, twelve years."

"But Chris must have been... how old then?"

"Fifteen, but you needn't be shocked, Chris had a sizable history with sexuality by that time, quite sizable, if you know what I mean." He nudged me with his elbow. "They start young on Pitcairn, although Chris tells me that since he *was* the only mahu in the island's memory, they didn't quite know what to do with him, but of course I knew what to do, and Chris was very eager, and he never looked back."

"I wonder if Chris would mind your telling me all this."

"Oh, I doubt it, but we could ask him, shall we?" He began to rise from his seat to call up front.

"Perhaps later," I said in a rush to head off whatever embarrassment he might be intending to shout to Chris across the entire busload of people. We fell into a short, miraculous silence and I turned to watch the beautiful Marin countryside pass by the windows. As we passed a particularly dramatic escarpment along the highway, however, Birdy launched into a unit on Marin geology which lasted for the rest of the trip. Actually it was just the ticket for a comfortable and enlightening journey, and I was very grateful to him for the change of subject. I kept imagining how entertaining his students in his lecture halls must find him. He finished with a flourish of geological nomenclature just as the bus pulled into our destination, a stretch of bluff falling straight down to the ocean. He added, as the other guests began to disembark, "You didn't ask what a mahu was, that surprised me."

"I thought I would look it up when I get home."

"You won't find it in any English dictionary."

"Maybe I'll try the Internet. How's it spelled?"

"m-a-h-u is the common spelling, though Captain Bligh spelled it m-a-h-o-o. The Internet, hmm?" he added with a frown. "Well, if you do find anything on your Internet, do let me know."

When I descended from the bus, I looked around for Audra to see how she had managed the bus ride since the road had been somewhat curvy. She seemed fine and in good spirits.

"How was Birdie?" she asked immediately in a whisper.

"What did Holly tell you about him?"

"Not much, but she doesn't like him."

"I can see why. But he's fun. He's funny."

"Funny-ha-ha or funny-queer?" she laughed.

"Both! But he's a bit of an eggma." Audra looked at me with a wry twist of her lips, sure she would get the joke if she worked on it, but not about to give me the satisfaction of asking me to explain it.

After a very pleasant walk on a winding trail down through the pines, we reached a beach which was already set up for our party's arrival. There were beach chairs and blankets, a fire blazing with the smell of coffee and bacon mingling with the sea air. It was a catering firm from Bodega Bay, I learned from Luz later. Delicious and special and a lovely way to introduce Double X to the world.

As I looked around at the thirty or so guests stretching out after breakfast, I said to Audra, "We should do something like this for Drusilla."

Audra frowned. "When the time comes." She went back for seconds. She was indeed eating for two these days without any embarrassment. It delighted me since she had always been a puny eater. If there's one thing I like, it's appetite.

Luz came walking up with a woman who might have been her older sister. She introduced her as her Awntie Rosalinda, rolling the R and reminding me of what was easy to forget, that she spoke Spanish as fluently as English. Awntie Rosalinda said straight off, "Call me Roz."

Luz had told me so much about her aunt that I was very eager to meet her. Somehow that I never fully understood, my complicity in the conception of Double X had drawn me into Luz's confidence like so many scattered needles and pins and paperclips to a great magnet. Despite her initial distrust of me—probably deserved because of the shallowness of my initial attraction to her, hardly any different from my father's—she had begun to embrace me, and we had shared several tender and meaningful moments, generally at our lunches or in walks in the early evenings before she drove home to China House. When I pressed her about her past, hungry for every piece of her person and life, she sidestepped. "You white people are so funny," she would say, and laugh ruefully. That Birdie had called her "outbred" and a "mongrel" had caught my ear. I could see from the copper and apricot color of her skin—the burnt side of the cot—and from the straight, thick hair and from the fullness of her lips and thinness of her nostrils and length of her forehead that she was a mix of many races of mankind. But no, she had not told me about being a descendant of Cortés and Malinche, which now impressed me all the more because of her reticence about such a famous—or infamous—connection.

She always did speak very fondly of her Awntie Roz and Tio Paco who she said had all but raised her, and I remarked to myself how peculiar it was that she anglicized the aunt while she used the Spanish title for the uncle, though they were brother and sister. An effect of California Spanglish, I supposed.

And now this Awntie Roz turned out to be a renegade charmer with a sense of humor at once boisterous and profound. I liked her immediately, and when I found out that she and Luz had a date for the next weekend, Roz's birthday, to visit Luz's mother's grave, I freely horned in. Luz was surprised but—I think—pleased over my intrusion. Roz seemed genuinely enthusiastic. "Oh, Rosie would have been so happy. She had a thing for white men, and she'd have eaten you up like jelly on a roll."

Every one of Luz's friends was a unique pleasure. Through the day I made it my business to talk to each of them. Some I already knew from the clinic—including Margarita having lots of fun with some very gay, gay women—some were from the university, some from high school, and one went all the way back to second grade. I found it extraordinary how Luz managed to have and keep so many people for so long on the rolls. I also found it extraordinary that—my first perception was right—all of these people were Luz's friends, none of them Holly's. I pointed it out to Audra.

"Well, it makes sense, doesn't it?" Audra replied. "Luz has been single. Single people keep their friends. A woman marries, devotes herself to her husband, and loses her friends. The marriage breaks up, and she's alone. It happens all the time. It happened to Holly."

"Well, that's a little blithe. You don't devote yourself to me. You have friends."

"Not really."

"Oh, come down off the morose horse, Audra!"

"Well, don't pick on Holly."

I wasn't about to pursue the conversation further. Audra, devil's advocate incarnate and always ready for a contest, had swept her comforting wing around Holly even as Holly had done the same with Audra: bosom buddies of the most outrageous type. That I could not make a simple observation about Holly without being seen to pick on her was absurd and not worth the effort, especially when the beach was teeming with interesting people.

A few hearty souls waded into the water, but it was too cold to go swimming. There was a bank of fog that lay all day like a flat, gray monster a quarter of a mile or so offshore. The day was too cool to burn it off, which made for fine volley ball weather. Chris and Luz, on opposite teams, were a wonder to watch, both of them spiking the ball down each other's throat with such good humor and sportsmanship that I found myself

yearning to be one of them, I didn't care which.

Late in the afternoon, I decided to take a hike up onto the bluff. I was influenced in this decision not so much by the sterling, cool weather and the promise of stunning vistas as I was by the fact that I saw Luz and Chris heading up the bluff together, Doggy bounding along before them. I meandered up the path behind them without calling out to them not only so I could freely change my mind and go back if my commitment to the hike should wane, but moreso that I could watch them both as they climbed. Birdie was right: they were beautiful to behold. And I was right in my initial impression that Chris was at least as much akin to woman as man. It was the way he moved his butt as he climbed the steep trail, his tight jeans emphasizing the contours. Though hard and round, a man's butt and not so much the upside down valentine of Luz's firm bottom, it swung like a short-arc pendulum with each step.

Luz and Chris disappeared from view from time to time as the trail took a turn behind rocks or trees, and at those times I would stop for a breather. I didn't want the two of them to turn, look back and find me resting. It seemed somehow unmanly, and to both this woman and this man, for different reasons, I wanted to appear manly. As a consequence, I lost them both for a while. When I came to a Y in the trail with no sight of them, I took the trail that looked the most travelled and soon found myself in a bramble. Retracing my steps—I thought—I couldn't find the Y again but came at length to a different Y, which then Y-ed again. I came out eventually at the top of the bluff and ran smack into Luz and Chris sitting on a bare boulder overlooking the ocean. Luz was weeping convulsively. Chris had his arm around her shoulder. He looked up at me with an expression of great pain in his beautiful eyes.

"What happened?" I said.

"I don't know. We sat down for a rest and she started crying."

"Go away, Cully." Luz said between sobs, turning her head from me, out to sea.
"It's not your fault, but go away."

I was stunned. "I'm ... I'm not going away. But I'll sit over here. Behind these rocks. So I'm over here ... in case ..."

Doggy kept me company as I waited behind the rocks and wondered. It had to be Double X, I decided. Guilt. The Catholic curse raising its macabre Mexican head. But who was I to point a finger when guilt was so close to the surface in myself. Luz had committed an extraordinary act, and I had witnessed it, something no man or woman had ever done before, something that if either of us were still religious, we might certainly call godless.

We had not talked, and we needed to. I came out from behind the rocks and found Chris and Luz where I had left them. Luz's weeping had calmed. I said, "Chris, I wonder if Luz and I could be alone for a few moments."

"No," Chris said. "She told you to go away."

"Well, she didn't mean it, of course."

"That's okay, Frenchy," Luz said. "I'm over it."

"What was it?" he said.

"Oh, just ... nothing. More of the usual nothing."

There was no talking for a while. Then I said, "Could I talk with you, Luz?"

She sighed. "Sure. Frenchy, could you...?"

"Sure," Chris said.

"Those rocks over there are nice," I said, pointing to where I had been sitting.
"You can see the ocean." Chris walked into the rocks. When he was out of sight, I said to Luz, "What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"You're avoiding me."

"No."

"Why?"

"I'm not avoiding you."

"Yes, you are, why? Is it because of the baby?"

"No. No. No. Oh, no, Cully, I'm so happy over that." She scrambled down from the rock and took me by the shoulders and embraced me hard. I was shocked. She felt comfortable in my arms. I didn't want her to move away. But she did.

"Well, then, what?" I said

"Nothing. Really, nothing that I can talk about." She played with a twig on a low windswept bush growing out of a rock where there appeared to be no soil at all.

"Well, can we see each other?"

"We're seeing each other now. We're seeing each other next weekend."

"I mean alone. Like we used to."

"Not next week. The week after? We'll have lunch?"

"Promise. And you won't break it."

"Promise. Now let's get Frenchy." She moved into the rocks and we found Chris lying face up on a smooth sunny one, his hand dangling to scratch Doggy's head. He looked up as we approached.

"Why does she call you Frenchy?" I asked.

Chris looked to Luz, who grinned and turned her head away. He grinned too. "Just seemed appropriate," he said, sitting up. She laughed. So did Chris.

"Why don't you come with us, Cully?" Luz asked, her smile twisting. "I'm taking Chris to this pretty little beach that no one ever goes to. The tide's coming in, so we don't have much time."

The main trail wound along the top of the bluff, following the contours of the rugged shoreline. Where some fingers of bluff stuck far out into the water, Luz found trails that cut across the crook of the fingers, saving minutes as not only the tide came in, but the fog began coming in from where it had lain offshore. As the sun lost heat in its descent, the fog bank seemed to grow like a live thing. We reached the bluff above the beach only moments before the sun sank into the fog which now nearly touched the tips of the fingers of land. We could no longer see the ocean, but only the little gulf below us with its smooth, sandy beach about thirty feet straight down.

"We can't get down now. Sorry, guys. The trail down is out there and the tide beat us to it." Luz pointed to the trail at the end of the finger across the gulf from us. On a clear day, with low tide, it would indeed have been a pretty little beach to explore, but here at the crook of the gulf the cliffs fell straight down. Besides the wind had come up as the fog had closed in, blowing shreds of it all around us.

"We should start back before the fog comes in any further," Chris said.

Just then, however, a seagull that had been gliding on the winds in the gulf floated on an updraft to a level with the top of the bluff, within a couple of feet from where we were standing. The three of us gasped in the same instant at its magnificence so close up, its wings outspread, each feather perfect. We gasped again as Doggy leapt onto the seagull's back and bit down on its head as together they dropped out of sight into the gulf. We stepped to the edge and saw the two of them lying in a tangled clump on the beach, some thirty or thirty-five feet straight down.

"Dog!" Chris shouted, and Doggy twitched slightly. The gull didn't move, not so much as a flutter. Chris reacted immediately, starting to climb down the vertical cliff, using outcroppings of rocks as handholds and footholds.

"Chris, come back, you'll fall!" Luz cried, but Chris paid no attention and kept

climbing down.

Doggy and the gull both lay on the beach, unmoving, but when a wave washed over them, Doggy yelped and tried to stand. He fell over in the wash but tried to stand again and this time made it to his feet, struggling through the receding wave up the beach to dry sand.

"Dog, stay!" Chris yelled down at him. He had come to a spot where there were no longer any outcroppings of rock to hold onto but only a sheer drop to the beach below, perhaps fifteen feet of undercut cliff.

The next wave came higher than the last, washing the dead gull up to Doggy's feet. Doggy retreated again up the beach but was now at the highest point. Chris dropped the last fifteen feet to the sand and picked Doggy up. Examining him quickly, feeling his legs, he yelled up to us, "I think he's okay. But scared. He's trembling."

"You've got to climb out fast," Luz called down to him. "The tide comes half way up the cliff, and it comes in hard with a strong undertow. Can you find a way up?"

Chris scanned the walls on both sides of the bluff, looking for handholds. The next wave washed over his ankles.

"Here, I think!" he shouted up to us, pointing to the opposite side of the gulf. "Can you climb down and give me a hand?" It was difficult to see where he was pointing because the fog was coming in fast in thickening patches.

"We'll try!" Luz shouted back.

Luz and I made our way through the low brush at the crook of the gulf and came out above where Chris was now trying to scale the smooth wall. He had taken off his shoes so as to get a better grip with his bare feet. And so he could use both hands to climb, he zipped Doggy into the front of his jacket, only the dog's head sticking out just below Chris's chin.

Luz started climbing down, holding onto the rocks as she lowered herself. I looked around the top of the bluff for a branch, or for anything else I might reach down to Chris. There was nothing but thin scrub.

"Cully, over there," Luz said. "I think if you can go down that crack, maybe we can both reach a hand down to him."

I was scared stiff. My joints didn't seem to move properly. The waves were now crashing into the crook of the gulf and if any of us slipped, it would mean sure death. But as I looked down at Chris and saw him sliding down the smooth wall into swirling knee-high water, I knew I had to help. I lowered myself over the edge of the bluff into a shallow, oblique crevice which allowed me to descend fairly securely for several feet, until it came to an end. Below me there was a promising outcropping of rock with a little bush growing out of it. I thought I might be able to station myself there, hold onto the bush, if it was strong enough, and reach a hand down to Chris if he could get high enough. Chris, meanwhile, had begun to climb the wall again, having moved a few feet to the side to try a different route. The waves were higher on the wall, each one stronger than the one before, Chris in advance only a few inches as he made his slow, careful way up the wall which was increasingly slick with spray. Luz had reached the bottom of her route. Any farther, she would lose her grip and fall.

I reached the outcropping, about the same level as Luz but about six feet to the side. The bush did have a very strong root system, which allowed me to hang down a few feet more. Chris was below us and between us. "This is as far down as we can get," I shouted to him, trembling so violently that I was afraid I might not be able to hold on. "Can't you get up any farther?"

"There's nothing to hold onto!" he shouted back.

"Here! See if you can grab my coatsleeve!" Luz shouted and began peeling back

her jacket. It was very difficult since she had to hold onto the cliff with one hand, and it took several precious moments to get the jacket off and herself into position so that she could lower the sleeve to him. The water was now roiling about his legs, halfway to his waist. Whatever foothold he might have, he would not be able to keep much longer. Meanwhile both his arms were stretched out to handholds at either side of his head, one somewhat higher than the other. Doggy was mute and still, pressed up against the cliff.

Chris's eyes were intent on the sleeve as it came within a few inches of his left hand. "You have a good handhold, Frenchy?" he called to her.

"I'm ready."

"Okay, I'm going to jump for the jacket with my left hand, then I'm going to try to get my right hand into that crack there, you see it?"

"Not from here. Go for it."

"Okay. Ready. Go."

It was so fast that I couldn't take it in, but Chris did manage to get himself about a foot higher on the wall, right hand secure and left hand clutching onto the sleeve of Luz's jacket.

"I lost my footholds now!" he yelled. "I can't find a foothold!"

With the two good handholds, he was now able to bring up his legs, searching blindly all around for a foothold on the slick wall.

From my vantage I could see the crack that provided Chris's right handhold, but it was too far away from where I was hanging from the bush for me to be of any use. I could see another crack, however, not too far above Chris's purchase, and just to his right.

"Chris," I shouted. "If I can make it to that crack above you, I might be able to reach my left hand to your right hand."

Chris turned his head to me and there was an expression in his eyes that I'd never

seen before in anyone's eyes. It was a dead look, dullness, no life, no hope. I moved quickly now, leaving my safe handhold at the bush and trusting in a crack in the wall. But I made it. I was only a little above him now. I found one good handhold and a solid foothold and reached my free hand down and grabbed onto Chris's wrist.

"Okay, Luz," I shouted, "bring him up! On three. One, two, three!" With a force I never imagined I had in me, together with Luz, we raised him another foot or so until he caught at another handhold. This time he also managed to secure a foothold above the water level.

The cliff at this point was rougher, not worn smooth by the seawater, and inch by inch, Chris made his own way the rest of the way up. Luz and I retraced our routes to the top of the bluff. When we were all three there, we sat holding onto each other, trembling and gasping for breath.

It couldn't have been more than five or six minutes that we sat in that huddle, and I have no idea how long it had been since Doggy leaped upon the seagull, but now when I raised my head and looked around, I saw that we were completely socked in with fog. Below us the tide was at its highest, the surf roaring against the cliff wall. The last of the daylight was doused by the thickening fog and it was growing dark and extremely cold.

"We've got to get out of here," I said, standing and breaking free of the others' arms. "We've got to get out of here now."

"My God!" Luz said. "I can't see anything!"

"Do you think you can find our way out, Luz?"

"Well, we know the beach is in that direction," she said pointing across the gulf. "We could start and see what it's like. Maybe this fog will thin as we go. Chris, how are you doing? Can you walk?"

Chris was shuddering so violently that he couldn't get words out. The ocean in this

area is very cold. Chris was wet from the waist down and the air temperature had plummeted twenty to thirty degrees with the coming of fog and night. But he got to his feet, rubbing his arms and slapping them against his body and legs to try to warm himself.

Luz started us out back to the trail, but we hadn't taken more than a half dozen steps when she stopped and shouted above the crashing of the waves, "We can't. This is too dangerous. I can't even see my feet. We could walk right off the edge."

I said, "We've got to get Chris back and dry. At these temperatures he could get hypothermia."

"Chris, we've got to get you out of those wet clothes. Come on, we'll lie down right here and put you between us."

Chris's hands were shaking so hard that he couldn't unfasten his jeans. Luz and I took over the job and struggled to pull the tight wet jeans down his legs. There was an ashen, yellow tone under his brown skin. His jacket and shirt were dripping at the bottoms so we had to take them off too, along with his underwear. There was no embarrassment at his nakedness. We were working too fast. I had a handkerchief in my pocket and dried him from the waist down while he stood with his arms wrapped around his shivering chest, goose flesh standing out all over.

"Here, put on my jacket," Luz said.

"And my pants," I said.

We got the jacket and pants onto his body then lay down together on the rocks of the bluff, which still radiated some heat from the day's sun. Our first impulse was to put our heads together, and try to encircle each other with our arms, with Chris in between. But we found immediately this was too cumbersome and that Chris's lower half got no warmth from us. I changed position so that I held his legs against my body and tucked his icy feet under my chin. I opened the front of my shirt and pulled his feet and shins into my

bare chest and closed my shirt front around them again. Soon I was shivering, too. I felt Luz's arms encircle my bare legs and pull them close to Chris's chest where she she zipped them into her jacket. With my arms I encircled his and Luz's legs so that the three of us were tight together in a weave. Doggy, I could feel at the back of my legs, was getting as close to Chris's head as he could. I was grateful for his fur and body heat, though he was wet.

We lay like that for a long time. Slowly, my own shivering stopped and after a much longer time, Chris's shivering began to subside. Remarkable, the body. And then, remarkable, I felt against my groin, through the fabric of my pants on Chris's body, the distinct rising of his erection. It was unmistakable, a huge hardness pressing against me, finally kicking. My own erection, unstoppable, rose to meet his through the cotton of my underwear, kicking too. I was mortified. Neither of us said anything. What could be said? "Excuse me."? And an unsought complicity between this strange man and myself was created which I found at once embarrassing and guiltmaking, ridiculous yet exhilarating and fun. That Luz was cupped against Chris's back, unknowing, and that I had my arms around her legs and could pull them closer to me, pressing Chris and his erection more firmly into my own body, was too delicious. I could easily have ejaculated without further frottage, but I fought to hold myself off. For one thing, we sure didn't want any more wet.

At the thought I snorted. So did Chris.

"What are you two giggling about?" Luz said. "As if I didn't know. "Oh, Frenchy, this is too much!"

"Can't help it, you know," Chris said.

I started laughing, and so did Chris, and so in a moment did Luz. We laughed at the situation and we laughed at each other laughing. We laughed until we were racked with laughter. And when the laughing was all done, the erections had fallen, and we were all

soft together in a bundle, and I think I must have fallen asleep. I awoke to hear Luz saying, "You and that dog are always getting us into trouble."

"Oh, Dog, bad dog!," Chris said, and Doggy whimpered. There was a moment of silence, then he said. "I thought I was dead. Thank you both."

"Boy!" Luz said softly.

"Yeah," I agreed.

Chapter Nine

I think I went back to sleep, but I can't be sure. I couldn't tell whether my eyes were open or closed, the night in the fog was so black. The first I knew was that, after an eternity, I thought I heard a voice calling from a distance. I tried to sit up, but my legs were caught in Luz's jacket. Perched on the bone of my elbow against the rock, I said, "Listen!" My legs lifted as Chris and Luz raised their heads. "Shhh!" I said. "Listen!"

Muted by the fog and the pounding ocean, the sound was elusive. Then it came again: it was a voice, from far off but sounding amplified as though it was coming over a loudspeaker. "Cully Rand. (pause) Luz Rivera. (pause) Chris Christian."

I yelled back, "Here!" then said to Luz and Chris, who had unzipped the jacket and now sat up beside me, "All three of us at once now. One, two, three. Here!"

We shouted our lungs out of air, then listened.

"We hear you! We're coming! (pause) Again!"

The voice was distinctly nearer. We exchanged calls several times more and the voice got nearer each time until we saw a glow behind the fog. The glow grew brighter until we could make out the beam of a powerful flashlight.

"Stay where you are," the voice warned, now no longer amplified. "We'll get you out of here." There was a fatigue and ennui to the voice, and when the five rangers arrived all together and found the three of us safe, we saw that all of them were indeed bored with us: three more day-trippers who didn't know when to come in out of the weather. They did seem to perk up when they found that I was in my underwear, a story to take home after all perhaps. I found myself going to further lengths to explain my near nakedness than was really necessary, digging the hole deeper by letting them know that my pants were

on Chris. The rangers nodded sagely and dispatched the problem efficiently. Included in their rescue supplies were robes and towels, which they offered me. Chris wouldn't hear of it but stripped off my pants and gave them to me, taking the robe from one of the rangers who, I couldn't help notice, cast a seemingly accidental beam of his flashlight across Chris's nether parts, emitting an almost but not quite inaudible whistle of appreciation. They also brought out of their rescue kit a variety of footwear, but none of the shoes were big enough for Chris, so the ranger cut out the toes of the largest, and Chris was able to walk.

The ranger who seemed to be in charge, a man they called Sonny, or Sunny, remarked to another ranger after I stammered through the story of how we came to be here like this, "Damn! Says the damn dog jumped off the cliff onto the damn gull. I always thought animals had more sense than humans. But there you have it."

I was growing angrier by the second at their non-appreciation of the fact that we had just faced death and survived to tell it. I said emphatically, "We saved that dog's life!"

"Yeah. That's what I'm saying," Sunny replied. I determined to speak no further to the man.

The party had left the beach, and the bus had left the parking lot. Audra, Holly and Birdie were waiting in the rangers' jeeps, and they all three broke into hysterics when we arrived out of the fog. The rangers drove us back to the parking lot at Mount Tam, where the Saturn, Volvo and basalt-blue convertible were waiting for us. We were above the fog there, and it was otherworldly. The fog lay like a thick, ruffled blanket below us, white and luminescent in the light of the gibbous, nearly full moon. Miles away the black silhouette of Mount Diablo and the red lights at its peak were the only signs of earth to be seen, all else stars of the universe above and fog below.

Having taken down the names and addresses of all of us, Sonny said simply, "Good night. We'll be billing you." And the rangers left.

Holly insisted that we all stay the rest of the night at China House. She had kept the rooms unrented for as many people from the party as might want to bunk over, but since all the other guests had long since gone home, we had the place to ourselves. The answering machine was full of calls from the guests, exclaiming how wonderful the day had been but what a terrible way to end it and was there any news of Luz and Chris and Cully, and would we please call as soon as we got in. Holly began immediately making the calls, giving half the numbers to Audra, who used her cell phone.

Chris went upstairs to take a shower, and Luz, Birdie and I made a fire and double whiskys for four, and hot lemonade for Audra and Holly. One by one the others joined us. It was past three and all of us were exhausted, but no one could bear to go to bed. There was a kind of jubilation mingled with terror in us all which caused us to speak in whispers. Even Doggy was subdued, sitting on the hearth as close to the fire as he could get, looking around at each of us wide-eyed and mournful.

Parts of the night's story were told and retold from each different perspective, each of us confiding our own personal fears at any given moment. When the drinks were freshened, I noticed the first casualty to exhaustion: Audra curled in my arms where I sat at one end of the couch, her cheek on my chest. Holly was stretched out on the floor in front of the fire, her head in Luz's lap, and she too had drifted away. It was Chris who made the second round of drinks while Birdie sat in a chair in the corner, watching the fire all with eyes like shiny buttons reflecting the firelight. He had been noticeably quiet all night. Finally he said, "And so tonight you made it into the family."

"What family?" I said.

"The Human Family." I almost groaned, but did not. I refrained from asking him what he meant, knowing that he would tell us at some length in any case. "Perhaps you know, or perhaps you don't—Luz and Chris can tell you—that one of the attributes we

anthropologists identify as peculiarly human is altruism."

"Yes, I know altruism, Birdie."

"Do you? Of course. You're a writer, aren't you? So then tell me, my young man, how did it feel, at that moment, that single moment, when you risked your own life to save the life of another?"

"I don't have any words for it. I'm not even sure that I made a conscious decision. Ask Luz; she risked her life, too."

We looked to Luz. She seemed not to have heard but was looking down at Holly, stroking her hair.

"Luz?" Birdie asked.

"Yes, it was a conscious decision. But at the same time there was no other choice to be made. Chris would have died if we had not gone to help him. That was clear. There was nothing else to be done. Oh, Birdie, it's such bull! I remember the chapter on altruism, and I remember thinking what a load of bull, I mean, not only is it *not* specific to humans—the chicken, Birdie, as you told us, gives the alarm call to the other chickens when the hawk flies over even though the call itself puts that chicken at greater risk than the others—but more than that, altruism is not *innate* to humans, we're not fucking born with it, it's something we learn, because it helps us all survive, and we learn it through society, through church, through the laws we make and teach. But now... " She paused a moment, and reached down to caress Holly's abdomen. "...I don't know. I mean, now that I'm a mother. This baby in this womb is more precious to me than anything in this world. And the life that she will have when she comes out of this woman has such potential... I'd do anything for her." She laughed. "So maybe I *am* human after all."

"A member of the Human Family, you mean," I jibed, with a look toward Birdie.

"You're a very noxious if hampsun young man," he said. "Chris, destroy him for

me, will you?" He tugged on Chris's sleeve as Chris took his seat again on the arm of Birdie's chair, slinging his arm casually around the older man's shoulder.

Chris replied, "But you know that he owes his life to me now."

"Oh, yes, true. Did you know that, noxious, hampsun young man? When you save a person's life, according to a Japanese superstition, you are responsible for that person for the rest of his life."

"Should be the other way around." I said.

"But it's not," Chris said. "That's the beauty of it." He was watching me intently with his outlandish eyes.

"What's your first name?" I asked him. "Chris short for what? Christian?"

"Yes. Why?"

"The rangers were calling for you, 'Chris Christian'. Your first name is Christian and your last name is Christian?"

"Middle name, too."

"Christian Christian Christian! Who would name their child like that?"

"A mother and a father with a sense of humor," Birdie laughed. "Both of them descended from the same Fletcher Christian with his blood and name on both sides and on both sides of the grandparents. I told you, inbred. Cousins marrying cousins, themselves the children of cousins, for two centuries. Isn't he beautiful?"

"So you have a mutineer's blood doubled?"

"Quintupled."

"My God!" I said, congenital abnormalities coursing instantly through my imagination, until I tried to recover with, "...but... you don't seem mutinous," I said and regretted immediately that it sounded exactly like Bacall uttering a line to Bogart.

"I left the rock, didn't I? What is that, if not mutiny? Pitcairners are a wonderful

folk, but no longer for me."

He pronounced it Peetkeeners. His accent was as beguiling as his manner, sitting on the chair arm in the white robe the rangers had given him, his long legs stretched lazily down to the floor where his knobby feet brushed back and forth across the carpet, his toes finding a piece of lint and picking it up deftly. Seeing my eyes on his feet, he said, "These are what saved me out there, these Peetkeerner feets."

"On Pitcairn nobody wears shoes," Birdie laughed, "so their feet are more like monkey feet than human."

"Frenchy only wears shoes now for show," Luz added. "He can do wonderful things with those feet." She grinned at Chris, and he grinned back. I was suddenly consumed with jealousy. These two clearly had been fabulous lovers, whatever their current sexual orientation.

Holly rolled over, got to her feet and, with a badly disguised glance at Chris, took Luz's hand proprietarily. "I'm going to bed. You coming, babe?" She pulled Luz to her feet and the two of them started off to their cottage. "Beds upstairs are all ready for you. First one up makes breakfast, so sleep in."

"Goodnight everyone," Luz said.

Audra roused herself, "You ready, hon?"

I wasn't at all ready. There seemed so much unresolved. Questions. About Luz and Chris, what their relationship had been, and when? Clearly they had been lovers. Clearly. But what did Birdie have to do with it all? Clearly he and Chris were lovers. Clearly. And delicious questions about Pitcairn Island, and mahus, and barefeet, and a grip on life, and the family of man, and altruism and having babies and making love.

But I said, "Yes, I'm ready," and said goodnight to Birdie, watching us with his birdie eyes, and Chris, whose life I had helped save.

When we got into bed, I was mad to make love to Audra, but I knew she would be too tired. To my surprise, she was the one who turned to me.

"What would have happened if you had fallen?"

"I'd be dead now."

"I think that would have killed me, too." She grabbed me suddenly and kissed me hard. We made love with a passion more needy and furious than I had ever known, and I saw as never before how tremendous it was to be alive.

Chapter Ten

The next morning I woke late, but everything was still quiet. I turned and raised myself on my elbow to watch Audra's face as she slept. I never tired of watching her sleep. There was a quiet, innocent beauty to her face in sleep which was lost or masked by her waking animation. I never loved her so much as when she lay asleep next to me. We had grown up together, but I somehow felt that I knew her only when she was asleep, as though this was the real Audra while the waking Audra was a tornado, hopping over the face of my planet, setting down only to wreak havoc, then moving on. Here, now, she was the innocent I first bedded with.

After only a few moments Audra woke, too, parting her eyelids and slewing her eyes around the unfamiliar room until they reached my own eyes. She smiled and stretched. "You *are* there." Then she nestled her head back into the pillow and went back to sleep.

I got up, washed and dressed, then went downstairs where everyone was acting quite normally, as though half of us had not almost died the night before, as though we were a family, making a fire in the hearth to keep back the cold, cooking up odorous concoctions in the kitchen to break the fast together. The fog was still with us and we seemed wrapped in a blanket, isolated and thrown into each other's grace.

At the breakfast table, after having offered my help in the kitchen to Holly and Luz who would have none of it, I was skimming the headlines when I caught one of interest and found myself immediately absorbed into the article. It was about a controversy at U.C. Berkeley arising from a mysterious Neanderthal find in the Yugoslav Alps. According to the article, the site had already captured media attention worldwide because several human

bones had been found among the debris in the moraine of an ancient glacier whose melting appeared to be accelerating because of global warming. Now, according to the article—which was very confused, filled more with rumor and gossip than fact—Neanderthal bones were also reputed to have been found, radiocarbon-dated to the same time period. As the article pointed out with great labor, the news that Neanderthals and modern humans had not only lived during the same time period but inhabited the same broad areas had already been established rather thoroughly by previous excavations in caves in the Levant area of the Middle East. But if it was true that these glacier bones were in fact Neanderthal as well as modern human, it marked the first time that Neanderthals and modern humans were in the exact same place at the exact same time. And the fact that these bones were found high in the mountains deepened the mystery. What could these two kinds of people have been doing so far from their known homelands and foraging grounds? The article proffered a few conjectures so improbable and badly written that my interest ground to a halt, and I skipped over several paragraphs.

There was much skepticism in the scientific community, the article went on to say, because of the unprecedented secrecy surrounding the find. Controversy was brewing hot and soupy, and a number of anthropologists were quoted in carefully hedged dubiety while others spoke bluntly, more than hinting at fraud. Then the article launched into a history of fossil fraud, dominated by "the infamous 1912 Piltdown Man forgery" that would have been ludicrous had it not caused four decades of fallacious science. Evidently a few ancient bones had been planted in a gravel pit in Piltdown, England with fragments of a modern man's cranium and the jaw of an orangutan in which the teeth had been filed down and the whole jaw stained to look ancient. The perpetrator of the hoax, whose identity has never been discovered, was not only clever but extremely knowledgeable about fossilized bones, breaking them in just the right places and leaving out the parts which would have

deteriorated first in the thousands of years they had supposedly lain in the ground. It was not until the early 1950's, when a new method of fluorine dating was developed, that the fraud was uncovered. Meanwhile careers of dozens of anthropologists were built upon the fraud and hundreds of monographs were published perpetuating misinformation and tortured theories about mankind's evolution. It was a terrific embarrassment to the scientific community and a huge, wry laugh was stifled around the world.

I turned to Birdie who, I found, was examining me with his sharp eyes as though I was a mouse nosing out of a hole in the ground.

I said, "Birdie, here's an article you might be interested in."

"Oh?"

"About Piltdown Man. Have you ever heard of Piltdown Man?"

"Oh, it's an article about Piltdown Man, is it?"

"Yes, it was a fraud, evidently."

"Chrissy, did you hear?" Birdie cried, turning suddenly to Chris who was sitting beside him at the breakfast table, reading the back of a box of cereal. "Cully has read an article on the Piltdown affair. Didn't I tell you?"

"Birdie, be nice," Chris said, without taking his eyes off the box.

I was confused. There was a joke, somehow, and somehow it was on me. Birdie turned his bright eyes back to me expectantly. I decided to wait him out and I smiled. Ingenuously, I hoped.

"What's the headline for that article, Cully?"

I read from the page: "Neanderthal Find, Hoax or Real?"

"Oh, there's a Neanderthal find? So then the article is *not* about Piltdown after all? And who made this find, Mr. Cully?"

Annoyed at being patronized but feeling trapped, I scanned the first few paragraphs.

"I don't think it says. There's mention of a Swiss paleoanthropologist Bernard Weiss who is quoted as saying that it's the most important discovery ever in paleoanthropology. What is paleoanthropology, anyway?"

"Old men, study of," Chris said, still reading his cereal box, or pretending to.

"Chrissy, be nice," Birdie said. "So, Cully, Bernard Weiss, yes, deplorable man who uses but a single bar of soap a year, but yes, any others in this Neanderthal find?"

"So you actually know this Weiss?"

"He's a colleague, yes. No mention of anyone else?"

I scanned several more paragraphs which led into the Piltdown section, then skipped to the end of the article. "There is a Dr. Alexander Bird, a professor of Anthropology at U.C. Berkeley who is 'unreachable for comment' and it goes on to say, 'All of the bones found so far, both of modern human and Neanderthal, if they exist, are reported by Weiss to be in the possession of Bird.' Do you know this Bird fellow, too?" I looked up at Birdie who blinked at me with amusement. "Oh," I said. "Are you this Bird fellow?"

"Here I thought you were being coy, when you were just being unimaginative. Yes, guilty."

I was stunned into silence. "Well, this is fabulous!" I ejaculated finally. "You must be hysterical!"

"My dear, I've always been hysterical. Now I'm also very happy."

"But how did these bones come to you?"

"It's not bones. But I can say no more." He made a gesture as though turning a key in his lips and then smiled at me in a clear impersonation of Scarlett O'Hara in her teen years.

"What is it then? Is it a fraud?"

"Oh, no, definitely not a fraud. But I can say no more. I found it!" He couldn't stop himself from adding. "I went out with my little shovel. It's mine."

"It?"

"The find."

"What is it?"

"Would you like to see it?"

"I would!"

"I'm afraid that's impossible because he's under lock and key in a refrigerated vault, but I can draw him for you."

"Him?"

"Oh, yes, definitely."

"How can you tell that from bones?"

"It's not bones. But I can say no more."

"Birdie," Chris said. "Say no more. Cully's a reporter, remember."

"I'm not a reporter; I'm a writer. What exactly do you have? You said you would draw him for me."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"But of course that I cannot. Chris would be very cross with me." Birdie was enjoying his game very much. So, in fact, was I.

"Careers will be built upon these remains?" I said, looking from Birdie to Chris.

"Oh, but definitely!" Birdie was barely able to contain himself. "Never, never, never has there been a find like this! Never!"

Chris cautioned, "Birdie." Then he turned to me. "Alexander Bird is already among the top five anthropologists in the world. He doesn't need this find to build his

career."

"But yours?" I asked.

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Regular Indiana Jones, hey, Frenchy?" Luz's soft voice beside me surprised a jump out of me. She had a coffee pot in her hand, and she proceeded to pour coffee into my cup. I don't know how much she had heard. "Frenchy's very young," she said quietly to me, "to have this sort of break. His name appearing with Bird and Weiss on the books and articles they have ahead of them will get him a position anywhere he wants to go in the world."

"He's not going anywhere," Birdie said. "Are you?"

"No way of knowing," Chris smiled.

"I will have none of that."

"We'll see."

"What are these books and articles you'll be writing together?" I asked, and took a stab. "DNA?"

"Oh, at least!" Birdie laughed. "DNA, the be-all and end-all, mind you!. You are very naive, Mr. Cully."

"Well, wasn't that the big deal just a few months ago? DNA tests on a Neanderthal that show we're not descended from them?"

"Oh, that. That means nothing. One Neandertal among so many. Notice my pronunciation, my hampsun young man. Neandertal, tal, tal, wit a t."

"It's right here in the newspaper," I said, vexed now not only by Birdie's pedantry but by his own tiresome mispronunciations. "'Neanderthal' with a t-h, pro-*nun*-ciation Ne-an-der-thal."

"German pronunciation, my rude rube, Ne-an-der-tal, Valley of Neander, named

after an obscure poet who lived in the valley, if you must know, but the spelling in German and French was changed all the way back to the turn of the century to reflect its correct pronunciation, and only the pesky English and unlearned Americans still spell and pronounce it incorrectly, with a t-h, and you don't mind, do you, when I correct you, my fine, sweet-tempered, hampsun young man?"

"I stand corrected," I said, managing—I hoped—an ironic smile.

Luz handed Birdie the sugar and offered me some vindication: "But it's really Nay-awn-der-tal, isn't it, Birdie?"

"Oh, well, yes, of course, but who cares!" Birdie snapped and speedily spooned four rounded teaspoons of sugar into his cup.

I said, "Well, tell me then, Birdie... this business of DNA that you pooh-poo—"

"Oh, I don't poo-poo DNA—" he said with a grin, leaning into me and leering to be sure I did catch his pun.

But I hurried on. "—tell me why is it that they've never been able to retrieve DNA before?"

"We've been doing it for years."

"I mean on Neanderthals, excuse me, Nay-awn-der-tals."

"Who's going to give up the bones!" Birdie exclaimed. "There are so few! and they're irreplaceable! you have to grind the bone to powder, you know... powder! and this case you're talking about, the DNA from the original Neandertal mind you from the Neander Valley itself, they took a large chunk of the humerus and destroyed it to extract the DNA... destroyed! and what, ultimately, did they prove? Nothing. Humorous? I think not!"

"As I understand it, they proved that modern humans do not descend from Neandertals. Isn't that somehow important to you guys?"

"Nonsense! They proved that modern humans do not descend from that particular Neandertal!" Birdie spit the words, genuinely angry.

"And your Neandertal?"

He was about to retort but collected himself. "I can say no more," he said with a wink and turned with a self-satisfied smile to Chris.

Chris had stopped reading his cereal box and was watching us both. I had been keenly aware of his presence despite, or because of, his silence. Now he said. "We've been very closed-mouth about this find, Cully, because of mistakes which have been made in the past. We're being very cautious."

"How did word of it get to the newspapers?" I asked.

"I leaked it!" Birdie said ecstatically.

"Birdie has a plan," was all Chris said.

"I liked the Piltdown business in today's article, Chrissy, didn't you? I thought they did that awfully well."

"So you planted that?"

"What's to plant? Piltdown happened."

"So you're deliberately trying to create a mystery?"

"You're a novelist; you make stories; you must understand."

"But what's the story here? What exactly are you trying to accomplish?"

"How much can I tell him?" He turned to Chris with the look of a little boy holding a present for his mother behind his back and about to burst with it. It was a moment of revelation about their relationship that was clearly just the reverse of what I had imagined: a spoiled little genius, taken care of by an infinitely patient and loving, younger yet more ancient personality.

Chris examined me without embarrassment for a long moment. "Well, Birdie,

according to the Japanese, since he saved my life he's responsible for me now. So he can't possibly betray me. What do you think, Frenchy?"

They both looked to Luz. She glanced into the kitchen where Holly was working on the breakfast, smiled back at us, shrugged, and headed into the kitchen where she commenced an overloud conversation with Holly and a racket of washing up pots and pans.

Birdie leaned across the table in the caricature of a conspirator and lowered his voice to a whisper. "A few months ago word came to us from Weiss about his site at the foot of a glacier in the Yugoslav Alps where he had been nosing around. He had found modern human bones from at least a dozen individuals and sent samples to Chris and me for radiocarbon-dating. We found them to be 28,000 years old, plus or minus 5000 years. That in itself was news, extraordinary news, but then..."

"Could I interrupt?" I asked, whispering too.

Birdie was annoyed but hissed, "Yes?"

"Why is that extraordinary news? I mean, I know that this is your work, and you're very keen on it, but with all the thousands and millions of fossils that we've found through the years that are way more than 28,000 years old, why is this find extraordinary? I mean, I don't mean to demean it."

Birdie looked to Chris in such a way that I knew I had betrayed a truly simple mind to them both. Chris was the one to reply. "We don't have thousands and millions of ancient human remains, Cully. We have fewer than can be housed in a very small one or two room museum."

"Oh. I thought we did."

"No. We don't." Birdie was genuinely aggrieved by me. "Humans have lived on the planet a very short time compared to almost all other animals, and only in the past few

centuries have we been populous, and humans—most of them—are smart so they don't often get caught in peat bogs or tar pits where they could be preserved, and humans live in warm climates where there are lots of scavengers who eat them up, bones and all, or, if they're buried, soil microbes eat the flesh and soil acids dissolve the bones, therefore a find like Weiss's, with bones intact from more than a dozen individuals is indeed extraordinary, and so much for Paleoanthro 1 A, may I go on?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"But further you should know, Cully, these bones of Weiss were once in a glacier, and now they're found in the moraine of that glacier. You're going to tell me that you don't know what a moraine is, aren't you now?"

"It's the rocks and stuff, isn't it, down at the foot of the glacier where it's been melted ... to?"

"That's very good, Cully, and one can tell at once that you are an author which use English good. Yes, and in this moraine were found the human bones, and here is the miracle of that: no doubt in the 28,000 years since the human deaths that these human bones represent, the glacier has receded and returned dozens of times in miniature warming periods and ice ages. How many times might these remains of these humans have been exposed to the ravages of the animals and elements meanwhile? And when the glacier returns? Glaciers are heavy, young man: glaciers move, glaciers grind, glaciers sheer; so how did these bones survive for 28,000 years? Do you begin to appreciate the miracle of this, Cully?"

"Yes," I said, in fact moved by a sudden knowledge which I had never even questioned previously. "Actually, it's fabulous. It's a fabulous find!"

"Yes, good, he thinks it's fabulous, Chrissy." Birdie smiled. "But this is only the beginning because..." he paused and leaned further across the table, reaching out his hand

as though to pull me in, "...in the same glacial moraine with the human bones of the dozen or so individuals, Weiss found tools and weapons, not only the flint blades he expected to find with human bones, but the heavier and more primitive denticulate tools which have been found only with Mousterian peoples, i.e., Neandertals, and that's when Weiss began looking for Neandertal bones, and he found them!"

"Yes, that much is in the article."

"Oh, is it? I wonder how it got there," Birdie giggled.

"But how could he tell they were Neandertal? They're only bones."

"First from their thickness. Some of the fragments of bone were from a skull, a skull shaped differently from our own and larger than our own, perhaps encasing a brain wiser than our own, but certainly Neandertal. Weiss sent us the Neandertal samples and we radiocarbon-dated them to the same period!"

"Plus or minus 5000 years?"

Birdie contained his annoyance. "Although it has been generally believed in the last several years that *Homo sapiens neandertalensis* and *Homo sapiens sapiens* did indeed co-inhabit the same general areas during the same general time periods, this is the first time that we see them in exactly the same place at exactly the same time, far far distant from where we expect them to be. Inside a glacier!"

"What were they doing there?"

"Exactly!"

Birdie allowed the pause to grow pregnant and I felt a kind of stirring in the groin of my creative imagination. I'd researched a bit on Neandertals through the years, dinosaurs too, tossing around implausible ideas for possible novels. Jean Auel, however, had seemed to have cornered the Early Man market with her fanciful *Clan of the Cave Bear* trilogy, and I always put the idea aside. Now, ideas began raising ugly heads again.

"Don't be a tease, Birdie," Chris said. "Tell him the rest."

"The day is cold and blustery when we arrive in the camp," Birdie launched with a twisted smile into the Present Tense Aggravational, "and we see for ourselves the great, melting glacier. Weiss is on the moraine, digging digging digging with his crew, and as I stand on a high rock above him for a moment, looking down upon him and his work, I turn, I look up at the glacier, I see... something very surprising, something that starts my heart pounding."

"You're having a party, aren't you, old man?" Chris grinned at him then winked at me.

"The glacier's melt-off has formed a rushing stream which courses down the steep V, carrying with it ancient soil and rock, and there, just above the melting ice on the north-facing slope of the valley wall, is a dark spot. I put my binoculars to my eyes. It is a cave." Birdie nodded at me significantly and repeated. "A cave. A paleoanthropologist's dream. A previously undiscovered cave. Undiscovered previously, I should amend myself, except for... But I get ahead of myself."

He paused. He took a sip from his coffee. He looked about him now like a villain in a Charlie Chan movie. Then he leaned across the table to me again. "I collect the crew and set them to work with pneumatic chisels and ice picks on the part of the glacier that blocks the entrance to the cave. They pick pick pick for days to clear the glacier ice first from the entrance, then from the cave itself. It is freezing work and the crew are unhappy and mutinous." He threw a glance toward Chris. "They must be goaded out of their sleeping bags at the start of every day. I watch over the work to make sure no mistakes are made, no finds are unfound, no particle of history is destroyed. Care, great care is taken. Finally, the ice has all been chipped out of the small cave and I can see that the cave is..."

Birdie paused for effect. I showed him none, though in fact I was breathless.

"...empty."

"Oh!" I said, successfully suckered.

"In one corner of the cave is a pile of rocks that catches my eye. It is foreign. It is not a part of this cave. The rocks have been brought into the cave by what can only be human hands and have been piled against the wall of the cave in what can only have been human ritual. Very carefully, I myself work at the rocks."

"What about me?" Chris corrected.

"...I myself and my trusted assistant... the work is laborious, the rocks are frozen together with ice that must be broken very carefully, one rock after another is removed, it begins to be evident that the rocks are covering a natural cavity in the cave wall, and when the last rock is removed we see that in the cavity, embedded in ice, is..." Again Birdie paused. He gazed solemnly at me. "...a child."

I gasped.

"Naked. Curled on his side. A boy of seven or eight. Whole. Completely preserved. A 28,000 year old Neandertal boy."

"My God!" I said.

"Shhh!" Chris gave warning as Holly came to the door behind Luz, startling her. Luz had evidently been standing in the doorway listening to the end of the story.

"Five minutes to breakfast everyone," Holly said, leaning into the room over Luz's shoulder. "Cully, should you wake Audra, or let her sleep in?"

"No, I'll get her," I said and escaped up the stairs, my nerves strung tight.

"Hey, Cully," Chris called after me. I turned at our bedroom door to see him taking the stairs three at a time. When he reached me, he whispered into my ear. "This is just between us. You, Luz, me and Birdie. No one else. Right?"

I didn't have a chance to answer before the door opened behind me, and I turned to

see Audra's stunned face as she found me practically in the arms of this man. Chris laughed out loud. "See! I told you!" He pushed me aside and grabbed Audra around her waist. "Come on, baby, breakfast is up!" He whisked her down the stairs so quickly that she had to hold onto the bannister to keep from tumbling. "Careful, doll! We had a bet you were still sleeping!"

The surprise tactic. It certainly worked on me. I went weakly down the stairs after them.

Chapter Eleven

The breakfast, which had smelled so tantalizing as Holly and Luz were cooking it, had no flavor at all for me. Birdie's story left me stunned and dull. Chris's swearing me to secrecy and my wife's finding me in near embrace with him left me queasy. I couldn't seem to understand anyone or follow the thread of any conversation. I remember looking around at people talking and laughing; I remember Audra watching me and sending me little question marks with her eyebrows while all I could do was smile weakly back at her; I remember poking the souffle with my fork, getting some of it onto the tines and into my mouth; but there was no substance. I felt like going back up to bed, but I couldn't figure out how to do that without someone questioning me, and I wanted no questioning. So I continued to fork souffle and sausage into my mouth and drink far too much coffee.

I tried to make sense of it, why I was struck sick like this. The Neandertal boy in the ice cave was nothing to me. It was merely an anthropological find. One of a kind, certainly. No doubt it would prove an enormous breakthrough in understanding the evolution of mankind. Chris would be famous, Birdie even more infamous, elevated to anthro-God. But I had met these two men only yesterday. Why should that matter to me? Even if I was now responsible for one of them for the rest of his life.

It was the boy himself, I think, that disquieted me: the image of the boy curled in his ice grave. Whole. Perfect. Quiet, frozen in darkness for twenty-eight millennia. Give or take five. I shivered uncontrollably.

"Do you have a fever, Cully?" Audra said. She stood and came around the table to put the back of her hand to my brow, as my mother always had. In fact, she was very like my mother at that moment. I don't remember Audra's ever being motherly before.

"I am cold," I said, looking around the table. "Would anyone mind if I just went back upstairs and crawled in bed for a while? I'll come down in a few minutes?"

Everyone scooted their chairs back from the table as though to make room for me to leave. It was unnecessary. Audra took me back upstairs to our room.

"What's wrong?" she asked after she closed the door. She stood with her back against it, watching me as I slipped out of my clothes and into bed.

"I'm just suddenly so cold," I said. "I was so cold last night at the ocean. I'm just so cold. I'll be all right. Go down and finish your breakfast. You're eating for two."

"Yeah, and God, I'm starving!" She came over and kissed me on the forehead. "What were you and Chris doing outside the door?"

"I think he's gay," I answered helplessly.

"Oh, gee, you think?" she said sarcastically. Then she gazed into my eyes a long while and played with my ear with her finger. "Were you kissing him?"

"My God! Audra! No! My God!" She kept looking into my eyes until I pushed her away. "That's revolting! That you should think that is revolting!"

She walked to the door, then turned back. "Was he kissing you?"

"No! He was going to knock on the door! We were coming to get you! How can you ask that? How can you even think that?"

"Well, feel better," she said and left.

I pulled the thick down comforter over my head and lay trembling in the dark warmth a few moments until I was stifling and flushed so hot from the comforter and from embarrassment that I threw off the comforter and lay with my arms outspread, staring up at the ceiling. The uncalled for remembrance of Chris's throbbing erection came into my head, along with my own humiliating response to it, and my pornographic imagination conjured an image of Luz in angelic white-browed profile moving into the image slowly as, from the

other side of the image, the bulbous head of a monstrous brown-black phallus moved to meet her lips, rubbed itself against their voluptuousness, inserted its apple-sized head between them, stretching them to engulf it while her cheeks hollowed and her throat thickened as she engorged inch after inch of the shaft until, at last, the lean body attached to the monster came into the image, and Luz's white-ringed eye raised up to the man in adoration.

I flung myself across the bed and buried my head in the pillow, only to meet with the close-up of the white curly hairs streaking jaggedly down the lush escutcheon of her vagina, whose lips began opening up like pink petals of a rose to accept—I was entranced—long, brown monkeylike toes which first played with the lips and then tickled their way, one by one, inside. I flung myself back across the bed to sit on the edge with my face buried in my hands, blinking my eyes and shaking my head till my brains felt bruised.

My pornographic imagination was a best friend, and we had sat up many hours late together and composed not only some of my favorite memories but all of my best erotic fiction. But this was an intrusion. I no longer wanted Luz in my pornographic imagination—I had grown too fond of her—and Chris was certainly not welcome. I rubbed my eyes viciously, but that merely shot the screen with neon colors as yet another close-up—extreme close-up—filled the image with the hungry labia licking now about the thick shaft buried to the hilt inside her—moans—dissolve to a lean brown back, muscles and ribs and scapula showing virilely through the skin, and long, bushy, wavy black hair clinging here and there in wet ringlets to the brown back which hunched oh so slowly as he achieved deep, deeper, deepest penetration—moans, sighs.

I was rock hard and furious with myself. I turned over in the bed and buried it beneath me, in case Audra should come back. I thought about calling her back. It probably wouldn't seem too strange to the folks below: a feverish husband calling his wife up to his

room. It would be a fine way to dispense with the erection and the lust and the images, not to mention Audra's absurd suspicions about this man Chris.

They were infuriating, all the more infuriating because they brought back to mind something I had quite forgotten. In our early years together, Audra used to joke among our friends that she thought I was probably gay and that she had rescued me from my destined lifestyle, taunts to which I always responded with a laugh. I took them for a playful comment—sure to be disbelieved—on my supposed sexual inadequacy. The simple fact, apparent to all of us, was that my own libido was ten times greater than Audra's and if there was any inadequacy on my part, it wasn't for want of application. Certainly Audra appeared more than satisfied. There was, of course, the fact of my gay younger brother Spud but—I asked them all aloud with a laugh—what did that have to do with me? Current findings are that homosexuality is not infrequent among younger brothers, probably due to some natural selection principle having to do with competing offspring—though I admit that could be simply a theory of my own to explain this difference between Spud and myself.

In any case, Audra's resurrecting this ridiculous specter of latent homosexuality with this improbable Pitcairn Island androgyn was galling. As were these pornographic images of Luz with the man: they were lovers, all right, get over it! And as for this preposterous erection, I took it into the shower and disposed of it without fanfare or pleasure and with no recorded fantasy. Most men, I felt sure, would treat it the same. Down the drain with all the dead, sluffed skin and all the other body dross.

The steam of the shower rose up around me in the tiny cubicle and I suddenly found myself unbearably lonely. I stayed a moment longer under the hot downspray then turned off the tap, toweled off, dressed again and went downstairs.

Audra and Holly were on the hearth in front of a very comfortable looking fire,

thumbing through a book together. Through the glass doors behind them I could see that the fog was beginning to lift. It would burn off soon. Perhaps we could go outside. In fact, Birdie was already standing outside, sniffing at the late-summer roses and frowning through the windows at everything he saw inside the house, including me as I came down the stairs.

Audra looked up from the book. "Hi, you're better?"

"I think so."

"Come and help us. We're looking for baby names." She held up the book she and Holly were browsing and I saw now that it was a dictionary of names. "Holly decided she didn't like Rainbow after all."

Holly looked up at me and smiled wanly, a telling juxtaposition to Audra's triumphal grin. "When I heard it shouted out by everybody on top of Mount Tam yesterday morning," Holly said, "I was embarrassed."

"Oh, well..." I said, but never finished the thought as I couldn't fully catalog it. I proceeded to make a tremendous gaffe. "At least you only have to look at girls' names."

I could see Holly freeze and, from the dining room, I sensed more than heard or saw Luz jerk. She was opposite Chris at the table, playing a board game.

"Oh, why is that, Cully?" Chris asked.

I couldn't think of a thing to say but started talking anyway, trusting in improvisational inspiration. "Well, because with two such lovely mothers, we demand a daughter, don't we? We demand to put her in pretty little pink things, don't we, ladies?"

Audra looked up again from her dictionary of names. "Cully, does it occur to you how obnoxious that is on how many levels? Do you ever think first before you speak?"

"Well, can't I make a little joke for our sexually diverse friends here, Audra?" I welcomed Audra's rebuke, actually, as it neatly dug the hole deeper in which to bury my

original context. "Of course we know that if it's a girl, you're going to name her Mikki or Jimmi with hearts over the i's, and if it's a boy, you're going to name him Vyvyan, with y's. We certainly don't expect you to do what's expected. Right, Birdie?" I added as Birdie came into the room. I hoped he would take the conversation far far away from me.

"Oh, I think a good strong gender-neutral name like Saxon or Kwaanza or Quincunx, speaking of which, how is the Scrabble game coming?" Birdie approached the table and looked over the board game that Luz and Chris were playing, which was indeed Scrabble. "Oh, I like that one. Is that a real word or one of your pretend words, Luz?"

I took advantage of the movement to join them in the dining room and leave Audra and Holly to their search through baby's names. As I came to the table, each person, in his or her own time, quietly looked up at me with an expression, each his or her own, of complicity. We had a secret together, the four of us, and the two of them bent over the baby book did not share it. This secrecy thing was new territory for me. I did not like it. And yet, I found myself revelling in it. There was something thrilling about possessing earthshaking information that I could not share with even my wife. An idea came to me.

"Birdie," I said, in a voice certainly loud enough for Audra and Holly to hear, if they tuned in. "What do you know about frozen bodies?"

The three at the table froze. This was great fun.

"How do you mean, Cully?" Birdie asked with a threatening flatness to his tone."

"In your anthropological experience, have you worked with frozen burials, you know, mammoths, stuff like that."

"Certainly."

"That Iceman they found a few years back. You know that Iceman they found in the Swiss Alps?"

"You're talking about Otzi? From the Otztal Alps?"

"They gave him a name?"

"They always give them a name, Cully: Neandertal Man, Java Man, Peking Man."

"Piltdown Man. Yes, of course. Otzi?"

"Some sort of bastardization of Otztal and, what else, Chris?"

"Yeti."

"Oh, yes, yeti, how ridiculous. You know yeti, Cully?"

"No," I said.

"Oh, yes you do," Birdie insisted. "Everyone in California knows yeti. Big Foot? Or at least the Himalayan manifestation of Big Foot, The Abominable Snowman, blahblahblah. What the silly people were doing mixing yeti with Otztal, an entire continent away, I don't know, but yes, that's the name that stuck, Otzi.. Yes, what about Otzi, Cully? I'm very interested in where exactly you're headed with Otzi."

"Well, I remember reading about the discovery, how well preserved the body was, and there was something about sperm. Is that true that sperm could survive thousands of years?"

"Oh, that's what you're getting at! good God, do you believe everything you read? sperm in his rectum! a bunch of dreary queens with nothing but a too-active imagination and a too-active right hand spread the rumor that Otzi had been raped up the ass and castrated and banished to the mountains, and the stupid media picked it up."

"Oh, was that it?"

"There was no sperm in Otzi's rectum, Cully! In fact, there was no rectum because it got in the way of the pneumatic chisel the recovery team used, sloppy work, horrific! they thought at first he was a skier, butchery! oh, the humanity! there *was* a penis, contrary to the dreary queens, there *was* a scrotum, but I have no idea about sperm." He turned to Chris. "Do you know if there was any sperm, Chris? Why are you so interested in this

man's sperm, Cully?" He turned back to me.

"I'm a novelist. Many things interest me."

"You're writing a novel about the sperm of a five thousand year old man? good heavens!"

"Five thousand years? Is that all?"

"He's a mere prehistoric babe, isn't he, Chrissy?. And you're writing a novel about this prehistoric babe, Cully?"

"I didn't say that."

"What is your point? uh, uh, uh, what is the nature of this conversation?" I saw with some satisfaction that, for the first time, Birdie was utterly non-plussed. He was not snippy, he was not snide, he was not flirtatious, he was utterly non-plussed. He feared where I was going. Oh, it was great fun.

"The mammoths," Chris said with a trepidatious look at Birdie, "they melted out of the permafrost in Siberia. Their meat was edible. They fed it to the sled dogs. When the meat thawed there was blood. Sperm from those mammoths, would they survive, Frenchy?" He turned to Luz.

"Depends, Frenchy. How frozen were they? What temperature? Did they ever thaw? Did they freeze, thaw, refreeze, rethaw? In the lab, we freeze our sperm in liquid nitrogen. That's minus ninety degrees centigrade. The men are always worried how long it will last. We tell them forever."

"How does minus ninety degrees centigrade compare to thirty-two degrees fahrenheit?" I asked.

"Not much. Thirty-two degrees fahrenheit is zero degrees centigrade Well, you can do the math."

"So, three times colder than freezing then."

"Well, maybe you can't do the math. I don't think it works like that, Cully. But believe me, minus ninety centigrade is cold!"

"And that's ideal for sperm?"

"Who knows? It works. I just do what I'm told."

"So Otzi..." I said. "He was found when a glacier melted, right? If he had sperm in his rectum...?"

"He didn't!"

"But if he did, would it be viable?"

"You mean, could we ICSI it?" Luz asked. "Is that what you're getting at, Cully? Is this something you're writing?"

"Oh!" Birdie said. "You're going to ICSI Otzi?"

"Well, tell me this. What's the temperature in a glacier?" I looked around at the three of them. They were blank.

"On the surface, in the middle, at the base, in the Arctic, on Mount Shasta, in summer, in winter?" Birdie smiled. "Which?"

Luz looked over her shoulder at Holly and Audra at the hearth.

"What happened to the lesbians?" she asked softly.

"Oh, I see," Birdie said. "We have a novelist with a fascination for multi-thousand year old sperm; we have the same novelist having just written, under a silly pseudonym, an article on In Vitro Fertilization, with a perhaps slightly too morbid emphasis on ICSI—"

"Oh, Luz told you about that?"

"Certainly. She gave me a draft and directed me to read it, and I so did."

"What did you think of it?"

"It was tidy, better than your fiction, but it certainly wouldn't pass a referee and what a penchant for over-dramatization! ICSI and Otzi, I see, and that's where you're going

with these nasty questions of yours?"

"I want to know the science of this, Luz."

"The science of what?"

"Injecting Otzi's sperm, if any, by ICSI into a modern woman's egg."

"My God, who would want to do that?" Audra said as she walked past the table into the kitchen. "Are you still on about that iceman guy, Cully? My God!"

"A novelist might try something with it, perhaps," I said.

"No good novelist!" Audra said. "Is this novelist a man or a woman, because no woman novelist would ever write that. And no woman character would ever stand for that."

"Oh, you could always find a woman like that, Cully," Birdie retorted. "There have been women who have volunteered themselves to be the mother of a child of a serial killer. Oh yes, you could certainly find that woman."

"Where did you read that, Birdie?" I asked. "In *The Enquirer*? Or the same publication that fabricated the sperm in Otzi's rectum?"

"No woman would take a five thousand year old man's sperm into her body and give birth to a baby, good God!" Audra insisted, returning from the kitchen with a can of soda, which she snapped open, spreading her legs as though to face off Birdie and me. "And no woman would read that book, Cully. And no woman would buy it."

"Never mind the woman," Luz said, "how are you intending to get the egg?"

"I was thinking of a mad scientist," I answered with a grin.

"Ooh, what about a character like that doctor in San Diego?" Birdie asked. "A megalomaniac who harvests the eggs of his patients and keeps some aside?"

"It wouldn't work," Luz said. "We have to keep a record of all the eggs, identify them, tell how each is used."

"But there are those eggs you don't use," Audra said. "Remember, Luz? Cully asked you about them, what you did with them, and you told him you used them for experimentation?"

"Experimentation!" Birdie snapped.

"I don't think that's what I said, Audra. I think I probably said we use them for practice."

"Practice!" Birdie hissed softly.

"But we sign the consent form," Audra persisted. "We give them to you for whatever purpose you want. And if you *are* a mad scientist and do have access to the sperm of whatever protohuman monster, you *could* make a monster embryo. What about King Tut, Cully?"

"Tutankhamen! I like that. But what would the mummification do to the sperm, Luz?"

"How should I know?"

"But we still come back to the same problem, Cully," Audra said, reverting to a role I no longer ever allow her, that of editor. "Why would anybody want to do this?"

"Because you *can*!" Birdie said. "If man *can* do a thing, man *will* do a thing!"

"A man, maybe. But not a woman."

"That is an unprovable and, to my mind, naive conjecture, my dear, oh, what is your name, Audrey, yes. It is all very well, Audrey, for women to tell men what women would never do because women are above doing it, unlike men, but the fact is women will and can do anything a man will or can do, if it suits them to do it. And the world is made up of a wide, wide variety of women, my dear, more than are dreamt of in your philosophy. In any case, our mad scientist-doctor will be a man, won't he, Cully?"

"But he'd need a woman to incubate the egg!" Audra snapped. "Because we don't

have the technology, not yet, to take that job away from her! And my name is not Audrey, it's Audra!"

"Let me just break in here between you two pugilists," I said. "May I remind you that all this fury is about a novel, a bogus novel I might add, a novel which I am not in fact writing. And I wonder if anyone would mind if we just changed the subject now, before anyone starts wielding pokers and throwing knives? Luz?"

"Please."

"Audra?"

"I didn't like it from the get-go."

"Chris?"

"I'm trying to find a word with an x, a q, and a z in it, and no vowels."

"Birdie?"

"Well, perhaps I'll just have to write this novel myself. But all right, I don't mind changing the subject."

"Where's Holly?"

"I'm in here," she called from the hearth. "And I'm not listening."

Audra sauntered toward the hearth, attempting the effect of leaving us defeated in her wake. Luz and Chris studied their Scrabble tiles as though they were extremely important. Birdie tapped a napkin ring on the table, watching me slyly until I finally gave up and turned to him. He reached over and punched me playfully on the shoulder.

"You don't fool me," he said.

Chapter Twelve

In fact, exactly such an idea as the Otzi ICSI was going through my weary novelist's imagination. The reader may not appreciate this—unless the reader is also a writer—but once a writer opens the door to new ideas, they don't stop walking through. If my lesbian heroes could make a double X baby, why couldn't they take another step and make a baby from the sperm of, say, King Tut, as Audra suggested, or Shakespeare or Jesus Christ? All I'd need is a plausible way to preserve the sperm. If Crichton could get away with dinosaur DNA extracted from the blood inside mosquitoes preserved in amber, for God's sake, I could surely create an archaeological find of, say, Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat under a receding glacier.

In fact, if Birdie and Chris's Neandertal were only a man instead of a boy, I could use his sperm. My mind reeled at the thought and a dozen story-lines began casting themselves out only to ravel into a tremendous mess. Still...

In many ways, I suspected, a story about such a Neandertal hybrid would find a wider market than Double X, or Dos Equis as I by now was privately calling Luz and Holly's hybrid, having tickled myself with the idea one lunch with Luz at a Mexican restaurant. (I never explained to her why I laughed into my beer; she would not have appreciated it.) A baby bred of two women might very well be so total a freak-out to so many readers that I might never sell a copy. First there is the lesbian thing which—however much it attracts me and, judging from porn flicks, a lot of other men—might not appeal to readers. (Assuming most of those men buying the porn flicks don't read, which is probably a fair assumption.) Lesbians might (or might not) like the theme, but lesbians are a small if fierce and devoted market and my novel might be consigned to a few brave

alternative bookstores.

Then there is the whole freakiness of *Dos Equis* herself. Male readers, I knew for sure, would freak out. This dumping of the male necessity for reproduction and potentially populating the world with little girls was a very real threat to the very existence of the male gender.

As for women readers, I mean non-lesbian women, it's difficult to know how they might respond to a lesbian theme of any kind let alone the plain old lesbian-mother realistic theme I originally began with Deirdre and Daphne or, now since *Dos Equis*, the evolving lesbian-mothers *XX*-daughter theme which might well turn to horror before it worked itself out. Even though *Dos Equis* was real and Luz did make her happen, and the science is clearly not only plausible but perfectly possible, with character motivations clear and commanding, might not women as well as men prefer the safer distance of this more sci-fi Neandertal hybrid? As Audra indicated very correctly, in her very incorrect, interfering way, who's going to buy this novel?

I was also having troubles with the unfolding of the lesbian story. First the characters of Deirdre and Daphne were indeed becoming confused with the characteristics of Luz and Holly. Deirdre was far too much like Luz, assertive and competent and nonsense, daring. And Daphne was beginning to merge with Holly's distant, critical, emotional, artsy self. In the many godawful pages which had found their way to the computer trash, lost for eternity to the ether, I had made the mistake of making Daphne first an actress, then a writer, then a photographer, only to succumb in the end to allowing her to become a painter: landscapes, mind you, not flowers; the Marin headlands; ocean waves crashing onto rocks; that sort of thing, all very masculine. Deirdre, of course, had to be the embryologist in order to accomplish the egg-to-egg transfer, but there was no reason I *must* make Daphne an artist, no reason other than the fact that I could not settle for her being

anything else. This worried me. If I ever did finish this lesbian-mother-XX story—which was looking more and more doubtful—and ever did manage to find a publisher for it, and anyone ever did buy it, Holly would never forgive me for Daphne. And what about Luz? Surely, I would lose her friendship forever. And rightly so, I supposed.

And then there were the names, Deirdre Dougherty and Daphne Dawn. Weren't they essentially laughable? Luz had laughed.

I had no confidence, and I was drying up. These were the thoughts that were obsessing me that Sunday afternoon, after the fog had burned off and all six of us were out on the bocce court below China House. I had never played bocce before and didn't have much of a knack for it. Chris was superb, and fortunately I won him in the casting of partners. There was a lob-thing he did, instead of rolling his ball, which was very effective for caroming balls every which way. Birdie won Audra as his partner—which was hysterical—and Luz and Holly won each other. In the rules of bocce, then, that meant that Holly and Audra and I were at one end of the court while our partners were at the other end. Not much to my liking. Audra and Holly were growing ever more giddy in their crushes on each other and each other's baby and were now reverting to high school behavior. They sat on the bench together giggling and whispering, much of it at my expense as I really and truly stank at this game.

I found myself wandering down-court, when it wasn't my turn to roll the ball, to try to join the companionship at the other end. Chris always seemed to meet me halfway, however, so that I seldom did make it to the bench at the other end where Luz was locked in seemingly serious and very quiet conversation with Birdie, so serious and so quiet, in fact, that I was dying to know what it was about. Continually, however, either Chris would intercept me mid-court or I would have to return up-court to take my pathetic turn.

Once on my journey down-court, met again by Chris midway, I lowered my voice

to ask him a question which had been preying upon me ever since we had been cut off that morning. "So you actually have the boy at U.C. now? He's in a freezer or something?"

Chris cast a glance down to Audra and Holly where they sat on their bench absorbed in an evidently conspiratorial conversation. "We've got a special room for him," he whispered, "with temperature and humidity regulated."

"How did you get him out? I would have thought the Yugoslav government would fight for him"

"Exactly."

"You didn't smuggle him out?" I whispered, not really believing it.

"Those peoples are at war. The cave was near the border in disputed territory. We weren't going to leave him there. There's bombs going off all over! You should have seen Sarajevo! That's why you've got to keep this secret for us, Cully. We've got to work out the international issues, and we stand to lose him. But your wife is paying us very strict attention."

I turned back to see Audra paying strict attention indeed. Holly was whispering in her ear and the two of them were intent as hawks on Chris and me. I was immediately infuriated again by this absurd suspicion of hers. We've lived in San Francisco for years, for God's sake; there was never a time when she and I would walk down the streets together that she didn't see some young man cruise me up and down; we've laughed about it together, for God's sake. For Audra, who loves nothing more than to have her possessions admired, it's always been the ultimate euchre that her man is coveted yet unattainable.

So miffed by her jealousy, I did something foolish. On a wayward whim to punish her, I reached up and brushed a tiny leaf off Chris's collar, knowing that from Audra's vantage it would look like a swift caress. I saw with a tingle of satisfaction that she and Holly stiffened on their bench. At the same moment, from the other end of the court I

heard a little chirp from Birdie and turned to find him stiffened on his bench, Luz beside him, watching us with her white and black brows drawn together in a frown. I myself stiffened and withdrew my hand—too quickly—so that I appeared to be caught in the act. Only Chris among the five of us remained unperturbed.

"You're like me mum."

"So is it really true then..." I lurched stiffly into the breach of the two stiffenings at either end of the court, raising my voice so that it would be heard by all, "...what Birdie says, that you've got Fletcher Christian's blood from both your mother and father?"

"Blood of Fletcher *and* Mi'Mitti."

"Yes, the blood of both Fletcher *and* Mi'Mitti, of course."

"Oh, we cross five times. From me mum it's straight down through the men. Fletcher and Mi'Mitti's first child is Friday October, then..."

"Friday October? I thought his name was Thursday October."

"Not at first. They first called him Friday October because he was born on a Friday in October, we think 1790, but after the first ship in 1810, they told us Fletcher sailed the *Bounty* across the International Dateline, so Friday changed his name to Thursday. Then Thursday October's first child was Thursday October the Second, then..."

"Was that because he was born on a Thursday in October or because he was named after his father?"

"They never told me that. I never asked. Then Thursday October the Second he get Francis, Francis get Edgar, Edgar get James who get Edgar again, called after his grandfather, then Edgar get James Edgar, called after himself and grandfather and great grandfather, and James Edgar get a daughter Sarah, who is me mum, and that's how I get my first name, Christian."

I had staggered upon a truly privileged opportunity to hear this intimate and colorful

genealogy of a world-famous historical figure, and I found myself delighted both by my privilege and by Chris's recitation which reverted to a sort of pidgin that I hadn't suspected and which I know I'm not doing justice here as I work from my notes.

"So how many generations is that?" I asked.

"From Fletcher and Mi'Mitti, I am eighth generation on me mum's side. And on me da's side, I go Fletcher and Mi'Mitti down to Hupper, their second child, called Hupper because he's the sick one, and Hupper get Fletcher called for his grandfather, who get Mary Mainmast because she's born long like her great grandmother Mi'Mitti, who is the first called Mainmast because she's a tall one, too, and Mary Mainmast marry a McCoy and get Margaret who marry a Young, but come out of a different Christian girl Nancy going back, and Margaret get a different Edgar, who is father to a daughter Polly who marry a different Christian line, a man called Fletcher again after his great great great great grandfather who come down through Charles, the twelfth and last child of Thursday October the Second, and this Fletcher is father to my father, giving me my last name, with my middle name coming from Nancy's maiden name Christian."

Holly had been keeping the bocce score on a pad. I went back up-court, retrieved the pad and pencil from her and returned to Chris. "Let's start from the top," I said. "Fletcher and Mi'Mitti, then..."

Chris and I spent the rest of the bocce game between our turns filling out a family tree that was, when we finished it, an intricate circuitry of the names Christian, McCoy, Young, Adams, a few Quintals, and a Portuguese sailor who passed by Pitcairn leaving his seed but not his name: dozens of lines of heredity crossing over, under, between and among themselves.

"How on earth did all this end up making ..." I paused, searching for the right word.

"Me? Good genes."

"I thought inbreeding like this got ..." I paused again, searching for the right word.

"Idiots? Oh yes, sir, Peetkeern's had them, too."

Chapter Thirteen

I couldn't wait to get back to my computer. Fresh new ideas for the novel were careening through my head. Christian Christian Christian was a must as a character. I would have to change his name, of course, which was too too too bad, but I wanted to capture his plain, wholesome humanity. I thought he might work very well as a previous lover to Deirdre. I liked the gender confusion: that this character made love to women and men alike, with equal enjoyment, abandon and tenderness was very attractive to me. At first I was thinking only of the advantage to the male character, but then I saw the benefit of the gender confusion to the character of Deirdre, too: that she had had a male lover in her past would give her depth and would make Daphne furiously jealous. I would endow Chris's character with Chris's more than ample endowments, both physical and mental, and I would involve him somehow in Deirdre and Daphne's present life together in Marin County. Daphne would resent him, naturally, and the fact that she was pregnant with Deirdre's child would work on him like acid. Or perhaps not. Perhaps he was so good and generous that he would rise above this baby.

My new threads were a hopeless tangle by the following Thursday, and I remember standing looking at myself in the mirror, trying vainly to find a way to extricate Deirdre and Daphne and return them to their original quest for motherhood, when the telephone rang. It was Chris Christian's Peetkeerner voice at the other end.

"Well, hello, nice to hear from you," I said as soon as I got over my momentary shock.

He wondered if we might have lunch.

"Why, yes, that would be great. My usual lunching companion," I felt compelled to

add, "is not available this week."

I was disappointed that he did not ask who this usual lunching companion was. We made a date for the next day at a little Vietnamese place I like in Berkeley since it was easier for me than for Chris to get away and make the trip across the Bay. I arrived at the restaurant before him and secured the table.

I was gratified to see, when he arrived, that every head in the restaurant turned to him, confirmation that he was indeed the physical specimen I thought him to be. I was a little annoyed in retrospect that no one had turned their heads when I walked into the room, but there you have it. I stood to greet him, holding out my hand. Now everyone turned to me. I had no idea what they might be thinking, and I didn't want to explore the thought further as I saw several of them turn back to each other and whisper and nod their heads. Chris seemed utterly unaware of the sensation he had caused, and we sat down to I guessed not what conversation.

I stumbled around searching for small talk as we looked over the menu. I felt certainly hampered by the information I had found meanwhile on mahus.

Birdie was right, neither m-a-h-u nor m-a-h-o-o were in any of my dictionaries. I got onto the Internet and found more than three thousand hits for "mahu", most in foreign languages. I added "homosexual" and got just fifteen hits, one an email address at UCLA and another an article evidently put on the Web by its author, an intriguing treatise titled, "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels".* It concentrated particularly on those novels set in the South Pacific, *Typee*, *Omoo* and *Moby Dick* and was very convincing and provocative. (I myself always thought that the attraction between Ishmael and Queequeg demanded deeper investigation.)

I wrote to the email address at UCLA asking what "mahu" meant and received a reply almost immediately from someone who signed himself only "q".

"it's a Hawaiian term for gay. originally used to refer to male crossdressers, with a neutral connotation, the term took on negative meanings after western invasion and expanded to include male and female homosexuals and crossdressers. we use "mahu" for our group to reclaim a positive queer Asian/Pacific Islander identity. hawaii is comprised largely of many Asian groups and so the term has become a panAsian symbol for queerness within the diverse API communities. well, at least that was what i was told when i first joined the group. fyi, many pacific islanders also use "mahu" and not just hawaiians. i hope that helps. q"

Help? I supposed so. But I wasn't satisfied, so I went down to the San Francisco Public Library. Birdie had said something about Captain Bligh, arch-foe of Fletcher Christian on the *Bounty*, and his spelling, m-a-h-o-o. After hours of searching, I finally found an entry from Captain Bligh's log, January 15, 1789, while the *Bounty* was in Tahiti:

"On my visit to Tynah and his wife Iddeah, I found with her a person who, although I was certain was a man, had great marks of effeminacy about him. On asking Iddeah who he was, she told me he was a friend of hers, and also of a class common in Otaheite called *Mahoo*. That the men had frequent connections with him, and that he lived and observed the same ceremonies as the women did. The effeminacy of this person's speech induced me to think he had suffered castration, and that other unnatural and shocking things were done by him, and particularly as I had myself some idea that it was common in this Sea."

"Common in this Sea." The treatise on Melville and its ideas of homosexuality (and cannibalism) in the South Pacific grew more interesting. *Typee*, *Otoo* and *Moby-Dick* were published between 1846 and 1851 (my, how the man could write!). This account in Bligh's log predated those novels by more than fifty years. Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde's "love that dare not speak its name" evidently spoke its name quite unabashedly in the South Seas during the century before their infamous love affair.

I gazed at Chris across the table and searched for signs of the "effeminacy" that Bligh described. Chris's voice was soft and pleasant, if very peculiar with his unique Peetkeerner accent. His gestures were fluid and graceful, but not particularly like a woman's. On the other hand he didn't belch or make fists. As for castration, I recalled only too well the bulge of both erection and all the other proper genitalia against my groin that

night in the fog. No, this young man did not resemble the Polynesian mahoo of Captain Bligh.

The Vietnamese waiter approached our table to take our order. As he stood beside Chris in his chair, I marked the contrast. Not so tall as Chris even sitting down, the Vietnamese must have been two or two and a half feet shorter than Chris standing up. It was hardly believable that the two men could be of the same species. Yet, surely the Polynesians had set sail originally from Southeast Asia, and surely these two men had more genes in common than I had with either of them. One of the random facts I had run across in my search for mahu was that the Polynesian men on many of the South Seas islands were about as tall as the English sailors who first met them there. How had they grown so many inches over the Asian height through how many centuries? I glanced around at the other patrons of the restaurant: Berkeley mongrels and purebreds from every race and of every color and size and shape imaginable in a single species. At one table sat a man so large and a woman so small, his beefy hand engulfing hers to beyond the wrist, that it boggled my imagination that they could actually mate.

I had to apologize to the waiter that I wasn't ready to order yet. Chris ordered in rapid-fire a main dish and several appetizers. "This is on me, you know, Chris." I said.

"Fantastic!" he said and ordered a bottle of wine. "Next time it's on me."

I took my eyes off Chris and put them back into the menu. He was indeed a specimen. I considered simply getting to the point, telling him flat-out that I was straight, that I was flattered, but that any hopes he might have were in vain. But since he had not displayed the slightest overt sexual interest in me, this would have been vain indeed. It could be, I thought, that he simply admired my intellect or, more probably, was impressed by my reputation, or perhaps there was something else he saw in me and wanted to get to know me better, perhaps be friends. I thought about explaining to him that I really had no

vacancies for friends right now, that in fact I was full up with a wife and with a child on the way, and of course with his Luz, but instead I simply segued stumblingly from my menu decision—which was not very imaginative after all and not even Vietnamese, chow fun, and which gave the waiter opportunity to frown and depart—into a vapid comparison of today's weather with yesterday's and how that figured into tomorrow's likely forecast.

Chris said very little but seemed comfortable with my babble. It wasn't until after the appetizers and wine arrived that he broached his agenda, bits of food and drink in, bits of words out.

"You know," he said, "I owe you a favor. A big favor."

"For ...?"

"Saving my life."

"Oh, well, that." I couldn't think of a thing to say.

"I was talking to Luz."

"Oh, umhm?"

"About your idea."

"Which idea was that?"

"The sperm. The ancient sperm. Otzi and ICSI."

"Oh, yes. That idea, uh huh."

"Luz thinks we should do it."

"Sorry?"

"Our Neandertal?"

"I'm sorry, you talked to Luz, something about your Neandertal?"

"Yes."

"Oh, uh huh."

"She says we should try it."

"Luz? Says we should try ...?"

"Cloning the Neandertal."

"Luz says we should try cloning the Neandertal?"

"He doesn't have any sperm. Too young, you know. But Luz thinks we could clone him."

The waiter brought us our main courses at that moment. The chow fun lay on my plate in a clump so unappetizing as to make me consider excusing myself to run to the bathroom. I pushed my chair back from the table. Suddenly I needed water. I sipped at it from my glass but spilled it out of the corners of my mouth and down my neck into my shirt front. Chris didn't notice. He was forking up noodles into his mouth and making an amendment, something about nuclear material, something about "the entire chromosomal panoply". I was taking a napkin to the job of the spilled water and hadn't really followed him, when he finished up, "What do you say?"

"I can't think of anything to say. This is not what I imagined you wanted to talk about."

"Oh, I see. But what do you say, about the plan?"

"What plan?"

"I'll biopsy the Neandertal, get the genetic material, and we'll give it to Luz to ICSI. And she wants you there to write it."

"Why doesn't she write it? This is insane."

"She wants your name."

"My name? Or my pseudonym?"

"Cully Rand', she says. Which is that?"

"My name. So she wants this to be fiction?"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask her."

"Did she call you, or did you call her? This is insane."

"She called me."

"I've got to talk to her."

"Sure."

"Is this against the law?"

"I don't think so. How could they have a law against this, even in the States? It's never been done."

Whatever other conversation we had on this subject, I don't remember it. I remember Chris eating his meal with an intensity and relish which furrowed his brow and precluded the spoken word, while my own food remained uneaten. I remember Chris finishing, sitting back, wiping his mouth, taking a deep drink of wine, and looking at me with great satisfaction. I remember his squinting up his eyes to me and asking, "Cully... do you know how many laws we have on Peetkeern?"

I said I hadn't any idea.

"Fewer than forty. As of the time I left. We learn them as kids by rote. Want to hear Law 21?"

He recited it to me, in that Peetkerner accent. I got on the Internet recently to determine that there are in fact still fewer than forty laws on the island today, and Law 21 does read as Chris recited it:

Shooting goats from the bend of the ridge at White Cow's Pen inland toward Aute Valley, and following the same line up to William's Block, and across to the head of McCoy's Valley, Taro Ground and so on throughout the entire boundary line for goats, is strictly prohibited. Fowls may be killed with bullets if found in the place allotted to goats. Discharging of bullets from firearms anywhere within the village, is not allowed, except it be into the air, or into the sea.

"There's a tidy enough law," I said to Chris. "I don't suppose you find the need for lawyers there? I'll tell Audra." I wondered how the law about cloning Neandertals might

read in our own future law books. I doubted it would be learnable by rote.

That night I was on the telephone with Luz. She called me. "Did Chris talk to you?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, he told me."

I wanted to ask her why she asked if she already knew, but Audra was in the room, and I had to watch carefully everything I said or she would be all over me with the third degree.

"So what do you think?" Luz asked, her voice breathy and provocative.

"It's very interesting. Yeah, let's talk about it. Maybe after we leave off your Aunt Roz." I pronounced it very distinctly "ant". The truth was, I realized at this instant, that it had always annoyed me that Luz called her "awnt" or "awnty". This was unreasonable, I knew, but my present perturbation at this woman left me in an unreasonable state. Cloning a Neandertal, good God! I deliberately had not called her to confirm our date at the cemetery the next day. I didn't want to see her. I had even considered standing her up. But she called me: I had to talk.

"So you're sure where the cemetery is?" she asked.

"Yes, I wrote down your directions the first time. Down Second Street and up the hill on River Street."

"Okay. See you at eleven. You're okay?"

"Yeah."

"You don't sound okay."

"No. Okay."

"Okay. Bye."

I hung up and went distractedly back to read the incomprehensible words on my

computer screen. Audra looked up from her notebook. "Leave off Roz where?"

"At her house after the cemetery."

"I can't believe that you're going to visit the grave of someone you don't even know."

"I know her daughter. I know her sister. Her daughter is a close friend of mine. Isn't that a normal thing people normally do?"

"I don't think it's even normal to bury people. Just burn 'em up and get rid of 'em."

"Supposedly it's one of the things that makes even Neanderthals human. Excuse me, Neandertals."

"Just burn 'em. So what's that you said is so 'interesting'? What's she want to talk about 'after you leave Roz off'?"

"Now don't get jealous."

"Who's jealous? I'm asking a simple, straightforward question."

"She has an idea she wants to write."

"What, for a book?"

"I don't know yet."

"What's the idea?"

"If I don't tell you *my* ideas for a book do you think I'm going to tell you *hers*? If you talk an idea then you don't write it."

"She talked it to you."

"She ran it by me. It's very rough."

"When did she tell you?"

"The other day."

"When?"

"On our walk. On the bluff."

"So Chris was there? He knows about it too?"

"I think he knows about it. He may not have been listening. He was walking behind us. The wind was blowing. I could barely hear it myself. It's very rough."

"Then why..." she started, but I cut her off.

"Audra what is this jealousy? What is going on with your hormones that you're suddenly jealous of everything that walks on two legs and anyone who talks to me?"

"I'm certainly not jealous."

"Suddenly I'm having an affair with Luz. Suddenly I'm kissing strange men right outside your bedroom door. I can't go to the graveyard with Luz. I can't have lunch with Chris."

"You had lunch with Chris?"

"I *can't* have lunch with Chris, I said!" I was furious with myself to have slipped up on that one. "You'll think I'll be under the tablecloth giving him a blowjob!"

She gave a little gasp and sat forward, grabbing onto her belly.

"What?"

"The baby kicked!"

I gasped, too. "It couldn't. It's too early. Not for at least sixteen weeks."

"That's next week. It's a prodigy. Shhh. Come and feel."

I walked over and put my hand on her belly, which had only begun slightly to distend. I pulled back her shirt and unzipped her pants to touch the skin.

"Wait. Feel that? Oh," she giggled. "Maybe it's just gas."

Chapter Fourteen

The cemetery was a beautiful setting for a lot of people to be dead in: on a high hill overlooking the Carquinez Strait leading from the Sacramento River into the San Pablo Bay at the top of San Francisco Bay; in historic Benicia, an early Capitol of California before the Capitol was stolen away during the night and established in Sacramento; home of Jack London and the giant sturgeon, both now extinct; named for Benicia, the wife of Generalissimo Vallejo, whose name is memorialized in the neighbor town just down the Strait, and both now also extinct.

My thoughts were running in a morbid vein. Roz was setting out the flowers into two vases on either side of the gravestone. She had cut the flowers from her own garden, the last roses of summer, propped up and beautified by ferns. Roz was gentle and thorough in arranging them, all the time murmuring to her dead sister beneath her.

Luz was a little distance away, sitting with Tio Paco on a rim of concrete which surrounded a family of graves, looking out over the Strait to Mt. Diablo which was serene and harsh against the sky. She had her arm slung loosely around her uncle's waist, and it was almost unbearable to watch them together. Luz had warned me—thank God!—about her uncle. He had been a soldier in Vietnam and, just before Luz was born, he was trapped in a misplanned napalm strike in which he suffered burns over more than eighty percent of his body. His head and face particularly were scarred so badly that today, bald and blind, with his mouth-hole and nose-hole pulled grotesquely toward the left side of his face, he never ventured out into public but limited his trips out of the house to this cemetery. Despite Luz's warning, when I shook his hand at Roz's house, I came away in shivers. When he went into the bathroom before leaving for the cemetery, Roz took down from the

mantel a photograph of Paco as a teenager, in uniform, ready to depart for Vietnam. A handsome, young latino face—very much like Luz's—smiled broadly at me with bright, hopeful eyes.

I looked away from the two of them, sitting hunched close together on the concrete perch like a pair of lovebirds, and turned back to Roz who was brushing off the headstone with a whisk broom she had brought from her house. She was humming a hymn I recognized without being able to name. The engraving on the headstone read, "Rosa Lopez Rivera, Beloved Daughter, Sister, Mother, Lost Too Soon. June 11, 1950-September 25, 1969."

"She was so young," I said.

"Yes, she was," Roz said. "But she packed a lot of living in those few years. Too much. It's what killed her, living."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, men mostly. They can take your soul away, you know. Well, no, I don't suppose you do, being a man. You don't have to deal with men the way we do. And besides, you're a good man. You love that child that's coming, don't you? You worked hard to get it. And you love your wife. You're a good man. But that's not the kind of man Rosie knew. Or our mama before us. Or her mama. You look at the Bible. You open it and look at the lines you find there."

She had given me her family Bible to hold while she arranged the flowers. I opened it to the front pages where Roz had already shown me a small part of the family tree. Now I unfolded the pages so that I could see the lines as they branched backwards in time.

"These names are all in the same handwriting," I said.

"That's because my mother rewrote them all. That's the Bible she gave me new.

Her old one was falling apart. She brought it with her from México. Her mother gave it to her when she came to this country. I've got the leaves at home if you care to see them. That Bible is more than two hundred years old and all the names are in different handwritings. Except the ones at the top of the list. Those were all by the hand of one woman, Juanita Lú Morales, see her name here, Juanita Lú Morales. Juanita rewrote all those names before her like my mother rewrote all these names because the women were long dead and her old Bible was falling apart, too. I don't know where that Bible got to. Gone. If you go back past Malinche here at the top of the list, I guess the names are written on stone. I'd like to see that stone. See here, these are good names of good women, handing down that Bible to the next in line, always to a girl child, always the no-name men coming in at them from some nowhere and leaving them again for some other nowhere, good riddance."

"And these names that branch off from your mother?"

"That's my daddy's lines, as far back as I can find out. That's all my handwriting. See my daddy's name here, Clayton Howard Rivera. And see way back up here, following his mother's line, here's this Reverend Davis here, he was a slave-holder back in Virginia who got his daughter Sarah here with his slave Nye-Kole, and that's where the first white blood and the first black blood cross. His tree goes back to England, to a place they call Suffolk. I've got some leads on that and I'm going to go to that Suffolk one day and follow them up. Nye-Kole goes back to Africa, and I'm going to go there, too, but I don't know which coast. She probably didn't even know. Just Africa. But I want to go just the same. When I collect the money."

"And these lines coming in down here?"

"Just lines. End-of-the-line no-names."

"I don't see Luz's father's name."

"That no-name. I guess he hung around for about two minutes after the ejaculation."

"Luz told me she was only two months old when her mother died. What of?"

"Commences with an 'H'. Hunter something, Hunter's Disease I think they said it was. Rosie went off as soon as it started coming on bad, and it came on fast. Died in a whorehouse down in Oakland. Fit of some kind. No one told us much. Paquito was just back from Nam, and I had my hands full with him and Luz. The police said the doctor said it was probably Huntington's, that's the name. But no one knew for sure."

"I thought Huntington's Disease is hereditary."

"Can be, I guess."

"But you being her twin? Were you identical?"

"No, that other kind, fraternal, only we were sisters, of course. And she was beautiful. Rosalinda, pretty rose, that's what Mama called me, but I think she mixed us up in the cradle. But that's what I mean about Rosie's living killing her. All that beauty but she didn't take care of herself. Out drinking and messing around all night every night, there's no making up for that. It's a wonder Luz didn't stagger out of that womb drunk and disorderly. But she turned out a good girl, don't you think?"

"She certainly did."

"Me, I take care of myself. If it was that Huntington's and I've got it, I don't want to know. Luz tells me there's a test now you can take to find out, but I told her I don't want to know. Paquito neither. We take each day as it comes to us, take it and live it and tomorrow we wake up live that day, too. Seems to be working, don't it?" She laughed.

I grinned at her. "Seems to."

"It's hard for Paquito, but I love this life. Say, would you care to read a piece from the Bible to Rosie? She always loved that."

"Which piece?"

"Oh, whatever you like. She was never choosy. As I told you."

Knowing next to nothing about the Bible, I flipped the pages trying to find *Psalms* or *Song of Solomon*, which I had heard were very uplifting or pretty or somehow suitable to reading aloud. Next to *Song of Solomon* was *Ecclesiastes* and my eye lit upon a verse which suddenly seemed perfect for Rosa Lopez Rivera and her sister and brother and daughter.

"A generation goes, and a generation comes, but Earth abides forever."

"Ain't that pretty," Roz sighed. "And so true."

We left the cemetery in two cars, Roz choosing to ride with me, Paco with Luz. At their house down in the flats by the river, Roz served us cookies and milk and asked us to stay for dinner, offering to make us "black-eyed peas and okry the way my daddy liked it" which, from the way she emphasized it with a swirl of her tongue on her lips, would surely have been delicious and spicy enough to take the top of the head off. Or they had in the freezer, she said, a batch of tamales Paco had put together last week, their mama's recipe going straight back up the line to Malinche. Paco sat quietly, volunteering nothing.

But Luz and I begged off, having our own secret agenda. We said our goodbyes in the house to Paco. Luz gave him a solid, tender hug and I shook his hand again, looking into the face that no longer resembled a face, relieved that he could not see my eyes and—ashamed of that thought and trying to make up for it—clasping his hand in a two-handed grip which I hoped conveyed my admiration without betraying my pity. Roz was far easier, and I embraced her as though she were one of my own family. From our cars we waved goodbye again to the good Roz standing on the porch and drove around the corner where we stopped, and I walked back to Luz's car. She rolled down the window.

"Where can we go?" I said. "Do you know this town?"

"Follow me."

We drove to a lookout on a high hill above the Carquinez bridges where in the far distance we could barely discern the point of land above San Quentin where the San Rafael Bridge met the Marin coast. Luz thought, I supposed, that this would be a perfect spot to talk about cloning a Neandertal: bridges.

All night and all morning I had been rehearsing different scenarios of how to begin this conversation, but as we drove and now as I walked across the lookout parking lot to her car, the rehearsals got fouled together. I had wanted it to be simple, clear, and to the point, not angry because there was no reason for anger (although why, then, was I so angry?) but what in hell was in her head?

"What in hell is in your head?" I said to her as I slid into the passenger seat.

She looked at me startled. "What do you mean?"

I was stunned. "That's what I mean, what do you mean? Why... why..." I stammered, "why did you go to Chris with this idea?"

"Because he's the one who could get the cells. I didn't want to come to you until I knew he'd do it for us. There's no reason to be jealous of that."

"No! No! Look I'm not jealous. See, I'm just asking you why, not why did you go to him first, but why did you go to him at all?"

"I don't understand." She shook her head, clearly perplexed. She repeated, as though trying to make it simple for me. "Chris is the one with access to the Neandertal; I need cells from the Neandertal; I had to go to Chris; Chris is my good, good friend. I don't understand what you don't understand about this."

"Why is there this gap in communication here?" I asked. "You act as though this is not a huge deal."

"It *is* a huge deal!"

"That's what I'm saying! It's a huge, huge deal!"

"Well, how am I acting?"

"Like it's a matter of course! Like what could be more natural!"

"Okay, okay, let's start over," she said. "Chris and I have got this plan, this *huge* plan, all right? He told you about it. He told me he told you about it, and you understood, right?"

"I thought I understood, but from the way you're acting, I don't know."

"What did you understand?"

"You and Chris want to clone that Neandertal boy."

"Right."

"And you're calm about this?"

"No!"

"You seem calm."

"I seem calm! This woman screaming at you in this car seems calm!"

I took a deep breath. Our voices had indeed become shrill. "Okay, okay, let's go back," I said. "You're planning to clone Chris's Neandertal, and it's a huge deal. We understand each other so far."

"Right. We're going to try. We don't know if we can do it. It's going to be an experiment, you understand. And do you understand *why* we would want to make this experiment?"

"No, not really. Because you *can*? As Birdie says."

"Yes, because we *can*, but also because it would be a huge advance in science and history. Whoever does this first is going to be huge, and we're right here. We're right to the point of it. There is a huge amount of money in it, Cully, for you and me and Chris. If we do this right, and write it right, and market it right, yes, it's huge. In the history of

mankind there has never been anything this huge., except the Atomic Bomb, and I don't think even that. That's how huge it is."

"And it's against the law."

"No. How could it be against the law?"

"Chris is stealing DNA from a Neandertal!"

"He's not stealing anything. He found that Neandertal with Birdie. He's got the right as a scientist to conduct scientific experiments with the find."

"So is Birdie in on this, too?"

"No."

"So you're keeping it from Birdie? Why, if it's not against the law?"

"Birdie ... is of a different time, a different scientific persuasion. Chris and I agree that Birdie would not approve."

"Well, don't you need his approval, as the senior paleoanthro-duck here?"

"Birdie's not going to miss a few cells. Chris will be very careful with his biopsy. No one is going to miss the cells. The little Neandertal boy is certainly not going to miss the cells, and if anyone's got a complaint, it's him."

"What about the no-cloning laws?" The words sounded so absurd coming out of my mouth that I had to laugh. So did Luz. It was a good laugh, and it helped break the tension between us.

"Well, there really aren't any no-cloning laws, yet. The government has made this loose, sort of non-binding moratorium request sort of thing on human cloning. But that's only the U.S.; it's not going to stop any scientists outside the U.S., you can bet. And I think we could make a very good case that this is not 'human' cloning. We would be taking Neandertal genetic material and injecting it into a human egg which has had all of its human nuclear material removed from it, to see if we can make a Neandertal embryo. It's not really

human, and it's not really cloning. It's not making a body; it's making an embryo."

"So, what, you'd just freeze the embryo?"

"Yes. At the blastocyst stage."

"You wouldn't want to go ahead with the transfer?"

"Cully, where on earth would we find a woman who would allow you to transfer a Neandertal embryo into her uterus?"

"You heard what Birdie said. If a woman *can* do it, a woman *will* do it"

"So are you thinking we should advertise?" Luz laughed.

"Well, I'm just saying that if we're successful in making this Neandertal embryo, and we write this big earth-shattering story, there's going to be women volunteering. Like Birdie said about the women offering to have the baby of the serial killer."

"Well, that's all in the vague iffy future, isn't it? That has nothing to do with what we're talking about here." She suddenly pounded her fist on the steering wheel and looked straight out over the water with an expression of grim determination, the white brow furled tight above her eye, the white lashes unblinking. "But we can do this much right now, the three of us. And if we don't do it today, believe me, someone else will do it tomorrow. All it takes is the idea."

"And a Neandertal. Which I guess we've got."

"Right now. But what if the Yugoslavs force us to give him back?"

"Can they do that?"

"Birdie's afraid of it. Chris is afraid of it. Their pretext was that they would only borrow him until the Yugoslavs could work out a place to keep him."

I sat for a while looking out at the shadows of the clouds chasing each other across the bay. I seemed sold. Somehow, despite the fact that I had come to this meeting with the definite intention of talking Luz out of this madness, I was now sold. I even found myself

looking forward to the first step.

"So what do we do now?"

"I've been giving it a lot of thought. Chris says he can do the biopsy any time, but I want him to do it on the night of my retrieval so that it will be as fresh as possible. You'll be with him to take notes and photos. Are you any good with cameras?"

"I'm excellent. How about a video, too?"

"You won't be able to turn on the lights in the lab because of the security guard. I don't think you could get a video. But Chris says you can use the flash, if you don't use it too often and shoot carefully."

"Where are you going to get the eggs?"

"I've already put myself on the cycle."

"You?"

"Why not?"

"Well... it just... I don't know." I was stunned. I said, "You don't have good eggs."

"My eggs are fine. It's just that I didn't get a very good harvest last cycle. Dr. Gage says that might have been due to something like polycystic syndrome, although that's usually with squat women, but hey, this whole IVF thing is pretty much brand new. So Gage agrees we should up the meds this time around and we're expecting a good harvest. Don't worry."

"You've already started?"

"We're in a slow time right now," she said, looking away and back up the Strait toward Benicia. "I'll probably be the only retrieval that day. That'll be perfect. I can do my own IVF, or pretend to. That night I'll be ready for you in my lab when you and Chris bring me the Neandertal biopsies, and I'll ICSI them."

I remembered the ICSI's she did with Holly's eggs, using her own nuclear material from her own eggs. It was easy to feature this next step.

"This is so sick! Luz, they're your own eggs that you're putting this thing into!"

"Cully, don't get maudlin, for God's sake! It's a shell and a yolk and a white, for God's sake! If it was big enough you could fry it for breakfast."

I remained quiet for several moments. I looked out at the double bridges over the Strait, built within a half century of each other, each truly ugly yet each magnificent in a small town kind of way. Looking at the bridges and the bay beyond reminded me suddenly of my father and something he never failed to say, looking out at no matter what vantage of the San Francisco Bay: "I just marvel who was the first person to ever stand looking at this."

Now it crossed my mind to wonder, too, about that first man or woman—or more likely tribe—who stood on this cliff looking across this river and the expanse of the bay, stymied at further migration. It would have been some distant ancestor to the Native Americans who still inhabit the area in their little reservations into which they have been pushed by the newer, white invaders. That ancestor would have come down from Alaskawards, after having come up from Chinawards or Japanwards. That ancestor would have gotten here and said, "Oh God damn! Another God damn river to cross!"

I chastised myself for my cynicism, especially regarding this gentleness in my old man. He was unfailingly gentle, always real, always truly marvelling at the beauty of this place and the beauty of mankind in it. I tried to recall a song he sometimes sang—in a high, soft baritone that was at once magical and comforting—about a river and how it was so wide that you couldn't get to the other side. Here was this river running into this bay, and I was cynical, and my father would be embarrassed for me. This woman in the car beside me, too, was good and gentle. She was inviting me into her adventure, and however

ungodly I might think it, she was gentle and real.

She said, "I've been reading up on that sheep they cloned last year, Dolly? You read about her?"

"I saw it on TV."

"If I'm reading it correctly, it seems like it's just a double ICSI. The egg needs to be punctured twice, once to remove the original nuclear material, then again to inject the clone nucleus. With Dolly, they used a mammary cell and gave it an electrical shock."

"Oooh!" I said. "The Frankenstein effect!"

Luz turned to me without laughing. "Cully," she said, "Chris and I are going to do this. You can join us. Or not. I think we can make more money with you in it and with your name on it. But you're not necessary. You decide. Now I'm tired. I want to go home."

I looked into the black eyes for a long moment. Then I got out of the car and said through the open door, "Yes, Gertrude, go home."

And she drove off without looking back.

On Monday, I showed up at the clinic just before lunch. The last two nights had been sleepless, the day sandwiched in between, eternal. I walked up to the reception desk without a plan in my head, leaned on the counter and attempted a playful, natural grin to Margarita who glanced up at me from a pile of files with a receptionist's smile that I recognized as politely disguised protective annoyance. "Luz here today?" I chirped. "I was just in the neighborhood."

Margarita sighed through the smile, "Well, let's just see," and punched some buttons and said something into her mouthpiece in Spanish which I could not quite make out but which included the name Cully Rand, then she turned back to me and said with a more inscrutable smile, "She's coming out."

In her white lab coat, striding straight at me down the hall, Luz's stern beauty and with-me-or-against-me attitude swept away all of the vacillations and insanities which had tossed me through the past nights and day. Suddenly there was no question left in my mind. She extended her hand to me when she reached me, and I took it and gave it a regular handshake. "Lunch?" I asked.

"I'm starving," she said. "Let me just get rid of this lab coat," she added, and as I followed her back up the hallway toward the lab, I glanced back at Margarita to see her shaking her head over the files.

And our lunches together were on again. There was much to plan and no time to lose. Luz's schedule was tight, disturbingly tight, and Luz was disturbingly confident and emphatic. She had hatched the plan overnight, she told me. Listening to our conversation in China House about the Iceman, the idea had occurred to her. She had confirmed certain facts about the Neandertal boy with Birdie at the bocce court that afternoon. Then when she walked into the clinic that Monday morning and found that a slow time was coming up, she realized she would be free to pursue her own IVF cycle. She consulted with Dr. Gage and made her plan. She had her menses on Wednesday, two days early, and started her meds on Thursday. Retrieval would be in thirteen days, probably.

I argued that it was too early for her to start another IVF cycle but Luz waved it off. This was her second menses since her first IVF cycle with Holly, she said, and unlike Holly who had continued her meds into pregnancy, Luz had stopped the meds as soon as she made the decision that she would not try for the pregnancy. The first menses after the IVF cycle had been fine, she said; the second would be fine; she was feeling fine; don't worry, she said.

As the days went on, she grew more and more abrupt with me. "Will you stop!" she cried at me one day at Davids. "Will you just ... stop ... worrying! Madre de Dios!"

This anxiety and shrillness was more than the hormones. I knew from my own experience with Audra during this part of her cycle that Luz was now being injected doubly with Follicle Stimulating Hormone and Luteinizing Hormone (the latter, ironically, synthesized from the urine of menopausal nuns—menopausal because menopausal women typically secrete extraordinarily high levels of FSH; nuns because nuns do not, typically, carry sexually transmitted diseases. When Audra found this fact out, she said, "No wonder I'm so goddam cranky!") FSH and LH not only stimulate the ovary to develop as many follicles as possible but also change the mature follicle into a scab, essentially, on the ovary after the egg has burst out while at the same time they make the environment in the uterus more favorable for the implantation of the embryo and, meanwhile, make the patient a living hell for all around her unless you really really love her.

But there was much more than the extraordinary hormones which were attacking Luz's nature. She was undertaking the unthinkable. It was understandable she should be tense and short.

I wondered what Luz had told Holly, if she had told her anything. I supposed she could keep the whole thing a secret from Holly. She could administer her own injections and go to work as normal on the day of the egg retrieval. Holly need not know. Indeed, since Luz was planning only to harvest her eggs but not get pregnant, it would be foolish to tell Holly anything at all about it. It could arouse a disastrous sense of competition. Holly would imagine that Luz did indeed want to become pregnant, which Holly would no doubt interpret as Luz's dissatisfaction with Dos Equis. No, I decided, Luz would tell Holly nothing about this.

Strange, I thought, that I did not dare ask Luz this question. We already were shielding from Holly that I was conspirator in the conception of Dos Equis. Next we shared Chris and Birdie's secret about the Neandertal. Now we had this third great secret.

But perhaps if I didn't call it a secret, we were not really betraying Holly.

Or Audra, from whom I kept these same secrets.

Chapter Fifteen

I drove Chris to his lab at U.C. Berkeley the night of the thirteenth day of Luz's cycle so that he could biopsy the DNA from the Neandertal. Excuse me, not DNA—as Chris patiently explained to me each time I misused the term—but the nucleus of the cell with its "entire chromosomal panoply" as he continually referred to it, with a little relish on it, I think. Actually we took the entire cells, actually thousands of them.

He had prepped me thoroughly so that I could write everything in scientific terms, but the reader will appreciate that I will ignore that. I taped Chris, of course, and took copious notes, fairly sure that in the end I would use only those terms that were plain and most colorful: for instance, grave wax. Chris also used a much longer word beginning with an A for the same phenomenon, but I knew from the start that I would use grave wax instead. Grave wax. It chilled me even to hear the term. As I understood it from Chris, grave wax is a conversion of fatty cells into a thick, waxy kind of armor in corpses which are recovered from ice: skiers and climbers lost down glacier crevasses for many years. The Neandertal boy's corpse, in fact, seemed to be entirely free of grave wax because, as Chris explained it to me, the boy was a "permafrost corpse". That term, too, gave me the cold shudders. And it seemed to be a significant point since Chris made it several times from several different angles, but I confess that I didn't fully understand it until I saw Chris make his biopsy. No grave wax: good. Permafrost corpse: good.

The fact that the cave was a "north-facing slope" was also repeated several times by Chris, until I finally wrote it down in my notes and showed him that I did indeed have it written and would indeed include the fact. It had to do with how cold the boy was at recovery and why they had chosen to regulate the temperature in the freezer in the Berkeley

lab to minus twenty-five degrees centigrade, in order to simulate the temperature in the cave where he had resided for 28,000 years.

The main thing that struck me, however, was that Chris believed that the boy had frozen to death. He said there appeared to be no decay whatsoever, not even from "enteric microbes". I wrote this down particularly because it was so gruesome to me that the first bugs to begin to eat you after you're dead are your own bugs in your own guts. That, however, is the extent of my usable notes from Chris's prep lecture.

The lab was surreal. We had a key and let ourselves in, but since we had to beware of the janitor we couldn't turn on the lights. We used flashlights to maneuver around the lab which looked uncannily as labs look in movies when they are invaded by flashlights, very scary and sterile and uninviting to the human species. Chris stopped outside a door that looked like a door to a freezer and pointed to a window beside it.

"He's in there."

I looked through the window and saw a plain room with a high table in the center of it. On the table was a white cloth with a very tight weave, perhaps linen. Covering the cloth were chips of ice. Under the cloth was a lump the size of a seven or eight year old boy. I shivered.

"What's the ice for? It's not cold enough in there already?"

"He's been in ice thirty thousand years. Seems like he should have some ice around now. You know, humidity. Here's your scrubs." He handed me a pile of clothes from a cabinet. They were more like sweats than the scrubs I had worn in Luz's lab.

"These are heavy," I said, following Chris's lead and slipping the pants up over my own pants.

"It's damn cold in there, especially if you stay in any time at all. The reflective lining works."

I slipped the shirt over my head and the booties on my feet and donned the cap and mask and rubber gloves. I felt like an adventurer into an unknown space.

"Okay. Once we get in there no more talking. This little kid's been out of circulation thirty thousand years. We want to keep our germs off him. So you know your job?"

"Yes. Got it."

"You've got the Nunc plate? You've got the syringe?"

"Got 'em."

"When I turn to you with the biopsy gun, I hold out the needle, you put one of the four wells in the Nunc plate under the needle, you take your syringe with the media in it, you wash off the needle into the well. Got it."

"Got it."

"You're sure? 'Cause there's no more talking."

"Got it."

I was in a sweat when we opened the freezer door and its Arctic air fell on me, chilling me instantly to the bone. Having lived in California all my life, I'd never felt a temperature anywhere near that cold. I followed Chris to the table where he gave me the biopsy gun to hold while he started to take the white cloth off the lump. The gun looked and felt exactly like a gun. Luz had borrowed it from Life, Inc., where they used it for what they call "testicular biopsy", about which I don't care to provide details since it makes my own testicles shrink up painfully at the mere thought.

Chris was careful, as he pulled back the white cloth, that he gathered up all the ice chips into the folds. Underneath was another layer of ice chips over a white plastic cloth. Chris pulled back the plastic sheet, and time stopped for me. It's hard to imagine now that I even breathed. It was the most incredible moment I could ever have expected in my life.

The boy might merely have been asleep, he was so real, so perfect. He lay on his right side, curled in a near fetal position, naked, his skin almost the same apricot color of Luz's apricot skin, the burnt side of the apricot. Silence and peace exuded from him as an almost palpable flow, as of a gentle, constant exhalation from every pore of his body.

I don't know how I managed to do my job with the Nunc plate and syringe. I remember Chris pausing before he took the biopsy gun from me. I remember him caressing the boy's shoulder with his gloved hand. Then he turned to me and, without a glance into my eyes but with a fixed look in his own eyes which showed me how moved he was, he retrieved the biopsy gun, turned back to the boy, held the gun to the boy's shoulder and pulled the trigger. A little pop. He turned to me and I held up the four-welled plate so that the well pre-labelled "shoulder" was toward him. He pulled back the sheath on the needle to expose the core. There was red tissue in it. I squirted it with the media in my syringe, washing the matter into the well until the needle appeared clean.

I reflected on these tools in our hands. I thought of the tools that had been found in the moraine at the foot of the glacier, the denticulate tools of the Neandertals and the more refined flint tools of the modern humans. I marvelled at what a long way we people had come, from stone carvers to biopsy needles to atomic bombs, extending the reach of our fingers and opposable thumb to accomplish whatever task needed doing.

When the needle was clean, Chris turned back to the boy. He caressed the boy's forearm a moment, then put the gun there and pulled the trigger. We repeated our procedures twice more on the thigh and on the chest. To reach the site on the chest, Chris had to kneel beside the table until he was at a level with the body, his eyes looking right into the boy's face. He caressed the face first, then the chest over the boy's heart, then he put the gun there and pulled the trigger.

We left the room as we found it, utterly quiet and frozen, minus twenty-five degrees

below zero.

It was shortly before midnight when I pulled out from the toll booth and up onto the Bay Bridge. The sky here was clear, and the strings of yellow lights lining the cables gave this world a merry-go-round effect. Off to the northwest we could see that the fog was dropping in over the Golden Gate and reaching fingers out into the bay between Angel Island and Alcatraz. The lights of Marin County would soon be blacked out.

As we drove through the tunnel on Yerba Buena Island, I was the one to break the silence. "How does this island compare to Pitcairn in size?"

"Oh, maybe three quarters."

"Three quarters? This little rock is three quarters as big as Pitcairn? You're joking!"

"If you attach Alcatraz, maybe that might amount to my rock. It's hard to say, though. This bay is so small, and the hills all around us, and no ocean to compare it to."

I tried to imagine that infinitesimal speck in the hugeness of that ocean, so far from any land. It defeated me.

"Do you ever think of that boy," I said, "buried in that dark for all those years?"

"I can't *stop* thinking about him. And he's still in the dark."

"How do you suppose he got there?"

"His mum and da, I imagine. I picture it this way," he said after a long moment. "I reckon they arrived just before the dark fell. I reckon they were dog tired, on the chase for many days. They were hungry because they hadn't had liberty to hunt. The boy, having no substance to him, froze in the night. The mum and da found him dead in the morning's light. They brought in stones from outside and buried him. They may have had a ceremony. In other Neandertal burials, there's indications of ceremony, sending the body into some sense of some future. This boy was naked though. The mum and da probably

needed his fur wraps. At daybreak, when they went outside the cave, they found their pursuers were on them again."

"What pursuers?"

"You'd probably know them as the Cro-Magnons. The people you and I are descended from. The people who had come up from Africa and through the Middle East and over to Europe, to these good valleys, with the good caves and the good climate, and the food."

"Why would they be pursuing the Neandertals?"

"Because those people can't help themselves but they've got to kill. They had found these other kind of people in these valleys and caves. And they couldn't stand it but had to kill them. It took them nearly ten thousand years, but they managed it in the end. Our boy's family was maybe the last of his kind of people. Why else were they in the mountains so far from home, unless they were driven there? I picture it this way. And we've got evidence to support it, those bones in the moraine, a dozen or so Cro-Magnon individuals and two Neandertal individuals, let's say a man and a woman, the mum and da, let's say. The Cro-Magnons couldn't stand to let them just go up in the mountains and die, but they had to pursue them and kill them. Sound familiar? Sound like our guys? The Neandertals come out of the cave in the daylight and find their pack of pursuers. They've got nowhere to run. They commence to fight, all of them howling and screaming. The snow up the steep slopes loosens from the echoes. There's an avalanche, too sudden for the peoples below to escape. They get buried. The mouth of the cave where the boy lies in his grave gets closed up. The planet spins. Snow falls. Year after year. But it's a north-facing slope, as I told you, protected from the sun. The snow compacts and turns to ice and a glacier is born. Through the decades and centuries and millennia, the planet goes through probably a couple dozen cycles of warming and cooling, wobbling on its axis, journeying

around the sun 28,000 journeys. This glacier recedes and returns, recedes and returns. The corpses of the two peoples thaw out of the ice and the vultures and wolves and foxes and mice and worms get at them. Nothing's left but the bones. Then the glacier reaches out to them again and collects them up into the ice and grinds them along, millennium after millennium. And the bones get broken up and mostly gone until the glacier recedes again and leaves them buried in its moraine. Weiss finds them. And Birdie and I find the boy, in the dark of the cave. That's how I picture it all happening."

He finished in the streets of San Francisco just as we pulled up to the curb around the corner from Life, Inc. I called Luz's pager from one of the pay phones in Union Square. She had told me she would have it set to vibrate, not ring. When Chris and I reached the back entrance to Life, Inc., Luz was there to let us in. The security guard, she said, was in the basement on lunch break. We got into the IVF lab with no problem.

"You're here sooner than I thought," Luz whispered. "I don't have everything ready yet. The eggs are peeled and in the media, and all the labels are in place, but I haven't enucleated any of the eggs. It seemed best to do that at the same time as I enucleate the biopsied cells."

"How many eggs did you get?" I asked in a whisper. The whole night would be whispering. It was maddening.

"Twenty-three."

"Wow!"

"Yeah, the upped meds worked." She looked away and busied herself organizing some papers that seemed already organized. She seemed more than distracted: she seemed distressed. And she looked utterly exhausted.

"You're worn out. Did you have other retrievals today?"

"No. I told you it's slow right now. It was just a hard retrieval, much worse than

the first time."

"You're exhausted. Can't you rest?"

"There's no time. You got all four biopsies, Chris? Any problems?"

"Nope," Chris said, handing her the sealed Nunc plate.

"They're labelled correctly?"

"Nope. We thought it'd be best to label them incorrectly."

Luz showed her exasperation but didn't answer. She picked up the Nunc plate and examined each of the four labels, shoulder, thigh, forearm, chest.

I said to Chris, "What made you choose those four sites?"

"No reason. Thought a variety would be good."

"Is one kind of cell better than another, Luz?"

"Who knows?"

"Well, surely somebody does."

"It's not in the literature."

"Well what about, Dolly? You told me they took a particular kind of cell from the mother sheep."

"It's not a mother sheep. It's a sheep. Another sheep got made from it: that's the clone. They used a mammary cell. We don't have any of those. That's why I told Chris to make sure he got a shot of the chest. I figured maybe they're cognates. It's not in the literature."

There was a tone to Luz's voice, heightened by the whispering, that warned me away from further questioning. She was tugging at one end of a very tight wire, and if it snapped, there was going to be haywire all over the lab.

"Okay, let's get going here," Luz said. "We've got a long night. Cully, I've got these charts set up already, but I need you to keep strict records for me as I go along of

exactly what I do to every egg, and exactly what time I do it. I'll talk, you write."

"Gotcha."

"Frenchy?"

"What you got for me, Frenchy?"

"First of all, clean off the biopsy gun and return it to the Operating Room. Then I've set up a gurney for you in the pre-op room."

"Gotcha," he said and opened the lab door quietly, took a careful look around, and then went out, closing the door behind him.

"Is he going to keep a look-out in Pre-op?"

"No, he's going to sleep. Don't worry, he doesn't snore."

"But if we've got so much work to do?"

"Cully, I can't work with Frenchy. He drives me nuts in my lab. Here. You remember the system from when we did the ICSI before?"

"Pretty much."

"It's going to be similar." She gave me a sheaf of papers, and began to dictate as she worked. The twenty-three eggs were all ready, according to their labels six in three petri dishes, and five in the fourth dish. Each egg was in a bubble of media and the entire dish was covered with mineral oil.

"I'm not sure what I'm doing, or how's best to proceed," Luz said, "but it looks to me like I should work on one egg at a time. I'm going to use a biopsy needle, Cully, not the regular ICSI needle because we're dealing with nuclei and not sperm. I'm going to put the clone cells in the same dish with the egg cells, extract the nucleus from the egg, discard it, extract the nucleus from the donor cell, ICSI it into the egg. Six times per dish. Got that?"

"Makes sense to me," I said and shrugged.

"Well, make the notes now, that's your job. This first dish of six eggs," she said as

she took a dish out of the incubator, "I'm going to use six cells from the shoulder."

"You want me to write 'shoulder'? I mean, you don't want me to write 'shoulder' or 'donor' or 'Neandertal' or like that, do you? I mean, who's going to be reading this? What if someone from the clinic looks into these charts?"

"No one ever reads them except me. These records are for myself. Us."

"What if somebody does come in and read them?"

"Nobody will. But all right. Write 'S', 'C', 'F', 'T'. No one will understand, but no one will ever look at it, but you're right, I need you to be exact but we don't need to tell the world we're cloning a Neandertal. Not yet."

"Are you all right, Luz? You're blithering."

"Yeah, I know. It's late, it was a tough retrieval, I should be in bed, but stop worrying about me. Okay this dish is the shoulder, the second dish is the forearm, the third dish is the thigh, the last one's the chest. I figure I'll make all my mistakes before I get to the cognates. Okay, got that? Got the plan?"

"Got it."

"It's going to take me some time now to get the cloning cells in place, so just... don't bug me, okay, just sit there and keep everything tidy. Here, watch it all on the monitor," she switched it on and turned it to face me, "and take notes, and don't ask any questions, okay? I've got to concentrate, okay? Any questions you've got, just write them down and we'll talk about it later, okay? I want you to get this right, but right now I need to concentrate, okay?"

"Okay," I said, and stayed shut up. She was crazed. But she was very sure in her movements with her tools. With a tiny pipette she transferred tissue from the first well in the Nunc plate into the first petri dish which she had taken out of the incubator.

"I have the six eggs around the periphery in bubbles of media of a balanced ph-

buffered saline solution. In the center of the dish—" She looked up at me and stopped.

"You're not writing."

"Oh, I'm supposed to write this?"

"I told you, you're supposed to write everything!"

"Okay," I began to write. "Balanced ph-buffered saline solution."

"In the center of the dish I've put a bubble of media reserved for the cloning tissue, which I've now put in place." She put the petri dish on the microscope stage, put her eye to the microscope and slid the stage until I could see on the monitor above her head that the bubble in the center of the petri dish was centered on the field. She switched lenses to a higher magnification. "Oh," she said, "these look very good! These look as fresh as anything they gave us in school to work on. These are excellent!"

Now she slid the stage again so that an egg came into view on the monitor, taking up the entire left side of the screen. "I'm maneuvering the holding pipette with my left hand. It's got a slight suction to it which holds the egg in place from the left, as I bring the biopsy pipette in from the right. You're writing, right?" She did not take her eye from the scope.

"'Biopsy pipette'. Got it. But you said needle before."

"Pipette or needle. You can write either."

I watched the monitor as the needle came in from the right. There was no sign of any hesitation in Luz's movements. The gray needle came into the gray screen, pressed its tip against the outside of the gray egg, pushed into the egg with an impressive indentation, punctured the shell, and was in.

"I am now enucleating Egg Number One. Write the time." I did. "Notice that I am using my left hand on the dial to create a suction in the needle, or write 'negative pressure' instead of 'suction', and... there it comes." The gray nucleus was sucked into the hollow

neck of the needle.

Deftly Luz withdrew the needle, took her eye from the microscope, put the needle over a paper towel at the side of the microscope stage, and with a turn of the same dial blew the egg nucleus onto the paper towel. Or so I imagine. There was nothing to be seen with the naked eye.

"Well, there goes that one," she said and turned back to the microscope. "Now we're into new territory." She slid the stage until she centered on the clone tissue under the lens. "Okay, there we are, this one looks good, see the nucleus? there's what we want, that's all we need, so just like with the egg, I use my left hand to bring in the holding pipette, set up a negative pressure, see that? put a negative pressure on the cell, pull it away from the others so that I can get to it with, see that? my biopsy pipette coming in from the right, and... I'm in. Are you writing all this, Cully? Do you see it?"

Actually I hadn't been writing, and I hadn't been watching the monitor. I was watching Luz, her eye attached to the microscope, her hands lightly gripping the two dials to her left and right, her whole body torquing to the task, putting english on the maneuvers, murmuring her way through. Now I looked up at the monitor.

"Yes, got it. I'm watching. I'm writing."

"And now, negative pressure in the biopsy needle and... Gotcha!" The tiny nucleus was sucked into the biopsy needle. "Okay, here we go, back out, new home, here we go." I followed her progress on the monitor as she moved the biopsy needle back to Egg Number One. "See the egg closed back over the first puncture immediately, but I can see where the hole was, and I can go in again the same hole and, with my left hand, change from negative to positive pressure, and, did you see?"

The clone nucleus shot into the egg. It was simple, it was clean. Luz withdrew the needle. A little cytoplasm came out of the egg with it, but the clone nucleus stayed inside,

and the cell wall closed up. Luz looked up from the microscope at me. "One down. Twenty-two to go." She bent her head from side to side, stretching her neck. I moved in to massage her.

"No big deal," I said.

"The odds are thousands to one against us, Cully. You know that, don't you? Do you have any idea the number of cells they did this to before they got Dolly?"

"How many?"

"I don't know. But lots. So we've got 22 to go. Did you write down the times?"

"Of the...?"

"Both enucleations and the final injection."

"Oh, no, not all three. Was I supposed to?"

"Now listen, Cully, I want the times marked down for every step. This one was very clean. Each step took only a minute or so. But sometimes I'm going to have trouble, getting in, getting out, losing the nucleus, going back for another. For each egg, I want a complete history, how long between the first puncture and the second, how many punctures if I mess it up the first time. Now do you have this, or not?"

"Okay, now I got it. Everything."

"Okay, here we go, Egg Number Two, mark the time."

I was busy the entire night, taking notes on every word that came out of Luz's mouth. I now found it no wonder that Luz could not work with the easy-going Chris: her precision was exacting and exhausting. And of course she was shot full of raging hormones.

When the first petri dish of six eggs had been completed, Luz sat back in her chair and performed a brief, well-rehearsed series of exercises designed to stretch out the tense muscles of her shoulders, neck, arms and fingers. The work was three times as intense as

regular ICSI because of the double enucleation plus the single injection. I myself was experiencing writer's cramp and brain lock, so I copied her stretching routine. It did indeed refresh me.

Then we proceeded with the next petri dish. Luz took the cloning tissue from the second well of the Nunc plate, put it into the center bubble and started back to work again. It was not until she finished each dish that she took a short break to stretch, and by the final dish she was trembling throughout her body from sustained tension. Nevertheless she managed to get through all five eggs in the final dish. I made my note: "Egg #23, nuclear transfer completed, 4:02 am."

Luz stretched, winced, stretched again, then turned to me. "Okay, now for the unknown."

"What's that?"

"The electric shock."

I had forgotten all about it. What I had laughingly called The Frankenstein Effect. "How are we doing that?"

"They don't detail it in the *Nature* article about Dolly. They just say 'electric pulse'. But I've got an idea. Here, you're going to carry this outside the lab with me," she said, putting the petri dish into a glass container very like the one in which we carried the four-welled Nunc plate from Berkeley. "This desiccator jar may not be completely sterile but it's very very clean and should keep out contaminants as long as we'll have it open outside the lab."

"Dessicater with an e-r or an o-r? Double s?" I said, making the notes.

"I have no idea, you can look it up later," she said as she took the lid off the jar and put the petri dish into it. "These paperclips," she added as she took four half-unbent paperclips out of another, smaller sealed jar, "have been sterilized with alcohol."

She put each paperclip into its own petri dish with the coiled end hanging on the edge of the dish and the unbent end dipped into the mineral oil inside the dish. Then she covered the desiccator jar with its lid and handed it to me.

"Whatever you do, don't drop this."

"Where are we going?"

"You're going to carry this out to that hallway that leads to Gage's office. You know which one I mean?"

"I remember it."

"At the end of the hallway there's a little table, just outside Dr. Gage's door."

"It's got a vase of dried flowers in it?"

"That's it. I've removed the vase so the tabletop is clear. You're going to put the desiccator dish on that table. Now be careful you don't slosh it around. When I tell you to, you're going to lift the lid of the desiccator jar, keeping it ready to close it up immediately, when I say so. Got that?"

"Got it."

"Okay, you wait here until I signal you to come out."

She opened the lab door quietly, peered around outside, then went out and closed the door behind her. I stood in the middle of the lab with the petri dishes in the desiccator jar in my hands, feeling a little foolish actually, all dressed up in my scrubs and mask and gloves and no costume ball to go to.

After a few moments, Luz opened the lab door and gestured me outside. She was still in her scrubs and mask but had taken off her gloves and booties and was now wearing a pair of black patent leather shoes. She gave me the quiet sign, and I came out. Down the hallway leading to the main lobby and reception desk, I could hear the distant sound of a blaring television set.

"I don't know why we even pay that guy!" Luz whispered as I came out of the lab.

I whispered back to her. "Should I take off my booties, too?"

"No, just come on. Be careful. Be quiet."

We turned left and walked down to the next hallway, which was the long corridor leading to Dr. Gage's office. I walked to the end and set the desiccator jar carefully on the table. When I turned, I was surprised to see Luz still at the far end of the hallway. She raised her hand as though to say, "Ready?" I bent over the desiccator jar with both hands on the lid to show that I was indeed ready, though I didn't know quite for what.

Luz started shuffling down the hallway toward me, sliding her feet on the carpet. When she reached me, she said, "Off." I lifted the lid off the desiccator jar and Luz reached toward one of the paperclips. As her fingertip touched the coil, a blue spark flashed in the semi-darkness of the hallway. She quickly pulled her finger away and said, "On!"

I put the lid back on, convulsing with laughter. I had to choke it back to keep from guffawing, stumbling into the walls blindly searching for something to grab onto to keep from falling as I bent over double with laughter. I found the knob to Gage's door and held onto it and butted my head against the door and covered my mouth with my hand and bit onto my knuckles, weeping with laughter, spastic with laughter as my mind's eye relentlessly reran again and again that image of Luz, her odd-eyed brows and lashes so comic over her mask and her black eyes so intent as she shuffled so earnestly down the hallway to zap that paperclip. It's an image I treasure, and it makes me smile, even now, goddess reaching out to her creation.

Luz's face, when I finally regained control and looked at her, was dark with with rage and humiliation. When I managed to get my breath back, I said, "You've got to be kidding!"

It was a vicious, desperate whisper back. "They didn't tell us how to do it! They

said an electric shock, they didn't say how powerful. How powerful do you think it should be?"

"Well, I don't know!" I whispered.

"Well, neither do I! It's not like I've done this before! It's not like there's a recipe, Cully!"

She was on the verge of tears and a tremendous crying jag. I had to control myself so as not to push her over the edge into it. She was exhausted and wrought up, it was going on 4:30 am, and she was losing her coping abilities. I contained my hysteria. For the moment.

But when Luz made her second run down the hallway and produced her second blue spark, I lost all control, all containment, choked with laughter again and almost broke the lid of the desiccator jar as I dropped it back in place, very nearly upsetting the table and losing all the eggs and all our work. It sobered me instantly.

And immediately I heard the whistle of the security guard as he approached down the other hallway. Luz and I froze and looked to the end of our hallway. It was a dreadful, off-pitch rendering of "Amazing Grace", whistled with the exuberance of a carefree, mindless soul. Luz and I held our breaths and watched the opening at the end of the hallway where, in a moment, the security guard's hulking silhouette appeared and then passed out of sight down his hallway. We heard a door open and saw a flash of light before the door closed again.

"He's gone into the bathroom," Luz whispered. "Quick, back to the lab. Here, I'll take this," she said as she very cautiously picked up the desiccator jar which I had nearly dumped. I led the way, peeked to the right down the hallway to make sure the bathroom door was still closed, then made a dash to the lab and opened the door for Luz. "No," she whispered coming up fast. "Into the pre-op. In case he wakes up Chris with his whistle."

I held the curtain of the pre-op room aside for Luz then pulled it all the way shut after she and I were behind it. Chris was curled on his right side on the gurney, sleeping as peacefully and deeply as a child. With a shock I was reminded of the Neandertal boy, the black hair and dark skin, the expression of innocence and rest. I moved to his side to be ready to stifle him if he should wake when the security guard returned. The whistle, which had continued muted all this while, grew suddenly loud again as the bathroom door opened. In a sort of miniature doppler effect, it grew louder and shriller as he neared us. I looked down at our feet, suddenly aware that they might show below the curtain since he was now headed directly toward us and there was enough light in the hallway. Luz saw my glance and shook her head or I might have panicked and drawn back my feet, ensuring that he did see. The whistle peaked and then grew fainter as the watchman made the turn and proceeded down the hallway to the lobby. Soon we could hear the whistle no more, just the distant garble of the television.

I looked down at Chris. His eyes were open. He had waked but not moved a muscle. Without a word, we all went back into the lab. On the way in, Chris collected new booties for us all and a complete set of scrubs for himself.

After we recovered ourselves, I said, "There's got to be a better way to make this electrical pulse. How about if we cut one of the wires to one of the lamps. We can replace it later. Then we'll peel back the insulation on both copper wires, plug one end into an outlet and put the two copper wires into the mineral oil. Wouldn't that do it?"

"We want to shock them, not electrocute them!" Luz said. "Well, what if we used two copper wires and connected them to a battery? I could slip out and get the battery out of my car. It would be like a jump start, wouldn't it?"

"We could use this?," Luz said, opening the cabinet below her and pulling out a heavy-duty flashlight.

"Why don't you just use the electro-jack, Frenchy?" Chris said.

Luz paused a moment, then sat as though defeated. "Of course," she said. "How stupid I am."

"What's the electro-jack?" I asked.

"Do you remember where it is, Frenchy?" Luz asked.

"In Gage's cabinet?"

"Here," she said, taking a small ring of keys out of a drawer. "This is the key to Gage's door, and one of these is for his cabinet. See if it's still there."

Chris quietly let himself out of the lab. Luz opened the desiccator jar and began taking out the petri dishes and arranging them on the countertop.

"What's the electro-jack?" I asked again.

"Dr. Gage used it when he was doing research on baboons in South Africa in the early years of IVF. He had to sedate the male baboons, and then to get sperm from them he would introduce the electro-ejaculator up the baboon's anus and give him an electric shock to his prostate."

"Lord!" I ejaculated. "What kind of tool is that!"

Chris returned with the tool in his hand, a longish, thin rod on a handle with a cord coming out its butt. He plugged it into an outlet and handed it to Luz. "You want to handle it, Frenchy?" he said with a grin. "You've got the style."

Luz was contemplating the four petri dishes arranged in front of her. She said, "I think I'm going to leave these first two as I've done them. Maybe the static electricity has its own kind of oomph. But okay, with these other guys, here goes. Have fun, boys." She put the end of the device against the glass side of the third petri dish and pushed a button. A little light on the handle briefly glowed red.

"Just one?" Chris said. "Remember?"

Luz looked at Chris a moment, pondered, then pushed the button again. "These are just little guys, Frenchy. I think two is all." Then she did the same with the last petri dish. Then she said, "Maybe three. They said in the article, 'electrical pulses'."

I said, "How did you guys know about this electro-jack?"

Luz didn't answer, but flushed. Chris said, "We had occasion to borrow it."

Nothing more was said on the subject.

I finished the notes in my charts, approximating the time of the first two electric shocks in the hallway, and noting the exact time of the last two shocks from the baboon prod. Then I made the final labels for the petri dishes as Luz transferred all of the eggs from the ICSI media to their incubation media, which was not "ph buffered", for reasons that she took pains to explain to me but which I could not understand at 5:00 am.

Luz had instructed me to label all of the dishes incorrectly, from 3:30 pm to 5:00 pm the day before. That way if anyone but she checked the incubator, they would not perceive that we had worked through the night on these eggs.

As I put the petri dishes into the incubator, I saw something which at first I paid little attention to, and then, which made my blood run cold. There were other petri dishes in the incubator, of course, for other clients of the clinic. But two of the petri dishes were labelled August 24, 1998, which was yesterday, the day we had just finished. One at 11:09 am and the other at 11:11 am.

Luz had put someone's sperm with someone's eggs yesterday morning at 11:09 am and at 11:11 am. Yet she had told me that hers was the only retrieval that day.

I said nothing. I finished my job and waited for Luz to finish cleaning up. Chris was sitting on a high lab chair, his head down on his chest, snoozing. I watched Luz work. Why would she lie about this retrieval previous to her own? My befuddled brain could come up with only one reason, and it became increasingly obvious that this reason, as

horrifying as it was, was the only possible reason. Luz had stolen some of the eggs from that retrieval and she didn't want anyone to know. She claimed that her own retrieval had leapt from four eggs at the beginning of July to twenty-three eggs at the end of August because Dr. Gage had "upped her meds". But what if her retrieval had been disappointing after all? What if this woman in the morning had had an abundant retrieval? Two dishes. How many in each dish? I opened the incubator again and looked at the labels again. Six eggs in both. Better than average. Almost as many as Audra and I had. This couple could afford to give up some of their eggs to the pursuit of science: was this what Luz was thinking? Why else would she lie to me?

"What are you doing?" she asked me, startling me into closing the incubator sharply.

"Just wanted to look at them again," I said. "History in the making, you know." I couldn't look her in the eye. I remembered that there was something in the way she had answered me when I asked her how many eggs in her retrieval. "Twenty-three," she had said, and looked away. I could not now look her in the eye. I didn't want to know any more about this.

I said, "Are we finished here?"

"Yes."

Chapter Sixteen

I slid into bed shortly before the sky grew gray and was awake when Audra turned over and woke. I had told her that I was playing poker with a bunch of penny-ante fiends that I haven't played with in years, but who I knew still did play together, old buddies, drinking and swearing like the adolescents we all once were. We used to have all-nighters on a regular basis when I was a younger man than I am today, and only freshly married, so they were very keen now to be my cover. "Anything!" Billy shouted, to deceive Audra. She used to be extremely jealous of my man's night out with these rogues and established with them a well-deserved reputation as harradan. When I asked Billy to cover for me this night and let the others know that I was supposed to be there with two raven-haired beauties, one of them a man, I'm sure he put it around to the rest that I was having one torrid three-way. But I didn't care. I left Audra a phone number one digit off Billy's, in case she tried to call him.

"You stink," Audra said to me and got right out of bed. I had doused myself with tequila in simulation of those "good old days".

There was no sleeping for me. I was too wrought up and wrung out. It was the third time in five months that I found myself watching the clock and waiting for the news if life had indeed begun. It was interesting to observe myself, and this time I made mental notes, felt my heartbeat jumping erratically, felt my nerves twitching all ajangle, saw how my eyes jumped around the room detailing unrelated non-essentials.

With Audra's eggs and my own sperm, I had been a nervous wreck, of course, but we had tried already so many times that I was secretly resigned to failure. When the news came that we indeed had eleven embryos, seven of them in good shape, the relief and

excitement and hope for the future had made me joyous.

With the egg-to-egg ICSI's of Luz and Holly, I was removed and cautious. It was not my own flesh and blood; it was not the child of my wife; and it was—I recognized now—a godawful experiment in my eyes, and in point of fact somewhere I did not approve. Not that my approval had anything to do with it. Still, it was a magnificent experiment, and when it succeeded I was genuinely happy for Luz and Holly.

With this cloning of the Neandertal boy, I was contorted with contradictions: misgivings with glee, hope with fear and terror, profound love with profound repulsion. I loved that little boy in the freezer—I realized though I could not explain to myself why or how that could be—and I missed his being in the world. Here we had the opportunity to give him his life back again.

Of course it would not be *his* life. I knew that. In fact even if we were successful he would probably never be anything but an embryo, he would never draw breath, he would never see or walk or cry or love. But there would be the seed of him, a return to viability. And.—I found myself unreasonably arguing with myself—some time in the future, perhaps even the very near future, a means might be found to incubate a human embryo and bring it into a human life. In the fast-changing world of IVF and cloning we have astonished ourselves time and again with our inventions and advances, if I'm right to call them that. Science fiction has become science fact in a very few years. Who would ever have believed when I was born that we would see a test-tube baby? Yet there was Louise Brown, born 1978. And there was Dolly, born 1997. And then Dolly gave birth naturally to her own lamb, 1998.

And now...

I got up and went out to the kitchen to see Audra, sick with my thoughts and fatigue. She was finishing a bowl of cereal, already dressed for work. "That was a wrong

number you gave me for Billy," she said.

"Oh. Really? Hmmm."

"Yes, hmmm. How much did you lose?" she asked.

"I broke even. Billy carried off the most money, of course, but I broke even."

"So it was just like wasted time?"

"Well, you could call it that. Or you could call it free fun."

After Audra left, the house felt empty. I tried to work on the novel but got nowhere. My thoughts were utterly in the lab. Although I couldn't sleep myself, I restrained myself from calling Luz or Chris until the night. Luz was clearly exhausted and strung out. Chris had slept most of the night in the pre-op room, but he seemed like a fellow who required lots of sleep to make up for the energy of his waking moments.

The plan was that Luz would pretend to arrive as usual at Life, Inc.—instead of having been there all night—perform the tasks that needed performing in monitoring and nurturing the lives of Life, Inc.'s other embryos at their various stages, then plead sickness and go home for the rest of the day. She looked dreadful when I left her and would certainly have no difficulty convincing anyone she was sick.

Then she would return at about 9:00 pm., 16 hours after the nuclear transfers and electric pulses. This was that brief window when meiosis or mitosis—or whatever is the correct name for cell division in these peculiar cloning circumstances, the separation of the PN's which Luz and I had witnessed together with hers and Holly's embryos—would occur. Further, Luz told me, she would take this opportunity to change the media for fresh, though "who knows?" if that helps or not. Luz's increasingly common "who knows?" locution had become very tiresome.

I waited until almost midnight for Luz to call. Audra had long ago gone to bed, first asking me, "Are you sick or what?" I told her a lie about Deirdre and Daphne and she

went to bed, shaking her head.

I didn't dare call China House at that time of night, so I called Chris instead. He appeared to be still up. "Any news?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, I'm right, aren't I, Luz did say 9:00?"

"Yeh."

"Well, I wonder why she hasn't called."

"Why don't you ask her?"

"Well, do you suppose she's still at the lab?"

"No. She's here."

"At your house?"

"Yeh."

I was very aggravated. I tried not to let it show. "Well... she didn't tell you anything?"

"She said there was no news. Nothing to see. No change."

My heart sank. "Oh."

"Did you want to talk to her direct?"

"I don't know. Does she want to talk to me?"

"I'll ask." He didn't bother to put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Cully wants to know if you want to talk to him."

There was a brief silence into which I read a dozen expressions on Luz's face. She sounded tired when she said, "Hi."

"So... no good, huh?"

"Well, we can't say. I told you, it's a small window. Some might be early. Some might be late. We'll know more tomorrow."

"Are you going in?"

"I've got to go in. There's work to be done. Lives at stake, etcetera etcetera ad nauseam."

"You don't sound well. Do you have to stay the whole day? Are you driving home tonight?"

"I might be able to go home early."

I wasn't sure which question she was answering. "Are you driving home tonight?" I asked again.

"No, I'm staying with Chris."

"Oh." I said. "Holly knows?"

"Of course."

"Oh. I was going to offer to call her for you if you wanted."

"No, Chris's phone reaches Bolinas, too."

It didn't even sound sarcastic. It just sounded tired. I tried to laugh but didn't succeed very well. I said, "Well, I'll let you get to bed then. You'll call me, won't you, when you find out anything?"

"Of course."

"Okay, then, good night."

"Good night."

"Good night to Chris."

"Okay, good night."

I hung up unsatisfied, jealous, angry, hurt, worried, all the usual lovesick emotions on top of a deep, deep, deep depression about Boy—as I was beginning to call him privately, this potential cloned embryo, already imagining the new beginning of his life.

I went back through all my Life, Inc. literature and the notes I made at the time of

Audra's IVF to satisfy myself about a point that was unclear to me. Meiosis, the process of cell division when the egg first shows the alignment of the two pro-nuclear bodies, happens normally between twelve and sixteen hours, normally with two gametes, as I knew already. But this was not two gametes: this was one clone cell potentially dividing itself. The time might be very different and it could mean nothing that Luz had missed seeing it. The next thing she might see should happen between 24 and 36 hours, which would be the first division of the single cell into two cells. That meant that when Luz arrived at work the next morning, it might have been accomplished, or not.. At the outside, by the time she knocked off the next afternoon, it would certainly have been accomplished. Or not. I continued to wait.

I made up my mind that I would not bother her the next day. I would wait for her call. But instead, at 11:30 in the morning I found myself walking into Life, Inc. Margarita said, "Oh, she didn't tell me you were coming in, Cully?"

"No, it's a surprise. I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by in case she's free." As Margarita punched in Luz's number, I added rashly, taking a chance, perhaps unwisely, "Any news yet?" My assumption was that Margarita and indeed all the rest of the people in the clinic would be on pins and needles about one of their own going through the IVF cycle, especially so soon after her first IVF cycle.

Margarita looked up at me cautiously and said with an inscrutable, polite smile, "You'll have to ask Luz." Then into the phone, "Luz, Cully Rand está aquí, quieres verle?." She listened a moment, then said, "Sí." She hung up. "She says she's over her head back there, Cully. Says she'll call you tonight?"

I smiled back. "Oh, great!" I said and left with a smile and a wave. I was going out of my mind. I went home and waited by the phone, literally waited by the phone. When it rang, I jumped for it, literally jumped for it. It was Audra. She would be late tonight,

Goddam Haley and Goddam Deardorf, didn't know what time she might be in, Goddamit.

"Okay, I'll look for you when I see the whites of your eyes."

"Are you okay, Cully?"

"Sure, why?"

"You seem distracted."

"Oh, Goddam Deirdre, Goddam Daphne."

At 8:00 I couldn't stand it any longer. I called China House. Holly answered. I decorated my hello with friendly tones.

"Well, hello back. You batching it tonight?"

"What do you mean?"

"Audra's working late: doesn't that mean you can play?"

"Oh, you talked to her?" That romance, at least, seemed healthy. After a few moments of pleasantries that I found very awkward, I said, "So can I talk to Luz?"

"She's over at Chris's. I'm batching it, too."

"Oh," I said. "Is she taking a little vacation over there?"

"She was driving me crazy, Cully. I mean, moods! I know I wasn't like that going through my cycle!"

I was stunned. I grew cautious. So Luz in fact *had* told Holly she was going through this IVF cycle. "No," I said, "I thought both of you did great. You should have seen Audra!"

"No, you're just a man. You don't understand."

I wanted to say, "Well, at least I didn't ship my lover off to sleep with my arch-enemy!" but I restrained myself.

After I got off with Holly I called Chris. "Yeh?" he answered.

"Hi, Chris, it's Cully. What do you hear from Luz? Any news?"

"Nothing."

"You mean you've heard nothing, or there's nothing to hear."

"Nothing to report. Nothing in the dish. Nothing."

"Oh. Shit. Shit."

"Yeh."

"Is she there?"

"Yeh."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Cully wants to know if he can talk to you," he said, again without bothering to put his hand over the receiver.

There was a noise of the receiver being passed. I imagined her face. "Sorry, Cully," Luz's voice was husky. She might have been crying.

"Could they just be late?"

"Probably not. It was 36 hours just when I left the clinic. I didn't see anything at all hopeful."

"Aw, crap!"

"Don't be too disappointed, Cully. We knew it was a long shot."

"Well, listen, this is what I've been thinking, Luz. I've been preparing myself for this, and this is what's been going around in my head." I found myself suddenly with a frog in my throat. I cleared it. "Is Chris still in the room with you?"

"Umhmm." I heard caution in her voice.

"Well, listen, this is the thing. I know about the extra eggs."

There was a little silence. "What do you mean?"

"The extra eggs you took from that woman." There was utter silence. "I mean there was another retrieval Monday. You lied. I figure you took some of those eggs."

Don't let on to Chris. Just say yes if I'm right."

There was a long silence. Finally, "Yes."

My heart took a drop. I felt sick. "This is the way I look at it, Luz. You left her twelve eggs. That was all she could use. You needed those extra eggs to have a better chance at this. What you did was okay. It really was."

"I'm not sure, Cully."

"How many did you take? Just answer yes or no. More than ten?"

"Little bit."

"Okay, so she had 25, 26, 27 eggs, something like that?"

"Yeah."

"So she didn't need all those eggs. It was simple, traditional IVF. What did she get out of it, more than eight embryos?"

"Umhmm."

"More than ten?"

"Umhmm."

"So you ended up freezing at least half of them anyway, right?"

"Umhmm."

"Remember that woman you told me about who had to end up trashing her extra embryos because she had twins? We don't know that this wouldn't happen with this woman, too."

"But that's not up to me, is it?"

"But this is what I'm getting at, Luz, listen..."

"Cully, I don't feel good."

"Listen to me now, I've been thinking about this. We've still got probably thousands of cells from the boy in the Nunc plate. You froze that, didn't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I know what it takes out of you to go through the IVF cycle. I don't want you to have to do it again. But let's say you get some other women coming in who get, let's say twenty, thirty, forty eggs apiece, many more than they need... we could try it again."

"No, Cully, I don't think so."

"Why not? You did it once, you can do it again."

"I'm not feeling good, Cully. I'm going to hang up now. Sorry. We'll talk later. Sorry. Bye."

She hung up with me still stammering.

I am as hot and sweaty and helpless at this moment, writing these words, as I was then, holding the phone in my hand, trembling at my thoughts, at my horrific proposition to this woman, at my certainty of the dreadful crime she had committed and my own complicity in it.

I called back immediately. Chris answered.

"Chris, can I talk to Luz again, please?"

"No. What did you say to her?"

"Something terrible. I'm so sorry. Please let me talk to her."

"No. You made her cry. She doesn't want to talk to you."

"Well, then, just tell her please, that I'm sorry and I didn't mean it."

"Cully says he's sorry and didn't mean it." There was a moment of silence. "Do you want to talk to him?" Another moment. Then a muffled sound. "She says she got your message, Cully."

"Thanks, Chris. So sorry."

"Yeh."

He hung up. I was left holding the phone again. I heard the key in the lock and

fled for the bedroom and closed the door. In the dark, I slipped off my shirt and shoes and got under the covers and turned my back to the door. After a moment or two, I heard Audra come into the room. Without turning on the light, she called my name softly. I didn't answer. I heard the door close, waited a few moments, then rolled over as though in my sleep and opened my eyes as though just waking. She was not in the room. I could hear her opening the refrigerator. I slipped off my trousers and socks under the cover and let them fall to the floor on the side of the bed then turned back on the bed as I was.

I tried to fall asleep. All night.

Chapter Seventeen

I lay low for the next several days. I didn't trust myself to look anyone in the eye. I couldn't talk on the phone. Audra thought I was sick and, as always when one of us comes down with a bug, the well one moved to the guest room. I was grateful for the privacy. I worked like a madman on the novel, but it convoluted into tortuous paths and cul de sacs and, of course, not a single page from those days survives.

One afternoon late the phone rang, and I decided to answer it.

"Why is Luz acting like a spook?"

It took me a moment. "Is this Birdie?" I asked.

"Of course. Why is Luz acting like a spook?"

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"When did you last see her?"

"I don't know. A few days ago."

"How was she acting?"

"No way special."

"What was the occasion?"

"I don't remember. It was last week some time. We had lunch. Why?"

"Has she left that woman?"

"Holly? No! I don't think so. Why?"

"What is the nature of your relationship to Luz?" I was struck dumb. "Are you lovers?"

"That is certainly none of your business."

"Luz is very, very, very unhappy. That makes it my business. Are you lovers?"

"I am not responsible for Luz's happiness," I said. "I mean if she *is* unhappy. Or happy, for that matter," I added.

"That girl is like a daughter to me, and if you hurt her, I will not stand for it. Do you understand?"

"Birdie, you are way beyond yourself. There is nothing going on between Luz and me. Have you talked to Chris? There's who you should be talking to. If I were going to be jealous of anyone, that's who I would be jealous of."

"Jealousy is not in my vocabulary."

"Well, I'm just saying," I remember saying, remarking to myself what a pathetic response it was to anything at all let alone to such an assailable target as Birdie's naive self-assessment. Perhaps Birdie had the same thought, because he didn't add anything for several seconds. Since I had nothing more to add, I too added nothing. I thought about hanging up without saying goodbye, or saying goodbye and hanging up, but both of those actions seemed wrong, and so I merely hung on. It was an extraordinary pause and I was extremely embarrassed. I thought again about hanging up but said, "Birdie? You still there?"

"I suppose you think I owe you an apology."

"Not particularly. It certainly is bizarre behavior on your part. But then that's what I expect, I guess." The pause returned, or a different one occurred, I couldn't tell from listening. "Birdie," I said, leaping to an advantage, "I have a question I've been wanting to ask you."

"Really? Me?"

"Your Neandertal..."

"My Neandertal, yes, thank you for the corrected pronunciation, young man, yes, my Neandertal, yes?"

"Well, Chris told me your theory..."

"And what theory is that?"

"About the Cro-Magnons killing off the Neandertals..."

"That is certainly not my theory. There *is* a theory that modern humans replaced the Neandertals, but I don't subscribe to it. Not altogether. I think it may be plausible in France and Western Europe, and that silly DNA test to which you once alluded rather does support that theory, and I know that it appeals to Chris's romantic, morbid side, but in Central Europe where our Neandertal lived, I am quite of an opposite opinion, and indeed the fossil evidence there supports an entirely different view, that those Neandertals did in fact interbreed with our modern human ancestors, did indeed mingle traits, did indeed pass those traits on to the people who live in those areas today."

"But you said you did find Neandertal bones and modern human bones together in that same moraine."

"Weiss found them, yes. He may smell, but he's expert."

"Then what were they doing there together, if they weren't there in battle, as Chris suggests."

"Oh, they might have been there in battle, I make no speculation. They're battling there today in Yugoslavia or Serbo-Croatia or Bosnia Herzegovina or whatever they currently want to call it, I can't keep up. Not a meaningful particle of difference in their DNA, mind you, but they're butchering each other by the thousands. It doesn't take a thing's being a different species to tempt man to kill it, it merely takes a thing's being alive. But what was your question, yes?"

"What were humans and Neandertals doing in that canyon together?"

"Neandertals were humans, too, dear boy. They might have been hunting together. Why not? I think that's utterly likely, two different peoples teaming up to bag a woolly

rhino, why not?. There *were* bones of a woolly rhino found together with our human bones in that same moraine, that same time period. The avalanche, yes, I do agree with Chris that there must have been an avalanche which killed humans and rhino alike, and that it was the snows of that avalanche, compacted over decades, which formed the beginning of the original glacier, but I am not willing to buy the rest of his story. It seems far likelier to me that this symbiotic teaming up of Neandertals and humans for reciprocal benefit is evidence of the theory to which I subscribe, for the peoples of Central Europe at least, that they did indeed meet, were indeed attracted, and did indeed fuck each other like bunnies, and that is what I shall publish."

"And so your Neandertal boy..."

"Is very likely a half-blood, as you say, like our Chris Christian. Certainly preliminary measurements show that he does not share all of the attributes of the so-called 'classic Neandertal'—that DNA fellow of yours from the Neander Valley—but of course how could he be expected to? Neandertals from the various areas where they have been discovered vary in significant ways from each other, as do modern humans around the globe today. If you were to see this boy of ours dressed in the baggy garb of today's youth running around on the playground, you would probably not be able to tell him from any of the other boys."

I tried to picture the boy's face. I remembered his nose was broad and his forehead was prominent. But then I thought of the people in the Vietnamese restaurant in Berkeley. Yes, certainly, this boy would not have stood out in that crowd.

"What's going to happen to him now?" I said.

"Now that the cat is being let out of the bag?"

He was referring to a growing spate of media articles about the finds in the moraine, as well as rumors of the "oldest ever, most complete ever remains" of an as yet unidentified

permafrost corpse. Birdie was being very sly in how much and what parts of his cat he indeed let out of his bag, how far, and to whom, in preparing the world for the article that he and Chris were readying for publication. Our Neandertal boy was going to make spectacular waves, a tsunami, when that article hit the stands, complete with photographs.

"Will they take him from you?"

"After all, I think not. Those iddy-biddy countries have been at each other's throats for years with all that violence and chaos, and our boy is an ancient monument which must be protected at all costs. It is expensive to maintain him, even when the facility already exists. To build the facility from scratch among the bombshells would be prohibitive to them, even if they could get themselves together and agree on their borders and work together to bring our boy home. They'll never get him back!" He laughed shrilly. I knew now that he wasn't only bizarre, but in some way, insane. "Oh, yes, it will be dicey, there will be criticism, there will be diplomacy, but they'll never get him back!" He laughed again. "Not as long as I have breath in my body!"

"And after that?" I offered it as a joke, but he did not laugh.

"That's not funny, Mr. Rand." No, indeed, he did not laugh. "But after that, we shall rely upon our Chris."

After I hung up with Birdie—how I managed I don't quite remember—I phoned Chris. I told him pretty much my entire conversation with Birdie.

"Yeh," Chris said when I finished. Not the input I had hoped for.

"Well, what's your take on Luz these past days? She's been staying with you, right?"

"Yeh."

"Well?"

"Seems okay to me."

"You haven't noticed her being moody?"

"Sure."

"Well, that's not usual in my experience with Luz."

"She's on those hormones."

"Well, that's true, but she stopped those after the egg retrieval. She should be getting back to normal by now."

"She didn't stop."

"Sure she did. There was no reason for her to continue after that. She wasn't intending to get pregnant."

"I saw her last night fill up the hypodermic."

"With what?"

"I didn't ask."

"How long is she staying with you?"

"I didn't ask."

"Is she there now?"

"Yeh."

I thought about asking to talk to her. "Well, say hi to her for me."

"Sure."

After I got off the phone with Chris, I pondered for a long moment what he had told me, a nagging, frightening concern beginning to build up inside me. Luz was still taking injections of some kind of hormone. Why? I called Holly.

After the usual amenities I said, "Have you talked to Luz lately?"

"Sure. Every day."

"I understand from Chris she's still staying over there. Hormones still berserk, I suppose?"

"Oh, yeah!

"What is it she's on?"

"Oh, you know that stuff they give you after the retrieval to make the uterine lining all plump and rich and everything."

"Progesterone?"

"Yeah, it's worse than the first stuff they put you on. Well, you know with Audra. And it's taking Luz by surprise, I think. She didn't even start the progesterone last time because we decided I'd be the one to carry the baby, so she got off easy. Now she knows what it's like. I told her, if you're going to be like this, go stay with Chris."

I was stunned. "Yeah," I said, searching for a comment, "it's like going through hell." The idea that had been forming like a cloud in a back corner of my brain began to whirl to the front, the wisps shredding away as the starkness of its eye began to define itself, and it was with dread of hearing the answer that I knew I would hear that I asked, "How did the transfer go? When was it?"

"Yesterday. I held her hand through it."

I was physically sick. I couldn't get a breath but managed to utter on spent air, "How many embryos?"

"All three of them."

"There's someone at the door!" I belched. "Bye." I rushed to the bathroom and vomited into the toilet. After several minutes I got my breath back and sat with my head resting on my arm on the toilet seat. Too many thoughts were rushing through my head, none of them invited or welcome.

Chapter Eighteen

I looked at my watch. It was 4:00. I ran out to the car and drove like a racecar driver across town to the clinic. I drove into the parking garage and found Luz's Volvo still there. I parked nearby and waited for her. It was only a few moments before she appeared. She was looking into her purse for keys, so she didn't see me until she was nearly on top of me.

"Oh, hi," she said, backing a little away.

I said, "I know."

She was startled and pulled further away. I said, "You had your transfer yesterday. Holly told me." She looked for a moment as though she were on a tightwire, catching her balance with the tiniest of muscle jerks, getting every element into perfect alignment.

She said, "Get in," and she opened her car door and unlocked the passenger's side and I did get in. We sat for a moment in silence.

"What in hell are you doing?" I started to say but she said, "Shh!" and I stopped. She turned the key in the ignition, started the engine, put it in gear and drove. There was something mechanical in the way she drove, gears shifting into place, turns being made, progress through the streets of San Francisco, thoughtless precision that was somehow comforting and quieting. I waited until she stopped, which was at the top of Twin Peaks, with the sun at our backs and the length of Market Street lying before us leading straight down to the bay. She parked and shifted into reverse and put on the brake and turned off the ignition. We didn't say anything for a long time.

"What are the chances?" I asked finally.

"The same as anyone's with only three. Not good. But possible."

"How did they look?"

"Good. They looked good. They looked just like regular. Good."

"You waited until Day 5, blastocyst stage?"

"You know, Cully, you could get a job in our lab, you know so much these days."

"All three?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't keep one out so we could freeze it and show it."

"No. I wanted the best chance possible for pregnancy."

"Luz, Luz!. Why on earth did you do this?"

She now turned around in her seat and looked at me for the first time. "Look at it this way, Cully. Chances are I won't get pregnant, so no big deal. If I do get pregnant, what a ride, huh?"

"What about the embryos? Those embryos were..."

"Nothing. Those embryos were nothing. A bunch of little cells, so what? So we did it, so what? Clones, clones of a neandertal, so what? They were nothing."

"Well now they're gone."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

The pause, at least, was pregnant.

"What are you going to do with this baby?" I said finally. "If this is successful, there's going to be a baby. Remember that? Beyond that, there's going to be a life. What do you intend to do with that life, Luz?"

"More on that later."

"You're being snide over this?"

"Cully, there are things I can't talk to you about. Not now. If I'd been able to talk to you, I would have talked to you. You wouldn't have to go snooping. It's my body. You

know? It's my body after all!"

I didn't say anything. "Feel like a walk?" I said after a few moments. I opened the car door and got out. "Got the time?"

"Well," she said and opened her door, "I don't have any immediate plans." She got out and we scaled the path together to the top of the peak where we had a three-sixty panorama.

"Is there any city this incredible?" she said.

I looked down at San Francisco. "No," I said. "Surely not." Actually, I wouldn't know. I had never been out of the state, let alone out of the country. There were my book tours, of course, but they hardly counted as travel: flying into an airport, seeing the inside of a nearby hotel room, being rushed through town to a bookstore, being rushed back to the airport, flying to another city. Now that I have seen other parts of this planet, I wonder back at this lackluster lack of wanderlust. I recognize now that I had always been a tag-along type of fellow, always content in real life to follow Audra wherever she led, which ultimately wasn't far from university or law office, always content in my fantasy to create my own little worlds in my novels where I could travel anywhere at all in the universe, known and unknown, without ever leaving my house. As I look at it now, I recognize it as a meagre existence despite the "romance" of being "a real-life author" married to "a beautiful, up-and-coming prosecutor", "hobnobbing with the rich and famous" in "the most fabulous city in the world". In fact, I was in isolation.

As I stood atop Twin Peaks looking out over the bay, my father's words came to me again: "I just marvel who was the first person to ever stand looking at this." I turned to look at the Golden Gate Bridge and where it met the Marin coast. That's where the people from Alaskawards would have arrived first—many thousands of years after the birth and death of our Neandertal boy, three particles of which were now in the womb of the woman

beside me, to survive or not to survive. They would have arrived at that point of land above the Gate, met the breach, seen there was no way to get across, not even on logs—or canoes? did they have canoes yet?—backtracked and gone east through the marshlands at the top of the bay, crossing the little rivers there—logs would easily achieve those crossings—traveled along over to that point above the Carquinez Strait where this woman and I had discussed attempting this clone, been stymied from proceeding farther because of the treacherous currents, traveled on around the waters until a ford was found, and then down again, and westward again until they reached that point across the bay where the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge met the land, stood on that point for how many moments or how many generations gazing across the bay to this hill upon which I now stood before they moved on, traveling southward around the great bay, then northward up the peninsula and finally climbed this hill and made this three-sixty turn and looked out upon the vastness of the ocean? "I just marvel," I said out loud, "who was the first person to ever stand looking at this. I just marvel what that person would say today. My father used to say that."

There was a ship making its way from the ocean toward the Golden Gate and another ship making its way from the Golden Gate out toward the wide waters of the Pacific. "Do you know a song," I asked, "about 'the wide river'? No, 'wide water'. 'The water is wide but you can't get over to the other side.' Something like that?"

"I don't know many songs. The one about the 'Wide Missouri'?"

"No."

"About the 'River Jordan' and how it's 'deep and wide'. Something, something 'on the other side'? 'Milk and honey'?"

"No."

"I don't know it then."

"My dad used to sing it."

"That's nice," she said. Then after a moment: "I wonder if my father sang. Auntie sings. That's how I know the 'Wide Missouri' that Nye-Kole crossed over."

"Oh, yeah, the slave from Africa. She must have."

"Holly sings. I think about our little girl. I think about Holly singing to her. Don't you think that's going to be beautiful?"

"Very beautiful," I said and turned to her and pulled her into my arms and held her tight. She cried in my arms and held onto me. I looked over her shoulder out to the shimmering ocean. A wind came up and blew at us. From China, I supposed.

"Boy, talk about 'wide water'!" I said, and Luz pulled herself out of my arms and turned to face the ocean with me. "People sail on that ocean. People have sailed across it."

"Frenchy's people did it. Both sides."

"You're right."

It was sobering. It was diminishing. Luz held onto me as the wind whipped us, and I held onto her. The threshold we stood on was terrifying and exhilarating.

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