

Glass Chimera

a novel by

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Beginnings

I

'Twasn't a good situation, there in 1927.

To hear the story from ole Wash (Great-Grampa Beau had said) the captain had ordered the boat to be steered too close to a breach in the levee. And so, while the pilot spun the wheel in frantic dismay, the *Leda Mae* gradually got sucked out of the main channel, and then suddenly found herself sliding on a torrent of river water right through a flood-forced levee crevasse.

"She quivered like a bridesmaid in a Yazoo wedding, then slid on down, twirling and rockin' like a sycamore leaf through a sluice gate, until Ole Miss finally dropped her on Beau Rivage ridge," ole Wash had said.

It had happened on this very spot seventy-three years ago.

The "ridge," by Louisiana standards constituted a mere rise of a few feet in several hundred of distance. And this is where William was now sitting, recalling the story that had been told to him of the demise of the *Leda Mae*. He was eating a pastrami sandwich, while taking a break from his work in the microbiology lab.

But even before that unfortunate incident, William's great grandfather, Beauregard Theseus, had quite possibly sat in this same spot back in, oh, 1907 or so, as he took a break from running one of the largest cotton plantations this side of New Orleans.

But now, in 2001, a pickle slice slid from the sandwich onto William's lap. He gingerly recovered it from his jean-clad thigh and slipped it into his mouth. A thought about his work in the nearby lab asserted itself. *Nuclear transfer from cell to cell should be so easy.* Maybe it would be, after a few times. But his mind wasn't ready to go there yet, so it started wandering again. He began to whistle an old melody that just drifted into his head, "*and every stitch was love. . . She made my coat of many colors that I was so proud of.*"

It was Dolly that called that tune—not Dolly the sheep, which pertained to his work in the lab—but Dolly the singer.

Oh, she had a crystal-clear voice that could whirl in your mind like pure white sugar spun into cotton candy. And yet it weren't so sweet that it wouldn't just absolutely pierce your heart, as if the belle herself, *Elise*, were splitting a wet Mississippi watermelon, and you could see its black-seeded, wounded-memory pith spillin' out so redly onto picnic-table recollections of afternoons long gone. Yes, for some reason or other the sound of her voice was plucking at William's insides as if he were still ramblin' along every dusty mile of foothill roads somewhere just north of the Ohio, beyond Kentucky, probably runnin' dang near empty.

Near Athens, William thought it was. Here's the thing: her voice weren't a Mississippi voice; t'weren't a Ohio voice neither. It was a Tennessee voice, resonating high and clear, as the wind on Rocky Top, comin' through the old Chevy radio in a breeze; it was the long flappin' tail of a coat of many colors, somehow soothing his urge to just be somewhere other than where he had started out.

Because this was America; you didn't necessarily end up where you started out.

As William sat munching, a flying blur beneath the nearby oak tree caught his eye. About twenty yards away from his rocking chair position, a black squirrel had leapt from a branch to the ground, and begun clawing for an acorn. Why the squirrel had leaped so dramatically God only knows, for the branch from which it had propelled itself extended all the way to the ground. The creature was frolicking—having a grand time, it seemed—jumping from limb to limb, then to the earth, then back up into its leafy haven again. *It's celebrating squirrelness, doing what squirrels do, actualizing some built-in rodentary genetic inclinations, gathering nuts for winter's approaching dearth.*

The animal's energetic tail began performing a repetitive motion—a back and forth motion slowly whipping the air. As William watched, almost thoughtlessly now, a breeze stirred the uppermost branches of the tree. His vision wandered from the squirrel low to the branches high. The enormous mass of this two-centuried oak organism suddenly struck William full of wonder. *Such a wide occupation of space (and time!)*.

The professor's curious gaze meandered to the ground again; he noticed an acorn on the ground beside his rocking chair. *It had all started with a little acorn such as this.* The old arbor, a massive proliferation of steadfast cellulose, was as wide as it was tall. *Surely, this acorn on the ground had dropped, or been blown from, the big one—the mother tree, as it were.* Then he remembered the story his daddy had told him about “mama oak” and its nearby offspring. William turned to his left to catch a view of the smaller, younger tree. Standing about thirty yards to his left, and sixty or so yards from the “mama oak,” was the one his father had called “baby” oak.

He was at a midpoint between the two. In front of him in the near distance, beyond a grassy pasture, was the cluster of agricultural buildings that included his lab. To his left and behind was a dilapidated gazebo, from which he had retrieved the weathered rocker. He swayed lazily in the warm October sunshine. After estimating the diameter of *baby oak's* trunk—probably three feet at eye level—he judged *mama's* to be about five feet at the same elevation.

The account of “baby” oak's sprouting had been passed to William's grandfather, Thaddeus, by Washington Jones, sharecropper and former owner of this 20-acre plot where William now daydreamed and upon which the two trees so generously cast their life-protecting shade. The legend extended by ole' Wash's telling was that *baby oak's* acorn had been thrust into its loamy home by the hull of the wrecked *Leda Mae* riverboat during the great flood of 1927. He was remembering the tale. A cool breeze stirred. The long, Louisiana summer was beginning, at last, to moderate.

William stood up, set his empty lunch bag down on the rocker, slurped the last swig of iced tea, and walked over to the base of *baby oak*. Standing on the tree's barky-dark, gnarly roots (if you could call them roots, for they were fully above ground), he examined its trunk closely, noting the grey-brown rivulets of space between each chunky ridge. He turned slowly around, balancing on *baby's* knobby knees, and looked back toward *mama*.

Yes, it was about a riverboat's length between the two trees. Ole Wash had said that the *Leda Mae's* paddlewheel had come to its final resting place at the base of *mama oak*. William gazed across the pastured expanse at the twice-centegenarian tree. Even at this distance, her voluptuous roots could be plainly seen, extending radially and forming a bumpy regal platform beneath the wizened trunk.

While gazing at the ancient one, William walked over to her.

As he entered her still, protective enclosure, it seemed she whispered with breezy boasts of having captured, or *rescued*, long ago the faltering riverboat queen. William's nose flared with some musty imagined awareness of shipwrecked lives that had found their watery end at *mama's* submerged roots. Their souls must have flown, like startled birds, from beneath this sylvan anchorage. Now a drooping cloak of low-arcing limbs, moss-laden, proclaimed *mama's* guardianship over the memory of faded Mississippi riverboat glory. But her quirky roots had no comment. 'Twere the leaves and branches who cast their symphony of earthen sorrow.

And there is a large cleft in *mama's* trunk. Could it be the gash inflicted by the *Leda Mae's* careening sternwheel?

Up above, a sparrow was chirping.

But good events had happened here too. Perhaps the stately wooden witness preserved some protoplasmic memory of sharecropper Washington Jones. Surely he had rested here, wiping the sweat from his brow during midday respite from daylong gathering of cotton. Surely he had taken a lunch of salted side meat and cornbread here beneath *mama's* merciful shade, in lieu of walking all the way back to the house.

Ole Wash's tale had further informed three successive generations that the two oaken growths, posted as they were on each end of what was for many years the *Leda Mae's* carcass, marked an identifiable site of wrecked-riverboat booty. For years afterward, local folks would visit the site regularly to retrieve blades, beams and planks from the midst of the forlorn boat's dilapidating frame.

Many a plow or hoe blade had been crafted from the *Leda Mae's* forsaken sternwheel. Many a shotgun home had been assembled by sharecroppers who had yanked, pulled and cut wooden treasure from her fashionably slick decks and her formerly sturdy hull. Such was the best and final use of her finely-crafted body parts, which had been, after all, not nearly

worn out; for the regal *lady* had met her demise, alas, on her maiden trip down and up the river.

William turned around and surveyed once again the *baby* oak. Standing now on the spot where *Leda Mae's* paddles had spun their last spin, William peered beyond his rocking chair and the weathered gazebo at the younger tree that legend says had germinated beneath *Leda Mae's* rotting bow. She had paddled down from Pittsburgh only once, unloaded her cargo of Americans and cotton in New Orleans, then returned only 57 miles upriver. Her legacy: a scattered bunch of tenant farmers' houses and two live oak trees.

"Honk! . . honk!" came a startling call from overhead.

For an instant the microbiologist glimpsed overhead a flock of migrating geese, veering in the whisper-blue sky. Then they disappeared beyond the expansive limbs. Noisily declaring a terminus of their annual flyway, they descended onto nearby Lake Mendelle. As William watched geese disappear beyond the gnarled majesty of the old tree, a flock of starlings took flight from its hundreds-year-old branches and headed into the direction from which the geese had flown.

And again his mind took to the air.

Oh, but Dolly had a voice that could break your heart, or put it back together. Thinking back on it, he must have been hightailin' it away from the memory of a certain belle, with the smell of her perfume still waftin' through his wincin' heart like the magnolia blossom on Aunt Charlotte's dinner table, where a childhood picture of the queen of England in blue velvet perpetually surveyed the room from above a sumptuous buffet. Elise's perfume was as pungent in his mind as that magnolia, the only thing that made scents of her absence. The two of them had sat there beneath the queen's benevolent gaze while Aunt Charlotte entertained. But then Elise had disappeared into southern air as thick as her perfume, and William had headed for Ohio and college. The memory, accompanied by Dolly's altous voice on the radio, had fanned out wider in his vacant life than that magnolia blossom in its doilied elegance.

But that was then, and this is now. He waved the distractions away like swamp gnats and turned to walk back to his lab and the task that he had set for himself.

It was time to get back to work. The dutifull left brain knew better than to chase those thumping right-brain rabbit trails, and he understood there's no productivity in permitting brain paths to be trodden by frivolous musings, wherein he might wander into oblivion along Ohio backroads that he had traversed almost forty years ago. At this moment he should be busily engaged in an important procedure beneath the microscope. *Better get back to it.*

It was Dolly that got him back on track. He had thought about Dolly—not the singer with a voice like spun sugar. Dolly, the sheep.

William was, at this time of his life—this juncture in his quest for knowledge, excellence, and proficiency—attempting to reproduce the Roslin nucleus-transfer procedure, which successfully engendered the world's first cloned mammal.

William's project would produce, however, not a new ewe, but a copied cow. Having shaken his mind from the distractions of oak trees, mamas, babies, belles and wrecked boats, he ambled all the way back to the low cluster of university outpost buildings, entered his laboratory and resumed the delicate procedure that he hoped would generate a cloned bovine.

With lunch and those unplanned thoughts safely set behind him in a designated place in the space/time continuum, the microbiologist found himself a few minutes later, back in the lab, gazing intently through oculars into the fertile Petri-dish home of *Elsie*, the calf-to-be, whose nomenclature, if not her primogeniture, would be a subtly anagramic variant of the name *Elise*.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch. A nucleus will not fight back. It will just sit there, being manipulated, allowing any bullish surrogate to penetrate her private space. William pressed the pipette, sucking the coy nucleus out of her cellular home.

You will be replaced, little nucleus, thought William, watching through his microscope as the miniscule blob disappeared into a glass tube. *You are expendable; your place in the universe will be taken by someone else, a nucleus who is better equipped than you for this embryonic mission.*

“Go on, little nukie, and make room for a genetically favorable substitute. Out with the old, in with the new,” spoke William softly to his little beast, his little bovine oocyte. Now he squeezed the rejected nucleus

out of the pipette, and into Petri-dish obscurity. It became a non-entity, like the fading memory of Dolly's voice on that Ohio backroad and the useless recalling of Elise's perfume.

Carefully, he obtained by similar procedure, the preferred nucleus from a different dish. Then, transporting it from one microscope-enabled workstation to another, he lowered his hand toward the glass container that would become Elsie's embryonic home for a while.

"Whoops!" He dropped it. William had pressed the pipette prematurely, squirting its special chromosomal cargo into cytoplasmic oblivion. Now he would never find it. He'd have to start over.

But not today. Gently setting all instruments aside, the patient scientist rested from his rudimentary opus of genetic engineering, exited the laboratory, and returned to the rocker in the sunshine to reconsider his strategies. He would need help.

All was well, in spite of his dropping the preferred nucleus. The Roslin people in Scotland must have had similar mishaps while assembling the first cloned zygote. Surely, William's project would be simpler. At least he had the benefit of knowing that the procedure *could* work; the Roslin team had published their results just a few years ago. So it was just a matter of bringing together the right combination of cellular components, in conditions that were conducive to embryonic growth. By now it had been done hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, in various species.

Theseus' aim was to produce useful pharmaceuticals from cloned animals, utilizing the predictable cloning method; it would surely prove more efficient than using the cumbersome gene-injection method.

So William Theseus, Doctor of microbiology, President of Theseus University, had thought he'd take his shot at cloning; medical facilities at Theseus were in need of hormones that could be produced by cows in their milk, if their genes were engineered accordingly. Might as well venture into the frontier of recombinant DNA, and do mankind a favor or two, since his financial security was a given. He still had, maybe, a good third of a life of research ahead of him. Starting with the clone procedure was a bit like learning the fundamentals, so that he and mankind could go on to greater, and possibly more profitable, exploits. And if he could get a handle on the necessary procedures, his students at the University would follow.

Couplings

2

“That upstart banty rooster is chasing hens around the barnyard again, Mother,” said Noah to his wife. “And in the middle of the night. It ain’t natural. What’s got a hold of him? I’ve a mind to take the shotgun after him, so’s I can get some sleep.”

“Oh, plug your ears, dear. We’ve got no need for a dead rooster. Besides, he’ll calm down in a minute, as soon as he finds what he’s looking for. Come on over here, honey. I’ll give you somethin’ that’ll put you to sleep.” Then, deciding not to wait for her agitated husband, Becky Davis walked over to the bedroom window where he was peering out at the barn. Standing behind the man with whom she’d spent these thirty years, she wrapped her arms around his brawny back and spoke softly, fetchingly: “Come on, hon. Let’s go to bed. He’ll shut up in a minute.”

And so they did.

The next morning, Noah was drinking coffee while Becky made scrambled eggs. Sitting at the kitchen table, he could see, out the window, the whitened tip of Aradne Ridge about three miles away through the crisp blue Carolina October morning. “We’ve got a little snowcap on Aradne, mother. The front came through last night, and we’re looking at...” He squinted at the thermometer hanging outside on the glass. “We’re looking at, oh, thirty degrees. It’s about time. This is the latest I can remember, getting’ the first freeze. I guess maybe Al Gore’s on to somethin’.”

“You mean the global warming thing?” She looked quizzically at him over little bifocals, and across the stovetop, which was in an island cabinet between the kitchen and breakfast table.

“Yes.”

“How can you think about global warming on a morning like this, when it’s thirty degrees out?”

“I mean, it should have happened a few weeks ago. Why, when I was a boy, we would have had two or three of these below-30 nights by now.”

Becky let out a little laugh. “This warming business doesn’t bother me much, since now it’s me out there at sunup gathering the eggs, instead of Robby and Roberta.”

She cracked another egg, allowing yolk and albumen to slide down into the frying pan. “I suppose the earth really is warming, Noah, but it’s probably too late to do much about it, as much stuff as we’ve already dumped into the atmosphere.”

“Well, don’t say that to Roberta. She doesn’t think much of any defeatist attitude when it comes to global warming. And she wrote in that email last week something about everybody’s ‘carbon footprint’ should get smaller.” Noah slurped coffee and looked out the window again. “Speakin’ of which, are they coming home for Thanksgiving?”

“Roberta will be driving up here Wednesday night. But Robby won’t make it here. He said there’s too much going on at the research station. Dr. Theseus will be cloning a cow or some such thing, and he doesn’t want to miss it.”

“Well I hope if they come up with something productive he can help us get a piece of that action. It would be nice to keep a few more milkers on the side and sell at top dollar to the drug companies. Robby had said maybe we could raise some cows that would produce, right in their milk, proteins for busting blood clots, or insulin for diabetics, or some other drug-kind of substances.”

“Oh, let’s do it with chickens, honey. They’re a lot more manageable, and don’t cost as much to feed. Besides, we already know all about chickens.” She held up an egg. “See. There’s your self-contained natural package for those enzymes, or whatever genetically-engineered stuff it is they’re wanting to produce, right there. Wouldn’t that be easier to work with than milking cows? Especially in winter time.”

“I was thinking of the cows because that’s what Robby says they’re working with at the research station. What makes you think it would work with chickens?”

“Oh, I read about it somewhere, *Nature* or *Farm Journal*, or, I don’t remember where.”

“Ah, it’s all just pipe dreams, mother. We can do with it, or we can do without it. We’ll see if Robby and that gang come up with anything. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, I’m headed out to feed the herd. Thanks for breakfast.” Noah rose from the table, retrieving plate and cup, and brought them over to the sink. He kissed his wife on the cheek and offered a stupid little smile. “Some things are best done the old fashion way.”

The phone rang as she leaned toward him to receive the little peck. Then she stepped away to answer it, and Noah was headed for the door.

“*Honk, honk.*” As he stepped slowly down the back-porch stairs into brisk mountain morning air, Noah turned his head upward toward the brightening sky to see a flock of Canada geese veering their way toward northeast. Occasionally he would see this, but could never understand why the birds would be headed in any direction but south this time of year. Maybe they were taking a side trip, a pit stop at Aunt Gertie’s house.

There were two barns on the Davis property: the old one and the new one. The new one had a lot to do with mechanical implements and gas-powered vehicles. The green metal building smelled of oil and hay, and it was much warmer than the old barn. Noah hopped inside his Dodge Ram, opened the garage door by remote control, and backed the big gray truck out of the building, drove the thirty-odd yards across the back yard to the old barn. He stopped the truck just outside of it, and stepped out. Sparky, his yellow Labrador retriever was at his heels, leisurely wagging his tail, expecting affection. Noah reached down, rubbed the dog’s hairy head lovingly. “Hey, boy,” said the farmer.

The old barn was a large wooden structure. A cold breeze was whistling through its exterior planks—gray, checked boards that had been nailed to a post-and-beam frame some seventy years ago. Noah took the few steps over to the door, fingered the wrought-iron latch open and slid the weathered planks open. A while back, he had taken the old hinges off it, and mounted metal tracks on the inside of the wall so that the door could be opened without swinging. Sparky followed Noah’s every step with fond interest, tail wagging continuously, although this routine was the same every morning at about this time, and had been for many a year. The dog thrived on this regularity, and so did his master.

Noah hefted the big door along its track with a rumbling metallic sound. It was only a month ago that he had converted it from the old hinged arrangement. The project had taken a few days, but he was immensely pleased with the result, even though the benefit gained by it was nothing more than a few saved steps every morning. A life conducted with such routine tasks as his farm required was a life that seemed sublimely improved every time one chore was simplified or improved. He could have automated the old barn door so that it operated like the garage door on the new barn, but he hadn't done it. Didn't know exactly why. Maybe it was because of Sparky. Somehow that first greeting every morning with the faithful canine required movements that were closer to the ground, perhaps closer to the very motion of the earth itself with all its slow rhythms and cycles, than just sitting in a new truck while a septugenarian barn door opened automatically. It just hadn't seemed in keeping with the music of the universe to totally automate this small leg of the journey that would end in visiting cattle that would be fed for yet another winter day.

The wheels could use a little grease though, he noticed.

Noah hopped back in the truck, drove into the barn. Sparky followed. The farmer got out of his truck. The air wasn't really warm in here, but there was far less wind. The contrast of stillness was appreciable. The place smelled, as usual, of hay, manure, and corn. Noah loved it. He had always loved it, since the time long ago when he had accompanied his father on this same chore, fetching hay bales from this whistly old barn to take to cows in the fields nearby.

The ghost of Noah's father seemed to whisper in every little breeze that cooed through the checked gray planks of this place, seemed to move across every wisp or remnant of straw or spider's web that moved with invisible, spritely drafts. Not really. *Swish. Swish.* In the stall, the horse's tail, swish. His huge equine lips blithering a soft blubby mumble seemed to declare that all was at peace with the world. Would that it were true. These were the insignificant, soulful sounds that had accompanied a man's interaction with the animal world from time immemorial. *Mmmmmmm*, in rising intensity and decrescendoing cadence crooned Betsy, the milk cow.

So Noah had followed in his father's footsteps of farming. But his son was taking a quite different path.

hddq://riverroad.loc

Robby Davis was driving his muddy little red Nissan pickup along the river road. Wind rustled through the half-open window, loud, but not loud enough to overpower Alison's songbird voice on the radio.

It was a winding little two-lane road that curved along the levee of the Mississippi, about fifty miles upstream of New Orleans. Back among the hardwoods and occasional live oaks, he saw in bright sunshine a decayed landmark coming up on the right: eight ghostly white Doric columns, all that remained of the old Theseus plantation home. The sight bespoke his proximity to the agricultural research station of Theseus University, about a mile further ahead. On Robby's left, just beyond the road, the continuous, grassy slope of the levee rose to its consistently predictable height, thirty-odd feet above the surrounding pastureland. On his right, a brambly barbed wire fence stretched along the road, ten or so feet from it. In the distance, brown, white and black cows grazed contentedly. Above it all arced the infinite blue sky, punctuated with a few puffy white clouds.

The short drive along the river road may have been Robby's twentieth journey to the research complex, situated on a few hundred acres of what had been the thousand acres of delta land upon which Beauregard Theseus had built his cotton and sugar fortune, more than a century ago. Robby's graduate assistantship afforded him access to the modest, remote facility where Dr. William Theseus, great-grandson of Beauregard, spent much of his time scoping the frontiers of microbiology as it applied to numerous agricultural practices. Both professor and assistant alternated between this station and the Biological Sciences department on the main campus in the heart of New Orleans.

This bend on the river road always kindled Robby's imagination. The lonely antebellum columns, man-formed as they were and so starkly incongruent in the overgrowing wildness, remained as silent, stubborn monoliths, superfluous sentries guarding the lost opulence of a plantation culture that had turned to ashes generations ago. Honeysuckle, ivy and scrubby saplings now ruled the spot from whence Colonel Theseus had commanded his legion of slaves and later sharecroppers. Surrounding the old mansion's skeletal array were hundreds of acres: dark, delta loam

fermenting microbial memory of black feet whose calloused heels and toes traversed row upon thousandth row of King Cotton's scurrilous servitude.

About a mile past the fallen home site, Robby turned his truck into the familiar driveway of Theseus University Agricultural Research Station. A quarter-mile into the site he passed the oval-shaped "palace" on the right, a large, clean masonry building where selected animals were kept in controlled conditions. To his right were three smaller buildings of the same golden masonry hue. These were labs where most of the experimental work was done. He parked between the second and third building, and stepped out of the little truck. As he approached the door of the middle building, which housed an office, he heard his name called from somewhere out in the field.

"Hey!" yelled William Theseus to his assistant.

Robby stopped, took a few steps backward so he could see beyond building # 3. He saw, standing between the gazebo and *mama* oak, his mentor and boss, Dr. William Theseus. The lanky, sandy-haired professor gave a little wave, smiled. Robby strode into the field, toward the gazebo, a favorite spot for the doc and his associates to occasionally grab a bite and talk about what-all was going on. "How's it going, doc?"

"I dropped the nucleus from the gap-zero donor cell, and decided I was too hungry to continue," said the wry scientist. "Just had lunch. How 'bout you?"

"Yeah, I had lunch. So you haven't cloned Elsie yet?"

"Nope. As a matter of fact, maybe I won't do her." He put on a look of feigned worry.

"Why not? Is there a problem?"

"No. But I think maybe you want to do it. Don't you?"

"Me? Why?"

The middle-aged professor started to take a little stroll toward *mama* oak. "Oh, you're younger...got a steadier hand. It takes a very steady hand, you know. The whole procedure is so incredibly, uh, small."

Robby began following as Theseus ambled toward the old oak. "Well, sure, anything I can do to help."

The professor was looking curiously at the big tree. "Robby, do you see that gash in the trunk of *mama* oak?"

"Yes."

“My dad told me it was inflicted by a riverboat that went through a breach in the levee during the big flood of 1927.”

“The flood water brought the boat from the river all the way over here?”

“Yes. And when the paddlewheel, which had long metal tines on it like a fan, struck the tree, they peeled the epithelial layer, or bark, off. And, look at this.” He walked over to the tree and put his hand in the crevasse at about eye-level on the trunk. “See. This part of the trunk never regenerated bark. It’s just exposed wood. But it was in this crevasse. You see how the surrounding bark continued to grow outward as part of the rings, but inside the gash there, in the wounded part, the tree sort of refused to grow, refused to cover itself with new bark. The cells in that area must have been in a kind of shock, or something.”

Robby was obliged to respond to the professor’s prompting observations. “Well, immediately after the injury was inflicted, of course there was no crevasse, no protective adaptation. The wound was just a naked gash on the exterior, with high exposure to the elements. The exposed part retreated, while the undamaged bark tissue around it continued to grow outwardly.”

“You think so? I think there probably *was* that crevasse there, pretty much in the shape we see here, after the boat struck it. The boat’s impact changed the shape of the tree. The tree retained the new shape as part of its continuing development. Correct ‘oak’ trunk shape became a lower priority than protecting exposed tissue.”

“Not really. The tree never put bark back over the wound.”

“The boat killed some cells, so those cells didn’t send the message to the outside to produce bark there.”

“The boat killed some cells? Maybe it just damaged them. Maybe the trauma knocked out part of their genes, those genes responsible for sending bark messages.”

“Well, look at those wood cells. Do they look dead?”

Robby walked over to the tree, reached in the crevasse, scratched the exposed wood with his fingernail. “It looks like living cellulose to me.”

“So those traumatized cells apparently continued to live. But they stopped making bark.”

“They might not have anything to do with making bark. It may be that the surrounding bark cells are responsible for ‘expanding’ their own influence.” Robby laughed.

“Yeah, well anyway, somebody dropped the ball, and the organism ended up unprotected in that spot.”

“Didn’t make any difference, doc. The tree has survived seventy-three years with that vulnerability.”

“But the tree will die one day. Will that day come sooner as a result of this unprotected spot?” The professor raised his eyebrows and formed a funny expression—half grin, half grimace.

“God only knows, doc. I don’t think anybody can answer that question. And I know nobody has the time to try and figure it out.”

“What we’re looking for is the genes that can make those corrections.”

“In the tree?”

“In the cattle that we’re working on. We want to locate the genes to make those corrections, then replace faulty genes with better ones, and then insert the improved DNA into egg cells. If we can do that for a bull, and for a cow, then mate them, we’ve got ourselves a herd of perfect bovines, Robby.” The professor laughed out loud.

“We’ll probably have to improve our own genes first, by inserting some longevity, so we can stay on the project for the next, oh, hundred years or so.”

“I don’t mean ‘we’ in the sense of you and me. I’m talking about the collective efforts of all biologists working together.”

Robby’s cell phone jangled in his pocket. He pulled the thing out and opened it. He looked quizzically at the screen, not recognizing the number. “Hello. . . oh, hi, Marie.” A big smile leapt onto his face. “Just fine. How are you? . . . Oh, Florence. Cool. . . Sure. He’s right here. . . Yeah. It’s good to hear from you.” He looked at the professor, who was looking up into *mama* oak at a squirrel, but listening intently to their phone greetings. “Here, doc.” He handed the phone to his mentor. “It’s your daughter.”

“*Buon giorno, mia figlia.*”

“You’re not going to believe what happened here last night.”

The doc laughed, still watching the squirrel as it worked busily in the tree branches far above them. “I’d believe anything coming from you. The Pope quit his job?”

“No, silly. Vandals overturned a statue in the *Piazza Signoria*. I’m standing here now looking at it, *Hercules Slays the Centaur*, by Giambologna. The statue was overturned; it’s down on the steps. Hercules’ arm broke off.”

“You’re kidding, *mia figlia*.”

“I’m serious, dad. The *carabinieri* have the area blocked off.

“How in the hell could anybody do a thing like that?”

“It happened about four o’clock in the morning. We’ve heard that the perpetrators managed to somehow get a truck into the piazza. They tossed a cable lasso around Hercules and pulled the whole statue over with the truck. Then they hightailed it out of here.”

“And the police couldn’t catch them?”

“It seems the whole incident took less than a minute to perform. And, at four in the morning, who could have expected such a thing to happen? The police were taken by surprise.”

“I’ll bet the cop who was watching the piazza entrances is in big trouble.”

“Well, actually, he was mugged. We’ve heard that the vandals tied him up and drugged him.”

“Who told you that?”

“Just a woman in the crowd here. There’s probably a thousand people here right now, gawking at Hercules with his arm knocked off.” Marie laughed. “It’s really kind of funny, especially the way the police are handling it. This one inspector, who seems to be the main one—I swear he looks and acts like an Italian version of Inspector Clousseau.”

“So, Marie, what would be the motive for such a crime as that?”

“Ha. God only knows. Maybe somebody out there wants to help the centaur obtain vengeance against his slayer.”

“Right. What was depicted in that sculpture? I’m trying to picture it.”

“The biggest, baddest hero of Greek mythology is locked in a kind of death embrace with a centaur, whose head is bent back in a quite helpless position. Hercules definitely has the upper hand. The story goes that he was furious because the centaur tried to rape his wife.”

“Now, since Hercules gets his arm knocked off in this episode with the vandals, Hercules loses the upper hand,” quipped the doc.

“Ha, ha, dad. That’s pretty good. But hey, I’ve got to go. We’re going to a concert, and it’s about to start.”

“Okay, Marie. Thanks for calling. It’s good to hear you’re still alive every now and then. And stay away from those Italian loverboy types. . . Yes. . . love you too. *Ciao*.”

“Sounds like the epicenter of Renaissance Art has some serious art thieves,” quipped Robby, as the doc snapped the phone shut.

Dr. Theseus laughed. “Or vandals. They overturned a statue of Hercules fighting a centaur in the middle of the night.”

“Hercules fought a centaur in the middle of the night?”

“No, wise guy.” The doc punched him playfully on the arm. “They pulled the statue, a famous statue, over in the middle of the night, with a cable attached to a truck.” He chuckled. “Man, it never ceases to amaze me—the strange things that people do.”

For a moment, there was an odd silence while he was thinking. Then Robby asked, “The centaur is the one that’s half man and half horse, right?”

“Right, in some Greek myths.”

“Hey doc, I was just wondering about your clone procedure. If, instead of inserting the selected bovine nucleus into our enucleated oocyte, uh...if you were to slip a nucleus from a human stem cell into it instead, what would we have then? Maybe a *cowtaur*?”

The doc laughed again, this time loudly. “You really are a wise guy, Robby. But no, the new cell would be essentially human, uh, 99% human in its characteristics, because of the human chromosomes in the human nucleus. Only the cytoplasm outside the nucleus would be bovine. But that’s a funny thought. Maybe that’s how the centaur came to be, and maybe that’s why Hercules wanted to kill him. Hercules might have had prejudice against a chimeric centaur—a creature neither fully human, nor fully horse—a creature caught between the world of humans and animal existence.”

“Well, we know the Greeks didn’t have nucleus-transplant procedures.” He smiled. It was a facetious hypothetical remark.

“No, but they must have had *something* like that going on...something a little more primitive, more basic to human urges.”

Tails

3

A fat rope went flying through the air like a tossed serpent. Dockhand Dree caught the end, and wrapped it around a flange on the end of the Decatur Street dock. *The Whoodoo Queen* was arriving at New Orleans, having sailed from Grand Cayman a few days ago.

The cruise ship had a load of passengers who had cavorted their way through carefree Caribbean venues and were now returning to that port city which funnels water, people and products like a great aortic spout from our North American heartland. It also has the dubious distinction of having become the mother of all North American party towns. From this confluence point the travelers, weary of their revelries, would disperse to all points west, north and east and resume their semiglamorous lives.

The ninety-ninth person to disembark was Simon Lafraneer—a fifties-something entrepreneur whose partly-hungover but dapperly-threaded girth wobbled slightly as he stepped from the gangplank. Simon's rotund face contorted into an uninhibited glower as he collided with Dockhand Dree. The dazed cruiser stepped aside and squinted at his obstacle. The rope-handler's attire of horizontally-striped shirt and gondolier hat clashed incongruously with these roughshod American surroundings, as if this port-of-call didn't quite attain its coveted status as a Venice on the Mississippi.

"That's the biggest damn gondola I've ever seen, matey," he cracked to the dockhand.

"*Buongiorno*, you idiot," said Dree. "Watch where you're goin'."

Simon's brief disorientation resolved into a slowly wayward stroll over the levee walkway, accompanied by the jostlings of his talkative fellow passengers. *So much talk. What the hell was there so much to talk about?* His hesitant,

hungover countenance this morning belied the raw intelligence hidden within; he knew himself to be smarter than he must appear. Unlike this menagerie of frivolous tourists who skittered around him, Simon had business to take care of in the city of Big Easy.

Oh, it was a party! just to be near this place.

Merging into a giddy sidewalk crowd at Jackson Square, our traveler found himself startled by the tip of a swishing horse's tail across his face, as if he were being welcomed with beastly caresses into King Creole's carnival of curious delights. The ticklish wisp of horsetail in his oncoming path arrested Simon's forward progress; he looked sideways at the animal's black mane, brown neck and then up at the white-shocked face. From beneath a polka-dot banded straw hat, high, whiskery ears protruded. The nervous creature shuffled its feet. With no turning of the head it cast large brown eyes, encumbered by blinders, toward our wayward visitor, as if to say with maybe a little embarrassment: *I did not choose this hat.* Simon thought: *I dreamed of that horse with the hat on. Was it last night?*

Bizarre barkers, fortune tellers, caricature painters and sleight-of-hand buccaneers surrounded the disembarker's path with a gilt drapery of jaded nonchalance that hung upon the humid air like a shroud of unbelief. A sequined jester walked by with flopping hat, fake smile, and alcohol breath at eleven in the morning. A contrived medieval merriment hung upon all this disheveled modernity like day-after Mardi Gras beads on a blinking traffic light.

"Déjà vu, to you too," said Simon to the horse. *Riders on the storm; into this world we're born...*

The wanderer ventured farther; he *was* going somewhere. Across the sedated, Sunday-morning square, then beyond the cathedral spire, an oddly iconic bastion of propriety amid so much frivolous aimlessness. Simon entered the narrow-streeted labyrinth of the *Vieux Carre*, a netherworldly region of wafting enticements: garish sights, exotic sounds and decidedly earthly smells. He was accompanied by a straggle of other strangers who, like himself, were looking for something unusual.

He walked into the *Mephisto Lounge* on Bourbon Street. Peering through the smoky darkness, Simon saw the unusual person he was looking for, a thin, slick blond man drinking coffee at a wooden table in the back of the joint. Next to the table, a neon juke box blared *Honky-tonk Women*.

Simon sat in a chair opposite him.

“Any luck?”

“Lots of luck, Simon. And it’s all yours.”

“So you’ve got something for me?”

“Yeah, man.”

“Which is it?”

“O’Nessus.”

“No kiddin’?” Simon raised his eyebrows. “Spawn from O’Nessus?”

“The very same.” Heinrich smiled.

“And how do I know?”

A waitress in a satin bathrobe approached the two men. “What can I get you?” said she as she refilled Heinrich’s cup.

“Coffee and beignets for me, please Madam.” replied Simon.

“No beignets here, sir. What do you think this is? The frickin’ French Market?”

“Okay, sweetheart. Well, what have you got then, that’s, you know, like that?”

“I got Danish. You want it hot, or not?” She chuckled.

“That’ll be fine.”

“Hot, or not, sweetie?”

“Yeah, yeah, hot.”

“And how do you want the coffee?”

“Black, but throw me a shot of Jack Daniels in it.”

“Back in a minute, sweetie.”

The men didn’t speak for a minute or so. Heinrich was looking at the *National Enquirer*. The jukebox provided a convenient cover of noise. Then Simon restated his question: “How do I know what the hell I’m getting here?”

“Certified.”

“Oh, is it now? Who’s certifying? The owner?”

“The trainer.”

“The trainer.” Simon said, cynically. He paused. “That’s not very convincing, Heinrich.”

“The racing association has a DNA record. You can match it if you want.”

“That’s a little risky, isn’t it?”

“It’s more than risky. It’s downright stupid. Just trust me.”

“Like a hole in the head. We’re back to the starting gate, then.”

“Call Rizzo. He’ll vouch for me.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“You know his winner, *Bullish*?”

“Sure.”

“*Bullish* came from the same source.”

“from O’Nessus?”

“Uh, no. Same trainer. Squeaky Robinson.”

Simon turned the prospect over in his mind for a minute. The waitress brought his coffee and sweet roll. He slurped the coffee. Then he looked at Heinrich and said, “Supposin’ I was interested, how much would it be?”

“Uh, ten thousand.”

“You deliver?”

“That depends on where.”

“My client is near Asheville.”

“Nashville?”

“Asheville, North Carolina.”

“I guess that could be arranged. It’s a little out of the ordinary, out of the beaten path, you know.”

“Well, for that price, a few hundred miles one way or the other—what’s the difference?”

“Yeah, yeah. We gotta keep it colder than 200 below, you know.”

Heinrich waved the question aside.

“In frozen nitrogen?”

“Yeah.”

“How long is it good for?”

“Longer than you’ll be around to think about it—years, as long as you don’t let it thaw out like an idiot.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Aw, c’mon Simon,” complained Heinrich, “I didn’t come all the way down here for my health.”

“Hey, my friend, I’ve got a deal for you that would be more profitable for both of us.” Simon paused, and looked into Heinrich’s eyes, to read them. His headache had gone away.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Heinrich, exasperated, looked across the room at the waitress,”

“Serious. You could turn this into big bucks.”

Heinrich sighed. He was thinking that his last few days of traveling from Chicago might have been a waste of time. Resignedly, he asked, “What is it?”

“Angus embryos, hundreds of them, from South America. We can trade.”

Heinrich looked at Simon incredulously, then over at the waitress again. He mumbled, “She must have been pretty easy on the eyes, back in the day.”

“Huh?”

“What’ya think? I’m Ben Cartwright?”

Simon bent over and assumed a more serious, conspiratorial tone. “I know you’ve got buyers for this on your list. “It’s top of the line beef.”

“Hey! I’m in horse-racin’, Simon. I ain’t no cowboy. I don’t even know any ranchers. What you’re talking about has nothing to do with me.” For a few seconds, Heinrich halted his little rant. “No. I can see this whole thing has been a big friggin’ waste of my time.”

“Don’t get bent out ‘a shape. I’m just checking out the territory. It’s no big deal. I just thought you might want to expand your horizons a little bit.”

“No. It’s outa my league. Fuhgedabahdit.”

Simon leaned back in his chair, relaxed a little. “Okay, then. When can I get the other stuff?”

Heinrich let out a sigh of relief. The waitress was passing nearby. He spoke to her, “Can you bring me another coffee, dahlin’?”

She stopped at the table. “Sure, honey.”

“And I’ll take it with the shot, like my partner here.”

“Comin’ right up, honey. Anything else?”

“I’ll have one of them Danishes too.”

“Okay.” She looked at Heinrich, and a slow smile crept onto her worn, but attractive middle-aged face. She was a redhead. “You look like a man who could use a good joke. You wanna hear one?”

Heinrich returned her smile, involuntarily. With a little wave of his hand, he said, “Sure, dahlin’, let’s hear what ya got.”

“It’s a dirty joke. You still wanna hear it.”

“Comin’ from a nice gal like you, couldn’t be too bad.”

She watched him, expectantly. “White horse fell in the mud.” Then she let fly a big cackling laugh, and turned around. “Back in a minute,” said the waitress as she disappeared into a back room.

Tales

4

Sunday afternoon, October 22, 2000, Robby Davis sat in the student Union coffee shop, drinking coffee and reading the *Times Picayune*. He was reading an article reporting a discussion in the City Council meeting about levees in New Orleans, and whether they were being properly constructed. He looked up. Outside the large window, rain was falling in a steady downpour.

And then a torrent of memory filled his mind. He was back at the home place in North Carolina, watching from the kitchen window, as his father led their two horses, Milo and Mila, out of a gulley-washing rain into the old barn. Robby was about twelve at the time. Just now, he could see vividly in his mind, the shocks of white on both horses' faces. For some reason those white spots, plainly visible to him through the pouring rain, shone brightly in his memory. Three days later and it was still raining; Mila had delivered a foal. His father had let him name the little horse. Although Robby had named it *Red*, he always called it *Reddy*.

"Hello, Robby." A stack of books landed on the table next to his coffee cup, and the beautiful, dark face of Rosa Cyprana suddenly supplanted his little musing with an infilling awareness of the here and now. "Is this seat taken?" Her black eyes and full lips registered an honest, though weary, smile. The question was rhetorical. She sat down.

"Hi, Rosa. How's biology treating you?" Robby couldn't think of anything better to say. Charm was not his forte. But he was smart, and Rosa knew it.

"Reynaud's really piling the work on."

"She's a demanding teacher, all right. But well worth the effort."

“I’m just trying to get out of here.”

Robby, a little puzzled, commented, “Uh, I’ve got an umbrella here. You can use it if you like.”

She reached over and lifted a wisp of hair that hung over his forehead, and looked directly into his eyes with a smile. “No, silly. I’m trying to graduate. I’m not going anywhere *right now*.”

“Oh, right, Rosa.” He smiled back at her. “I feel for ya.” There was a little silence. Sensitivity was not Robby’s strong suit. Then he thought, and spoke, “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Well, Robby, since you mentioned it, yes.”

“Go ahead. Shoot.”

“Cell biology.”

“Sure.”

“The DNA’s all wrapped up in chromosomes, in the nucleus, right?”

“Uh, basically, yes, but not entirely.”

“There is DNA outside the nucleus?”

“Yes, in the mitochondria.”

“Those are organelles in the cytoplasm.”

“Right. They are like power plants, making energy for the cell to use in all its internal functions.”

“And they have their own DNA?”

“I wouldn’t say they have *their own* DNA. They do have some of the cell’s DNA. But it’s circular, not presented in helical strands like it is in the nucleus.” He thought for a moment. “Actually, Rosa, maybe the mitochondria do have something like their own DNA. That’s a matter for discussion. Biologists hypothesize that they existed as independent organisms during earlier stages of life development. It’s thought that they were taken in symbiotically by larger, more advanced molecular life forms.”

“Taken in?”

“Yes. It’s called endosymbiosis. The larger molecule needed ATP, which a mitochondrion produces; the mitochondrion needed, uh...” Robby was searching for an analogy. “a home, a sort of comfortable home.”

“I see. And this ATP substance is, er, something phosphate.”

“Adenosine triphosphate. Complex life forms need a lot of it. Mitochondria produce it very efficiently and prolifically, so the bigger cells took them on.”

“As partners.” She smiled.

“Right. Endosymbiosis.”

“Cool.”

“God thought so too.” He took a gulp of coffee, and smiled awkwardly while Rosa was writing. The expansive, high-ceilinged room echoed with the sounds of numerous voices, and rain pouring outside.

“It’s unique to the mother,” he said.

“What?”

“The mitochondrial DNA is unique to the mother. Unlike that in the nucleus, which is formed in the zygote by male and female chromosomes together, the mitochondrial DNA comes only from the mother.”

“Really?” She finished notetaking, and looked up at him.

“Yes. Kind of like the virgin birth thing.”

“How’s that?”

“God wanted to do a new thing in the human race, so he suspended the rules for one particular birth; he cut the male side off, and the whole chromosomal package was from a woman.”

Rosa thought for a moment. “Was Jesus a clone of Mary, then?”

Robby guffawed. “Well, I wouldn’t say that, I guess you could say God supplied the other half of the helix. At any rate Jesus was unlike any other man ever born.”

“I think he was kind of like you.”

“I hope so. I’d like to think that I’m a little like him.”

“You are, Robby. You are so kind to help me figure this out.”

“Any time. What other questions do you have?”

“Enzymes and proteins. What do they do? Oh, look.” Rosa noticed someone on the other side of the room. Stretching her arm up excitedly, silver bracelet sliding down to the elbow; she waved to a tall woman and called out, “Hey, Salli. I’m over here.” Rosa was obviously glad to see the other woman, who had a small child at her side. “Excuse us, Robby.”

As the mother and child approached, Robby could see that Salli was a woman in her early thirties, of similar Mediterranean, maybe Moroccan? ethnicity as Rosa. She was elegantly dressed. Her child was a boy of about four years old.

Rosa leaped up and hugged Salli; they exchanged fond greetings. Then she turned to Robby for introductions. “Salli, this is Robby Davis. He’s

a graduate assistant here in the biology department.” He stood to shake her extended hand.

“Robby, this is my friend, Salli Cretani.”

As the lovely woman shook Robby’s hand, she said, “This is my son, Alex.”

“Hi, Alex.” Robby directed a large grin at the boy, who stood shyly at his mother’s side, holding her dress for security.

Salli looked at Rosa and said, “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“You’re sure. He…” The elegant, dark-haired woman arrested whatever statement she was about to make. She had an unusually confident presence. In a kind, yet quite commanding feminine voice Salli looked into his eyes and spoke to him: “Robby would you excuse us for a minute?”

“Oh, sure.” He grinned, and lifted his arms from the table with a shrug.

The two women started to walk away. Alex did not move, but stood looking at them, suddenly very content to be where he was. Salli had a sudden thought, turned around. Picking up Alex, she set him in the chair next to Robby. “Now, Alex, you sit here with Mr. Davis while I talk to Rosa. Mama will be back in a few minutes.”

“Okay, mama.” He didn’t seem to mind being left with a stranger.

Salli reached into a large carry-back that was strapped to her shoulder, and produced a colorful book. Handing it to Robby, she advised, “He might like to hear you read this, if you care to, page 40.”

It was a dog-eared old copy of Harris’ *Tales from Uncle Remus*. Robby felt himself being amused as he flipped through the pages, lingering on the old line illustrations. He looked at the copyright page—1933 edition. *I remember this.*

Salli and Rosa walked over to a large glass panel that afforded a wide view of the grassy commons area outside. Just outside the window were camellias that still had white blooms. The rain had diminished.

Robby stopped turning pages at page 40. He looked at Alex, who was waiting expectantly. *I sure didn’t think I’d be doing this today.* He read aloud:

“Then Brer Rabbit talked mighty humble: ‘I don’t care what you do wi’ me, Brer Fox, just so you don’t fling me in dat

brier-patch. Roast me, Brer Fox, but don' fling me in dat brier-patch!

'It's so much trouble fer to kindle a fire,' says Brer Fox. 'dat I 'spect I'll have to hang you.'

'Hang me jez as high as you please, Brer Fox,' says Brer Rabbit, 'but fer the Lord's sake don' fling me in dat brier-patch.'

'I ain' got no string,' says Brer Fox, 'en now I 'spect I'll have to drown you.'

'Drown me jez as deep as you please, Brer Fox,' says Brer Rabbit, 'but don' fling me in dat brier-patch.'"

Robby turned a page and looked at Alex, who was rapt with attention. Robby was getting into it too. *What a good kid.*

" 'Day ain' no water nigh,' says Brer Fox, 'en now I 'spect I'll have to skin you.'

'Skin me, Brer Fox,' says Brer Rabbit, 'snatch out my eyeballs. Tear out my ears by de roots, en cut off my legs, but do please, Brer Fox, don' fling me in dat brier-patch.'"

"Cuz Brer Fox wanna hurt Brer Rabbit bad as he can, so he caught him by de behind legs en slung him right in de middle er de brier-patch. Dar was a considerable flutter where Brer Rabbit struck the bushes, en Brer Fox sorta hung 'roun fer to see what was gonna happen. By n by he heard somebody call him, en way up de hill he see Brer Rabbit settin' crosslegged on a chinkapin log combin' the pitch outa his hair wid a chip. Den Brer Fox know dat he been swop off mighty bad. Brer Rabbit was bleedsed fer to fling back some er his sass, en he holler out:"

" 'Bred n' bown in a brier-patch, Brer Fox—bred n' bown in a brier-patch.' En wid dat, he skip out jez as lively as a cricket in de embers!"

Hmm, thought Robby, whoever said the fox was the craftiest of critters?

It almost seemed as if the women had timed their exchange to fit this little episode. They sauntered back across the room, around tables filled with people who were talking, reading, eating. Salli was happy about

something. Rosa—he really didn’t know her very well, but—she had an undercurrent of worry beneath a slight smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Davis, for helping us in this way.”

“Oh, the pleasure is mine. I assure you. You have a fine young man here.

“Perhaps we’ll see you again some time. My husband, Kemal, owns the *BookCell* bookshop on Napoleon Avenue.

“Oh, yes, I know Kemal. Would you like a cup of coffee, or, anything?”

“Thank you, but we must be going. It was very nice to meet you.”

Robby stood as mother and child slowly walked away. Alex offered a wave and smile that seemed to include both Robby and Rosa.

Robby had noticed, with glances between Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit, that Rosa had retained a serious expression on her face throughout her conversation with Salli. “Are you okay?” Her eyes seemed a little red, as if she may have shed tears.

Rosa released a pent-up little laugh, as if something had yearned to burst from her soul. Then he saw a faint smile steal her lips, as she said: “Things are a lot better now than they were just a few days ago. They’ve offered me a room in their house. I’ll be moving in with them tomorrow.”

“Oh.” He didn’t know what to say. His cup was empty. “You want some coffee or something? I’m going for a refill.”

“Sure. I’ll go with you.”

As they approached the coffee line, he asked her: “So you’re moving. Where have you been living?”

“I’ve been in a small house a few blocks off St. Charles, but it’s a bad situation.”

After an awkward silence, made tolerable by the busyness of filling coffee cups, he inquired further: “Do you care to tell me about it?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I like stories. Have you heard the one about Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit?” Now he was handing the cashier a few bills.

“Actually, Robby, it’s a little bit like that.”

“Oh, yeah? How so?” He smiled at the cashier. “Keep the change.”

“I’m like Brer Rabbit, hoping somehow to get tossed into a brier-patch. It would be better than the tarbaby I’m stuck with now.”

“And what tarbaby is that?”

“Not really any kind of baby...a man I’ve been living with.”

“Ooh. I see. Hey, let’s move over there where you were a few minutes ago.”

“Sure.” They gathered their goods and walked across the room, now less crowded than it had been an hour ago when she had sat next to him. When they arrived at a table by the big glass looking over the commons, he decided not to be *too* inquisitive. So he sat opposite her at the table, and just looked into her eyes. She was grateful to have a friend to listen. He didn’t say anything, just looked out the window, and then back at her. What trouble there could be behind those beautiful dark eyes, he could not fathom. Nor could he imagine a man who, having access to the person behind them, would violate that trust. But he knew he was about to hear only one side of a complicated story. Any broken-up love affair could not be a simple story.

“I never should have moved in with Mick. But there’s something going on that he’s not telling me about.” She was wiping tears away.

Robby had the feeling that the hearing of what she was about to say would place him in some kind of risk. But he didn’t care. *You only go ‘round once. Live life to the fullest. Damn the torpedoes. We’re going in.* Furthermore, she was becoming, minute by minute, irresistible to him.

“Something going on. Is it another woman?”

“I don’t think so.”

There was a very long silence, two or three minutes. He looked out the window. The sky was clearing. He thought of his father, Noah, and the two horses Milo and Mila, and Reddy their foal. *That had been seventeen years ago.* Similarly, it seemed a long time ago that he had followed that memory trail, although it had been only an hour ago. It seemed a long time ago that he had explained mitochondria to Rosa, a casual acquaintance. Now, she was confiding in him. How had she judged him worthy to fulfill some trustworthy role? He couldn’t fathom it. *Doesn’t she know I’m the dorky kid who blew the curve for everybody else in chemistry class?*

“I moved into his place about a year ago. It was fine for a few months. But as time went by he spent more and more time at the riverboat casino, and I know he was drinking a lot...getting drunk every weekend.” She looked at Robby for signs of impending judgment, or rejection.

He said nothing, did nothing, wanted to take her hand, but would not. This was not the time to make gestures that could be easily misinterpreted. He looked out the window at the camellias, then at her again. He wanted to be a mirror for her.

“He took me with him a few times. But I’m not into it. Then he continued asking me for awhile even though I had no interest. By summer, he quit asking me, but he kept going. We’ve been living like strangers since about the time school started.”

“What does Mick do?”

“He’s a loan officer at a bank uptown.”

“Is he going to make any trouble about you moving out?”

“I hope not. And I don’t know why he would. I’m just an albatross around his neck now.”

“You’re a party pooper.” Robby thought he’d inject a little levity into the curtain of solemnity that surrounded them. It worked.

“Right!” she blurted, almost laughing with relief. “That’s what I am. I’ve had it with the party scene, even if it is with all the important people. Well, they’re not really important people, although they *think* they are. In fact, they seem pretty low-life to me.”

A sudden curiosity filled Robby. “Where are you from, Rosa?”

“Tarpon Springs, Florida. My father, Stephanos, was a sponge-diver and entrepreneur in the Greek community there.”

“And your mother?”

“A good woman, Cressida. She passed away two years ago.” Rosa looked out the window. Geese were flying by overhead. The sky was almost clear now. She gazed up at it for a few seconds, then down at the camellias just outside the window.

“When are you going to move?”

“As soon as I can get motivated to do it.” She was still looking at the flowers.

“I can help you if you like.”

“Oh, no.” She looked up at him. “No, you don’t want to get involved.”

“I’ve got a little truck. If I can help, it needs to be today, because tomorrow I’ll be back to teaching and grading tests for Dr. Theseus.”

“No, Robby. You don’t want to get involved.”

“You know, Rosa, there was a time a few years back when someone helped me. I was in a similar situation. And it made a huge difference. After that ordeal, everything got easier.”

“What happened?”

“It was pretty much the same situation, except there was no love affair going on. It was just a bad situation with two roommates who didn’t like me, and I didn’t like them.”

“And someone helped you out?”

“Yeah, my buddy Rashad. He’s gone back to Nigeria now. Graduated cum laude. He took me into a dorm room in the middle of my second semester, junior year. What a difference his intervention made! In the new living situation, I was able to turn what would have been a disastrous semester into a good one.”

Rosa was being very quiet; her expression was changing from relief back to worry. “I don’t know, Robby. What would you do if Mick came in while we were moving stuff out?”

He laughed confidently, perhaps a little arrogantly. He was beginning to warm up to this prince-in-shining-armor role. “Well, there wouldn’t be any reason to do anything, except...keep moving your stuff.”

“Right, Indiana Jones.” She nodded her head facetiously. “I could see him decking you.”

“Nah. The Lord is my shepherd. He prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve seen Mick throw tables, when he was drunk.”

“I’ll tell ya what, Rosa. In a few hours it will be Sunday night. He’ll probably go out for one more fling before the work week starts. We’ll wait till it’s dark, after supper. Then we’ll ease on over there while he’s gone, grab your essentials, and bingo! you’re home free. We’ll get you into Salli’s place. And if you’ve got some furniture to be moved...ah,” He fluttered his hand with a little gesture to indicate improvisation. “We’ll get it some other time.”