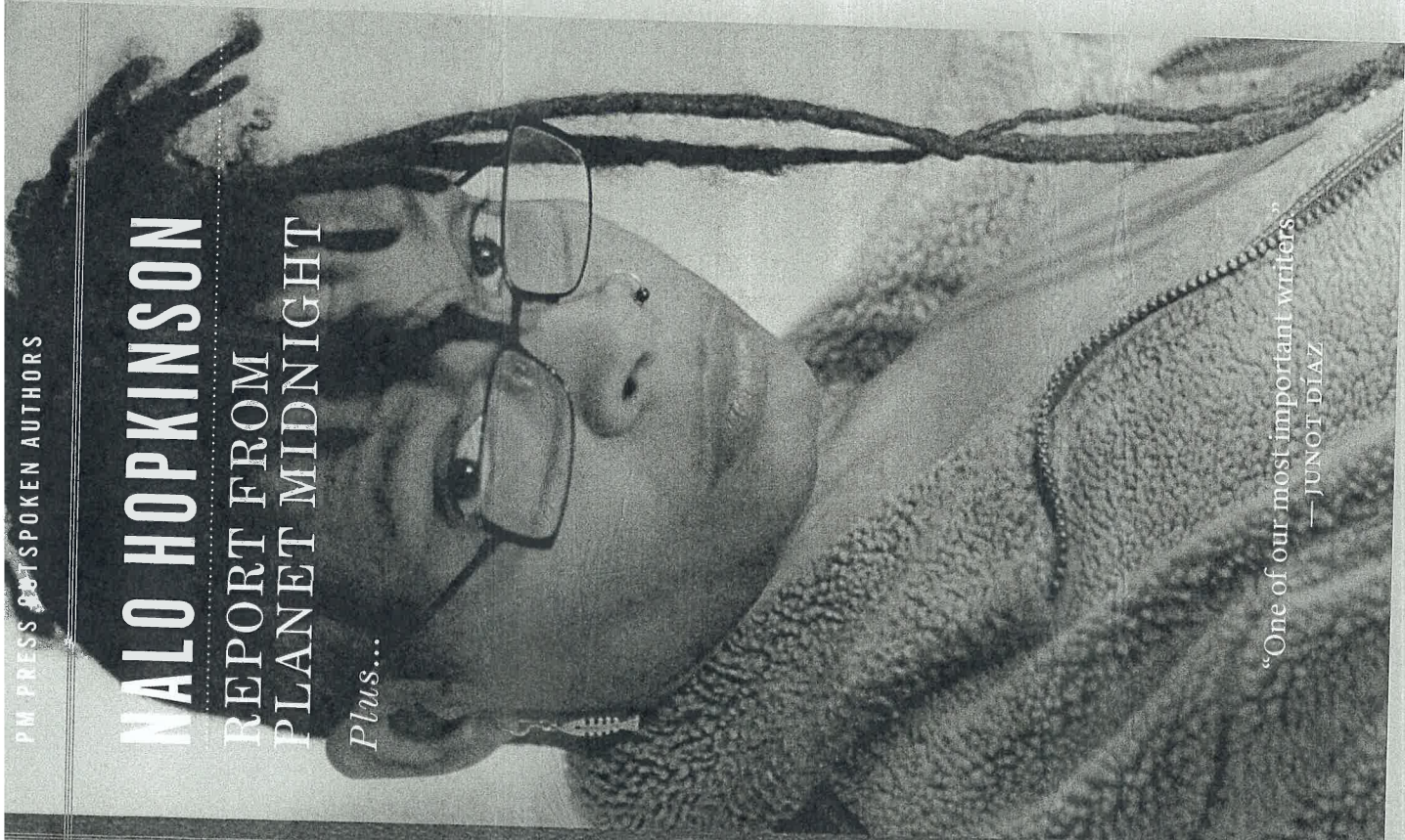


NALO HOPKINSON

REPORT FROM
PLANET MIDNIGHT

Plus...

"One of our most important writers."
—JUNOT DIAZ



REPORT FROM PLANET MIDNIGHT

plus

"Message in a Bottle"

and

"Shift"

and

"Correcting the Balance"
Outspoken Interview

NALO HOPKINSON

PM PRESS

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

"WHATCHA DOING, KAMLA?" I peer down at the chubby-fingered kid who has dug her brown toes into the sand of the beach. I try to look relaxed, indulgent. She's only a child, about four years old, though that outside head she's got looks strangely adult. It bobs around on her neck as her muscles fight for control. The adoption centre told Babette and Sunil that their new daughter had checked out perfectly healthy otherwise.

Kamla squints back up at me. She gravely considers my question, then holds her hand out, palm up, and opens it like an origami puzzle box. "I'm finding shells," she says. The shell she proffers has a tiny hermit crab sticking out of it. Its delicate body has been crushed like a ball of paper in her tight fist. The crab is most unequivocally dead.

I've managed to live a good many decades as an adult without having children in my life. I don't hate them, though I know that every childless person is supposed to say that so as not to be pecked to death by the righteous breeders of the flock. But I truly don't hate children. I just

don't understand them. They seem like another species. I'll help a lost child find a parent, or give a boost to a little body struggling to get a drink from a water fountain—same as I'd do for a puppy or a kitten—but I've never had the urge to be a father. My home is also my studio, and it's a warren of tangled cables, jury-rigged networked computers, and piles of books about as stable as playing-card houses. Plus bins full of old newspaper clippings, bones of dead animals, rusted metal I picked up on the street, whatever. I don't throw anything away if it looks the least bit interesting. You never know when it might come in handy as part of an installation piece. The chaos has a certain nestlike comfort to it.

Gently, I take the dead hermit crab in its shell from Kamla's hand. She doesn't seem disturbed by my claiming her toy. "It's wrong," she tells me in her lisping child's voice. "Want to find more."

She begins to look around again, searching the sand. This is the other reason children creep me out. They don't yet grok that delicate, all-important boundary between the animate and inanimate. It's all one to them. Takes them a while to figure out that travelling from the land of the living to the land of the dead is a one-way trip. I drop the deceased crab from a shaking hand. "No, Kamla," I say. "It's time to go in for lunch now."

I reach for her little brown fist. She pulls it away from me and curls it tightly towards her chest. She frowns up at me with that enfranchised *hauteur* that is the province of kings and four-year-olds. She shakes her head. "No, don't want lunch yet. Have to look for shells."

They say that play is the work of children. Kamla

starts scurrying across the sand, intent on her task. But I'm responsible to Kamla's mother, not to Kamla. I promised to watch the child for an hour while Babette prepared lunch. Babs and Sunil have looked tired, desperate and drawn for a while now. Since they adopted Kamla.

There's still about twenty minutes left in my tenure as Kamla's sitter. I'm counting every minute. I run after her. She's already a good hundred yards away, stuffing shells down the front of her bright green bathing suit as quickly as she can. When I catch up with her, she won't come. Fifteen minutes left with her. Finally, I have to pick her up. Fish-slippery in my arms, she struggles, her black hair whipping across her face as she shakes her head, "No! No!" I haul her bodily back to the cottage, to Babette. By then, Kamla is loudly shrieking her distress, and the neighbours are watching from their quaint summer cottages. I dump Kamla into her mother's arms. Babette's expression as she takes the child blends frustration with concern. Kamla is prone to painful whiplash injuries.

Lunch consists of store-bought cornmeal muffins served with sausages cut into fingerjoint-sized pieces, and bright orange carrot sticks. The muffins have a sticky-fake sweetness. Rage forgotten, Kamla devours her meal with a contented, tuneless singing. She has slopped grape juice down the front of her bathing suit. She looks at me over the top of her cup. It's a calm, ancient gaze, and it unnerves me utterly.

Babette has slushed her grape juice and mine with vodka and lots of ice. "Remember Purple Cows?" she asks. "How sick we got on them at Frosh Week in first year?"

"What's Frosh Week?" asks Kamla.

"It's the first week of university, love. University is

big people's school."

"Yes, I do know what a university is," pipes the child. Sometimes Kamla speaks in oddly complete sentences. "But what's a frosh?"

"It's short for freshman," I tell her. "Those are people going to university for the first time."

"Oh." She returns to trying to stab her sausage chunks with a sharp spear of carrot. Over the top of her head, I smile vaguely at Babette. I sip at the awful drink, gulp down my carrot sticks and sausages. As soon as my plate is empty, I make my excuses. Babette's eyes look sad as she waves me goodbye from the kitchen table. Sunil is only able to come up to their summer cottage on weekends. When he does so, Babs tells me that he sleeps most of the weekend away, too exhausted from his job to talk much to her, or to play with Kamla on the beach.

On my way out the door, I stop to look back. Kamla is sitting in Babette's lap. There's a purple Kamla-sized handprint on Babette's stained yellow T-shirt. Kamla is slurping down more grape juice. She doesn't look up as I leave.

When I reached the age where my friends were starting to spawn like frogs in springtime—or whenever the hell frogs spawn—my unwillingness to do the same became more of a problem. Out on a date once with Sula, a lissom giraffe of a woman with a tongue just as supple, I mentioned that I didn't intend to have kids.

She frowned. Had I ever seen her do that before? "Really?" she said. "Don't you care about passing on your legacy?"

"You mean my surname?"

She laughed uncomfortably. "You know what I mean."

"I really don't. I'm not a king and I'm never going to be rich. I'm not going to leave behind much wealth for someone to inherit. It's not like I'm building an empire."

She made a face as though someone had dropped a mouse in her butter churn. "What are you going to do with your life, then?"

"Well," I chuckled, trying to make a joke of it, "I guess I'm going to go home and put a gun to my head, since I'm clearly no use to myself or anyone else."

Now she looked like she was smelling something rotten. "Oh, don't be morbid," she snapped.

"Huh? It's morbid to not want kids?"

"No, it's morbid to think your life has so little value that you might as well kill yourself."

"Oh, come on, Sula!"

I'd raised my voice above the low-level chatter in the restaurant. The couple at the table closest to us glanced our way. I sighed and continued: "My life has tons of value. I just happen to think it consists of more than my genetic material. Don't you?"

"I guess." But she pulled her hand away from mine. She fidgeted with her napkin in her lap. For the rest of dinner, she seemed distracted. She didn't meet my eye often, though we chatted pleasantly enough. I told her about this bunch of Sioux activists, how they'd been protesting against a university whose archaeology department had dug up one of their ancestral burial sites. I'm Rosebud Sioux on my mum's side. When the director of the department refused to reconsider, these guys had gone one night to the graveyard where his great-grandmother was buried.

They'd dug up her remains, laid out all the bones, labelled them with little tags. They did jail time, but the university returned their ancestors' remains to the band council.

All Sula said was, "Don't you think the living are more important?"

That night's sex was great. Sula rode me hard and put me away wet. But she wouldn't stay the night. I curled into the damp spot when she'd left, warming it with my heat. We saw each other two or three times after that, but the zing had gone out of it.

Babette and Sunil began talking about moving away from St. John's, perhaps to Toronto. Kamla was about to move up a grade in school. Her parents hoped she'd make new friends in a new school. Well, any friends, really. Kids tended to tease Kamla, call her names.

Babette found a job before Sunil did. She was offered a post teaching digital design at the Emily Carr Institute in Vancouver. Construction was booming there, so Sunil found work pretty easily afterwards. When she heard they were moving, Kamla threw many kinds of fits. She didn't want to leave the ocean. Sunil pointed out that there would be ocean in Vancouver. But Kamla stamped her foot. "I want *this* ocean right here. Don't you understand?"

Sunil and Babette had made their decision, though, and Kamla was just a kid. The whole family packed up kit and caboodle in a move that Babette later told me was the most tiring thing she'd ever done.

On the phone, Babette tells me, "A week after we got here, we took Kamla down to Wreck Beach. The seals come in real close to shore, you know? We thought she'd love it."

"Did she?" I ask, only half-listening. I'm thinking about my imminent date with Cecilia, who I've been seeing for a few months now. She is lush and brown. I need both of my hands to hold one of her breasts, and when we spoon at night, her belly fits in my palm like a bowl of hot soup on a cold day.

"You know what Kamla did?" Babette asks, bringing me back from my jism-damp haze. I hear the inhale and "tsp" sound of someone smoking a cigarette. Babette has started smoking again during the move. "She poked around in the sand for a few minutes, then she told us we were stupid and bad and she wasn't going to talk to us any more. Sulked the rest of the day, and wouldn't eat her dinner that night. She's still sulking now, months later."

That's another thing about kids; their single-mindedness. They latch onto an idea like a bulldog at a rabbit hole, and before you know it, you're arranging your whole life around their likes and dislikes. They're supposed to be your insurance for the future; you know, to carry your name on, and shit? My mother's been after me to breed, but I'm making my own legacy, thank you very much. A body of art I can point to and document. I'm finally supporting myself sort of decently through a combination of exhibition fees, teaching and speaking gigs. I want to ask Cecilia to move in with me, but every time I come close to doing so, I hear Sula's words in my head: No children? Well, what are you going to do with yourself, then?

"Greg?" says Babette's voice through the telephone. "You still there?"

"Yeah. Sorry. Mind wandering."

"I'm worried about Kamla."

"Because she's upset about the move? I'm sure she'll

come around. She's making friends in school, isn't she?"

"Not really. The class bully has taken to calling her Baby Bobber. For the way her head moves."

I suppress a snort of laughter. It's not really funny. Poor kid.

"But it's not just that. She's making our lives hell with this obsession for Bradley's Cove. But it's not even that. She's not growing, Greg."

"You mean she's, like, emotionally immature?" Or intellectually? I think, but am afraid to ask.

"No, physically. We figure she's about eight, but she's not much bigger than a five-year-old."

"Have you taken her to the doctor?"

"Yeah. They're running some tests."

Cecilia can jerry-rig a computer network together in a matter of minutes. We geekspeak at each other all the time. When we're out in public, people fall silent in linguistic bafflement around us.

"They say Kamla's fine," Babette tells me, "and we should just put more protein in her diet."

Cecilia and I are going to go shopping for a new motherboard for her, then we're going to take blankets and pillows to the abandoned train out in the old rail yards and hump like bunnies till we both come screaming. Maybe she'll wear those white stockings under her clothes. The sight of the gap of naked brown thigh between the tops of the stockings and her underwear always makes me hard.

"There's this protein drink for kids. Makes her pee bright yellow."

The other thing about becoming a parent? It becomes perfectly normal to discuss your child's excreta with anyone who'll sit still for five minutes. When we were in

art school together, Babette used to talk about gigabytes, Cronenberg and posthumanism.

I can hear someone else ringing through on the line. It's probably Cecilia. I quickly reassure Babette and get her off the phone.

Kamla never does get over her obsession with the beach, and with shells. By the time she is nine, she's accumulated a library's worth of reference disks with names like *Molluscs of the Eastern Seaboard*, and *Seashells: Nature's Wonder*.

Kamla continues to grow slowly. At ten years old, people mistake her for a six-year-old. Sunil and Babette send her for test after test. None of the reports make sense. "She's got a full set of adult teeth," Babette tells me as we sit in a coffee shop on Churchill Square. "And all the bones in her skull are fused."

"That sounds dangerous," I say.

"No, it happens to all of us once we've stopped growing. Her head's fully grown, even if the rest of her isn't. I guess that's something. You gonna eat those fries?"

Babette's come home to visit relatives. She's quit smoking, and she's six months pregnant. If she'd waited two more months, the airline wouldn't have let her travel until the baby was born. "Those symptoms of Kamla's," Babette tells me, "they're all part of the DGS."

The papers have dubbed it "Delayed Growth Syndrome." Its official name is Diaz Syndrome, after the doctor who identified it. There are thousands of kids with Kamla's condition. Researchers have no clue what's causing it, or if the bodies of the kids with it will ever achieve full adulthood. Their brains, however, are way ahead of

their bodies. All the kids who've tested positive for DGS are scarily smart.

"Kamla seems to be healthy," Babette says. "Physically, anyway. It's her emotional state I'm worried about."

"I'm gonna have some dessert," I tell her. "You want anything?"

"Yeah, something crunchy with meringue and caramel. I want it to be so sweet that the roof of my mouth tries to crawl away from it."

Cecilia's doing tech support for somebody's office today. Weekend rates. My mum's keeping an eye on our son Russ, who's two and a half. Yesterday we caught him scooping up ants into his mouth from an anthill he'd found in the backyard. He was giggling at the way they tickled his tongue, chomping down on them as they scurried about. His mouth was full of anthill mud. He didn't even notice that he was being bitten until Cecilia and I asked him. That's when he started crying in pain, and he was inconsolable for half an hour. I call him our creepy little alien child. We kinda had him by accident, me and Cecilia. She didn't want kids any more than I did, but when we found out she was pregnant, we both got . . . curious, I guess. Curious to see what this particular life adventure would be; how our small brown child might change a world that desperately needs some change. We sort of dared each other to go through with it, and now here we are. Baby's not about changing anyone's world but ours just yet, though. We've both learned the real meaning of sleep deprivation. That morning when he was so constipated that trying to shit made him scream in pain, I called Babette in panic. Turns out poo and pee are really damned important, especially when you're responsible for

the life of a small, helpless being that can barely do anything else. Russ gurgles with helpless laughter when I blow raspberries on his tummy. And there's a spot on his neck, just under his ear, that smells sweet, even when the rest of him is stinky. He's a perfect specimen; all his bits are in proportion. I ask Babette what new thing is bothering her about her kid, if not the delayed growth.

"She gets along fine with me and Sunil, you know? I feel like I can talk to her about anything. But she gets very frustrated with kids her age. She wants to play all these elaborate games, and some of them don't understand. Then she gets angry. She came stomping home from a friend's place the other day and went straight to her room. When I looked in on her, she was sitting looking in her mirror. There were tears running down her cheeks. 'I bloody hate being a kid,' she said to me. The other kids are stupid, and my hand-eye coordination sucks."

"She said that her hand-eye coordination sucked? That sounds too . . ."

"Yeah, I know. Too grown up for a ten-year-old. She probably had to grow up quickly, being an adoptee."

"You ever find out where she came from before you took her?"

Babette shakes her head. She's eaten all of her pavlova and half of my carrot cake.

It just so happens that I have a show opening at Eastern Edge while Babette and Sunil are in town. "Excavations," I call it. It was Russ's anthill escapade that gave me the idea. I've trucked in about half a ton of dirt left over from a local archaeological dig. I wish I could have gotten it directly from Mexico, but you make do

with what you have. I seeded the soil with the kinds of present-day historical artifacts that the researchers tossed aside in their zeal to get to the iconic past of the native peoples of the region: a rubber boot that had once belonged to a Mayan Zapatista from Chiapas; a large plastic jug that used to hold bleach, refitted as a bucket for a small child to tote water in; a scrap of hand-woven blanket with brown stains on it. People who enter the exhibition get basic excavation tools. When they pull something free of the soil, it triggers a story about the artifact on the monitors above.

Sunil is coming to the opening. Babette has decided to stay at her relatives' place and nap. Six months along in her pregnancy, she's sleepy a lot. I'm holding court in the gallery, Cecilia striding around the catwalk above me, doing a last check of all the connections, when Sunil walks in. He's brought Kamla. She doesn't alarm me any more. She's just a kid. As I watch her grow up, I get some idea of what Russ's growing years will be like. In a way, she's his advance guard.

Kamla scurries in ahead of her dad, right up to me, her head wobbling as though her neck is a column of gelatin. She sticks out her hand. "Hey, Greg," she says. "Long time." Behind her, Sunil gives me a bashful smile. I reach down to shake the hand of what appears to be a six-year-old.

"Uh, hey," I say. Okay, I lied a little bit. I still don't really know how to talk to kids.

"This looks cool," she tells me, gazing around. "What do we do?" She squats down and starts sifting soil through her fingers.

"Kamla, you mustn't touch the art," says Sunil.

"Actually, it's okay. That's exactly what I want people to do."

Kamla flashes me a grateful glance. I give her a small spade, take her through the exhibition. She digs up artifact after artifact, watches the stories about them on the video displays, asks me questions. I get so caught up talking to her about my project that I forget how young she is. She seems really interested. Most of the other people are here because they're friends of mine, or because it's cool to be able to say that you went to an art opening last weekend. The gallery owner has to drag me away to be interviewed by the guy from *Art(e)*. I grin at Kamla and leave her digging happily in the dirt.

While I'm talking to the interviewer, Kamla comes running up to me, Sunil behind her, yelling, "Kamla! Don't interrupt!"

She ignores him, throws her mushroom-shaped body full tilt into my arms, and gives me a whole body hug. "It was you!" she says. "It was you!" She's clutching something in one dirt-encrusted fist. The guy from *Art(e)* kinda freezes up at the sight of Kamla. But he catches himself, pastes the smile back on, motions his camerawoman to take a picture.

"I'm so sorry," Sunil says. "When she gets an idea in her head . . ."

"Yeah, I know. What'd you find, chick?" I ask Kamla. She opens her palm to show me. It's a shell. I shake my head. "Honestly? I barely remember putting that in there. Some of the artifacts are 'blanks' that trigger no stories. The dig where I got it from used to be underwater a few centuries ago."

"It's perfect!" says Kamla, squeezing me hard.

Perfect like she isn't. Damn. "I've been looking everywhere for this!" she tells me.

"What, is it rare or something?" I ask her.

She rears back in my arms so that she can look at me properly. "You have no idea," she says. "I'm going to keep this so safe. It'll never get out of my sight again."

"Kamla!" scolds Sunil. "That is part of Greg's exhibition. It's staying right here with him."

The dismay on Kamla's face would make a stone weep. It's obvious that it hadn't even occurred to her that I mightn't let her have the shell. Her eyes start to well up. "Don't cry," I tell her. "It's just an old shell. Of course you can take it."

"You shouldn't indulge her," Sunil says. "You'll spoil her."

I hitch Kamla up on my hip, on that bone adults have that seems tailor-made for corching a child's butt on. "Let's call it her reward for asking some really smart questions about the exhibition."

Sunil sighs. Kamla's practically glowing, she's so happy. My heart warms to her smile.

When the phone rings at my home many hours later, it takes me awhile to orient myself. It's 3:05 a.m. by the clock by our bedside. "Hello?" I mumble into the phone. I should have known better than to have that fifth whiskey at the opening. My mouth feels and tastes like the plains of the Serengeti, complete with lion spoor.

"Greg?" The person is whispering. "Is this Greg?"

It's a second or so before I recognise the voice.

"Kamla? What's wrong? Is your mum okay?"

"They're fine. Everyone's asleep."

"Like you should be. Why the fuck are you calling me at this hour?" I ask, forgetting that I'm talking to a child. Something about Kamla's delivery makes it easy to forget.

"I've been on the Net. Listen, can you come get me? The story's about to break. It's all over YouTube already. It'll be on the morning news here in a few hours. Goddamned Miles. We told them he was always running his mouth off."

"What? Told who? Kamla, what's going on?"

Cecilia is awake beside me. She's turned on the bedside lamp. *Who?* she mouths. I make my lips mime a soundless *Kamla*.

"It's a long story," Kamla says. "Please, can you just come get me? You need to know about this. And I need another adult to talk to, someone who isn't my caretaker."

Another adult? "Okay, I'll be there soon."

Kamla gives me the address, and I hang up. I tell Cecilia what's going on.

"You should just let her parents know that she's disturbed about something," she says. "Maybe it's another symptom of that DGS."

"I'll talk to Babette and Sunil after Kamla tells me what's going on," I say. "I promised her to hear her out first."

"You sure that's wise? She's a child, Greg. Probably she just had a nightmare."

Feeding our child has made Cecilia's breasts sit lower on her rib cage. Her hips stretch out the nylon of her nightgown. Through the translucent fabric I can see the shadow of pubic hair and the valley that the curves of her thighs make. Her eyes are full of sleep, and her hair is a tousled mess, and she's so beautiful I could tumble her right now. But there's this frightened kid waiting to talk to

me. I kiss Cecilia goodbye and promise to call her as soon as I've learned more.

Kamla's waiting for me outside the house when I pull up in my car. The night air is a little chilly, and she's a lonely, shivering silhouette against the front door. She makes to come in the passenger side of the car, but I motion her around to my side. "We're going to leave a note for your parents," I tell her. I have one already prepared. "And we're just going sit right here in the car and talk."

"We can leave a note," she replies, "but we have to be away from here long enough so you can hear the whole story. I can't have Sunil and Babette charging to the rescue right now."

I've never heard her call her parents by their first names; Bab and Sunil aren't into that kind of thing. Her face in her weirdly adult head looks calm, decisive. I find myself acquiescing. So I slip the note under the front door. It tells Babette and Sunil that Kamla's with me, that everything's all right. I leave them my cell phone number, though I'm pretty sure that Babette already has it.

Kamla gets into the car. She quietly closes the door. We drive. I keep glancing over at her, but for a few minutes, she doesn't say anything. I'm just about to ask her what was so urgent that she needed to pull a stunt like this when she says, "Your installation had a certain antique brio to it, Greg. Really charming. My orig—I mean, I have a colleague whose particular interest is in the nascent identity politics as expressed by artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and how that expression was the progenitor of current speciesism."

"Kamla, have you been reading your mum's theory books?"

"No," she replies. There was so much bitterness in that one word. "I'm just a freak. Your kid's almost three, right?" "Yeah."

"In a blink of an eye, barely a decade from now, his body will be entering puberty. He'll start getting erections, having sexual thoughts."

"I don't want to think about all that right now," I say. "I'm still too freaked that he's begun making poo-poo jokes. Kamla, is this the thing you wanted to tell me? Cause I'm not getting it."

"A decade from now, I'll have the body of a seven-year-old."

"You can't know that. There aren't any DGS kids who've reached their twenties yet."

"I know. I'm the oldest of them, by a few weeks." Another thing she can't know. "But we're all well past the age where normal children have achieved adolescence."

Goggling at her, I almost drive through a red light. I slam on the brakes. The car jolts to a halt. "What? What kind of shit is that? You're ten years old. A precocious ten, yes, but only ten."

"Go in there." She points into the parking lot of a nearby grocery store. "It won't be open for another three hours."

I pull into the lot and park, leave the engine running so we can have some heat in the car. "If the cops come by and see us," I say, "I could be in a lot of shit. They'll think I'm some degenerate Indian perv with a thing for little girls." Shit. I shouldn't be talking to a ten-year-old this way. Kamla always makes me forget. It's that big head, those big words.

"DGS people do get abused," she tells me. She says 'people,' not 'children.' "Just like real children do."

"You *are* a real child!"

She glares at me, then looks sad. She says, "Sunil and Babette are going to have to move soon. It's so hard for me to keep up this pretence. I've managed to smart-mouth so much at school and in our neighbourhood that it's become uncomfortable to live there anymore."

My eyes have become accustomed enough to the dark that I can see the silent tears running down her cheeks. I want to hold her to me, to comfort her, but I'm afraid of how that will look if the cops show up. Besides, I'm getting the skin-crawly feeling that comes when you realise that someone with whom you've been making pleasant conversation is as mad as a hatter. "I'm taking you back home," I whisper. I start turning the key in the ignition.

"Please!" She puts a hand on my wrist. "Greg, please hear me out. I'll make it quick. I just don't know how to convince you."

I take my hand off the key. "Just tell me," I said. "Whatever it is, your parents love you. You can work it out."

She leans back against the passenger side door and curls her knees up to her chest, a little ball of misery. "Okay. Let me get it all out before you say anything else, all right?"

"All right."

"They grew us from cells from our originals; ten of us per original. They used a viral injection technique to give each of us an extra-long tail on one of the strands of our DNA. You need more telomeres to slow down aging."

The scientific jargon exiting smoothly from the mouth of a child could have been comic. But I had goose bumps. She didn't appear to be repeating something she'd memorised.

"Each batch of ten yielded on average four viable

blastocytes. They implanted those in womb donors. Two thirds of them took. Most of those went to full term and were delivered. Had to be C-section, of course. Our huge skulls presented too much of a risk for our birth mothers. We were usually four years old before we were strong enough to lift our own heads, and that was with a lot of physiotherapy. They treated us really well; best education, kept us fully informed from the start of what they wanted from us."

"Which was?" I whisper, terrified to hear the answer.

"Wait. You said you would." She continues her story. "Any of us could back out if we wanted to. Ours is a society that you would probably find strange, but we do have moral codes. Any of us who didn't want to make the journey could opt to undergo surgical procedures to correct some of the physical changes. Bones and muscles would lengthen, and they would reach puberty normally and thereafter age like regular people. They'll never achieve full adult height, and there'll always be something a little bit odd about their features, but it probably won't be so bad."

"But a few of us were excited by the idea, the crazy, wonderful idea, and we decided to go through with it. They waited until we were age thirteen for us to confirm our decisions. In many cultures, that used to be the age when you were allowed to begin making adult decisions."

"You're ten, Kamla."

"I'm twenty-three, and my body won't start producing adult sex hormones for another fifty years. I won't attain my full growth till I'm in my early hundreds. I can expect . . ."

"You're delusional," I whisper.

"I'm from your future," she says. God. The child's

been watching too many B-movies. She continues, "They wanted to send us here and back as full adults, but do you have any idea what the freight costs would have been? The insurance. Arts grants are hard to get in my world, too. The gallery had to scale the budget way back."

"Gallery?"

"National gallery. Hush. They sent small people instead. Clones of the originals, with their personalities superimposed onto our own. They sent back children who weren't children."

I start the car. I'm taking her back home right now. She needs help; therapy, or something. The sky's beginning to brighten. She doesn't try to stop me this time. Glumly, she goes on. "The weird thing is, even though this body isn't interested in adult sex, I *remember* what it was like, remember enjoying it. It's those implanted memories from my original."

I'm edging past the speed limit in my hurry to get her back to her parents. I make myself slow down a little.

"Those of us living in extremely conservative places are having a difficult time. We stay in touch with them by email and cell phone, but not all of us have access to the technology. We've never been able to figure out what happened to Kemi. Some of us were never adopted, had to make our own way as street kids. Never old enough to be granted adult freedoms. So many lost. This fucking project better have been worth it."

I decide to keep her talking. "What project, Kamla?"

"It's so *hard* to pretend you don't have an adult brain! Do you know what it's like turning in schoolwork that's at a grade-five level, when we all have PhD's in our heads? We figured that one of us would crack, but we

hoped it'd be later, when we'd reached what your world would consider the age of majority."

We're cruising past a newspaper box. I look through its plastic window to see the headline: I'M FROM THE FUTURE, SAYS BOBBLE-HEADED BOY. Ah. One of our more erudite news organs.

Oh, Christ. They all have this delusion. All the DGS kids. Crazy, I find myself wondering whether Sunil and Babette can return Kamla to the adoption centre. And I'm guiltily grateful that Russ, as far as we can tell, is normal.

"Human beings, we're becoming increasingly posthuman," Kamla says. She's staring at the headline too. "Things change so quickly. Total technological upheaval of society every five to eight years. Difficult to keep up, to connect amongst the generations. By the time your Russ is a teenager, you probably won't understand his world at all."

She's hit on the thing that really scares me about kids. This brave new world that Cecelia and I are trying to make for our son? For the generations to follow us? We won't know how to live in it.

Kamla says, "Art helps us know how to do change. That's made it very valuable to us."

"Thank heaven for that," I say. "Maybe I'd like your world."

She sits up in her seat, buckles herself in. Shit. I should have made her do that the minute she got in the car. I have one of those heart-in-the-mouth moments that I have often, now that I'm a parent. "In my world," she says, "what you do would be obsolete." She sniggers a little. "Video monitors! I'd never seen a real one, only mini-beams disguised to mimic ancient tech. We've all become anthropologists here in the past, as well as curators."

"Wait; you're a what?"

"I'm a curator, Greg. I'm trying to tell you, our national gallery is having a giant retrospective; tens of thousands of works of art from all over the world, and all over the world's history. They sent us back to retrieve some of the pieces that had been destroyed. Expensive enough to send living biomaterial back; they couldn't afford to send us forward too, back to our time. So we're going to *grow* our way there. Those of us that survive."

There are more cars out on the road, more brakes squealing, more horns honking. "I'm not going to miss mass transit when I finally get home," she says. "Your world stinks."

Yeah, it does. We're nearly to her parents' place. From my side, I lock her door. Of course she notices. She just glances at the sound. She looks like she's being taken to her death.

"I didn't know it until yesterday," she tells me, "but it was you I came for. That installation."

And now the too-clever bloody child has me where I live. Even though I know it's all air pie and Kamla is as nutty as a fruitcake, my heart's performing a tympanum of joy. "My installation's going to be in the retrospective?" I ask. Even as the words come out of my mouth, I'm embarrassed at how eager I sound, at how this little girl has dug her way into my psyche and found the thing which will make me respond to her.

She gasps and puts her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Greg! I'm so sorry; not you, the shell!"

My heart suicides, the brief, hallucinatory hope dashed. "The shell?"

"Yes. In the culture where I live, speciesism has become a defining concept through which we understand

what it means to be human animals. Not every culture or subculture ascribes to it, but the art world of my culture certainly does." She's got her teacher voice on again. She does sound like a bloody curator.

"Human beings aren't the only ones who make art," she says.

All right. Familiar territory. "Okay, perhaps. Bower birds make pretty nests to attract a mate. Cetaceans sing to each other. But we're the only ones who make art *mean*; who make it comment on our everyday reality."

From the corner of my eye, I see her shake her ugly head. "No. We don't always know what they're saying, we can't always know the reality on which they're commenting. Who knows what a sea cucumber thinks of the conditions of its particular stretch of ocean floor?"

A sea cucumber? We've just turned onto her relatives' street. She'll be out of my hands soon. Poor Babette.

"Every shell is different," she says. My perverse brain instantly puts it to the tune of "Every Sperm Is Sacred."

"Every shell is a life journal," Kamla continues, "made out of the very substance of its creator, and left as a record of what it thought, even if we can't understand exactly what it thought. Sometimes interpretation is a trap. Sometimes we need to simply observe."

"And you've come all this way to take that . . . shell back?" I can see it sticking out of the chest pocket of her fleece shirt.

"It's difficult to explain to you, because you don't have the background, and I don't have the time to teach you. I specialise in shell formations. I mean, that's Vanda's specialty. She's the curator whose memories I'm carrying. Of its kind, the mollusc that made this shell is a genius.

The unique conformation of the whorls of its shell expresses a set of concepts that haven't been explored before by the other artists of its species. After this one, all the others will draw on and riff off its expression of its world. They're the derivatives, but this is the original. In our world, it was lost."

Barmy. Loony. "So how did you know that it even existed, then? Did the snail or slug that lived inside it take pictures or something?" I've descended into cruelty. I'm still smarting that Kamla hasn't picked me, my work. My legacy doesn't get to go to the future.

She gives me a wry smile, as though she understands. I pull up outside the house, start leaning on the horn. "The creature didn't take a picture," she shouts over the noise. "You did."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. With my precious video camera. The shell wasn't an interactive part of the exhibition, but I recorded every artifact with which I seeded the soil that went onto the gallery floor. I didn't tell her that. But she knew.

She nods. "Not all the tape survived, so we didn't know who had recorded it, or where the shell had come from. But we had an idea where the recording had come from."

Lights are coming on in the house. Kamla looks over there, sighs. "I haven't entirely convinced you, have I?"

"No," I say regretfully. But damn it, a part of me still hopes that it's all true.

"They're probably going to institutionalise me. All of us."

The door opens. Sunil is running out to the car, a gravid Babette following more slowly.

"You have to help me, Greg. Please? I'm going to outlive them all. I will get out. But in the meantime . . ."

She pulls the shell out of her pocket, offers it to me on her tiny palm. "Please keep it safe for me?"

She opens the car door. "It's your ticket to the future," she says, and gets out of the car to greet her parents.

I lied. I fucking hate kids.