

THE MEN | 1

by
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A Novella in Two Parts

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She is lucky, Beth knows. Lucky to have been artificially inseminated, lucky to be part of the trial program, lucky to no longer be barren. But she doesn't feel lucky as she emerges from the examination room, where she catches her reflection in one of the mirrored columns of the waiting area and sees only frailty, qualmishness, infirmity.

Doctor Lairman talks as he escorts her out. He talks and talks, leaping from one subject to another like a bee pollinating summer dandelions. About human cloning and why it will never be an ethical nor practical solution to human infertility. About how it would require the sacrifice of too many failed embryos to achieve a single viable specimen. About the interior design of the clinic, which is too cold, he says—as they pass several other seated patients, all of them women—too sterile.

He escorts her all the way to her car, where she pauses before getting in, concerned that she isn't showing, even at 16 weeks. Her dog, Frodo, looks on, even as Dr. Lairman assures her that she will; that all tests are normal. They are distracted by a commotion at the door to the clinic: a little girl, exiting the building with her mother, wants to take a doll from the office. Her mother is saying: "No, no, sweetie. That doesn't belong to you. It belongs to them."

The girl runs up to Lairman and hands it to him. He examines it. "Oh, no. This won't do at all. This child is much too pretty." He hands the doll back. "She is clearly not ours. But I dare say, she looks a lot like you."

The little girl beams; her mother smiles. So does Beth, admiring Lairman. The mother and daughter leave as he greets an arriving patient, another woman of about thirty-five. As this woman is attractive, and Beth is attracted to Dr. Lairman, she makes special note of her.

Beth and Dr. Lairman say their goodbyes, and she drives off. She cannot help but glance in her rearview mirror as he puts a hand on the woman's shoulder and escorts her into the clinic. Then she drives past a guard post and a sign that reads: Nellis Air Force Base. And the desert swallows her.

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THEY ZOOM ALONG THE deserted highway, Frodo sticking his head out the car's passenger window, Beth talking via cellphone with her mother—who

does not approve of her daughter's decision to have a baby out of wedlock, even if doing so will benefit science.

"...what about Arnold?" she continues, hearing nothing Beth has said. "He seems like such a nice boy. What? Not loser enough for you? Or are you running for head of the misandrist club?"

The diamond-shaped novelty sign—BABY ON BOARD—swings from the rearview mirror, clicks against the plastic. Beth sighs. There are flashing lights ahead of them; they are approaching what appears to be a roadblock.

"I'm not a man-hater, mother. I just ... don't trust them. You were lucky enough to find a good one, that's all."

She slows to a halt, joining a long line of vehicles.

"And you think you can trust a woman just because she's a woman? *Ay Yai Yai.*"

They all wait in the sweltering sun as a State Trooper moves up their ranks. Frodo pants as Beth lights a cigarette—she is watching the trooper as he works his way toward her, allowing some vehicles to continue while redirecting others. Beth's mother says: "Was that a lighter I heard? Are you smoking again? You know that isn't good for the child."

The air shimmers with convection waves due to the heat and the idling cars. It appears many of the motorists are not happy with the trooper's directives.

"Are you stuck in the '50s?"

Beth doesn't say anything, only scans the area, noting a small car sitting nose-down in the ditch, covered with a tarp—as well as a large motorhome parked on the shoulder. A helicopter pounds past, leading her to notice other choppers in the distance, crossing each other's paths, flying in circles. There are men in what appear to be surgeon-green chemical suits spread all along the horizon.

The State Trooper, who is suddenly at her window, startles her. She hangs up on her mother. Composing herself, she asks him what on earth has happened. He explains that there's been a motor vehicle accident involving industrial chemicals, as well as a prison escape, and asks to see her driver's license.

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No, ma'am. It's strictly routine."

He attaches her license to a clipboard, appearing to cross-reference it with something else. She groans and puts a hand to her stomach. He scribbles a few

notes, glancing at her from under the brim of his Mountie hat. At last he hands her license back.

"You're good to go. Drive safely." An instant later he adds: "You're smoking for two, you know."

She looks at him, perplexed.

"Your sign," he says.

She nods and smiles uncomfortably, drives forward.

As she cruises past the ditched car its covering catches the wind and lifts, revealing that the vehicle's roof has been ripped clean off ... and that the rent metal is spattered with blood. A shorn lock of matted hair fidgets skittishly in the breeze. She gasps, continuing—passing the RV, the windows of which are tinted—then watches through the rear-view mirror as the roadblock shrinks away—shimmering like a mirage, blending back into the sand and scrub.

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DUSK, IN THE MIDDLE of nowhere. Beth pulls into a rest area and shuts off the engine. Helicopters can be heard in the distance; Frodo whimpers and whines. There is a drone of crickets as Beth leans against the wheel. The place is abandoned save for a single pickup and camper.

She sits back after a moment, stroking the dog's neck, and rolls her head to look at the truck. It sits silently in the twilight about a hundred feet away: quiet as a tomb, with no sign of a driver. She experiences a wave of nausea—which sends her hurrying toward the restrooms—as the sound of the choppers rushes closer.

She collapses over the toilet, vomiting repeatedly, as the helicopters thunder overhead. The pounding of the rotors diminishes as she spits and wipes her mouth. At last she reaches up with trembling fingers and flushes the bowl, and the water swirls down, gurgling. She slowly catches her breath. The crickets drone and Frodo barks. She sits on the floor with her back against the cold cinderblocks—notices a shoe covered in green plastic just outside the stall.

She looks up. An eye is visible between the doorjamb and the wall. It blinks as she shrieks and suddenly disappears.

She shrinks against the cinderblocks, whimpering. Seconds pass as her breath comes and goes in fits. Finally, she eases forward on all fours and peeks beneath the door.

Nothing.

She opens the stall and creeps out. Cautiously, she inches her way outside, reemerging into the twilight. The pick-up is still there. She walks quickly toward her car, never taking her eyes off the camper. She gets in and slams her door, locks it.

She starts the engine, still looking at the camper, and revs it a little. A lamp turns on inside the rig. Seconds later an old man peers out the riveted window. She picks up her cellphone and points at it, smiling. He disappears for a moment— then reappears with his own phone. He nods and smiles innocently.

Beth flips him the bird and starts to tear from the parking lot, then backs up suddenly and jots down the man's plate number. He looks out at her from a different window, no longer smiling, as she peels out of the rest area. Then she is back on the road, dialing 9-1-1 as she drives, wondering if she saw what she thought she saw ... which wasn't just an eye but an eye staring out of a mask—storic, featureless—its color that of turquoise surgical scrubs.

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A DESK OFFICER ANSWERS and Beth explains to him what has just happened. The officer seems concerned, asks if she wrote down a license number. Yes, she says, and reads it to him. He puts her on hold.

She notices a bright light—or lights—further on up the road. She shakes a cigarette from her pack, proceeds to light it. The BABY ON BOARD sign flaps in the wind. She glances at it ... and lowers the lighter.

The desk officer returns to the line. He says they'll investigate but downplays the event's importance. "At worse he was just a dirty old man. At best, someone who thought you needed help. We'll send out a car, just to be safe."

Beth feels herself calm down considerably; indeed, a kind of post-stress euphoria seems to have set in. "You can't very well send the helicopters for every Peeping Tom, can you?" She laughs.

"No, ma'am. You have a good evening now. And drive safely." There is something familiar about the desk officer's voice.

As she draws closer, she realizes that the bright lights are a combination of police lights and construction floods. Tragically, there appears to have been yet another accident. She slows to a crawl as she arrives at the scene ... is waved around it by a state trooper, at which point she observes a small truck spun around on the shoulder—with a tarp draped over it—and a group of men garbed in green chemical suits, their faces hidden from view just outside the light. They are huddled around something on the ground, which is obscured by their legs, something blackish and twisted, small. She slows way down as a white sheet is lowered over it and is quickly stained through with red. The program on her car's radio has broken for the top-of-the-hour news; the announcer is talking about human torsos found in the rubble of a building in Syria. It is at this instant that she recognizes the shoes of the surrounding men—shoes covered in green plastic—and nearly stops.

"Move along, move along," prompts the trooper—whom Beth realizes is the same one from earlier in the day. "Remember to drive safely," he adds with a wave.

She faces forward again—and sees the motor home from the first accident. It is parked on the shoulder, just as before. Apparently, it was involved in this incident too. For the first time she notices the small parabolic antennae mounted atop its roof.

Frodo whimpers and collects his own spit; Beth shakes her head. "You can say that again, kiddo."

And then they are clear and picking up speed, the accident quickly vanishing to a point of light behind them, and it isn't until she has begun nodding off at the wheel that she realizes the state trooper's voice and the desk officer's voice were one in the very same.

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A NEON SIGN: VACANCY. Beth pulls into the lot of a ramshackle roadside motel. She shuts off the engine and gets out, starts walking toward the door to the office—and pauses. She looks around the lot.

The wind has picked up considerably. A section of newspaper skitters past ... a styrofoam cup bounces serendipitously across the pavement. The VACANCY sign buzzes. Beth's car is the only one there. She goes in, finding the little office to be silent as a tomb, and rings the bell.

Waiting, she glances at a magazine lying on the counter. Its cover boasts a photo of bright lights on the desert horizon. Its caption reads: "Nevada's Area 51: What Exactly Are They Doing Out There?"

A two-way radio seated in a battery-charger on the counter suddenly squawks to life, and Beth jumps. She catches bits and pieces of a broken transmission—something about having "secured grid 12" and "Zebra Base confirms I.A.C. entering grid 7"—before an old woman snatches it up, turning it off, and apologizes for the noise.

The two women quickly warm to each other as Beth pays for a room and is given a key. The old clerk encourages her to use the pool before "Andy" closes it for the night. Beth says she will, indeed.

As she leaves, the woman asks, "How's it feel?"

Beth just looks at her. "I'm sorry?"

"Your bundle of joy, there. How's it feel?"

Beth is taken aback. "But I'm not even showing!"

The old woman smiles. "It shows in your eyes. Your face."

"It's terrifying," Beth says at last. "Being an expectant mother ... isn't at all like what I expected."

The woman seems to think about this. "Nothing ever is. And nothing's ever easy, or cheap. But make no mistake: that's a gift from above you got there."

Beth smiles, then leaves, colliding with Andy in the doorway. He is clearly smitten by her. He is also clearly developmentally disabled. The old woman tells him that Beth will be using the pool before closing time, "so be sure to have it open for her." Andy, excitedly, assures her that he will.

Inside her room, Beth dials Dr. Lairman, but only gets his answering service. She leaves him a rather desperate message, pleading that he call her as soon as possible. Sitting at the edge of the bed, she turns on the radio and pets Frodo absently.

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SHE IS STANDING BEFORE the bathroom mirror. Untying the belt of her bathrobe, she allows her garments to slide to the floor, revealing a white bikini, then weighs herself: 115 lbs. She gives her smallish breasts a gentle heft; she is most definitely not showing. The phone rings and she rushes toward it.

"So, do you get a charge out hanging up on your poor mother like that?"

Beth exhales, then explains to her what has been going on. Her mother is horrified. There is the sound of helicopters in the distance, which grows louder and louder as they talk, ultimately making the conversation impossible. At last Beth promises to call her tomorrow and hangs up.

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SHE DIVES INTO THE water and surfaces, wearing swimming goggles and nose plugs, then does the backstroke down the length of the pool, gazing at the clear night sky. She turns her head slightly to one side—sees Andy at the edge of the water. Staring at her.

She quickly hides her body beneath the surface, looks up at him.

He asks her if she knows what that luminous band across the sky is. She shakes her head.

"It's the Milky Way," he says. "It's where we live. There's less light pollution out here, that's all. So we can see it."

Beth calms down and looks at the starry sky. "Anybody out there, you think?"

He nods absently. "Not us."

She stares up at him through the goggles and he stares back. "Not Us?" she asks.

He shrugs his shoulders and looks back to the sky, then wanders off. Beth watches him go, then looks to the sky herself.

A moment later she jumps off the diving board and penetrates the water like a knife. She swims below the surface, passing the round portal-lights which burn eerily in the haze, then rolls around onto her back.

A figure is standing at the edge of the pool, watching her. It is not Andy. The cone-headed shape is clothed in surgeon-green plastic and is wearing a stoic-faced mask of the same color. There are two others accompanying it, one to each side so that together they form a triad. Beth cries out beneath the water and surfaces.

The figure is gone. She coughs and gasps, then paddles toward the edge of the pool. There is a sound of helicopters in the distance, which grows louder by the instant. She gazes at the sky as she bumps against the edge.

Andy taps her on the shoulder and she spins around.

"Them," he says. "I've got to close the pool now."

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SHE LIES BACK IN BED, staring at the ceiling, as a low-flying chopper rattles the panes. She isn't feeling well at all. Frodo lies on the floor, whimpering and whining. The sound of the choppers continues as she places a hand over her stomach, groaning, until at last the helicopters pound into the distance and she bursts into tears.

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IT IS THE NEXT DAY. It is gray out. She is on the road again, listening to an AM talk show as she drives along. Frodo hangs his head out the window, tongue dangling. She is feeling better. She passes a sign that reads: OPEN RANGE, NEXT 10 MILES.

The topic of the radio program concerns human cloning and the problem of needing so many hosts to achieve a single successful embryo. As she drives along, listening, she passes a dead cow off to the side of the road. Through her rearview mirror, she watches it disappear behind her as the talk show continues: "I mean, where is this all going? Are we going to just keep birthing mutated babies until we finally see something we like? What of all the rejects? Do we just truck 'em to the baby dump?" She shifts her gaze back to the road.

There is a human body there.

She cries out, yanking the wheel. The tires of her car barely miss the body as she careens off the road and stalls. She collapses against the wheel. The radio program drones on.

Finally, she gets out, and Frodo follows. He meanders into the desert as she walks slowly toward the body, the breeze blowing her hair across her face—draws steadily toward the nude, broken corpse of a twentysomething year-old woman, lying face down in the gravel.

She looks after Frodo; he is out toward the horizon, sniffing at something on the ground. She halts near—but not too near—the cadaver.

It lies there in the gray light, flies buzzing all about it, its flesh bluish-white, its hair black and matted. It is bent back upon itself like a ragdoll. Beth peers both

directions along the length of the highway, seeking help, but is utterly alone. The only sound is that of the flies.

Cautiously, she nudges the body over with the tip of her shoe.

The woman has been gutted of her reproductive organs—which causes Beth to leap back, clasp her mouth. Frodo barks in the distance as Beth realizes that she recognizes the woman. It is the attractive gal from the doctor's office. It is the woman she'd made special note of.

She glances toward the dog as he excitedly trots up. He has an umbilical cord in his jaws. He is dragging along a human fetus.

Beth screams as he drops it at her feet and it spins like a top. The fetus is horribly mutated and appears to be only partly human. She backs toward her car, horrified, as he picks it up again and runs toward her. She screams at him, getting in the car, then starts the engine, causing the dog to drop the fetus and leap inside. She tears away from the scene.

Inside the moving car, Frodo immediately gives her a big sloppy kiss. She curses and hits him, hard, then shoves him into the backseat. He lies down, whimpering and whining, eyeing her dolefully.

She zooms down the road like a maniac, gasping and crying. Frodo suddenly sits up, staring up through the windshield, snapping and growling. Beth, still hysterical, swats him down. But the dog persists.

"Stop it! What is the matter with you?" She follows the direction of his gaze.

There is a huge, black, triangular-shaped *thing* outside; it is above the car. It is keeping pace with her. She suddenly grunts and doubles over, as though kicked in the stomach. Although she is in excruciating pain, she glances upward again: the shape is gone. She careens about the road, then swerves onto an off-ramp.

She zigzags up to a truck stop and shudders to a halt, then collapses against the wheel as a handful of patrons rush to help. She holds her stomach desperately.

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To be continued in:

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