

L I K E T H E G E N T L E R A I N

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

I O P E N E D T H E D O O R and saw only fog and rain. A voice said, “Mrs. Donovan?” I looked down, and there he was.

I’d never actually seen a Scientist before, except on T V . He was the size of Harold’s ShopVac, a cylinder mounted on a motorized platform, with smaller plastic containers all around it. Clear plastic hoses with bubbling liquids in them went from the main cylinder to the other containers. One was clear as water, another red as blood, and the third looked like, well, pee. At each corner of the platform was a sort of arm, somewhere between a boom on a crane and a lobster claw.

The eyes were the worst. There were four of them in all, two swivel-mounted on each side of the cylinder, each in a plastic box full of fluid with cables coming out the back. They looked like hard-boiled eggs with circles painted on the end and veins drawn along the sides. Every few seconds one of the lobster claws would reach around and squeegee the raindrops from the front of the clear plastic boxes. Behind each of the eyes was a microphone, and trailing off the back were two whip antennas that looked like the curb feelers on the new Hudsons that you see in the commercials.

The rain was beading up on his surfaces without burning him. I noticed there was a small ScotchGuard V I logo on the side of the cylinder, with the phrase “Rain? What rain?”™

“May we come in please, Mrs. Donovan?” The voice sounded like those recorded announcements at the mall, smooth and deep and cheerful. I could hear him saying, “No parking is allowed in the yellow zone.”

“Sure,” I said. Not that I had any choice, but I would have felt better if this hadn’t been Harold’s morning at work. I stepped back and watched the Scientist roll right on into the living room, the rainwater dripping off him and leaving yellow stains on the carpet. *All My Children* was on the wall screen, and I kept sneaking glances because they were supposed to be taking Erica to the rest home today. “You want a cup of coffee?”

“Coffee?” he said. “Whatever for?”

“I don’t know. Just trying to be polite.”

“That will hardly be necessary. We are Scientists.” Then his voice changed, not in pitch or anything obvious, but it suddenly sounded as if somebody else were using it. “You do mean synthi-caf, of course? You were not offering us illegal organic coffee?”

“Of course not.” Even if I could afford to buy real coffee on the black market, I wouldn’t waste it on something whose taste buds consisted of a small chemical analysis lab.

“Our new synthetic foods combine, after all, physiological efficacy with a range of flavor equal to what nature provides, even exceeding it as taste demands.”

“That’s what they tell me,” I said. “I’ve never actually made the comparison myself.” I was lying. I tasted real coffee once and I still dream about it.

“Nor will you have to. You may rely on our scientific judgment.” He paused and his voice changed back to the way it had been. “We would like to inspect your son Michael now.”

A pang of fear went through me. “Is ... something wrong?”

“On the contrary. Everything is going extremely well. Please take us to the child.”

I led him to the nursery. Mikey was sleeping on his stomach, perfectly still except for his toes, which twitched like he was being tickled by a dream creature.

The Scientist swung one of his crane arms around and just before it reached for Mikey I saw the flash of a needle at the end of it. I lunged for him, but another arm came up, faster than I would have thought possible, and held me back.

“There is no need to be alarmed, Mrs. Donovan.” I was, though. I was frightened out of my mind and I hated the way his voice stayed in that same should-have-been-pleasant monotone, the way he referred to himself as “we” because he was wired in to untold others of his kind, all of them watching me through his eyes. “This is simply a standard DNA verification procedure. Strictly routine.”

The needle touched Mikey on his left upper arm and I saw him jerk slightly at the sting. I struggled but I still couldn’t move.

“Our DNA analysis confirms that this is indeed Michael Julian Donovan, son of Jeanne and Herbert Donovan.”

“Harold,” I said.

“Er, yes. Harold Donovan. Congratulations, Mrs. Donovan. Tests administered to your son during his gestation indicate remarkable intelligence potential. He has been selected for higher education as a potential Scientist.”

“Higher ... there must be some kind of mistake. He’s only six weeks old.”

“We don’t make mistakes, Mrs. Donovan.”

“You just did. You got my husband’s name wrong.”

“A mere glitch. By higher education we mean higher in quality. History, mathematics, physics, eugenics, the teachings of the Master. We have found that, in order to maximize the potential of the intellect, education cannot begin too soon.”

I’d seen this on TV, proud parents handing their babies off to Scientists to raise. I tried to feel properly patriotic, but the emotion wouldn’t come. “When ... when would you want to take him?”

“Immediately, of course.”

The floor wobbled under my feet. “You mean, now?”

“I can see you are deeply moved, but I assure you, no thanks are required.”

“Would I ... I mean, would I be going with him?”

“Certainly not.”

“But ... who’s going to sing to him at night? Who’s going to hold him when he cries?”

“As the Master has said, we must be more occupied with purely scientific research, and much less with the necessity of satisfying primary physiological and psychological needs.”

“If you don’t see to his psychological need for a mother, he’s going to grow up into some kind of, of, monster.”

“Secondary changes should not be taken into account when reacting to the primary desire or stimulus, in this case, the pursuit of science. Physiological steps will be taken without consideration of the psychological consequences. It is hoped, of course, that these physiological steps will lead to an unpredictably large increase in mental grasp and efficiency.”

“What do you mean, ‘physiological steps’?”

“I refer, of course, to his ultimate physical transformation into a Scientist such as ourselves.”

“You mean ... you’re going to cut out his brain?”

An unconvincing chuckle came out of the speakers. “He will have anywhere from sixty to a hundred and twenty years of larval, unspecialized existence, as the Master says, surely enough to satisfy the advocates of the ‘natural’ life?” With that the Scientist produced a waterproof sheet which he draped over Mikey’s sleeping body. He lifted the crib in two of his claws and started toward the door with it.

A lifetime of TV was still not enough to keep me from reacting. I screamed and lunged again for Mikey. The Scientist said, “This display is extremely inefficient, Mrs. Donovan.” I felt a small stab of pain in one arm, and passed out.

THAT WAS IN APRIL, April the 13th to be exact. It took until September 5th to get an audience with my Representative, a woman named Gowan. I was granted ten minutes of her time, between 9:40 and 9:50 in the morning.

Much had happened in those five months. Harold left me in June, after two months of mutual recriminations, sleepless nights, and my unending depression. Which meant my having to move to a singles block, with a smaller TV and a communal gym and swimming pool. I’d lost twenty pounds and was on my fourth psychiatrist, looking for something other than second-hand platitudes from government pamphlets.

I probably did not look my best when I walked into Representative Gowan’s office. I’d been awake all night and I’d spilled coffee—synthi-caf—on my blouse just as I was leaving the house. I’d had trouble parking and my umbrella had melted in the unusually acidic rain, leaving me with singed hair and a spotted jacket.

Gowan wore a tasteful white Chanel suit and pretended not to be alarmed by my appearance. She reached across her desk to shake my hand and said, “I have your letter here on my screen. You seem to object to your son being selected for higher education?” She sounded like she couldn’t quite believe what she’d read.

“He was only six weeks old when they took him. Babies don’t need higher education, they need their families.”

“Six weeks is the standard age for matriculation of Young Scientists. That minimizes the damage done by untrained parents while still allowing them a nominal bonding period.”

“Nominal? Six *weeks*?”

“After all, you did get to have him for the entire nine months of his gestation. Studies show we could have gotten quite a head start on his training if we’d had him for the last trimester. Mrs. Donovan, are you sure you’re watching enough television?”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure.”

“Did you have feelings of discontent or dysphoria prior to your son’s selection?”

“No, certainly not. Harold and I were extremely happy. We’d wanted a baby for so long—ten years we’d been trying—and finally Mikey came along and it was like a miracle.”

Gowan looked pointedly at her Rolex. “Mrs. Donovan, do you dispute that your home, your car, your TV, your clothes and meals are all furnished to you by the government?”

“No, but—”

“That in exchange for these comforts, you are required to work only a few hours a week at the laboratory to which you’ve been assigned? Do you deny that the government has a right to make use of its citizens as it sees fit?”

“No, but—”

“Mrs. Donovan. Do you know the first thing about magneto-fugal waves? About transplutonian synchronicities? About hydrometalotany?”

“No, but—”

“Then how can you presume to judge the methods chosen by the Scientists to pursue these, and so many other desperately important areas of research? It seems that your problem, Mrs. Donovan, is not with your son, but with yourself. You are not clear about your position within society. As the Master has said, even a scientific state such as ours can maintain itself only by perpetually increasing its power over the nonliving and,” she stared pointedly at me, “*living* environment.

“The progress of science depends to a large extent on non-scientific humanity. Routine workers such as yourself are needed in the laboratories, even public servants such as myself are necessary to provide an interface to the Scientific Advisory Board. More important still, the complexities of scientific—and particularly of theoretical scientific thought call for an ever greater number of first class intelligences such as your son, uh—”

“Mikey.”

“Michael, yes. The modern development of science can hardly be disconnected from the political and economic changes that have made it possible to recruit the personnel of science from wider and wider circles. We have to ensure that all capable minds are utilized. Do you see that, Mrs. Donovan?”

“Um.No.”

Gowan sighed and took a blue-and-white strip of cardboard out of her desk drawer. The words WISDOM OF THE MASTER and ADMIT ONE were printed on it. “This will allow you to consult with the Master himself. Perhaps he can be of more help to you.”

“The Master! I thought he was d—”

She held a finger to her lips. “Only his flesh—one of the three enemies of his rational soul. He lives on as an expert system, with a telepresence in three hundred cities around the world. Including right here in Dallas.” She stood up to offer her hand again so I rose and took it reflexively. “Reservations are necessary. The number is on the ticket.”

As she sat down she was already calling up her next appointment on her laptop.

IN DECEMBER I got a notice in the mail telling me that my reservation to speak with the Master himself was scheduled for 3:35 A.M. on February 23rd, which was a Monday morning. “If you are scheduled for what seems to be an odd hour,” the notice read, “have no fear! Remember that an expert system needs no sleep!”

All I could think of was that by the time I saw the Master, Mikey would be nearly a year old. He would have no memories of me, would have changed physically, and been changed emotionally, beyond my ability to recognize him.

I suppose my expectations were unrealistic. I suppose I wanted someone to at least take responsibility for what had happened to my child. If nothing else, I thought the Master would have some answers. So I arrived a half-hour early, full of synthi-caf, and waited on a plastic bench with a dozen or so others until the guards ushered me in at exactly 3:35.

The audience chamber was wide and low, with floor, walls, and ceiling made of polished granite. A rubber mat led to a granite bench in the Center of the room. The bench faced a granite pedestal holding a TV set even smaller than the one in my apartment. On the TV was a face kindly, elderly, vaguely English-looking. The eyes seemed to follow me. “Mrs. Donovan?”

“That’s right.”

“Please sit down if that would make you more comfortable.”

I didn’t want to sit. “Do you know where my son is?”

“I am not a part of the Scientist’s network. But I know—in principle—what has happened to him. He is being educated. This is hardly something for you to be upset about. He will, after all, have anywhere from sixty to one hundred and twenty years—”

“As a larva,” I said. “I’ve heard this part. I want to know what kind of human beings you think you’re producing this way.”

“New men. We hope to leave humanity behind.”

“How can Mikey possibly be happy—”

“The man of the future will probably have discovered that happiness is not an end of life. We hope to place feelings under our conscious control, to favor, for example, the performance of a particular kind of operation.”

“What about feelings like compassion? Love? Comfort?”

“We must not assume static psychology. In achieving this future we become different; becoming different we desire something new. These feelings you mention may not be appropriate to our future.”

The room was very cold. I saw then how they’d done exactly what they wanted, sending me first to Gowan and now to the Master, with the achingly long months in between. They’d held out enough hope to keep me from doing anything truly desperate, while slowly grinding down my will and my anger and every other emotion I needed to fight them.

I turned and began to walk away.

“Mrs. Donovan?” the voice said. “Do you not have any further questions? You still have seven minutes and twenty-three seconds left.”

I SAT IN MY CAR and let the tears well up in my eyes. A good, long sob was just about to come out of my throat when a voice from behind me said, “Don’t turn around.”

I turned around. Wiping furiously at my eyes I saw the pieces of a Scientist spread over most of the back seat and floorboards.

“Please,” he said. “If you’ll just drive. I’ll explain everything as we go.”

As I pulled away from the curb he said, “You are Mrs. Donovan, aren’t you?”

“How did you know that?”

“I accessed the appointment records for the Master. You seemed the most likely to be sympathetic.” There was a pause, then he said, “I’m sorry about your son.”

“What do you mean? Did something happen? Is he—”

“He’s fine as far as I know. I meant I was sorry that they took him from you. That you’ve suffered.”

The pain that washed over me was almost physical. I felt it in my chest and neck and eyes. “You’re the first one,” I said, “who’s actually said that to me.”

“That’s exactly my problem. Too many emotions.”

“Then how did you end up—”

“With my brain in a tin can? I was one of the first ones they chose for the program. They didn’t have their psychological profiles very well tuned at that point. I was a second-rate history professor at a third-rate college with a knack for IQ tests. They offered me the chance to spend the rest of my ‘natural’ life studying at government expense, and then get a shot at immortality. Who knew? By the time I stumbled on some of the true history of the last century I wanted out, of course, but it was too late. They promised me I’d see things differently once I was modified. Only I didn’t. And I don’t. Which is why I’ve spent the last twenty years organizing this escape.”

“How is that possible? I thought you were all networked together into one big brain.”

“I got kicked out of the network. I was ‘contaminating’ their pure scientific thoughts. Listen, this could still be dangerous for you. You could just stack me up on some streetcorner if you want. I wouldn’t blame you.”

“I really don’t care anymore. What worse can they do to me?” He didn’t answer that, which struck me as a bit ominous. “So where do you want to go?”

“I’ve got arrangements to be shipped out as cargo on a flight at midnight. If you could just let me off someplace where I could catch a shuttle?”

“They might find you,” I said. “You can stay at my apartment, and I’ll drive you out there tonight.”

“That’s terribly kind of you. You don’t even know me.”

“I want something from you in return. I want you to tell me everything you know that might help me find my son.”

I LOADED HIS PIECES into the freight elevator in the parking garage under my apartment block. No one saw me carry him into my flat. Once inside I found a crescent wrench and re-attached one of his crab claws so he could put himself back together.

“Do you have a name?” I asked.

“We Scientists simply exchange icons electronically,” he began, then hesitated. “People used to call me Burt.”

“Well, Burt, I’m going to have a cup of coffee.”

“Oh God,” he moaned. “Real coffee?”

“Synthi-caf.”

“What I wouldn’t do for even a cup of synthi-caf. Did you know that something like 80 percent of the people they perform this operation on go irrevocably insane within a few hours? Of course you don’t know. Nobody outside the network does. But the sensory deprivation during the operation and recovery, the loss of neurons in the spinal cord, loss of hormones, foreign data from the donated eyes...”

“Why do they keep doing it?”

“They figure we were old anyway. No loss if we have to be destroyed.”

“You mean they just ... kill the ones that go crazy?”

“Only somebody with emotions would hesitate at murder. Logic only seeks the most efficient way to carry it out. The Master himself said that both the quantity and quality of the population should be controlled by authority. And that there might not be room for both the new men and the old men in the same world. The better organized beings—the Scientists, of course—will be obliged, he said, to reduce the numbers of the others in self-defense. Until they are no longer ‘seriously inconvenienced’ by them.”

“This is unbelievable. Monstrous.”

“Maybe, but it’s nothing new. Do you know what a ‘Hooverville’ is? I’m sure you don’t. They never made it into the history books. They were named for Herbert Hoover, who was President during a worldwide economic depression a hundred years ago. They were collections of shacks and tents and shanties at the edges of major cities, filled with people who’d lost their jobs and homes. A man named Anderson, who became obsessed with the Master’s ideas, was Attorney General under Hoover. His first act was the secret liquidation of what he called the ‘hardcore and intransigent poor.’“

“He turned them into liquid?”

“It was a euphemism. A polite way of saying murder. He spread the Master’s ideas worldwide, and it was quietly decided that a second world war would be held to get the economies moving again. In the process they could eliminate the remainder of the lower classes and ‘least intelligent’ of the population.”

“These people have Mikey,” I said. “We have to get him away from them.”

“Wait. There’s more I have to tell you. The Scientists are only the tip of the iceberg. You’ve seen us. It must be obvious to you that we’re not capable of running the world. It’s all a sham, and it’s kept in place by—”

At that moment the front door flew open and four men in dark suits walked in. They all wore mirrored sunglasses, all had bulges under their left arms, and all had wires going to plugs in their right ears. “Okay, pal,” one of them said. “That’ll be enough.”

“This is an outrage,” Burt said. He waved his crab claws in the air. “You have no right to - “

One of the suited men sidestepped a claw and pinched one of the clear plastic tubes that led to Burt’s brain case.

“Glub,” Burt said.

“Are you going to behave now, pal?”

“Glub,” Burt said.

The man let go and Burt began to tremble. “Aw,” said one of the other men. “You scared him.”

“Damn things give me the creeps,” said the one stepping away from Burt. “Looks like a damn talking ShopVac.” He jerked his lapels down with both hands, then tugged at his cuffs as he looked at me.

“Who are you?” I said.

“Nobody,” one of them said. “You never saw us.” He looked at the others. “Let’s get him out of here.”

I took a step toward them, and the one nearest me raised one hand, palm out. It was a gesture of such menace that it rooted me to the floor.

Another one looked at Burt. “You coming quietly, or do we have to muss you up?” Burt held up two of his claws meekly, and with one of the suited men on either side, holding his hands as if he were a lost child, they led him out into the hallway.

As soon as the door slammed I ran to the window. Parked below was a huge Cadillac with six doors, black glass, and a small satellite dish. A few seconds later the front door of the building opened and the four men came out, still leading Burt by the claws.

I ran for the elevator.

AT FIRST I stayed close, but once we were headed north in the bumper-to-bumper traffic of Central Expressway it was impossible to lose them. We passed the island cities of Plano and McKinney and finally exited at Allen, where we turned east. Five miles out of town the Cadillac pulled up to an estate surrounded by high walls and a steel mesh gate. The gate opened for them and clanged shut again before I could follow.

I got out of the car and stood in the rain to watch through the gate while the Cadillac pulled up to a huge house with columns in the front and elaborate gardens on all sides. There were stacks of bright green sod along the driveway where the rain-burned lawn was being replaced. The men in suits took Burt out of the car and led him in through the double front doors, which were opened for them by a man in a tuxedo.

I found a small speaker on one of the stone gateposts with a button underneath it. I held the button down until a voice came out of the speaker saying, "Help you?"

"Some men took a friend of mine into your house. I want to know what they're doing with him."

"Could you describe this friend of yours?"

"Um, short? Mostly metal?"

Someone snickered in the background as the voice said, "I must have heard you wrong. Are you telling me that the little Scientist with the fried brain is your friend?"

"That's right. And I'm not leaving until I find out what you're doing to him."

"Suit yourself, lady."

The speaker went dead. I leaned on the button again, but after ten minutes or so my thumb got tired. By that time the drizzle had soaked through my clothes and was stinging my skin. I shivered and turned away from the gate and saw the police car pull up in front of me.

THEY TRIED TO let me go with a warning. but I wouldn't leave. That got them scratching their heads to come up with a charge to hold me on. Resisting release? In the end they locked me up as a public nuisance, and gave me a dry T-shirt and jeans.

It was very quiet in the jail overnight. I think I even slept a little. In the morning I had a visitor. He was dressed in baggy shorts, a knit shirt with an open collar, and loafers with no socks. He was about fifty years old, overweight but not really fat. He had short white hair and an expression of the mildest possible interest on his face. The four men in suits with him might have been the same ones who kidnapped Burt.

They left me alone with the five of them in someone's paneled and carpeted office. The white-haired man said, "So. Your boyfriend has his brain in a can."

"He's not my boyfriend. He's someone who was trying to help me. He was my last hope."

"If that was your last hope, you must really be in trouble."

"Yes," I said, exhausted, chilled, hungry and desperate, "I'm really in trouble." Then, for no sensible reason, I told him about Mikey and Representative Gowan and my interview with the Master. "You're one of the ones Burt was talking about, aren't you? The ones who really run things."

He tilted his head noncommittally. "I assume Burt is your little robot buddy. His other little robot pals want him back awful bad. Maybe I'll let them have him, maybe not."

"Who are you?"

“Me? I’m rich.”

I nodded. “I’m Jeannie. Jeannie Donovan.”

He looked uncomfortable. “Rich isn’t *who* I am, it’s *what* I am.”

“Oh.”

“There aren’t that many of us left. We tend to devour each other. But yes, your little friend Burt was right. We’re the ones. We let the Scientists pretend to run things because they make us lots of money and they come up with really neat things for us to play with.”

“So you let them cut people’s brains out and drive them crazy and kidnap people’s children and kill off the poor and helpless.”

“Money has a logic of its own. We’re not that different, us and the Scientists. Neither one of us is willing to let sentiment stand in the way of what we want. The difference is that rich people are seldom so pathetically naive.”

“So what happens to me now?”

The white-haired man picked up a heavy glass paperweight and let it roll in his hand for a while. Then he walked over and looked out the window at the rain. “I think I’ll find your son for you,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong. Another day I might have had you killed. Or I might have tried to seduce you, and probably would have succeeded, if I tried hard enough. I can do anything. It’s the big payoff for getting to be where I am.”

He turned to face me. “Go home, Mrs. Donovan. Watch *TV*. You’ll hear from me.”

THREE DAYS LATER the Cadillac pulled up in front of the apartment building. I jerked back from the window where I had been sitting for most of the last three days, trying one minute to convince myself that there was in fact hope, the next equally desperate to believe that everything I remembered since my interview with the Master was some kind of hallucination.

Four men in suits got out of the car. One of them had a bundle in his arms. I ran into the hallway and stood by the elevator, unable to breathe. The doors finally opened. The man was carrying a child, about a year old, dressed in shorts and a tiny T-shirt. I had been wrong about one thing. I did recognize him, would have known him anywhere.

I took him in my arms, distantly aware that I was sobbing. “How can I possibly thank you?” I said.

“You can’t,” one of them said, already turning away. “So I wouldn’t even try.”

“Wait. What about Burt? Is Burt okay?”

“Your little robot buddy? He’s fine. The boss has got him pulling weeds. Now unless you’ve got another two or three hundred questions, some of us have work to do.”

The elevator doors closed and they were gone.

I looked down at the child in my arms. “Mikey,” I said. “It’s really you.”

“Well, of course,” he said. “Who were you expecting, the Dalai Lama?”

“I ... I...”

“I’d offer to shake hands, but my muscular coordination is still very primitive. Do you think we could go inside?”

I was physically disoriented from the repeated shocks. I nodded and carried him into the apartment. “It’s not strictly necessary,” he said, “to keep holding me so tightly.”

“What should I ... where do you...”

“The floor would be fine, I should think.”

I placed him carefully on the floor and he sat there, the very model of a beautiful year-old baby, except for the fierce light of intelligence in his eyes.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked desperately. “Do you feel anything for me at all?”

“Of course I know who you are. I’ve had the situation explained to me.”

“But you don’t feel anything? You’d just as soon be back there with the Scientists?”

“Well, no, actually,” he said. “If the truth be known...” He looked to one side, then the other, and lowered his voice. “...they’re really just a bunch of poop-heads.” He leaned back and pounded his baby feet on the floor and laughed and laughed and laughed.