

PORCUPINE CONCUBINE

by Steve Mobia

"An hour before opening! Everybody look lively for the new season!" Ravous Flogsmith clapped his hands as the crew busied itself washing concrete walls, mopping floors and cleaning cages.

Ike Lorensi trotted by pushing a large crate of canned food with a hand truck. "I remember the time when those bastards used to sit up and beg when I came to their cages with food. Now they're so spoiled they don't even look at me. It's horrible. I feel like a rusted robot."

"Quit talking like a pig shit," shouted Smartinez on the floor polisher, "or we'll send you in for a lube job!"

"To become a robot is the highest form of evolution," declared McBrian Hartie while he shined the brass bars of cages. "Losing ones feeling toward his work is they best way of ridding oneself of emotional strain."

"Who's the one with the hernia in the head?" Ravous responded, throwing Hartie a clean rag. "I want to see my reflection in those bars."

A small dark skinned man approached Ravous. "Mr. Flogsmith. Another death in cage eight. It seems that this one didn't eat for weeks, got real thin and last night tried to escape through the bars. He only made it halfway through before suffocating."

Ravous closed his eyes briefly. "Okay. I've been hesitating on this but I guess we'll have to replace bars with steel screening, at least for the younger ones. Can the kid be stuffed for window display?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, turn him over to taxidermy right away. The doors open soon so be sure cage eight is spotless."

"Right" The small man left.

Another approached. He was Ralph Anason, in charge of window display. "I want to complain, Mr. Flogsmith. The children I've been getting recently are downright grotesque. It might be due to a slip up in taxidermy, I've no idea, but it's getting me down, giving me headaches."

Ravous patted Anason's shoulder. "Now now Ralph. You mean to say with your talent you can't do a thing with those ugly ducklings?"

Anason rested his head on Ravous' chest. "I'll tell you. When I first started working on the window displays, I loved it. I mean, beautiful children excite me, make me feel young again, refreshed, fulfilled..."

"I'm sorry. I'll look into the situation." Ravous helped Ralph straighten up. "In the meantime, put masks on them."

Ralph Anason beamed. "Thanks. I'm happy you understand, feel sympathy, can relate to human problems." Anason adjourned.

"All the kids hosed off?" Ravous asked Michael Rhode, head of hygiene.

"Yeah, I sprayed em down hours ago," said Rhode as he peeled off latex gloves. "And the air freshener should be kicking in now."

A line of customers were already forming outside. Ravous spoke to his publicity agent at the entrance: "Seems they're responding to the full page ad."

"Yeah. We even hired a skywriter. Tonight's really gonna be big."

All the children, male and female, were dressed in leotards, color coded to correspond to their respective ages. Hair stylists, their dryers blowing, put finishing curls and fluffs on some, braided pigtails on others.

The music system filled the concrete chambers with vibrant sentimentality. Custodians completed their final chores, then hurried off to the billiard room in back. Salesmen primed each others hair.

Children, perched on monkey bars and swings, were given a pep talk by Russ Junkel, ex-badminton coach, who paced in front of the cages.

"You want out of here?" Junkel asked a dejected group of eight-year-olds. "Good cheer's the key. If you've got dimples, use em."

It was seven thirty. Everything was set. Ravous walked into his padded office and pressed the 'begin' button. Colored floodlights livened the concrete walls. Fireworks were launched from the roof as a massive banner unfurled: "ORPHAN EMPORIUM OPEN, NEW SPRING LINE."

The soon to be mothers and fathers were led inside, escorted by the multitude of wide mouthed salesmen who used their honed intuition to pitch their products to specific customers:

"You know. I can tell you'd make a great mother for a mulatto. We just received a new shipment of house-trained mulattos, all at bargain basement rates."

"I can see you are a man of high integrity and rigid standards. You'll settle for nothing less than a pedigree child—whitest skin, whitest teeth and whitest urine. If you'll just step over to cage number one, I'm sure you'll like what you see."

"We've got exotic infected cripples complete with complimentary crutches. These kids are so bad off they're guaranteed to die within five years. So if you just want to try out a child without worrying about binding obligations the rest of your life, carry one to your crib tonight."

Ravous, after adjusting the air freshener, saw a middle aged couple standing by themselves in quiet conversation. The man, tall and lanky with a jutting chin was leafing through the color brochure on "spring line specials"—children happily posed in synthetic settings with their physical statistics and genetic map below the photos. The woman, a red head wearing a modest full length dress, looked over her own copy of the brochure. They glowered and mumbled. "Unhappy customers—can't have that," thought Ravous as he approached them, vowing to infringe.

"Hello. My name is Ravous Flogsmith, manager of the Emporium. You're probably debating over what kind of child you want. Why don't you step into my office. It's quieter there."

The couple hesitantly entered the office. Ravous closed the heavy door. It was dead silent inside. The walls were lined with stuffed feather pillows.

Ravous walked to his desk. "Now, tell me a little about yourselves. I might be able to assist you."

The couple sat in billowing leather chairs. The woman was first to speak. "My husband and I are looking for a little girl that we can call our own. You see, we had a baby..."

The man interrupted. "Nanette. I don't think it's necessary to get that personal."

Ravous leaned forward. "Quite all right. Choosing a child is a very personal affair. All our personnel are trained in personal affairs. Please continue."

"Well, our baby was stillborn." The woman paused and took a breath. "We don't want to chance going through that experience again so..."

"All understandable." Ravous pressed his hands together. "Many people have gone through the very same ordeal. Say, you both look so

dedicated to each other and so loving, I can't see any reason why you shouldn't adopt a little girl. In fact, I think I have just the one for you."

The man stroked his chin. "What is her history?"

Ravous stood and walked to a file cabinet. "Let me get you some information on her. I just know that she had been abused as an infant. In fact, that's why she's here. Some concerned neighbors brought the matter to police attention. The girl was taken from her parents." A folder was pulled out and opened. "Ah, here it is. Her name is Amanda. Her parents were Thaddeus and Silvainia Karcus. One month from now, she'll have her twelfth birthday. Let's go out to the cages. I'll show her to you. She's a fine specimen."

Ravous and the couple pushed their way through the now crowded Emporium until they reached cage eleven where fifteen girls in violet leotards gazed wide eyed through polished brass bars.

"Amanda, dear." Ravous unlocked the cage, "Come out. There are some people to see you."

Hands clasped behind her back, Amanda stepped from the cage. She was a tiny child with long flaxen hair recently combed and curled. Though her head bent down, her light green eyes rose upward at the couple.

The woman knelt down. "Hi Amanda. How do you feel tonight?"

"Fine," Amanda responded in monotone.

Ravous made a sudden motion to Russ Junkel who carried a box labeled: 'Happiness Helpers'. "Russ, over here. Give this girl a plaything."

Russ set the box down and took out a red jump rope. Amanda, as if obeying an unheard order, quickly took the rope and began jumping.

Ravous smiled back at the couple. "You see, she's a very healthy active child—full of fun. She jump rope all day if I'd let her."

Husband and wife spoke softly to each other:

"She does resemble Constance."

"She looks so pathetic. We've got to help her."

"Doesn't seem to be a problem child."

"So serious though."

"I wonder what kind of abuse she's been through."

"I don't know but that's in the past. We'll make it up to her."

"She'll probably love us more this way."

Ravous interrupted. "Well, what do you think?"

The man gave another glance to Amanda. "I think we might take her." He looked at his wife. "What do you think?"

"Amanda," the woman asked, coming as close as she could to the whirling rope without getting hit. "Would you like us to be your mommy and daddy?"

Amanda, with a solemn blank face, continued jumping rope silently.

"She's too involved in her fun to answer." Ravous put his arms around the shoulders of the couple. "Let's go back to my office and we'll work out the legalities." He pushed them away from the cage. The woman turned her head to look back but Amanda was concealed by the other customers. All that could be seen was the top arc of the red jump rope at its highest point.

"Make a wish and blow out the candles." Lloyd and Nanette Roblan hugged each other as Amanda puckered her lips. The cake was large with generous sweet waves of pink icing crowned by a ring of twelve beeswax candles. Amanda was wearing the new frilled dress Nanette had bought her the day before

"That's it." Lloyd bent down over the red draped table, whispering into Amanda's ear. "See if you can get them out all at once."

During the month of her stay, Amanda had seemed preoccupied as if she were living in a different world. But as she took a deep breath and leaned toward the cake, faint tracings of a smile appeared.

Lloyd and Nanette clasped hands, pleased that Amanda was finally showing an emotion. "Don't keep us in suspense," said Lloyd.

Amanda continued holding her breath. The smile disappeared, giving way to consternation.

"It's not all that hard now is it?" Lloyd's jaw grew tight.

Nanette spoke with a nervous laugh. "Amanda, there's nothing to be afraid of."

Amanda's eyes stared fiercely at the flickering candles as if she were determined to extinguish them, yet no air came from her mouth.

Nanette turned away. "Lloyd, what can be wrong with her?"

"I don't know." Lloyd shrugged his shoulders. "Ask her."

Nanette touched her new daughter's arm. "Amanda, do you feel all right?"

As she looked up at Nanette, Amanda began to cry. "I can't blow out the candles."

Nanette stroked Amanda's shinning hair. "Of course you can. There's nothing to it. Here, sit up and try it again. It doesn't take much to blow them out."

Following her mother's instructions, Amanda took an even bigger breath. "That's my girl," Lloyd said, walking to the opposite end of the table. Once again though, Amanda did not exhale, the air seemingly trapped inside her could not find a way out.

"Amanda, let it out." Lloyd stared at her through the flames.

"Come on," pleaded Nanette. "Just a puff."

Amanda almost fainted and Nanette pulled her away from the cake. She slumped back in her chair, retreating again into a numbed vacancy.

The Roblans walked to a nearby corner.

"What is making her act this way?" pondered Nanette. "She seemed almost excited about her birthday, nothing bothering her until now."

Obviously anxious, Lloyd ran fingers through his hair. "Do you know if she's afraid of fire? That might be the problem."

Nanette looked back at Amanda. "There are so many things I can't figure out about her. I don't think she's doing this on purpose.."

Lloyd's voice grew low and gruff. "Well, I don't know. It certainly isn't very funny. What should we do? A birthday isn't complete without the candle ceremony."

Nanette bowed her head. "Oh Lloyd. You really want to push it that far?"

"Listen Nanette." Lloyd shook Nanette's shoulders. "She's a twelve year old girl now, living with us. She must learn to adjust to us. She must go along with her birthday celebration."

"Okay." Nanette squeezes Lloyd's arms. "Just be gentle with her. Give her confidence."

The Roblans walked back to Amanda who was again sitting upright, gazing blankly at the cake before her.

Lloyd again whispered to the girl. "Hey, what's got you? You're almost a woman. Are you going to let those little candles keep you back."

Amanda lowered her head.

Nanette joined Lloyd. "You can open your presents afterwards."

The girl suddenly looked up, horrified. "You bought me presents?"

Lloyd, puzzled by her reaction, pulled away. "Haven't you ever been given birthday presents before?"

Instead of answering, Amanda covered her eyes with a napkin, her body trembling.

Nanette knelt close. "Amanda, if you're doing this on purpose, please don't. You know we want you to be happy. We want that more than anything. If something is bothering you, we'd like to help."

"I can't blow them out." Amanda sobbed.

Replacing the soggy crumpled napkin with a new one, Nanette helped Amanda dry her tears. "Come on now. You shouldn't cry like that. You don't have to blow out the candles if don't want to."

Lloyd pounded the table. "What are you saying? Of course she has to blow them out. That's the most important part of a birthday."

"Please Lloyd. She's had enough."

"She's had enough?" Lloyd paced the floor. "What about me? Do you know what she's doing? She's rejecting our love."

"You don't know that," Nanette stood to face her husband. "We have no idea what's wrong with her."

Amanda let out a siren-like scream.

Lloyd plugged his ears. "Okay little girl, off to bed. No presents or cake for you. Get!" Lloyd gave Amanda a swat as she ran past him to the stairs.

Nanette grabbed Lloyd's arm, her face stern. "So you really want her to love you."

Pulling from Nanette's grasp, Lloyd slumped into Amanda's now empty chair.

Nanette shook her head. "Why is it so goddamn important to have the candles blown out?"

"Because.." Lloyd was groping apologetically for a satisfying answer. "Because...I want her to love us and somehow...well, I suppose I just can't take the rejection."

"Why do you insist it's rejection?"

Lloyd looked past Nanette to the staircase leading to Amanda's room. "It must be. You just said it yourself—the way she avoids us as if we were monsters or something and she's always so silent, never responding. I just reached the breaking point, that's all. Why won't she tell us anything? Those screams at night. Why does she scream? I don't know what to do."

"...So you swat her and send her to bed."

"Okay, but I couldn't take it anymore. You know how much I care."

"I'll say."

"Look, I'm not perfect! There must be people who can help us." Lloyd blew heavily on the candles. They continued to stay lit. Aggravated, he stood up, leaned over the table and blew with more force. Still none went out. He grabbed a glass of iced tea and drenched the cake with it. Still there was light.

"What's going on here?" Nanette blew on the candles, then both Nanette and Lloyd puffed in unison. The flames flickered but refused to extinguish.

Nanette walked into the kitchen and called to Lloyd. "Take them out of the cake. We'll try dipping them in water."

Lloyd attempted to remove one of the candles. It didn't come loose. He felt the cake's frosting. "Tell me. Was this cake in the deep freeze?"

Nanette returned to the family room with a bowl of water. "No. In fact it was sitting on the kitchen counter for forty five minutes."

"That's funny. The entire cake is frozen solid and the candles won't budge."

"I don't understand," Nanette exclaimed. "I'm sure I put in the proper ingredients."

When I looked in my bedroom mirror, my eyes were all red. Daddy never believed me. I was really trying to blow those stupid old candles out. It felt so bad, like my lungs were punctured. But I couldn't tell mommy or daddy because I didn't know what the real reason was. So I put on my nighty and knocked on the dollhouse at the end of my bed. Morris was in there all right. He scampered out of the garage door I made and ran into my lap. I found I had to take him to bed with me more often than before and that night I just had to. He seemed to know my problems because he was very sad. We both slipped under the sheets and I curled up around him. Of course it was painful but I got used to the pain and after awhile, all I felt was numb. I told him that my daddy was mad at me and we'd have to be very still. You know, porcupines are funny animals, they can make you stop thinking—I mean, stop thinking about anything bad or what went on that day; anything. Well, at least Morris did that night. I wasn't sure if I should

have told him I was supposed to be twelve but I said, "Morris guess what. I'm twelve years old now." All he did was make his quills stick out.

"Open up cutie pie." A spoonful of banana bruise pudding was pressed against Amanda's lower lip. Silvainia Karcus grew impatient with her baby and pushed until Amanda's mouth opened.

"Your mommy spent all that time cutting the best banana bruises for this pudding and you're going to eat it!" The spoon was forced down the baby's throat until she gagged and spit up the contents.

Silvainia slapped Amanda. "Just what do you think you're doing? What a disgusting kid you are. Where's your manners? You're one year old and you still can't keep your food down. I don't know how much more I can take."

Thaddeus Karcus, wearing a black leather jumpsuit, ran into the dining room. "What's the trouble Silvie?"

Silvainia pointed to the floor. "I just waxed it and look. She still can't control her swallowing."

Thaddeus frowned beneath his brisling goatee. "We'll just have to teach her a lesson, that's all. You get her cleaned off and meet me in the rumpus room."

Silvainia slapped Amanda a second time while removing the tray from the highchair. The baby screamed as she was lifted abruptly from her seat and heaved into a kitchen sink full of hot soapy water.

"I don't know why you do things like this. You know it gets us upset," said Silvainia as she gave Amanda a scrubbing with a steel wood pad. "You can't imagine all the hard work and time we spend on you. You're just a spoiled brat."

The rumpus room door was thrown open and Silvainia entered with Amanda thrown over her shoulders.

"Well, I'm afraid we'll have to get to the heart of the matter. Discipline's the only way," spoke Thaddeus from an easy chair, glaring grimly at the squirming screaming infant.

He stood and unfolded a large transparent plastic bag. "Dump her in here."

Amanda's cries were muffled as she plunged into the plastic. Thaddeus climbed a prepared ladder and tied the bag to one of many chrome hooks on the

ceiling so that Amanda hung above the floor. Climbing down and moving the ladder, Thaddeus studied the thrashing baby inside the sack.

"Remember the umbilical cord we saved?" He asked.

Silvainia nodded. "Yes."

"So you know where I keep it."

"Yes. Coiled in the medicine cabinet beside the bandages."

"Right. Would you go get it please?"

Silvainia left the room.

Thaddeus extended his hands as if in supplication, touching the bag tenderly. "I love you, Amanda. If you only knew how much. I'm sorry I have to treat you this way. I pity you. Why must you suffer so much?" He fell to the floor, hands covering his anguished face. "My poor baby."

Silvainia's clicking stiletto heels signaled her return. Embarrassed, Thaddeus jumped to his feet, drying his eyes with his shirt sleeve.

"Here's the cord." She unwound the limp tube.

"I hope it hasn't lost its strength." Thaddeus took the umbilical cord and stretched it repeatedly from the middle to the ends. In his hands, the cord appeared to lengthen and grow more solid. "Good, it's still as strong as ever." He stepped behind the bag. "Now my little girl. It's about time you learned to swallow your food."

He cocked his arm back, then flung it forward. The umbilical cord snapped against the bag. Inside, Amanda's arms and legs convulsed as if electrocuted. Thaddeus whipped the bag again and again.

Silvainia covered her eyes. "Oh my god. Poor Amanda."

The whipping continued. Amanda's thrashing weakened the bag, her piercing cries grew hoarse and ragged.

After the sixtieth beating, the bag burst, dropping Amanda to the floor. Silvainia's head turned away.

Exhausted, Thaddeus stared at his wife, the umbilical cord now shriveled and limp. "What have we done to our baby?"

They embraced each other, standing over Amanda who lay motionless on the rumpus room floor. Thaddeus whispered to Silvainia, "Feel sympathy for her. It's our only hope."

"Is this the office of Luigi Carbuncle?" asked Lloyd. "It's the right room number but there wasn't a name on the door."

"Yeah, sure is," replied the blue-headed receptionist. "Carbuncles' a humanist ya know. He says it's more human to have his name spoken than to read it on some sign. You two have an appointment?"

Nanette nodded. "Yes we do."

"Well, it doesn't matter," the receptionist playfully threw up her hands. "Luigi doesn't believe in appointments—too goal centered. Sit down somewhere. I'll see where his head's at." She got up and vanished behind velour curtains.

Lloyd and Nanette sat awkwardly on multi-colored bean bag chairs.

"I'm not too sure I can be comfortable here," whispered Nanette. "I haven't sat on a chair like this since the sixties."

Lloyd pressed a finger to his lips. "Let's wait till we see Mr. Carbuncle. He's supposed to be very good—rated highly in 'Psychology Today'."

"I read it too. Isn't that the article?" Nanette pointed to a frame on the wall. Inside the frame was a piece of paper haphazardly torn from a magazine. The Roblans stood to investigate.

"Yes. This is it," remarked Lloyd as he began reading aloud. "Existential psychiatrist Luigi Carbuncle advocates free will as a remedy for psychic disturbances and responsible choice as a panacea for present predicaments."

The receptionist returned, buttoning her blouse. "Yeah, he'll be right with ya. What kinda trip are you on anyway? Maybe I can prepare you. Carbuncle's a little strange—I mean, a little strange at first. You'll get used to him though—all geniuses are like that ya know."

"Oh?" Nanette eyed the waiting room. "He isn't normal?"

"Man, you are really out of it. There is no normal. Read the diploma." The receptionist pointed to the framed magazine article.

Lloyd took a quick questioning look back at the frame. "That's his diploma?"

"Yeah, we replace it every time someone writes about him. Luigi says it's better than having the old fashioned kind—ya know, the kind that never changes."

A low muffled voice was heard from the next room, the words barely audible. "I am walking to the door in order to greet my clients in a human way; that is, in a free way."

A door opened and out stepped Luigi Carbuncle. He was around forty five and balding, but had long hair and a beard to compensate. Despite the blaze of color from his lime green polyester shirt and turquoise corduroy coat, there was a haggard look about him. "Greetings my clients."

"Hello," replied Lloyd, shielding his eyes from the garish garments. "I'm Lloyd Roblan and this is my wife, Nanette."

Carbuncle grinned. "Greetings again. Now, why did I say greetings again? I said that in order to let you know I still welcome you even after you have given me your names and have let me hear your voices. Of course I said greetings the first time as a customary acknowledgment of both our presences; that is, the presences of three humans—or four if you count Sally there—in a chaotic universe; that is, the universe perceived through our deceiving senses as being meaningless. Now, if you will step into my office, I shall continue."

Cautiously Lloyd and Nanette followed the psychiatrist into a darkened room lit up entirely with black light. All the furniture was fluorescent and glowed in a multitude of colors. Luigi Carbuncle's clothes assumed prominence here while his face retreated into the background.

Carbuncle continued, "You are walking into my office and allowing your senses the gift of investigation over the phenomenon within; that is, the unique arrangement of unfamiliar sensory data; that is, the environment in which the act of self discovery is taking place. I am walking to my desk because that is where I belong." He watched the Roblans feel their way into two orange chairs. "You are now sitting down in front of my desk which is relative of course because I am also in front of my desk; that is, I come before my desk; that is, existence of me precedes the essence of my desk; that is, I define myself by my actions, my work; that is, my desk."

The sides of the desk were covered with luminous designs resembling targets. In the center of each was a wide open eye. Luigi Carbuncle, his face just dimly visible, continued. "You see, Mr. and Mrs. Roblan, in order to be free—and what we mean by being free is acting and willfully choosing each activity spontaneously and without the interference of habit—we must be entirely and consciously responsible for every choice we make. The so-called unconscious with its ties to past experience must be exiled from the decision making process. All that counts is now; that is, to be consciously responsible for each and every act. I create myself through my actions; that is, the other—in this instance being you two—create an impression through actions of the

perceiver—in this case being me—and if I am consciously and responsibly choosing my actions, I am also creating my impressions and since all the senses are collections of impressions, I am creating myself in the process of free will choices; that is...."

Lloyd interrupted, "Excuse me Mr. Carbuncle, but since I'm paying for all this time, could we discuss the problem?"

"Well naturally; that is, all problems are natural in that we ourselves are natural, but then what we call problems are.....Right now I am taking out a handkerchief and wiping my forehead to remove the sweat....Where was I?.....Why did I ask where I was?.....I was asking where I was because...."

"It's about our daughter," Nanette injected. "We just recently adopted her and..."

"Go right on ahead," Carbuncle leaned back in his seat. "I'm glad you interrupted me; that is, it shows a degree of choice on your part and responsibility because you must be responsible for the knowledge you're missing when I'm not talking; that is, when I'm moving my mouth and making sounds as I'm doing now, a degree of..."

"Please Mr. Carbuncle," Lloyd's voice rose "If you don't stop talking about yourself, we're going to walk out and refuse to pay you a thing!"

There was a sustained silence. "Very well," Mr. Carbuncle finally replied. "What is the problem?"

"Our adopted daughter," Lloyd began, "is not getting along well. She's been with us a little over a month now and still doesn't speak unless we force her to. She's not been doing any school work and she screams every night, probably from nightmares. She also has bed eating habits—almost like she's afraid of the food."

Carbuncle took out a hot pink pipe, lit it and took a long puff. The fragrance of hashish filled the air. "This appears to be a problem of adaptation to adoption; that is, the girl is unwilling to adapt to the new situation. How old is she?"

"Twelve," Nanette replied. "She's just had her birthday."

There was quiet until Carbuncle exhaled, his voice tightened and shrill. "She's passed the age of self responsibility; that is, even though she's still a minor, she can choose her mental states and should in order to release herself from her previous home situation. Did she like her previous parents?"

Nanette looked at Lloyd who shrugged his shoulders. "She never says much about them. All we know is that she was abused by them and had to be forcibly taken away. I doubt if she liked them."

"You can never tell about thing like this. Sometimes the aroma is misleading." Carbuncle sneers at his pipe then beats it on the desk ashtray until emptied. "Don't choose to let me distract you.,"

Lloyd leaned forward. "We think maybe she can be helped psychologically."

Suddenly Carbuncle pounded his fist on the desk. "Nobody needs psychiatry! It's an absurd profession; that is, each individual is his own psychiatrist; I'm not needed. Remember that in our consultations. I'm just a figurehead, all I truly care about is myself. If I choose to help you, it's only for my own benefit because the only existence I can ever begin to know is my own. I can abuse you all I want; that is, it's helping you to be abused because you can then think and make choices and become free!"

"Mr. Carbuncle..." Lloyd got up and pulled Nanette to her feet.

"Don't interrupt!" Carbuncle stood and walked around the desk toward his clients. "You middle class cock suckers! You and your fucking useless baby girl..."

"She's twelve," Lloyd angrily corrected.

"I don't care; that is—why should I care?" Carbuncle, his breath reeking of hashish, spoke into Lloyd's face. "I have stood up in defiance of your values; that is, I think you are yuppie scum personified! You call yourselves parents?"

"We're better parents than you are a psychiatrist," Nanette yelled back.

Carbuncle turned from Lloyd to Nanette. "That's it, shoot me down; that is, tell me what a quack I am! I am getting angrier and angrier; that is, growing more disgusted with you. Come on, attack me!"

He spat on Nanette while reaching under her dress, feeling the inside of her thigh and grabbing her up between the legs. "What's wrong with this? It must not be working. Can't have a real baby of your own; that is, your pussy out of order?"

Lloyd leapt on Carbuncle's back while Nanette slapped the psychiatrist, pushing his probing hand away from her crotch. Carbuncle whirled around attempting to throw off Lloyd.

Having been released, Nanette reached for a paper weight containing a gem of deep red encased in resin. Carbuncle, seeing her intent, jumped

backwards, throwing Lloyd against Nanette's arm. The paper weight rolled to the floor.

"Fight me! Fight me!" Carbuncle yelled as he unzipped Nanette's blouse from the back. "You must choose to fight me."

Lloyd caught sight of the rolling paperweight on the dimly lit carpet. "You're a madman!" Lloyd retorted as he scooped it up.

"And you're mad, very mad!" Carbuncle unhooked Nanette's bra, then reached around under her blouse, feeling her exposed nipples. "What your wife needs is the real thing; that is, something growing inside her, getting bigger and bigger."

Lloyd slammed the paper weight into Carbuncle's head.

Nanette screamed and pulled free. The stunned psychiatrist stood for a moment suspended as if by will alone before collapsing to the floor.

As Lloyd helped Nanette fasten her clothes again, Luigi Carbuncle, his voice deep and slurred, continued. "...Good. Now we can begin; that is, you've learned to go against your superficial natures; that is, we've encountered one another and released pent up frustration. This is the start of a free exchange, communication. Carbuncle's a catalyst, first, last and always."

"We're leaving here," said Lloyd. "And don't expect us to be quiet about what happened. You're a sick man."

The psychiatrist continued unabated. "All problems contain their own answers within; that is, in fighting, we made the solution to our differences more apparent; that is, peace is now within reach; that is...." The words faded to a low mumble, incomprehensible. Carbuncle closed his eyes.

"Rest in peace," said Lloyd, slamming the office door shut and leaving the psychiatrist alone on the floor, unconscious.

Amanda entered the multi-purpose room carrying her lunchbox. Every table was crowded with children. She walked to the designated area for third graders. Mrs. Mirage, the cafeteria supervisor for the day, pointed out an open spot at one table.

"Hey Amanda, you're not tryin any more food tricks are you?" Harve Grumplestein asked as Amanda sat beside him.

Bobble Bigski, the boy to Amanda's left, attempted to push her from the bench. "Hey, this spot is for boys only."

"Ah, leave her alone," Harve grabbed Bobble's arm. "As long as she doesn't try to poison us."

Amanda took her seat. "It's not my fault. It's what my mommy packs me for lunch."

"Your mommy must be a witch." Harve laughed.

Amanda hit Harve's arm. "Don't say that. I don't know what she is."

"She could be a witch then."

"Don't say that!" Amanda tried to place her hand over Harve's mouth. Bobble grabbed her shoulders and pulled until she fell from the bench.

Amanda was crying. Mrs. Mirage huffed over to the table. "Can't you kids ever get along?" She helped Amanda to her feet. "All right, who pushed you?"

Amanda answered without looking up. "They were calling my mother names."

Mrs. Mirage frowned. "Now listen boys. One more act like this and you'll be sent to the chiropractor."

The boys immediately turned and continued eating. Amanda again sat at the table as Mrs. Mirage leaned over her. "If they pester you any more, you come tell me."

"I wish they wouldn't say those things about mommy," Amanda fingered the table's chrome edging.

"Well, your mommy can protect herself. Just ignore what those boys say." Mrs. Mirage gave Amanda a pat on the back before leaving.

The boys were quiet but gave sidelong glances at Amanda who cautiously unlocked the lunch box lid. She paused before opening it.

Bobble broke the silence. "What's wrong? Aren't you hungry?"

"Of course I'm hungry," Amanda curtly replied as she threw the lid back. The box was filled to the brim with black widow spiders. They flooded over onto the table. Amanda leaned back and fell off the bench. The boys knocked each other down attempting to get away. Others at the table screamed and threw milk cartons at the spiders.

Some children couldn't move fast enough and got spiders in their hair or down their dresses. Trying to kill them or shake them out, the kids rolled on the floor or jumped around. Mrs. Mirage tried to push her way through the jittery crowd. "All right, who brought the spiders in?"

The cry was in chaotic unison. "Amanda!"

Stopped by a group of boys, Amanda was pushed toward Mrs. Mirage. "Here she is," they said.

"Throw her on the table so she can get bit," one of them said.

"Make her eat them," said another.

Mrs. Mirage grabbed the girl by the arm. "You're in for it now little lady. If any of these kids die or get sick, we'll never hear the end of it from their parents."

Amanda was led by Mrs. Mirage back through the children toward the main door. "You're going to the chiropractor!"

"No!" I yelled and woke up, almost squashing Morris. I pulled him closer so I wouldn't think about those awful dreams. He tried for a little bit to get away from me but I held on and forced him to stick out his spines. I remembered last night's dream. It was terrible being a baby again—and tonight I was eight years old at the school.

Now I really wanted to be twelve, more than anything. I opened my eyes and looked at the bedroom, thinking of the cake candles still burning downstairs. My old parents aren't around anymore, why was I so scared? My new parents were probably asleep in the next room, I thought. Still, I really wanted to see them, to tell them "I love you."

"Morris, wait here for me," I said and put my porcupine back in the dollhouse. Then I went out in the hall and listened at the door to my mom and dad's room. I must have waited forever but finally I decided to turn the knob and go in.

The bed was empty and still made up. Ten o'clock at night said the clock on the wall. Then I remembered mom saying she and dad were going out to some meeting and would be back around eleven thirty.

It occurred to me that I was never in this room before and so I looked around. There was a note on the dresser from my teacher, Mrs. Magnot, about how I was slipping so bad in my schoolwork. She seemed to know I really wanted to do the work but when it came to actually reading or writing, I just couldn't. Maybe that was what the meeting was about and I wondered if I'd get in trouble.

There were some pictures on the dresser also—a wedding picture, a picture of my new dad in an office and a real strange one of a baby's face but with the eyes closed. Its cheeks were kind of puffy like something was wrong with it.

The closet door was open a little bit and I went to have a look. Inside I saw something real gross and scary. A big bottle sat up on top of a high pink table and inside was a baby. It was floating in some kind of liquid with its arms and legs all curled up. The face was the same as on the picture.

I didn't know what to do I was so scared. I knew it was something I wasn't supposed to see so I closed the closet and left the room. Morris was waiting for me as always, scratching his paws against the dollhouse garage door when I came back to my room. I was shivering because I remembered that dream where I was a baby in a bag. Now there was some terrible secret about my new mom and dad I shouldn't know.

"Morris, come here." I patted the bed and out he came, jumping up to join me under the covers. I gave him a big hug. "Make me forget," I said and he stuck out his spines. Soon I couldn't think about anything anymore.

"I was brought up very lax. Maybe lax isn't the right word."

"Lax is a fine word Mrs. Roblan. Just go ahead." The interviewer, a short round man with a thick gray mustache, typed rapidly into his computer.

"We'll, my father died when I was seven and my mother was nearly always preoccupied with herself so I was left on my own, to do what I wanted."

Lloyd smiled sarcastically. "Fortunately I came along before she got herself too messed up. I had a boring life but at least it was stable."

The interviewer looked up from the screen. "What was your upbringing like Mr. Roblan?"

Lloyd settled back into the soft chair. "My parents were both very protective. Maybe protective isn't the right word."

"Protective is a fine word." The interviewer continued typing.

"Right, well, I was a very sheltered kid—afraid of friends, enemies, girls, you name it."

"Parenthood?" For a moment the interviewer peered over his glasses at Lloyd before returning to the screen.

Lloyd seemed puzzled by the question. "Yes, that too. It took a real radical woman like Nanette to break the shell."

"And did it break?" asked the interview without looking up.

"Break probably isn't the right word."

"Break is a fine word Mr. Roblan. And it is the first word you chose—that's important."

"Well," said Lloyd, exasperated. "She convinced me to move away from my parents. Gave me confidence in myself. I would still be washing the windows for mom and dad if it wasn't for Nanette."

The interviewer smiled. "So you started washing Nanette's windows?"

"Ah, no, yes, sometimes." Lloyd's face reddened. "I mean, the split was made. I no longer needed my parents. Nanette wasn't a mother figure or anything."

The interviewer stopped typing. "I'm not too sure."

Both Nanette and Lloyd, shaking their heads in disbelief, stared back.

The man seemed pleased with their attention. "You say you had a child eleven years ago, a stillborn child immediately after marriage."

Lloyd looked at the ceiling, high above. "Yeah. Nanette seduced me before I could afford the wedding ring."

"Look boy, you were desperate," Nanette laughed. "You were a pitiful sight that night."

"So Lloyd, " the interviewer continued. "Perhaps you married and had the child to please your parents. In other words, you made Nanette your mother. It was the only way you could break free. You would become the child of a new parent."

"Seems a little far fetched," Nanette observed.

"Life's a little far fetched if you ask me." Two forms emerged from a printer and the interviewer laid them on his desk. "Anyway. at least one of the departments in the Parent Perfection Institute can help. There are so many approaches to parenthood today, a plethora. Take these forms to the Inquisition Counter through the main hall."

The Roblans thanked the interviewer and exited his tiny cubicle. A honeycomb of similar cubicles formed by padded partitions opened onto a room resembling the inside of a long airplane hanger. Counters were everywhere.

Couples, singles and groups clustered around seating arrangements, tables and vending machines. The Inquisition Counter was at the far end.

Several men and women in bright blue jumpsuits waited like bell hops near the counter. One of them, a slender man with a bony face, approached.

"Stuchom Solivat will provide the getting acquainted procedures," the woman at the counter said as she placed the forms on a clipboard and handed it to the bony man.

"Pleased to meet you." Stuchom extended his hand. "I'm glad you've decided that parenting in today's world requires the advise of experts. Here at the Parent Perfection Institute we have more experts per square foot than any other facility of its kind."

Stuchom lead the Roblans through the building.

"We have many approaches to the problem of parenthood. For instance, the Mediocritist approach. The most important thing about Mediocritism is indifference. All emotions, except happiness, confuse a child and cause neurosis. The goal is to create a world of indifferent but untroubled people. The advice in this department is to avoid any touch contact with the child, and if at all possible, avoid turning your face toward the child because faces are so vulnerable to feelings. It is recommended you wear a smiling rubber mask when with your child for any length of time."

"I don't know. I hope there are other approaches." Nanette reached for Lloyd's hand.

"Of course; the Implosionist way is the opposite. Expressions of emotion are welcome. But, if you must fight at the dinner table, for instance, it is suggested you use paper plates and plastic utensils so when the dishes start flying, the child can join in too. Make it fun for the child. Of course, classes train in these techniques."

Suddenly an Asian lady ran up, wearing a stylish white dress pleated and pressed into folds like a Japanese fan. "New trainees? My my, what god awful clothes. Children imitate their mommies and daddies you know—and a poorly dressed parent does not set a decent example. If parenthood is your occupation, you must have a uniform to go with the job. Come this way."

"I'll wait here," Stuchom said as the lady ushered the bewildered Roblans through a wide glass doorway.

Inside there were hundreds of mirrors—mirrors on the ceiling, walls, floor and even a few suspended in mid-air from gleaming wires. Circular clothes racks

abounded among sumptuous furnishings. Thickly padded carpets muffled footsteps.

The lady, with great pride, pointed to one corner of the shop. "In this area is our restraint boutique. It's quite a paradox that in order to restrain a person, old fashioned straight jackets are not as effective as tissue thin garments which rip easily. It is a psychological deterrent to our clothes conscious public for even when they are boiling mad, they want to look good and to have clothing rip is simply out of the question."

"Straight jackets?" Lloyd laughed. "That's your idea of a uniform? You're saying someone has to be crazy to be a parent?"

"You're not listening. Now over here..." The lady in white moved to an underwear rack but the Roblans hurriedly exited the clothing shop, the soft carpets hushing their escape. Whirling around to introduce a new line of "Freudian Slips," the lady suddenly saw she was alone, slammed her hand down in disgust and accidentally shattered a tilted floor mirror. Like a contagion, the crack spread by reflection from one mirror to another, making them all appear broken. "All my wardrobes are torn!" she exclaimed in horror, running into the back room for a blindfold.

Stuchom and two others were waiting outside the shop and before Lloyd and Nanette could protest, Stuchom pushed the strangers forward, his hand behind their backs. "Let me introduce to you a couple of Psychomechanics," Stuchom said. "This is Malcolm Tacs and Salean Gridly."

"The mind, like the body is a machine," Malcolm began, his jaw motion resembling a ventriloquist's dummy. "It's all a chemical construction. If your child is depressed or apathetic about life, all it takes is the right pill. We've come a long way. There's a babysitting pill which makes the child interested in everything and prolongs attention span; there's an pill we call 'Want Wean' for when you go shopping—that's a cash saver. And of course there's the trusty pill for unconditional love which guarantees the adoration of your little one."

Nanette turned to Lloyd and snickered. "Looks like we'll need a deluxe medicine cabinet."

"Medicine cabinets are obsolete," Salean declared in an exaggerated squeaky voice. "We advise turning your walk-in closet or pantry into a personal pharmacy. With all the advances being made today, you just can't have enough space."

"I don't like it," Nanette said as she and Lloyd continued walking, the others trailing behind. "What we came here for is to get closer to our child, not drug her into doing what we want."

"Don't leave yet" said Stuchom, standing at a door marked 'Tower'. "You must come inside. This is a brainstorming room where the greatest minds in psychology get together for discussions."

"I'm not too sure this is the place for us," said Lloyd with a labored civility.

"Don't make bad judgments so soon," Stuchom motioned to the door. "After all, what you've seen is a very small part of the whole."

Shrugging their shoulders, Lloyd and Nanette entered 'The Tower'. An enormous elliptical table occupied the gray padded room. The wall at one end was a monitor screen on which the image of a small boy playing with a flashlight was being studied by men and women of various ages sitting at the table. Their voices rose in cacophonous debate

"He's trying to make a gestalt by try to stretch the beam to cover the whole room."

"The boy's competing with the light."

"What tripe. Can't you see the light is phallic and he's enjoying turning it off and on."

"He's having fun, that's all. Nothing significant exists here."

"It's an initiation rite. He's seeking illumination."

"What's your source?"

"Castles of Consciousness' by Jerome Monocle."

"I'd never think of leafing through his pages."

"You're still stuck in the middle ages."

"No I'm not, look here — copyright 1970."

"It's forged!"

"You're using a DEFENSE mechanism!"

"SO ARE YOU!"

"That book only has eighty pages. Mine has two hundred and eighty."

"You can't judge knowledge by its **thickness**. Read this pamphlet."

"Fuck you and your Christian Science!"

They pulled books from their briefcases, waving them in front of each others faces. The arguing became a violent brawl. Books were thrown and used as clubs or shields. Throughout all this, the boy was still seen on the screen, contentedly playing with his flashlight.

"I'm sorry about all this," Stuchom said as the Roblans left 'The Tower'. "It's all a malfunction of the equipment. Usually the image changes before the discussion gets that out of hand. But you see how involved they are. Apathy is one thing we can't be guilty of."

"Involvement with what? Any real human beings or only illustrations of your theories?" Lloyd asserts. "We're going home to our daughter. "

"Give us a chance," Stuchom ran after the Roblans, leaving Salean and Malcolm slumped in a chair. "Believe me, this never would have happened..."

"Where's the exit?" demanded Nanette.

Stuchom reluctantly lead the Roblans to the main entrance. "If you won't study with us, will you at least buy a practical gift?"

"What's that?"

"One of our stuffed babysitters." Stuchom pointed to a carnival-like booth on which were suspended large adult size dolls without faces. A sign over the booth read: "Mother Figures, everybody's a winner."

"We're almost there," declared Thaddeus as his car rounded another residential corner. "Soon she'll be ours again."

Silvainia consulted the road map which blanketed both of them. "Needles Lane. That's the next left. I hope she's home."

"If she isn't, we'll wait." The car took a left. "We must find her. No law ever written could take away my love for that girl." Thaddeus straightened the wheel and put the headlights on high beam. "Did you bring all her birthday presents?"

"Of course, they're in the trunk." Silvainia checked over her list. "Eye irritant, thumb screws, clamps for her new nipples. I wish we could have gotten that bed of nails."

Thaddeus groaned. "Yeah, they're far too expensive. We'll have to make our own for her next birthday."

Silvainia checked her reflection in the lit visor mirror. "Think she'll be glad to see us?"

"Come on." Thaddeus shook his head. "What little girl would want to be taken from her parents, put up for adoption, then end in a strange house with an imitation mommy and daddy?"

"Oh, take a right here!" shouted Silvainia.

The dented black old Cadillac squealed as it made the corner. Amanda turned in the direction of the sound. She knew it was them. She had to get out of the street, back to the safety of the sidewalk, but the road seemed miles wide. Her new house barely visible in the distance, she began to run toward it, the soft light in her upper room beckoning. The freshly paved asphalt seemed sticky and soft beneath her feet so her strides became longer to avoid touching the surface. The Cadillac's engine revved and Amanda knew it was closing in.

For what seemed forever, Amanda raced to the distant house—her shadow stretched out, cast forward by the pursuing headlights. As she neared the curb, the pavement grew even softer. There was something else up ahead, a fleshy patch in the asphalt. Even through the droning car engine, she heard a

crying. It was quite near now. She fought her instinct to panic and stopped at the fleshy spot. Responding to the cry, she reached down and pulled on what appeared to be a newborn baby. She raised it into her arms, holding it close, brushing off bits of asphalt around its eyes and mouth. It was almost dead, its cries faint and breathing shallow. Now the car engine was deafening. Amanda knew she was trapped and turned to face the car, the baby cradled in her arms. She prepared to jump as high as she could. Thaddeus and Silvainia waved as if in greeting but their chrome bumper collided with Amanda's shins as she leapt upward. Her head cracked against the windshield.

"What was that?" Nanette asked Lloyd as they approached the front door. "Sounded like glass breaking."

Lloyd fumbled in his pockets for the keys. "I had a feeling it was the wrong idea to leave her tonight."

"What a waste that place was." Nanette stood back, looking up at Amanda's dark bedroom window. "Parent Perfection Institute, huh. Can you imagine being raised by any of them?."

Finding the key, Lloyd hurriedly unlocked and threw open the door. A wind from outside flickered the birthday cake candles, still burning in the kitchen. All was quiet.

"It seemed to come from upstairs," said Nanette, already halfway up the steps.

The door to Amanda's room was ajar. As Nanette neared, Amanda—just getting up from bed—opened the door further. She was terrified.

"Darling," Nanette asked. "What was that noise?"

Amanda was relieved to recognize Nanette. "Oh it's you. I thought it might be..."

"Nanette," Lloyd spoke low and serious from his bedroom. "Come here."

Amanda followed Nanette into the bedroom which reeked of formaldehyde. On the floor, framed by shattered glass, was the baby, its rubbery bloated face turned upward.

Nanette knelt and reached for the infant. "Constance, what happened to you?"

"Watch the glass," warned Lloyd who now noticed Amanda standing in the doorway. "What are you doing up at this hour?"

"The bottle breaking probably woke her up," reasoned Nanette, as she held the baby to her chest. "I wonder how it fell?"

Amanda stepped forward. "Whose baby is that?"

Lloyd gave Nanette a concerned look. There was an awkward silence. Lloyd sat on the bed and motioned for Amanda to come close.

"She's ours, her name is Constance." Lloyd spoke in a faltering tone. "She died. It caused us so much pain, we kept her and pretended she was still alive."

Holding the baby in a desperate hug, Nanette wept. "She's dying Lloyd. Constance is dying."

Lloyd covered his face, hiding his grief. "You know she's been dead for eleven years."

Nanette, face flushed with pain and embarrassment, looked up to Amanda. "She was going to be the perfect girl—everything about her was going to be perfect. We imagined what her whole life would be like. Your dad and I were so happy, it was the most happiness we ever had. We couldn't let that die. But when she came out..." Nanette shut her eyes.

"She was dead." Lloyd's tear dampened hands closed around Amanda's. "It was too much to take—so we pretended. You must know about pretending."

Amanda grimaced. "But you couldn't feed her or take her on walks."

"But we could look at her and talk to her." Lloyd stood and walked to the closet, examining the pink platform which had supported the bottle. "And we made offerings to her. It was the best that we could do." Lloyd shook the platform, testing its strength. "All people have souls, even little babies."

"Lloyd," Nanette stood and set Constance on the bed. "What pushed the bottle off?"

There was a rustling under the bed. Amanda turned just in time to glimpse a scampering animal leave the room. "Morris, come back!" She pursued the creature.

Nanette, leaving Constance behind, followed Amanda. "What did you see, Amanda?"

Amanda ran down the stairs and out the open front door. "Come back Morris!"

Lloyd joined Nanette at the entrance. "Where is she going?"

Nanette searched the darkness outside. "She was calling for Morris."

"Morris?" Lloyd hurried outside to the sidewalk and stood, straining to see down the street. He felt Nanette's arm around his waist as he shouted, "Amanda!"

"I think we should bury Constance soon." Nanette whispered.

Lloyd appeared shocked. "We can get another bottle."

"No I don't feel right about it anymore. We can't go on living like this, especially with Amanda knowing about it." Nanette looked off down the street. "I did learn something from those psychologists, though it wasn't anything they said."

"And what's that?" asked Lloyd.

"I want a living daughter, no matter how imperfect she is."

Morris always came back when I called, but not that night. It was the last time I saw him. I ran for ten blocks before I just gave up. I cried so hard, all of the neighbors probably heard me. I mean, Morris had been my pet for so long. He was my only company when my old parents locked me up. We'd gone through so much together, the thought of being without him scared me to death.

He must have gotten real scared when my new parents saw him. It was probably my fault for keeping him a secret but not everyone likes porcupines. I wanted my new parents to think I was normal so they would love me. But now they knew and I was so worried I'd be sent back to the Emporium. It was a big deal, Morris knocking over that bottle—I didn't know he was that strong. And even if Morris didn't do it, my new parents thought he did. He was in the room.

I cried for a long time. It had just rained and the streets were wet and shiny just like my cheeks. Here I was, just standing on the sidewalk, not knowing where to go or what to do. It was late and no one was out there. I called for Morris a couple more times but he didn't come. I thought about running away just like Morris did—running away into the dark, not caring where I stopped, just going, going. But it was cold and wet and I knew that sometime I'd have to end up somewhere—and then what?

Looking back down the street, I could just barely see the house. My bedroom was now lit up. In the dream I couldn't wait to get back there. Now before I knew it, I was walking faster and faster—almost running but not quite. I wanted to show them I could do something right—something important.

There was a fresh smell all around from the spring rain. The grass on the front lawn sparkled from the lights on in the house. The front door was still wide open and I could see my new parents inside.

My mom had just buttoned her coat and my dad had pulled out his car keys when they heard me. "Mommy, Daddy!" I yelled—the words just slipped out. It definitely shocked them to hear me call them that way and they smiled more than I ever saw them smile. I stopped just before going in. "I've got to show you something," I said and then walked straight past them into the kitchen.

There on the dinette table was my birthday cake. Before, it seemed like the cake was really for someone else but now it was mine. Even after all this time the candles looked like they had just been lit. I took the deepest breath of my life and waited until mom and dad came in. It was like I was breathing in all this power that just couldn't wait to be free—and when I was sure they were watching, I blew hard and fast. All the candles went out.

"Happy Birthday, Amanda," they said and I knew, even though it was late, it truly was my birthday.

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