

THE HOSTS

The first time Clare saw one of the creatures for herself was on the flight home from Hong Kong, when a thin length of segmented tail (or head?) extended from the ear of another couple's adopted baby. That explained why the poor little girl had been crying so much; and here Clare had just thought the changes in air pressure might be hurting her ears.

There had been four couples going together as a group – three straight couples and a pair of lesbians – to bring home their babies at last. Clare had known that the babies would fuss with discomfort, and this would make the other passengers uncomfortable as well, but they would all just have to endure it together. And so she had reclined her seat against the knees of the man behind her, trying to make a cushy bed of her body for the boy they had named Dylan. Despite all her zealous dieting programs, she had a large body presumably made for birthing children, though she had not been successful in that endeavor, either. Her husband, Gary, had an even larger body, imposingly tall and broad but more successfully toned from racquetball and bike riding. He took turns cradling their tiny new son, so unlike them with his dark hair standing up in wispy spikes and his glistening black eyes. The four babies looked more like siblings than they did relations to their new mothers, who were uniformly blond – though in Clare's case, anyway, not in the natural sense. But Dylan's differences didn't cause his new parents concern. Rather, it would announce to others the generousness of their hearts, in that they had obviously gone so far in their efforts to give a child from a less privileged country the opportunity for a better life. They expected most people to be charmed and admiring, rather than confounded. Celebrities did this all the time.

"My favorite souvenir," Gary joked, kissing his squirming son on the top of his head. Whenever he moved his big body, he acci-

dentally dropped a burping towel or teething ring or cover to a baby bottle behind him, so that the passenger crushed back there would have to dig down at his feet to retrieve it. Oh well. He'd just have to understand how important this all was.

The couple ahead, at least, understood. With a little girl of their own, they had been excitedly babbling to Clare and Gary over their seat like neighbors over a fence between neatly groomed yards. It was during one of these moments, when the other couple were holding their baby up to see Dylan, distracting their infant long enough for her bawling to subside into mere sniffles, that the animal inside her skull snaked about six inches of its body out of her ear to test the air lazily, before sliding moistly back inside.

Clare had been shocked silent. The father holding his new child up like a hard-won trophy had cried out in horror and held her up higher, as if to throw her away from himself in an impulsive act of revulsion, as if a porcelain doll had broken open in his hands to reveal itself filled with excrement. Only after he and his wife began blurting loudly and miserably, and Gary said, "*What? What?*" did Clare begin to tremble hard and mumble over and over, "Oh my God."

And then she remembered that her own adopted child had been crying a lot during the long, long flight, too.

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"Hi, honey; do you need a ride to the —"

That was all that Clare's friend Patricia got out before her fourteen-year-old daughter Brice slapped her across the face with cracking force, and strode off to her room upstairs. They heard her door slam, and urban music come thumping to life like the dramatic beat of her teenage heart.

"I'm sorry," Patricia said to Clare, turning to her with a mix of stunned pain and embarrassment. She smoothed her hair back over her reddened ear. "She's going through a tough time right now. I guess her boyfriend has stopped talking to her, and kids tease her sometimes about Chad — you know."

Clare knew, despite having no other children. According to

the experts on talk shows and in counseling classes, older siblings of those carrying the parasite often exhibited resentment arising from feelings that, in attending to their more physically afflicted younger brothers or sisters, their parents weren't giving them sufficient attention. Thus, there were really two kinds of affliction sweeping the country's children.

Like most flu strains, apparently, the parasite was thought to have originated in Asia. Of course Clare had heard of it before witnessing a case for herself on the plane; it had been hard to miss on the news. But it had all seemed so far away, as removed from her world as conditions like elephantiasis, brought about by nematodes and other parasites, better known but still inconceivable to Clare in this day and age. In her subsequent research (and she prided herself on how much research she had done, comparing notes with her friends in support class), Clare had read about other parasites that had harassed human beings through the millennia. Tapeworms thirty feet in length, sometimes expelled from the mouth. Round-worms and their like vomited up, or inching their way out through the penis, or burrowing out the navel. Lumbricoid worms inside the ears, the nose. Worms inside the human heart.

It all seemed so — Third World. So Dark Ages. And yet here they were, almost seven years later, and the parasite that afflicted Dylan had spread around the globe like a communicable virus. Seven years later, and it was all just a sad fact of life in even the most privileged of countries.

"You handle it well," Clare said to Patricia. It was the kind of thing they all said to each other, all the time, in and out of the classes. "I know it's hard with a teenager, even without a host-kid." It was what they called them.

"Well, how about you? Sometimes I don't know how you do it alone, Clare."

"Oh, Gary sees Dylan every other weekend, and usually at least one evening during the week. He's still a good father, I have to give him that." Clare had straightened up her body in her chair in order to pay her ex-husband these compliments. She had to show her grace, her strength, even as it ate at her that after almost ten years of marriage her husband had left her for another

woman. Blonder, much more slender. And now, pregnant. She hoped it wouldn't be a host-kid, she really did. After all, what kind of self-respecting, mature, well-balanced adult would hope otherwise?

"Here's our little guys now," Patricia said, smiling fondly, as her son Chad and Dylan came into her livingroom.

They came like two frat boys who'd been drinking too hard, stumbling and bumping into each other and half leaning on each other. Chad was crying. He looked beat up and feverish and ill-rested all at once. Mucus glistened thickly over his upper lip, and he licked at it. Patricia sped over to him to wipe it away. "Don't lap it, honey, how many times have I told you?" She also dabbed away a trickle of the stuff that had run down his neck out of his ear. She rubbed vigorously at the collar of his expensive sweater. Next she dabbed his eyes; the wetness leaking from them might not consist solely of tears.

Dylan wasn't crying, but he looked drugged, his gaze meandering around the room as if he couldn't distinguish his mother from the furnishings. Actually he *was* drugged, for pain and to keep the parasites' growth, activity and reproduction in check, though there was no way yet that could be found to poison the parasites entirely or root them out fully without involving delicate brain surgery. Clare went to him and took his hand and his befuddled eyes found her at last. It seemed like the last time they had looked bright and alive had been on that flight home from Hong Kong, so many miles and years before.

Well, she still prized those dark slanted eyes. But though she had studied Chinese culture extensively, and admired it to the degree that she felt would be expected of her, she couldn't help but congratulate herself that here she was taking such very good care of a little boy from a country where murdering healthy infants simply for being female had once been so widespread. It was her responsibility, as an educated and sophisticated human being, to represent her species in a much more civilized and enlightened fashion. It was all about courage, tenacity, personal grit. Patience, balance, and endurance. Endurance above all else. These qualities had served her well in college, and in the workplace. She had never known they would also become such valu-

able resources in this way.

These qualities were what enabled her to smile into her son's face, as he looked up at her now, even with the bulge protruding from his brow where some of his parasites – a dozen in number, the most recent scans indicated – had bored through his skull and laid a cache of eggs under the flesh. The doctors reassured her that they felt these eggs wouldn't hatch, since being so close to the surface like this had made it easier and safer to inject enough of a solution to prevent the larvae from developing. Hopefully. But Dylan still bore scars on other parts of his head (patches of hair were missing or growing back unevenly) where clusters of newborn worms had spontaneously erupted. They couldn't all be sustained within the narrow confines of a single brain, so it was their habit to lay their eggs and hatch nearer to the surface, in order to spread afield in search of other hosts. (And it was still being determined why they only chose children from newborns to adolescence.) It was just the occasional stray worm that lost its way back inside the head, and got too comfortable to seek egress again, that caused their numbers to grow within a single host. Not that there hadn't been exceptions. Hosts who eventually died, their brains found to house colonies of a hundred worms or more.

The bulge on Dylan's forehead could be seen pulsing, if you looked closely and in a certain light. Throbbing like a second, ailing brain feeding off his own. And it was only when Dylan sniffed that Clare spotted the tip of a parasite, maybe a blind head taunting her, before it disappeared back inside the boy's nostril.

Meeting her eyes, Dylan said, "The host-boy kicked us. Chad worm-child kicked our extremity. Shit shit fucker."

"Now, honey," she told the seven-year-old, not wanting to upset her friend by showing any resentment toward her child; you had to be as understanding of them as you were your own. "I'm sure Chad didn't mean it."

"We want to break kill eat peanut butter on toast mom-worm. *Now!*" He kicked her sharply in the shin. Always the shin. The host-kid moms joked in class that their black-and-blue shins were their badge of honor.

Clare winced and said, "Okay, honey, I'll take you home now

and make you some toast with peanut butter.”

“Tuna sandwich! Tuna sandwich, sow-mom!” He bubbled his lips at her, speckling her face with saliva and parasite mucus, and then he squeezed her hand warmly and started leading her toward the door.

“Catch you later, Pat!” Clare called over her shoulder. “The prince is whisking me off!”

“I can see that,” Patricia said brightly, although she was struggling with her own son to keep his hands off her breasts. “See you in class.”

They both heard the door to Brice’s bedroom door slap open upstairs, the violent music boom louder, and the teenager shriek down at them, “Keep the noise down, you stupid fucks – I’m on the phone to Brad!”

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The parking lot of Dylan’s school gleamed with ranks of SUVs, like an army of giant beetles in readiness for world domination. They were owned by parents come to see their children play soccer in the field behind the school. The parents perched on opposing bleachers, trying to look composed and good-natured but each inwardly praying that the coaches – especially trained to work with host-kids – could keep their children in line, like diligent dogs herding an unruly flock. Soccer had been a great way for a lot of these kids to focus their attention and channel their aggression. (Their disgruntled older siblings contented themselves with sports on video game consoles, though they tended to prefer games involving shooting sprees.) Of course, it had sometimes proved disastrous to mix host-kids and “typical” kids on the same teams, or have host-kids teams oppose “typicals,” and so the schools now kept these teams and events separate.

But not all host-kids responded well; a lot of it had to do with how many parasites the individual child contained, and how they affected his or her particular brain. Clare had hoped that she could sit proudly in her class and report on her child’s successes, as did Melissa and Dawn and other moms whose kids had reaped

therapeutic benefits from the sport, chasing and kicking the ball as if to kick the very worms out of their own skulls. Dylan, though, just wasn’t into the whole thing, as was evidenced by the kick he had just delivered to his mom’s shin instead of a soccer ball.

He panted red-faced and sweaty-haired by the side of the field, Clare hovering over him as Coach Chandler left them alone together to go address some other dilemma. Dylan had had to be taken out of the game for flopping down on his back in the middle of the field and shouting obscenities, much to Clare’s chagrin, though she tried to countenance that display and the pain in her leg with calm and composure.

“Honey, this is supposed to be fun,” she told him.

“No fun no fun chase sterile egg we don’t like soccer.”

“Well *we* don’t like your attitude, young man. You’ve got to have more patience.”

The boy snapped his eyes to hers, suddenly looking less distracted than he had before. “Who is *we*? Are you our queen?”

“Now honey,” she sighed with irritation in her tone, reserved for times when no one else could hear and think she might be losing control, “you know I’m your mom. I told you, don’t let those pests talk for you. You have to work on that.”

“You call us prince your prince so you are our queen!” he whined, growing more agitated. Clare flinched, expecting another kick, but his shoe scuffed at the asphalt instead.

“Okay, okay, I’m your queen.” She took his hand and began walking him away toward the parking lot briskly, looking over to give a little shrug to Coach Chandler as if it didn’t ruffle her much, though it secretly irked her that other kids continued to run and play behind her, their parents no doubt glowing with pride – when not twisting their hands in their laps with dread that their child’s meltdown would come next. “Let’s just get home now so I can start thinking about dinner.”

“We want queen take us to king Burger King!”

“Whatever,” she sighed.

By the time they reached the rows of vehicles, however, her embarrassment was easing up already. Dragging him to their SUV had been like carrying a splintered cross upon her shoul-