

Pernille Rørth

# The Unedited

A Novel About Genome  
and Identity



Springer

# Science and Fiction

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A Novel About Genome and Identity

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ISSN 2197-1188

Science and Fiction

ISBN 978-3-030-34623-2

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34624-9>

ISSN 2197-1196 (electronic)

ISBN 978-3-030-34624-9 (eBook)

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Cover art by Stephen Cohen

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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# Part I





# 1

## The Wall

“It’s just a huge fucking wall.”

“Of course it is. What did you expect?” Leo says, tapping the controls. The pod swerves smoothly to the left. They start moving alongside the looming mass of concrete.

“Something a bit more sophisticated,” Raphael responds. “Our latest technology to keep out the barbarians. *And* their deadly diseases.”

“They probably consider us the barbarians,” Eiko says under her breath. Only Ben, who is sitting next to her in the back seat, hears it. He shrugs but adds no comment of his own. He continues to look out the window. Eiko follows his gaze. The solid gray structure streaming past them is strangely mesmerizing. It goes on and on, massive, smooth and silent. It bulges out here and there, possibly accommodating something on the other side. It towers above them, ominously, when they come in close. But it is just a wall.

“Why don’t we just hop over it?” Raphael asks, a few minutes later. He is sitting on the other side of Eiko. “It’s not that tall.”

“A shitload of laser-zappers on top,” Leo answers, waving a hand in that direction. “But I’ll let you out so you can find out for yourself.” He smirks. “Zap, zap, pong, poor Rafi’s gone.”

“Fuck you,” Raphael responds.

“Rafi,” Celia says, “don’t be so sensitive.” She turns to Leo, her voice flat. “And you—don’t be such a prick.” He looks surprised, almost shocked. She notices and hides a miniscule smile. Switching to a lighter tone she adds “but wouldn’t they be directional?”

It takes Leo a moment to realize what she is talking about. “Our zappers would be, for sure. But they’ve put up their own, as well.” He taps the

dashboard display and a camera from the micro-scout zooms in. “They look almost exactly like Huang flats.” He scoffs. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the software is copied as well. Pathetic, really.” He looks at Celia and raises an eyebrow. “I’ve tricked flat zappers before. Do you want me to try?”

“They’ll revoke the visas if we do anything stupid,” Eiko interjects before Celia can answer. “Let’s just find the transit point.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Leo says. Eiko does not respond.

“But you could take it up a bit—so we can see what’s in there,” Celia says, touching Leo lightly on the arm.

“Celia, please,” Eiko says with a sigh. “Be patient.”

“Come on, Eiko, aren’t you curious?” Celia’s tone is light and playful. She turns around and smiles at Eiko. “Let’s just have a peek. The satellite photos are useless.”

“Scramble shield,” Leo says.

“Naturally,” Celia says and turns toward him. “But this close, and from this angle, we should be able to see something, shouldn’t we?”

“Probably,” Leo concedes. But he continues flying low.

“I’m more curious about the people,” Eiko says, with a tentative smile. “All we know is their history, their old-fashioned rules—”

“But we’ve never met any of them,” Celia interrupts, turning back to Eiko and nodding enthusiastically. “This is so exciting!” She exclaims, then pauses. “They might be quite primitive, though. Maybe they think we—” Eiko sends her a quick look of reprimand with a side-glance to Ben. Celia mouths “sorry” and turns to face forward again.

No one says anything for while.

Raphael glances at his wrist-link for the twenty-seventh time, but resists touching it. He does not need another condescending explanation of why there is no connection inside Leo’s pod. He looks out the window, instead. On his side, trees pass in a blur.

“Look!” Celia suddenly says and points to a section of the wall immediately ahead of them. “The wall has collapsed.” They all turn their heads as they glide past a series of dramatic vertical cracks with piles of gray rubble below. “Well, not quite,” she continues, “but I guess it *is* pretty old. It was built during the crisis, wasn’t it?”

“Threatened by superstition and ignorance...” Eiko starts.

“...we found the courage to act,” Raphael continues, the pitch of his voice rising to match that of their former teacher. “Knowledge and fortitude, children. Remember that! Knowledge *and* fortitude.” He is a good mimic. He and Eiko giggle. Ben glances over at them and smiles.

“We certainly will remember Ms. Clifton.” Eiko says, once the giggles have subsided.

“You three,” Celia says, shaking her head. “Sometimes it’s like you never left primary school.”

“You missed the best part.”

“Believe me, I had my share of-”

“Could that be it?” Leo interrupts them. “That thing up ahead, close to the wall?”

They see a rectangular structure in the distance, alternately darker than the wall and sparkling bright. As it grows bigger, they continue to stare at it. Their expressions range from eager to apprehensive.

“It looks about right,” Celia says briskly, breaking the long silence. The building is two stories tall and directly connected to the wall. It is part concrete, part steel and glass, and looks quite new. Around it, the clearing has been widened considerably and partially landscaped. There are no parked pods or any other signs of activity.

“Taking it down, folks.” Leo decelerates the pod and lands it in the gravel-covered area marked “Visitors’ parking”.

As soon as the pod is stationary, Raphael opens his door and jumps out. Ben and Eiko exit more slowly from the other side, grab their backpacks and walk away from the pod, their eyes fixed on the silent building. Celia also takes her time getting out. She looks around and inhales deeply. She smiles; the air is fresh and pleasant. Then she moves toward where Ben and Eiko are standing. Raphael remains near the pod, fidgeting with his wrist-link. Leo is the last person to exit the pod, thumbing his fob to reattach the micro-scout and lock the doors as he does so. Seeing what Raphael is doing, he tries his own wrist-link. After a moment, he frowns and shakes his head. He catches up with Celia.

“There’s no connection,” he says, pulling up his wrist-link to illustrate. “We’re on our own out here.”

“Finally—a real adventure.” She beams with delight. Then she turns to Eiko and her expression softens. “What is it, Eiko? You look unhappy.”

“Something is wrong with this place,” Eiko says, in a half-whisper. “It’s too quiet. Why is no one else here?”

“Because I got our applications fast-tracked,” Leo says. “Right to the front of the queue. We’re the first.”

“Sure you did,” Celia says, skeptically.

“It’s true.” Leo grins. “I know all kinds of tricks.”

Celia looks amused, Eiko even more worried.

Just then, Raphael joins them. He holds up his wrist with an expression of alarm.

“We know,” Celia says. “No connection.”

Raphael looks deflated.

Eiko turns to Ben. “Ben, are you sure you want to do this?” she asks.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he says, with a hint of impatience.

“Benito, my man,” Leo says and reaches across to pat Ben’s shoulder. “We’re right here with you.”

“Thanks,” Ben says, giving him a brief glance.

Finally, a door opens on the near side of the building and two people step outside, a man and a woman. They are a few years older than their visitors, mid to late twenties, and are both wearing plain-looking, dark clothes. The group of five starts moving toward them, Ben and Eiko in front and Raphael bringing up the rear. The man speaks to them when they are still some distance away. His voice is clear and slightly over-enunciated, as if he is unsure whether they will understand him.

“Welcome to transit station West-one.”

The group slows, hesitating. The man and the woman stay where they are and continue to smile pleasantly. When the visitors are within arm’s reach, the man continues. “Good day to you all. I am Jonathan Parker and this is Catherine Seville.” He indicates his companion with a slight movement. Catherine nods and smiles, but keeps her hands clasped throughout the welcome.

“Leo,” Leo says and holds out his hand.

“Leo Huang, yes, pleased to meet you,” Jonathan says as he shakes the proffered hand.

“Raphael.” Raphael has stepped forward on the far side of Celia.

“Yes, of course. Raphael Delacroix.” Jonathan tilts his head slightly.

“No—Winter. It’s Raphael Winter,” Raphael says, looking irritated.

“My apologies,” Jonathan offers, with minimal expression. “Welcome, Raphael.”

“Eiko Carr,” Eiko says with more confidence than she feels. Her hand is half the size of Jonathan’s.

“Celia,” Celia says, with a smile and the hint of a challenge.

“Charmed,” Jonathan responds, but his expression remains unaltered. He turns to Ben. “And you must be Ben Hatton.”

“Yes,” Ben says, forcing himself to offer a steady hand. Jonathan looks at him for a moment longer than he needs to, it seems.

“Shall we go inside?” Jonathan says. Without waiting for an answer, he moves toward the building and opens the side door. Ben follows him closely,

with a determined expression. Eiko keeps up, but is mostly looking at the ground. Celia is scanning the building, alert. Leo is grinning, Raphael scowling. Catherine closes the door behind them.



# 2

## The Day of the Readings

*One month earlier.*

“Ben Hatton?” The councilor said with a quick professional smile.

“That’s me,” Ben responded as he took the seat across from her. The conversation cubicle was small and impersonal, but well separated from its neighbors by opaque insulators; noise from the large and busy hall retreated. He passed his wrist-link over the sensor and the councilor mumbled something like ‘thanks’ while moving her fingers rapidly across her desk. From the reflections in her eyes he could see her screen reacting.

“Let us have a look at you.” She tapped on her screen and the shared display sprang to life. At the top, he saw his name and underneath it a helix icon with his name repeated. She muttered a puzzled ‘hmm’ while her face twitched, frowned and finally realigned. She was around thirty, he guessed, so she must have had her own reading ten years ago. Did hers start with a worrying ‘hmm’ as well? He did not like the sound of it.

“So—all we have is your current sequence file. Not the pre-edit—or any links to your parents’ files... That’s—well—unusual. And no treatment files.”

“I’ve never been to the hospital or anything.”

“But you’ve seen a family doctor? For checkups and so on?”

“Sure. Aunt Vera.”

“*Aunt Vera?*”

“Dr. Vera Weiss. She was our doctor.”

“OK.” She tapped slowly. “W-e-i-s-s?”

“I think so.”

Another ‘hmm’ escaped her.

“Those other sequence files, do I need them?” he asked.

“Well, maybe not. It depends on your questions. Are your parents with you today? We could just have them link in and then re-attach the files and re-build a most likely pre-edit.”

“No. My parents... My parents are gone.”

Her eyes rushed to his, in surprise.

“I am so sorry,” she said. “Were they...”

“It was an accident,” he said. “Two years ago.”

“I’m...” She stopped herself. “What are...” She cleared her throat. “What were their names? And birthdates? I’ll try to find them.”

“Jack and Bella Hatton.”

“Previous names?”

“Sorry?”

“Before marriage? I assume one of them had a different surname.”

“Oh, yes.” He paused. “I don’t know.”

She glanced at him. Skeptically, he thought. But he really didn’t know.

“Birth dates?”

“May fifth—my mother—and September ninth—my father.”

“Year?”

“Sorry.” He felt her disapproval. “They’d never say.” Ashamed of everything he didn’t know, he looked away.

“No problem.” She said briskly and focused on her screen. “I’ll just go for sequence matching.” Her fingers slid across her desk again, tapping here and there.

“No luck. I can’t find them,” she finally said, frowning. “That’s very unusual. What...” From her eyes, he saw that new information was popping up on her private screen. For a moment, she seemed rattled. Then she drew a deep breath and settled into another reassuring professional expression before turning to face him. “Let’s just go ahead with what we’ve got, shall we? It could just be the system acting up. We’ve been having some problems...” She smiled, apologetically. “But first things first,” she continued. “If you could place your forefinger right there.” She pointed to a small box with a fingertip-sized indentation. “So we can confirm your identity.”

He did. “Ouch!” he exclaimed, retracting the finger quickly. It had not actually hurt, but the needle-prick had surprised him.

“Now, let’s have a closer look at that file.” She clicked on the helix icon and a double screen opened up. One side was the chromosomes, the other a long list of names and numbers. She clicked on one of the chromosomes and expanded one area in a few steps, until they could see the actual sequence—two identical sequences. A third sequence was aligned below, in red. She scrolled along the alignment. Then she did the same for another chromosome.

“Both fine,” she said. “Naturally.” She folded her hands. “So, do you have any specific questions?”

“Yes, right, I was...” He stalled for a moment, but eventually continued. “Do you see... is there anything I should know about?”

“Well...” She scrolled down through the list on the right-hand side of the screen. “You have good cancer protective alleles, generally. One...” she scrolled on “...no, two of them are not optimal. I’ve marked them, in case you want to go for somatics.” She looked at him directly. “It’s borderline. For the tissues where these genes matter, somatics are ninety to ninety-five percent effective.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself. Do you know how somatics work?”

“Sure. I’ve done premed.”

“Of course, yes, it says so right here.” She jumped to the bottom part of the screen, where his citizen file was displayed. “So...”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Right. To apply for somatics, you go right down to the end of this hall.” She pointed out the direction. “They’ll have you talk to another councilor—and a doctor, a stem cell replacement specialist.”

“I’ll think about it,” he repeated. “Anything else you can see? Anything unusual?”

“I don’t see any problematic alleles for diabetes, either, or even for less common diseases. So, no, nothing stands out.”

“What about edits?”

“Without the pre-edit sequence, or your parents’ files, I can’t tell what are edits and what is just... regular genetics.” She looked at his face for a moment. He was frowning. “If there is anything specific that you’re concerned about,” she added, “I can look for it.”

He hesitated briefly. “Do I have any of the profiles?”

“Which type? There are so many different traits and combinations. I have to know what to look for.”

He hesitated again, this time for longer. Slowly, he leaned in over the shared desk. “Lo-test,” he whispered. He pulled back quickly and looked down, at his hands.

The councilor executed several searches, scrolling through each output list as it appeared, before she shook her head. “No. There’s no evidence of a lo-test profile being implemented.”

“Are you sure? It was twenty—twenty-one years ago. It might be an old one.”

“It was twenty-one years ago for everyone here today,” she replied, waving a hand about. “So yes, I am quite sure. No profile selected. It’s just...”

“Right. Regular genetics.” He let it sink in.



“Is there anything else? Any specific health problems in the family?”

He gave her a blank look. “No... Nothing else,” he answered after a while.

“Please feel free to contact me again.” She touched her wrist-link and held it close to his. His beeped. “If you would like to hear more about the somatic options—or if you have more questions, once you’ve...” She reached for something attached to a slim box on her desk. “Here’s your copy of the file. And the software to read it.” She handed him an e-stick.

He took it, but stayed seated, looking confused.

“I’m afraid my next appointment is...” she said, after a while.

“Of course,” he said, snapping to and getting up. “I’ll let you get on with your day. Thank you for your time.”

She looked thoughtful, but responded with a simple “you’re welcome.” She turned to her private screen and started tapping again.

Ben walked slowly away from the cubicle, lost in thought. Soon, a lively babble of voices reminded him where he was. He looked around. The large hall was full of this year’s new adults, many of them excited, or nervous, and speaking too loudly. Some parents had come along, as well. No wonder the place was noisy. He started to feel uncomfortable, hemmed in, but did not know where to go.

“Benito!” he heard someone call. He spun around a few times and finally located the source. Walking toward the familiar face, he pushed away the many confusing thoughts competing for his attention.

“Leo,” he said, with a smile of relief. “I thought you were staying away from this circus.” Leo seemed to be on his own, as well, but completely calm, unaffected by the crowds. He was not much taller than Ben, but almost twice as broad, all muscle. His upper arms were bare, showing off a couple of simple yet intriguing tattoos. Ben still did not know what the characters meant. Leo’s hair was ultra-short and heavily bleached from its natural black. Ben disliked his own hair, which was reddish-brown, matching his abundant freckles, and full of soft curls. But he did not know what to change it to, so he let it be.

“Well, I didn’t exactly need a reading, did I?” Leo’s expression wavered between nonchalant and bitter. “But I wanted to sign up for my first somatics.” He turned and pointed to the rear of the hall. “It’s over there. Do you need to get anything done?”

“No, I don’t think so. I...”

“You have plenty of time, anyway. There’s a three month obligatory waiting period.” Leo made a face and shifted his voice to a mocking high pitch. “Just to be completely sure that you are making the right decision.”

“Well, I suppose...”

"I've been *completely sure* about this for years," Leo stated, irritably. "Come on. Let's go somewhere. Celebrate—or commiserate." He frowned. "When do you have to show up at that silly job of yours?"

"I start at four a.m."

"Four a.m.! You *are* bonkers." Leo's slap on the back almost knocked Ben over. "But that means we have all night. Tonight's on me, Benito." He looked carefully at Ben's face and added, "You look like you need it."

"I..."

"You don't need to tell me about it. It's the shits for all of us."

Ben could feel himself starting to relax. Leo's company was probably just what he needed at this point. Then he remembered his promise. "I'm supposed to meet up with some old school friends tonight," he said.

"Bring on the friends. The more, the merrier."

"Sure." Ben allowed a smile. 'Safety in numbers,' he thought. Out loud he said: "Let's get out of here."

"Benito! That's the spirit."

\* \* \*

"You know, Ben, you look *exactly* the same," Celia said to him, tilting her head first one way, then the other. She was either very drunk or playing it up; he couldn't tell which. Everyone was speaking loudly to be heard over the music. "No older, no wiser, no... Whereas you..." she turned to Leo, who was leaning in over the table. "You look—well, you *are* new, I believe."

"New to you, old to the world. I'm Leo," Leo said, smiling, and sat down in the spot vacated by Raphael.

"Nonsense." Celia frowned. "We're all *exactly* the same age." She flung out her arm to indicate their table as well as the rest of the room. They were sitting in a curved sofa, giving them a good view of the dance-floor and of each other. Eiko was on the other side of Ben, but currently distracted, looking off in another direction. Ben had introduced Leo to Eiko and Raphael early in the evening. Leo had drifted away but returned to the table soon after Celia joined them. "That's why we're here tonight," Celia continued, "celebrating our final step into adulthood: complete self-awareness and self-determination." She sighed, with exaggerated world-weariness. "Well, self-something... I'm Celia, by the way." She looked Leo up and down, appraisingly. He was still wearing the tight-fitting, sleeveless T-shirt that accentuated his physique. "Now tell me, was this selected or did you work for it?" She ran her fingers lightly over

his exposed upper arm, stopping short of the first tattoo. Leo was momentarily lost for words.

“Hard work. Hours and hours of it, I bet,” Raphael said, coolly. He had come back from the bathroom and was glowering, first at Leo, for being in his seat, and then at Celia, for allowing it. She shrugged. Tall and slender, Raphael towered over both of them. Dislike pulled at his mouth and spite narrowed his eyes. “Your father,” Raphael directed at Leo, “or whatever you call him—is not exactly a hulk, is he?”

“Piss off. I don’t want to talk about my father.”

“Piss off? You’re in my seat, buddy.”

“Come on, guys,” Ben tried.

“Who’s your father, then?” Celia asked, turning toward Leo with a sweet smile.

“Can’t you tell?” Raphael said. “It’s fucking obvious. Victor Huang, the defense contractor guy. The slime ball CEO of Huang Shields.”

“Rafi,” Ben said. “Leave it, will you? Please?”

“But it *is* obvious.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“He’s a youngtwin,” Raphael said to Celia with a big, mocking grin. “He looks just-”

Leo shot up from his seat and pushed Raphael hard, with both hands. Taken by surprise and less-than-optimally coordinated, Raphael fell backwards into the dancing crowd.

“It’s kind of funny, actually. Huang senior is so-” Raphael continued from floor level, his voice gradually disappearing in the noise. Someone in the crowd gave him a helping hand and he managed to get up again.

“Don’t mind him,” Celia said, to Leo. “He’s had a tough day. You know, his parents wanted him just they way he was. Isn’t that terrible? Wouldn’t you be mad if...”

“Cee, don’t. That’s private.” Raphael voice had shed all attempts at humor.

“Of course, Rafi.” Celia flashed another saccharine smile. “Does that mean we won’t have to hear about how Fran-”

“Celia, please,” Eiko interrupted her. She had turned around and was paying attention to the table again. “Let’s just have fun tonight.”

“Well, then.” Celia pulled at Leo’s T-shirt, making him sit fully down again. She ignored Raphael’s glare. “So, your father...”

“Is an egomaniac.”

“And your mother?”

“She’s an idiot.”

“An idiot?”

“For going along with it. For being an incubator.”

“Well, it could be...” Celia tilted her head. “Never mind. I find it terribly interesting.” She moved even closer to Leo. “I suspect *you* are interesting, too. You’re certainly handsome.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Leo seemed confused, but recovered quickly. “And *you* are beautiful.” He shook his head as if he had only just realized this. “You’re a real doll.”

“Hardly,” Eiko said, leaning forward. “Do you know what she scored on-”

“Not now, sweetie, not now,” Celia half-whispered to Eiko. “Didn’t you say ‘have fun’?” She added a quick wink and got up from the sofa, keeping her balance easily. “Barbie profile, darlin’,” she said to Leo, swinging her long, luscious hair forward and arching her upper body. “Not bad, huh?” She fluttered her extended lashes while keeping her green eyes sharply on his face.

Leo grinned. Raphael looked on with disbelief.

“This doll needs some dancing,” Celia continued, pinching Leo’s upper arm. He started to get up.

“Sit over here with me, Rafi,” Eiko said. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to you all evening.” He looked reluctant. “Please?” She added. Raphael’s hostile pose finally softened. Ben and Eiko slid over to make space on the far side, while trying not to pay attention to Celia.

“You know she doesn’t mean anything by it, Rafi,” Eiko said, as Raphael sat down next to her. “She’s just having a bit of fun.”

“At my expense.”

“If anything, at Leo’s expense,” Ben said. “He’s an easy target.”

“You new friend does seem a bit...” Eiko started. She noticed Ben stiffening and did not finish the thought. “So, how was it today?” She said to Raphael while sliding backwards on the sofa, thereby making it a conversation for all three of them.

“It was fine,” Raphael said. Eiko kept looking at his face, but he did not add anything.

“Did François go with you?” she continued.

“No. Why should he?” Raphael responded, slightly aggressively.

“I don’t know... It seems a big brother kind of thing to do. He had his reading two years ago, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, he did.” This had an edge of bitterness. Finally Raphael lightened his tone and added with a shrug: “Anyway, you know what he’s like.”

“Head in the clouds.”

“Exactly. He doesn’t notice a thing.” Raphael paused. “Not his fault, really.”

No one spoke for a while. The music dissolved the remaining tension and the dance floor provided amusing distractions. Celia and Leo were already well into the crowd.

“I didn’t learn much,” Ben said, looking from Raphael to Eiko. They both looked back. “At the reading, I mean. No profiles, no scary alleles, no...” He shrugged. “The only thing that was odd was...” He stopped talking and picked up his glass. He noticed it had been refilled. Leo seemed to have set something up to keep the drinks coming. Eiko was still looking at him, but he did not continue.

“And you?” Raphael asked Eiko, who gave a small jolt in surprise. “Anything unexpected for you?”

“I...” she responded with a strained smile. “I’ll tell you guys some other time. Too much—” she indicated the room, the dancing, possibly the noise, “too much stuff going on tonight.”

Ben and Raphael exchanged glances, but did not challenge her. All three focused on the music and the gyrating bodies again. Ben looked back at Eiko and finally noticed the unexpected flash of color. Her hair had always been completely straight, chin-length and pure black. It now had a bright pink streak in it, on the left side. She must have had it done very recently. Not the kind of thing he’d expect from her. He decided not to comment.

“Ah—it’s my song!” Eiko suddenly exclaimed. “I have to dance. What do you say?” She placed one hand atop Raphael’s and motioned with the other toward the dance floor.

As they left the table for Ben to guard on his own, Eiko sent him an apologetic look. He smiled and mouthed “no problem”. Shortly after, he looked at his wrist-link. Almost one o’clock. He might as well stay awake for another couple of hours and go straight to work afterwards. As Leo had predicted he would. Crazy guy, that Leo. Sometimes. But no wonder... Ben remembered what Leo had told him in confidence: that his father wanted another son—with his new wife. This time, however, he wanted a “normal” son. They didn’t have the license yet, but any mention of it sent Leo ranting and raving with anger and bitterness. Before that, being a youngtwin hadn’t bothered him quite as much. Now he had cut all contact with his father *and* with his mother. But Leo had been a good friend these past two years. Sometimes it was too complicated with old friends, childhood friends. They meant well, but... Ben looked back at the dance floor, spotting them easily. At this distance, tiny Eiko with her tentative, girlish movements could easily be mistaken for a twelve-year-old. Raphael’s height added years but his awkwardness gave away his youth. Further away, Celia and Leo were putting on a show. Leo was a good dancer, Ben saw, well attuned to the rhythm and to his partner. Celia was going for the full sexy act, moving herself slowly up and down Leo’s thigh, her face all rapture. Ben watched. It was hard not to.

Another dance-favorite started up, the drums and bass pounding away. Now everyone was dancing with exaggerated abandon, as if they all had something that needed exorcising. Maybe they did, he thought. Disappointment? Relief? The readings were over and done with. The time for hoping and guessing was over. From today, they all knew their DNA sequence and—for the most part—how it got to be that way. Now they just had the rest of their—officially adult—lives to deal with.

A girl seemed to be trying to catch his eye. She was standing off to the side, swaying to the music, but not exactly dancing. He looked away, quickly, and kept his eyes from returning. Or he tried to. He did not quite succeed. Perhaps the Dutch courage was working. Perhaps the problem was all in his head. Or perhaps the reading had screwed with his head, making him believe that he could... He looked again. The girl was gone.

\* \* \*

A shrill sound penetrated his dream, twisting the narrative. It was an alarm. Fire alarm? There were lots of people, in a big room. Panic rumbled; it spread. The sound continued, mercilessly. He finally reached the surface and immediately lost the dream. The doorbell. It was his doorbell ringing.

The heavy curtains showed bright light along the edges. He looked at his wrist-link. Midday. He had slept only a couple of hours. The bell rang again. Who could it be? No one used that bell. The sound was too damn irritating.

“Ben Hatton?”

“That’s me.” The deliveryman looked suspicious, so Ben held out his wrist-link for ID. A vague unease kept him from offering a finger imprint. He really hadn’t had enough sleep.

“I have a—a package for you.”

The man held out a very thin, rectangular item. Ben took it and felt its flimsy lightness. It was an envelope, an old-fashioned paper envelope. Maybe it had an old-fashioned paper letter inside. He was mystified.

Back inside, Ben sat down on the crumpled sofa-bed and turned the envelope over a few times. Why would anyone send him a paper letter? There was no clue on the outside—just his name and today’s date. He found a knife and slid it carefully under the flap.

The letter was one page long and typed, but signed by hand. The name was typed underneath, which was helpful, as he could not decipher the signature. “Dr. Vera Weiss.” He was surprised that she had used her title—Doctor. He read the letter carefully, frowning toward the end. It wasn’t that the text was

overly complicated, but, apart from the warm words about how much his parents had meant to her and how much she had enjoyed watching him grow up, he didn't understand what the letter was really about. It was somehow related to his newly acquired adult status, but too vague to make proper sense. He groaned, wishing Aunt Vera were there, so he could just ask her. 'What do you mean?' But she was gone. She had died a few years before his parents' accident. She must have written this beforehand, to be given to him on the day following his reading. She seemed to assume his parents had explained something. But they had not. And now they could not. He frowned again. This was maddening. He went to the kitchen section, put the mug in place and pushed for long black. Maybe a jolt of caffeine would lift the fog.

Sitting on the sofa-bed again, he drank his coffee while staring at the letter and trying to think. He reread the letter. It did not help. Finally, he thought of Eiko. Eiko and her parents. They knew him and they knew his parents and... Maybe they could help. But first, he needed a shower—anything that might help clear his fuzzy head.

\* \* \*

"Ben!" Yuriko's eyes lit up. "How good to see you." She smiled at him, affectionately. "It's been ages... Come in, come in."

He stepped inside. She was right; he had not been to the house for several years. It seemed unchanged. The tiny entryway was as neat as always. The ornamental garden out front was a serene display of stones, moss and trimmed greenery. He used to find it strange, a bit dull. Today it had made him smile. He assumed they still had the bigger, less organized garden out back, where he had spent so many hours as a child. Eiko's house had been like a second home to him. Eiko was also an only child and in this they differed from most of their classmates. Her parents, Yuriko and Paul, had always made him feel welcome.

Ben followed Yuriko from the entryway into the main downstairs room. This room looked different, somehow, but he could not tell how. Yuriko was her usual, soft-spoken self. She asked to his summer job—Eiko must have told her something about it—and to his plans for the future. He admitted to the former being not very challenging and to the latter being undetermined.

"It must be very difficult for you," she said, her face filled with delicate empathy. "You must miss them terribly."

"I do," he said, "very much." He was glad that she had not completely avoided the subject, but did not want to dwell on it. "It helps that I live in student housing. There are lots of people around, even in the summer."

"Of course, of course." Yuriko looked away, letting her eyes scan the rear section of the room. She probably expected Eiko to have heard their voices and to have come down by now. "Eiko is in her room," she added, with an air of apology. "Do you remember...?"

"Sure." Ben nodded toward the narrow staircase leading upstairs. The grand piano stood between him and the staircase, unlit and silent. Seeing it, he realized what was different about the room and the house. It was silent. Previously, if he had come by on a Saturday, he would have entered to the sound of Eiko on the piano or Paul on the cello, or both. If not, there would be some classical recording filling the air. Not today. The lid was closed over the piano keys. "I'll go up," he added when Yuriko did not move or say anything further. She looked sad. He wondered briefly if this had to do with his parents, with the quiet of the house or with something entirely different. With a half-nod, she turned away. He mounted the stairs, walked down the short corridor and tapped lightly on Eiko's door.

Eiko looked surprised to see him, almost annoyed. "Ben?"

"Yes. I..." He noticed the splash of pink again. "I like the accent," he said, gesturing loosely to her fringe. "New?"

"Yeah, yesterday. I needed... something." She added a reluctant half-smile.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." She stepped aside. "Sorry for being a grump."

"No practice today?" he said, tilting his head toward the stairs with the question. "I remember I used to love that: coming here and listening to you play." She frowned. He continued lightly. "Maybe you did more damage last night than I thought."

"I'm just not in the mood. That's all."

Something was surely off with her. Was it recent? He wasn't sure. He hadn't been paying enough attention, he realized. He followed her across the room to the futon. Her room was the same size as his 'mini-apartment', but much cozier. The semi-cluttered table, the fabric on the futon, the wall displays, everything was so Eiko. Even the standard desk screen had the softening touch of a paper flower garland along the edge.

"I've always liked this room."

She looked around, dismissively. "I'll be moving out soon," she said, her voice flat. "As soon as I can find a place."

"But why? It's great here. Your parents are... And it's so close to Uni."

She gave him a look and he did not push it.



“So, what’s up?” she asked. Then she frowned, softened her voice and added “you can’t have had much sleep.” He did not answer immediately, so she continued. “You could get a much better summer job, you know. In the lab or something. I could ask. I mean, herding cleaning bots around an office building... That’s not exactly-” she stopped abruptly. “I’m sorry, that was...” She shook her head. He looked away. “Do you think of him when you walk around there by yourself?” She asked softly, tilting her head. She frowned again. “What am I saying? Of course you do. I’m... Just ignore me today, Ben. I’m a bit...”

“It’s OK. No one understands why I’m doing it.”

“I do. And I should know not to do it.”

He shrugged.

“So, something’s up,” she said. “Tell me.” She stopped. “I’m sorry—again. Manners. Some tea?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Eiko busied herself in the corner of the room while he tried to recollect the pieces of his story. Returning, she handed him a colorful, steaming mug and sat down in the other end of the futon, nimbly folding her legs beneath her. Her expression had in the meantime switched from preoccupied irritation to concern and interest.

“Do you remember Aunt Vera?” He asked.

She furrowed her brow, looking puzzled.

“My Aunt Vera.”

Eventually, she shook her head slowly from side to side. “I don’t think so.”

“I guess you didn’t come to our place all that much,” he went on. “Dr. Vera Weiss. She was also our family doctor.”

“Dr. Vera Weiss.” Her face lit up. “*That* Dr. Weiss?”

Now it was his turn to look puzzled. “What do you mean by *that* Dr. Weiss?”

“The famous Dr. Vera Weiss. She crossed over many years ago, had extensive somatics done and went on become a brilliant cancer specialist.”

“I know she specialized in cancer genetics,” he said. “So I suppose we are talking about the same Dr. Weiss.”

“Do you know she donated her cells for research? Tumor cells as well as stromal cells and blood samples. She had samples collected throughout the whole treatment. It’s really interesting to compare the changes occurring in the edited and in the...” She stopped. “Sorry. That was insensitive.”

“I don’t mind. I’m sure she’d be happy to know that what she did... that it was useful. Her work meant a lot to her.”

“So she was family? That’s a bit...”