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A Novel

By William Bowles

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With a nod to Steve Jones who, in part, inspired this story

Installment 14

‘Valentina, do you like it here?’

‘Yes Mama. I have lots of friends here. Do you want to leave? Don’t you like it here?’

‘Well if we did decide to leave, would you be unhappy at leaving your friends behind?’

‘Yes, especially Rebecca. She’s my best friend. Could she come with us?’

‘Well I doubt if they’d let us take her with us.’

‘Why not? She has no Mama and we all love her.’

‘Yes we do darling, we love her very much and if do leave we’d love to take her if she wanted to come with us.’

Valentina sat there, at the kitchen table considering our conversation for a while. Then she said, ‘Why do you want to leave?’

What to say? Should we tell her that they’re studying us and if we did, what would she make of it? But as usual, she was ahead of us.

‘Is it because they watch us?’

‘You know they watch you?’

‘Oh yes Mama, we all know that. We think it’s funny. We make up games for them to watch.’

‘Games?’

‘Yes Mama, we decided it would be fun to see if they could understand them.’

‘So you don’t mind if they watch you?’

‘No we don’t mind. We know they’re afraid of us just like you told me so we pretend.’

‘Pretend? What do you pretend?’

She considered my question for quite a while before answering.

‘They think we are dangerous, that we’ll be able to make them dead, so we make up games which make them think we’re just like normal children only more intelligent.’

‘Aren’t you?’

Again, she sat there considering my question. She looked at me and then at Judy as if considering what to say to us.

‘Mama, you’re almost like us but you don’t know it.’

‘What do you mean, almost like you?’

‘We’ve been on the Internet Mama and we know what happened to you, how you changed. We think the watchers know what we’ve been doing too. Rebecca is really good with computers and she told us they know what we look at.’

‘Do you think that’s why we’re here, so they can look at us?’

‘Oh yes Mama. There are lots of us out there all over the world, living without being watched. They send us emails.’

‘You’re in touch with them?’

‘Of course we are Mama. You are silly sometimes,’ she said giggling.

‘Would you rather live here then?’

‘We’re not sure Mama.’

‘We?’

‘Yes, we want to live together because it’s fun and we love each other, but some of us think that they could make us dead if they wanted to. Is that why you want to leave?’

‘Yes it is but we know you have your friends here and we don’t want to take you away from them if you don’t want to leave.’

‘We could take Rebecca with us without telling them?’

‘If we took Rebecca with us, they’d probably come after us.’

‘I don’t think I could leave without her Mama. I love Rebecca.’ She said it with such finality that I had distinct impression that she meant something other than the obvious but I was reluctant to press her to explain what she meant.

‘Can Rebecca come and stay with us?’

‘I don’t know, but we’ll ask.’

‘Oh please Mama!’ She jumped up and down with excitement.

Later, to my amazement, when I asked the management if Rebecca could stay with us as she was very close to Valentina, they agreed. The following day, she moved in. That night, after the girls had gone to bed, we sat up and talked about the situation.

‘Things keep changing so fast, it’s difficult to keep up. I have the feeling trying to put a book together now would be pointless, don’t you? And I’m not sure I want to put everything I know into it anyway. By the way, I think I owe an apology Nova.’

‘For what?’

‘For calling you paranoid.’

‘What because of the girls you mean?’

‘Well not just because of them, although they made my mind up for me.’

‘Look Judy, you don’t need to apologise. I’m more concerned about why they let Rebecca move in with us, or am I being paranoid?’

‘It makes sense, after all, they want to know how the girls think and how they interact.’

Without saying anything, I scribbled a note on a scrap of paper and handed it to Judy. On it I'd written, 'It makes more sense if the place is bugged.'

We carried on talking about the girls in a general kind of way and then got up and went upstairs to the girls' room. They were both fast asleep, wrapped around each other. Where to look though? They could be buried behind the walls for all we knew. Maybe the entire place was bugged. We decided to not check. Downstairs in the kitchen, I wrote another note while Judy made tea, 'Let's go for a hike tomorrow and we'll talk then.'

The following day we told the girls we were going for a hike and thankfully they didn't ask to come along. I'd never actually spent any time exploring the estate, so in a way, we had a good excuse. We made some sandwiches and a flask of coffee and set off dressed in parkas and walking boots even though it was quite pleasant, as the weather could change quite suddenly.

The estate was south of Mount Snowdon, in I suppose part of the national park and there was plenty to see without getting even close the boundary walls that enclosed the estate. Occasionally, we'd come across a security guard, but they just waved to us or said hello. Aside from these occasional meetings, we were completely alone as far as we knew.

We found a small clearing in a copse of pines, full of primroses and wild strawberries where we sat and ate our sandwiches.

'We should bring the girls here I know they'll love it,' I said.

'So what are we going to do Nova?'

'I don't know. We don't have a lot of choices. But it's obvious that this place is more than simply a refuge and that the main reason for the place is to study the girls and probably to a lesser degree, the mothers. Frankly, I don't think they really care about how many get killed. The point is, do we take the chance and leave and head back to the cottage?'

'What about Valentina, and Rebecca for that matter? It's obvious they don't want to be separated. And if we do leave, how will the authorities deal with it? I'm sure their main concern is Valentina as she's the oldest.'

'And if we do leave, what about our safety back at the cottage? They made it clear we'd be on our own.'

I lay back and look up at the sky. Fluffy clouds drifted overhead visible through the gaps in the treetops. A cuckoo's call echoes through the clearing. I was so peaceful, it was easy to forget where we were and what we'd been through.

'I've been living in limbo all this time since Valentina was born. I can't remember what it's like to live a normal life. I'm sick and tired of it. I think about the fact that I've not

even experienced what it's like to get up in the morning, get dressed and take a walk to do the shopping or go to a movie, or take Valentina to the park. I live the life of a freak of nature. I haven't even experienced what it is to be a normal woman. It's no good Judy. The alternative is staying here for years, perhaps 'til I die and I'm not prepared to that. We've got to get out of here.'

'So what do you suggest?'

'If we had lots of money, maybe we could buy our security. Buy a place where they can't get at us. The rich can do it.'

'Weren't you offered a million for your story and there's my book?'

'I'm not sure it's still on offer but assuming it is, how long would your book take do you think?'

'I could knock it out in about three months, especially if we work on it together. I could ghost write yours, maybe write them together.'

'And how long before we had enough money to buy our freedom and hopefully our security?'

'Well that would depend on sales. The best bet would be to do a deal with a newspaper and serialise the book, or extracts from it. Get an advance, then we could be set up within a couple of months. I need to talk to my agent and introduce you to her.'

'We couldn't keep it secret.'

'Would it matter? They can't stop us.'

'How far have you got with yours?'

'I've made a start, and it's not a problem once I get down to it.'

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For the first time in quite a while, Judy wasn't around and it felt strange. She'd gone to London to see her agent. Valentina wanted to know where she was going and was she coming back and I had reassure her. It made me realise just how insecure Valentina was, and maybe more to the point that she understood a lot more than I gave her credit for. We now spent a lot of time talking and playing together, especially now we had Rebecca staying with us. And although I hated being here, when I was with Valentina, I forgot about everything else and simply enjoyed her presence. We tend to take even so-called normal children for granted and not to notice them when we interact with other adults as if they're not really there. You couldn't do this with Valentina or Rebecca. They heard and absorbed everything you said and almost immediately quiz you; what do you mean by this or that statement?

‘Mama, are you and Judy writing a book about us?’

We’d not mentioned it directly in front of either of the girls since our hike, yet somehow she knew and I wasn’t surprised.

‘Yes we are. Why, do you want to help us?’

‘Can I? I can write you know. Rebecca showed me how to use a word processor.’

I still found it difficult to come to terms with a child who is not even a year old possessing the abilities of a child much older and the danger of underestimating her. Yet I should know better. There was no provision for education in the refuge. The people running it had made the same mistake I had not that it made any difference, as all the girls in the refuge had organised themselves into some kind of a school anyway, all of it centred around the Internet as a source of information.

‘When Judy comes back from London we’ll talk about it okay?’

‘Some of us are already writing stuff on our Website.’

‘Website? What Website?’

Exasperated with me, she said, ‘Oh Mama, haven’t you seen it yet?’ Tutting, she took me by the hand and dragged me upstairs to her room where Rebecca was sitting at the PC frantically typing away and talking to herself.

‘Rebecca, show Mama our Website.’

‘Wait,’ she said, ‘Can’t you see I’m busy.’

Eventually, Rebecca finished whatever it was she was doing and showed me their Website. The address was newgurls.com.

‘Newgurls.com? Who on earth dreamt that up?’

They both laughed, ‘It was Sophie’s idea.’

The Website to my eyes anyway, appeared chaotic. More a stream of consciousness than any kind of organised attempt at presenting information. It seemed that any of the girls could put up anything they liked and in any kind of order, at least that’s how it looked to me. But after exploring it for awhile, I realised that appearances were deceptive for not only was their order to it, there was an awful lot of information. I suppose the best way to describe it is as a collection of diaries and observations as well as transcriptions of online conversations between not only the girls in the refuge but many other children from around the world.

‘Can anyone see this?’

‘Oh no, it’s protected. We’re letting you see it and some of the other mothers have looked at it as well.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘They try to get into it but we’re better than them.’

‘Whose them Valentina?’

‘The government silly,’ like she was stating the obvious, which I suppose she was.

The incongruous mix of child and adult in their conversations constantly threw me but it also made me laugh.

‘Do you want to see mine?’

Valentina sat at the keyboard and up came a moving image of Judy, Rebecca, Valentina and myself. It looked like it had been taken somewhere in the refuge judging by the background. Valentina is holding my hand and smiling into the camera, with Rebecca on one side and Judy on the other. Judy and myself didn’t appear to know that we were being filmed and I couldn’t remember there ever being a time when someone had shot this.

‘Where’s this from Valentina?’

Giggling and nudging Rebecca she said, ‘The security cameras.’

The more I learnt, the less I knew.

‘You have access to them?’

‘Of course we do.’

‘Do they know?’

‘Who cares, they can’t stop us,’ said Rebecca.

‘What else do you have access to?’

‘What do you want to know?’

Did they realise how much power they had and how dangerous they were?

‘Do they listen to us, here in the house?’

‘They try to but they can never get it to work right. They’re not very good are they Valentina.’

Valentina nodded vigorously and smiled at me and leant over the keyboard and kissed me.

‘Mama, don’t worry. We know what you and Judy want to do and we’ll help you. Soon we’ll be able to leave here and be free.’

Now it was me who felt like a child.

‘So show me the rest of your site.’ She clicked on the image and it dissolved into a page of text and images, some of it going back to the hospital, with shots of me from just after I’d gone through the change, accompanied by comments from Valentina. I saw a shot of Friedland another of Victoria and myself in the shopping mall. Another page showed images

from our time at the house with Naomi and Carol, again accompanied by Valentina's comments.

'I don't have images from Judy's house but I wish I did. If you'd had me in the hospital Mama, I would have images of me being born too.'

'You have access to everything?'

'If it's on a computer somewhere and connected to the Web. Rebecca's really clever with computers. Rebecca can find anything, can't you Rebecca?'

She nodded looking very pleased with herself, yet coy at the same time.

'Can all the girls here use the Web like you do?'

'Oh yes. Rebecca taught all of us. She's the best.'

'Can you find out how many of us there are?'

'Here in England?'

'Well everywhere?'

Rebecca grabbed hold of the keyboard and pretty soon, different databases, obviously official, were scrolling by the screen.

'It'll take a little while,' she said, typing furiously and hitting the return key with a flourish, a gesture totally out of keeping with a small girl in a pretty dress and her hair festooned with ribbons and tiny plastic barrettes in the shape of various animals and insects, her favourite style. Soon, the screen returned what looked like a spreadsheet which on closer inspection contained countries with estimates of the number of people who'd been through the change, survivors, live births and so on. It was a lot of people, almost three-quarters of a million in total and over one hundred and fifty thousand deaths worldwide. Over half million babies! I had no idea it was so many.

'Where did you get these numbers from Rebecca?'

'Oh from governments and other places. I don't know their names though. Do you want me to find out?'

'No, it doesn't really matter.'

I was stunned. Not only by the ease with which Rebecca was able to access so-called secure computers and apparently all over the world, but more by the sheer number of girls, newgirls as they call themselves, that had been born and were apparently alive. No wonder the powers that be were worried, there were a lot of us. Had all survived, there would have been over a million new women and babies by now. But it was also the discovery, was it was hidden? of their Website that astounded me. How could all of this go on and we not know about it? Were we so oblivious to our own children? Apparently so, yet they didn't seem to

mind. It was as if they expected us not to know, almost condescending, no not condescending, more one of understanding what our limitations were. I couldn't wait to tell Judy of my latest discovery about our amazing kids.

Judy got back late in the evening.

'We've got a deal. I've got a contract for you read and they'll negotiate for you over the newspaper deal. They really want to meet you but I told them that they may have to come here, unless of course you feel able to travel down to London?'

'Let's see shall we. That's fantastic news! Maybe we can actually get out of here.'

Then I filled her in on the girls' Website, and especially how much they knew about our desire to get out of the refuge. Judy echoed my own feelings about our ignorance of their capabilities and how it could be, that right under our own noses, they could have developed so much.

* * * *

Then things started to move very fast. Frankly, I felt overwhelmed by everything, for not only did I have to deal with recapitulating the events of the past months, Valentina was developing at what I can only describe as an alarming rate. I felt guilty about neglecting her as I focused on working with Judy on the memoirs. The only thing that kept me going was the goal of getting out of the refuge. Strangely, I seemed to have accepted my new state in the sense that I never thought about it much on a day to day basis. Maybe it was because I was too occupied with Valentina and the events that swirled around me. All the things that had obsessed me before, the fear and embarrassment at having my period, the reality of being a woman in every sense of the word now seemed ridiculous and irrelevant. Perhaps it was the reality of survival that overrode everything else and a sense that the world as I knew it was coming to an end? And maybe it was also the sense of isolation I felt in what, under any other circumstance, would have been the ideal location of North Wales. All of it led to an unreal feeling, of being disconnected. Even the mountain of information that I waded through every day didn't impinge on me really. It was as if it had nothing to do with me. I felt like a researcher in a library, looking through someone else's life, that it couldn't possibly be me. Then I remembered that the last time I'd actually done anything remotely resembling research had been at Victoria's house, only days after I'd nearly died. Could it be that long ago?

The days fled by during which the girls developed almost in step with the pace of the writing. Then one day, Valentina asked me if she could read the manuscript. Perhaps I need to explain something about my understanding – or lack – of Valentina. It would shortly be her first birthday, yet there was no way I could think of her as being a year old. In fact the idea

was ridiculous, for not only did she look much older in part due to her height but more so because she now had the mind of a young woman. But then I realised that making comparisons with ordinary children were useless, there were none. In this sense she really was an alien. Her intellectual capabilities were a complete unknown, a blank. I didn't even know how to measure them. One got a real sense of this when she was with the other girls. I would sometimes sit and watch them interacting and after a short while I realised that I had no idea what they were talking about. Was this how the Neanderthal felt when confronted with the Cro-Magnon? It sometimes sounded as if they no longer used English until I realised that much of their communication relied on the unspoken, you know the way a husband and wife relate who've been together for years.

In any case, when she asked me if she could read what I'd written, it came completely out of the blue and I didn't know what to say. Why I reacted this way I had no idea until I realised that I had real trouble relating to her as my daughter. I know this sounds crazy but that's the way I felt. I suppose it's an extreme case of, what can one call it? Maternalism? Yes, that's the right word, maternalism. I wanted her to be my daughter, an ordinary girl, a baby even, not some super gurl whose qualities and potential I had no idea of. Was I jealous? Yes, I suppose so. In a way I felt eclipsed by her, left behind in a crazy race for the future. The very idea of my baby girl wanting to read a manuscript was more than I could deal with. I tried to communicate this to Judy but it came out all wrong and all I succeeded in doing was ending up feeling frustrated by my inability to deal with something I only dimly comprehended. And as more time passed, this feeling of being left behind only increased. Eventually, I knew I had to confront it and the only way was to talk with Valentina but not surprisingly, she was way ahead of me.

'Mama, we know how you feel but you mustn't worry. We feel the same way about ourselves. We've no idea who we are or what we'll become. We've read everything on rearing normal children and we know that there's nothing to prepare you for us. I'm sorry.'

'Why are you apologising?'

'Because we feel as helpless as you do. But you must just learn to accept us for what we are even if you have no idea what that is. Your love is enough. We do understand love even if it can't be quantified.'

Can't be quantified? The statement rocked me.

'What do you mean, can't be quantified?'

Valentina looked embarrassed, as if she'd revealed a secret.

‘Well, it’s difficult to know how to explain how we feel. Do you remember when you dreamed, when we talked to each other when I was still in your tummy?’

I nodded.

‘It’s like that. We know now that we really are different, so different that we have no idea what we’ll become. The future is as much a blank for us as it is for you. We know that we might die. That we frighten you, all of you.’

‘I’m frightened that I won’t be able to protect you and yes, you’re right, I don’t understand you. I want you to be my baby.’

‘I am Mama, I am.’

She got up and sat on my lap and stroked my face, making me feel like the child. It was such an adult gesture that it sent a shiver through me. The situation was getting more and more unreal. I hugged her to me afraid that somehow she’d slip through my fingers. But something nagged me that she wasn’t telling me everything, that she was holding something back and somehow, she sensed this and looking directly into my eyes, searched for something, for the truth I was avoiding?

‘Mama please, don’t be afraid. We need you.’

‘Why do I get the feeling that you’re holding something back then?’

‘Because we’re afraid of losing you. You’re all we got aside from each other and we know we’re vulnerable. We’re just little girls aren’t we.’

Was she being sarcastic?

‘So what then? What is it?’

She sat on my lap contemplating what to say, mulling over the best way to tell me. Something drastic I wondered?

‘You haven’t been keeping up with the research on us have you.’

‘No, I must admit I’ve not.’

We are like you even though we’re a few years off maturity.’

‘Like me? You mean you don’t need men to have babies.’

She nodded.

‘Do they know?’

‘We’re not sure. It’s difficult for us to explain this to you but we know more about our bodies than you know about yours.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I can’t explain it Mama except it has something to do with how our brains work. We can turn things on and off.’

‘What, like getting pregnant?’

‘Yes, that’s one of the things we can do, or will be able to do.’

‘How do you know?’

She shrugged. ‘We just do that’s all.’

‘And you’re afraid that when they find out, they’ll kill you.’

‘Yes Mama.’ And she burst into tears, real uncontrollable child’s tears of fear.

I felt completely helpless, powerless in the face of this knowledge and then the anger started to build up inside me.

‘Over my dead body!’ I shouted.

Through the tears, a look of puzzlement until I realized that she didn’t understand the statement.

‘What I mean is, I won’t let them, believe me.’

‘We wish we could grow up now. It’s not fair,’ she sobbed.

I understood how she felt, trapped inside her child’s body, much as I had felt in the beginning, trapped in a woman’s body, helpless in the face of a world that not only didn’t understand her but that would wipe her out if it could. My anger just burned all the hotter and I was even more determined than ever to get away from here. We sat there for I don’t how long, holding on to each other like survivors of a shipwreck. We must have fallen asleep from sheer emotional exhaustion because the next thing I knew, it was dark and Judy’s voice penetrating through to my consciousness.

‘Oh there you are. Have you been sitting in the dark?’ she whispered.

‘Yes, we fell asleep.’

I carefully lifted Valentina so as not to wake her and laid her on the sofa.

‘Let’s go into the kitchen,’ I whispered. We sat around the table while I related the gist of my conversation.

‘You know what will happen if this gets out.’

‘Yes. And how do we know that it hasn’t already?’

‘We don’t do we.’

We sat there in silence afraid to voice our feelings, as if to do so would invoke them. Then Valentina was standing there, observing us. I felt embarrassed, as if I’d been talking behind her back. She looked from me to Judy and back again, her long black hair tangled and looking very sleepy, she walked over to me and put her hand on my shoulder in another one of those unnerving adult gestures of hers. I turned to her not knowing what to say really. I suppose it had mostly been said already. In circumstances like ours, the terror one feels is

often avoided in I suppose, a natural reaction to the unthinkable. It was this place, like a bizarre Butlin's or one of those propaganda films the Nazis made about the concentration camps just for Allied consumption; everything was so rosy and comfortable, while just off-screen wholesale mayhem was taking place. Am I over-reacting or just losing it completely? I was really petrified but just couldn't bring myself to say it. Did Valentina and all the other girls feel it too? And as if she read my mind, Valentina said,

‘Yes Mama, you know it, we know it, we have to get out of here and soon.’

* * * *

Writing the book went fast. Frankly I don't really remember much of this time, it was such a desperate scramble. In fact this entire period is a bit of blur. I do remember the agent coming to see me and me signing a contract after having sent it to a lawyer first but the desire to get out of the place was now all consuming and I really didn't care what I had to do to do it. In the meantime, Judy was taking care of finding a place for us to live. We debated leaving the UK altogether but couldn't agree on where to go. The people who ran the camp (I could no longer think of it as a refuge) by and large left us alone. Did they know what our plans were? If they did they gave no indication.

In the meantime, the scale of the epidemic as the press were now calling it, showed no signs of diminishing. In some countries attacks were taking on the dimension of full scale pogroms. The more patriarchal the country, the more extreme the attacks became. But by now it was clear to all but the most reactionary governments that no matter how many were killed it would not slow down the rate of transformations. Every now and then, I would come across a report of this or that ‘breakthrough’ in reversing the process but one never read anything about the results. I didn't want to speculate and asking the children to find out was met with blank stares that I knew hid fear and anger so I didn't press them.

The children meantime continued to develop but now at a slower rate. It was as if the first year had been the result of some kind of mad, genetic scramble to survive but who really knew? There was nothing to go on except the children themselves and here I realised that they were less than forthcoming even with us. Attempts at asking them were evaded I sensed not because they didn't trust us but because the less we knew, the less we could reveal even inadvertently. On a personal level however, my relationship with Valentina and Rebecca deepened. Occasionally we would have strange, very disconcerting conversations that intimated things that they know about me that I wasn't aware of. When pressed on what they meant they would retreat into silence accompanied by odd knowing looks.

The camp, had by now settled down into some kind of normalcy if that's what you can call it. By now the children kept pretty much to themselves, except for their mothers. The people running the camp had tried to set up creches and then kinder gardens and finally classes but eventually gave up, the kids didn't pitch. Instead, they set up their own classes led by a few of the older girls, although what went on in them was a complete mystery. Every time an adult sat in on them, they would clam up and engage in what were obviously sham games of some kind or another. This tactic infuriated the people running the camp but there was nothing they could do about it. Ironically, they were all under age for enforced education, all they could do was let them get on with it. Every now and then, a delegation from one government department or another would visit and we would be called in, one at a time and quizzed but what could we tell them? It was obvious they didn't believe us and veiled threats would be unleashed, for example, that the government couldn't continue to subsidise the place indefinitely but nothing ever came of it. They were in a bind. They needed to know where it was all headed and that was going to take time, so all they could do was watch. It was our one, real lever over our situation and one that the girls had understood well before we had. Yet we also all too aware that breakthroughs could occur somewhere else and the chilling thought that one day we would be redundant and simply 'disposed of'. Ideally of course, the best outcome would be if they simply left us to our own devices.

The first installment of my story appeared accompanied by a massive fanfare in the media. I refused to conduct any interviews or to attend the book launch. Then Judy's book was published and she went to the launch but didn't do any signings. By now we had enough money to leave but the critical problem of whether they would let us leave still had to be dealt with. We debated sneaking out one night but realised that was an unrealistic plan. And how would the authorities react? Would they let us leave? We decided that the best thing to do was first of all buy a place, get it set up and then simply tell them we were leaving. In theory there was nothing they could do to stop us. The girls came up with an ingenious plan to neutralise the surveillance system but of course once put into action, the authorities would know something was up. Were we being totally paranoid? And what about the other mothers and children? Rebecca wanted them all to come with us but of course that was impossible. We weren't even sure they would let us take Rebecca. Then one day, we got a visit from Victoria.

* * * *

'They know,' she said.

'Know? Know what?'

‘That the children are just like you. That they can have children without men. At least they’re pretty sure.’

‘Are you sure? How?’

‘It’s all in the genes plus the post-mortems they’ve conducted, hundreds of them. They’ve spent millions. While you’ve been squirreled away here, a massive project has been underway...’

‘Have you’ve been part of it?’

‘No, they don’t trust me but I’ve got friends, contacts. And they know the process is irreversible. It’s just too complicated. It would mean altering the DNA which is simply beyond them, there are too many changes. Even one altered gene sequence has unknown consequences, never mind dozens. The permutations are infinite.’

‘So where does that leave us?’

We were sitting in the same glade we’d discovered when we first came here almost a year ago. We’d brought a picnic with us and the girls were off exploring. They loved it out here, their inquisitive minds investigating everything, the birds, the plants, the animals. They would engage in intense debates about the whys and wherefores of everything. Why was a plant this shape and colour? Or what was the relationship between this or that plant and animal? They sounded like a couple of absent-minded professors, an incongruous vision with the two of them in their pretty dresses and their hair, as always, tied up with all kinds of barrettes and combs, a style that for some reason, virtually all of the girls preferred.

‘I’m not sure. I think they’re not sure either.’

‘What can they do?’

‘Well the question is, simply put, one of power and who wields it. Right now, it’s men but for how long? After all, it’s actually quite a simple equation to figure out just how long the male of the species has actually got.’

‘Well don’t keep us in suspense. How long is it?’

‘If the current rate of change is maintained and all the girls reach puberty at say 15 and here, we’re still not sure how the method of self fertilisation is triggered, no more than ten generations. That’s about three hundred years tops. Of course in reality, men as a species will be effectively redundant long before their actual extinction.’

‘That’s a long time, three hundred years.’

‘The issue isn’t really about how long but about firstly, how will men react to the knowledge of their demise and secondly, what can they do about the issue of maintaining the status quo?’

‘I take it this isn’t common knowledge then?’

‘No it isn’t but it won’t be long before it gets out. They’re afraid of a backlash and what it’ll do the economy. You have to understand something here, right now it’s down to what happens to stock prices and international relations, trade, energy, the works. What they’re really afraid of is the fact that this new species is not interested in conducting business as usual and by looks of it, they’re right.’

Victoria looked us oddly and said,

‘You do realise what’s been going on out there?’ she gestured to the sky.

‘What do you mean, ‘I said.

‘God, have you been so isolated here? The Catholic church is in meltdown, closely followed by all the other major religions. Have you no idea what the implications are?’

I looked at Judy who just shrugged and then said,

‘We’ve been rather pre-occupied here. We don’t have much time for theological discussions.’

‘The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost? And God created Man in His own image?’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Yes, well if you put it that way, then I see what you mean. It does rather make a mockery of the entire thing doesn’t it. When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman? I suppose the Pope must be really pissed off.’

Victoria got up and paced around the clearing looking decidedly frustrated with us.

‘Have the girls not asked you about religion?’

‘Now that you mention it, no. It’s never come up.’

‘Do you think they believe?’

‘Why don’t you ask them? And anyway, what does the Pope say?’

‘Not much, yet. But he will once these findings come out.’

‘Perhaps he already knows but he’s not letting on? After all, his job is on the line isn’t it.’

I started laughing and then Judy joined in. Then the girls came back and wanted to know what was so funny, as by now, we were in hysterics. I tried to tell them but couldn’t get it out.

‘It’s not funny Nova. This is deadly serious.’

‘Tell the girls Victoria.’

‘What Mama? Tell us what?’

‘Religion. Victoria wants to know if you believe in God. I take it you mean any god, not just a Christian one, right Victoria?’

‘God?’ said Valentina. ‘Oh yes, God.’

She looked bemused and not sure what to say.

‘Do you Mama?’

‘Me? No I don’t.’

‘All the churches are run by men aren’t they?’

‘Well most of them are, yes.’

‘And the Pope thinks we’re freaks.’

‘He does?’

‘Oh yes Mama. He called us abominations. We don’t like the Pope.’

Valentina and Rebecca nodded vigorously to each other. Their reaction made me smile in its innocence.

‘Well there’s your answer I think, Victoria. I’m not sure that religion figures highly.’

Then Rebecca interceded.

‘Well we have discussed it.’

‘And?’

‘Well it all seems highly problematic. It’s difficult to prove a negative and as there’s no real evidence as to the actual existence of god, any god, it all seems a little academic. Of course the universe is a really big place...’

‘Problematic?’ I interceded.

‘Or really small,’ Valentina said, ‘depending on how you look at the idea of really big. After all, look at the inside of an atom, it’s really big.’

‘Yes, that’s true too. In any case, it hardly seems worth bothering about unless of course you find it interesting,’ Rebecca responded.

‘And you don’t?’ I inquired.

‘No not really, not now anyway,’ replied Rebecca. ‘Although I might sometime. We do have a real problem with the idea of faith. It all seems a little vague doesn’t it.’

Every conversation I had with the girls had a surrealistic air to them. I still couldn’t get used to the idea that such adult ideas could come out of their mouths. Could their thinking simply be the result of innocence? Sometimes they sounded like the classical idiot savants who could do calculus in their heads or play Mozart after one hearing but were clueless about the way the world worked. Yet were any comparisons useful at all? With the arrival of the ‘gurls’ had the rule book been thrown away?

The men arrived the following week, early in the morning. Descended on us would be a more accurate description. I was still in bed when I heard the commotion outside. Judy rushed into my bedroom, "Get up, quick! They're here!"

"Here?" I wasn't really awake and it took awhile for the words to sink in. Outside, I could hear the voices of the mothers shouting. When I looked out of the window I could see a line of white vans with a lot of men milling about shouting out instructions. Some of the mothers were arguing with the men, though I couldn't hear the words.

"What's going on?" I shouted to Judy.

"I'm not sure, but I think we're being moved."

"Moved?" I had a sinking feeling in my stomach and a sense of rising panic coupled to helplessness.

Outside, things were getting chaotic with women and children milling about. Jean Terson was arguing with one man who looked like he was in charge of things. I quickly threw on some clothes and rushed downstairs and joined Judy and we went outside to try find out exactly what was going on.

Jean turned toward me as I came out of the house. She looked panicked and out of control.

'Nova,' she cried out.

I walked over to her but I had nothing to say. What could I do? Eventually, my mouth worked.

'What is going on? Who are these men? What do they want?'

'They want to move us. They say it's no longer safe here.'

'Safe? Then where is safe? Where do they want us to go?'

'They won't tell me.'

'Then why should we go?'

The man who I thought was in charge walked over to me.

'And you are?'

I could feel a real anger rising in me.

'Who wants to know?'

He sensed my anger but my question pulled him up short. A silence followed surrounded by the turmoil around us, while he decided how best to deal with me. We faced each other down, neither giving ground. Eventually, he spoke.

'I'm Inspector Davis and I'm in charge of relocating you. This location has been compromised and...'

As he spoke, I knew he was lying and he knew I knew. He looked away from me, unable to look me in the eye. I turned and Judy was there with Valentina and Rebecca at her side.

‘We’re not moving,’ I said and as I spoke, a silence broke out. The other mothers and their children turned and looked at me. Had I shouted it?

‘We’re not moving and that’s final, so you better leave.’

The men shuffled uncomfortably not knowing what to do. This was it, I knew. A vision came into my mind of cattle trucks and men in uniforms herding people into them. No way I thought. I’ll die here before I move and as if sensing my mood, Valentina came to me and grabbed hold of my hand. I held on to it tightly and stood my ground, defying Inspector Davis. He started to speak and then changed his mind and looked around him, uncertain as what to do next. He’d lost the initiative and didn’t know how to regain it. Sensing his uncertainty I went for it.

‘We’re not moving, don’t you understand? So I suggest you take your men and leave.’

Eventually, Davis moved back and got on his mobile. A heated conversation took place. Clearly he was under orders to move us no matter what, but he was obviously reluctant to carry them out. Bereft of leadership, the other men milled about. I turned to the women and said,

‘Go back to your homes, now.’

What had come over me? First one of the mothers and then the rest, and picking up their children or grabbing hands, they dispersed. The men did nothing to stop them. Davis was still talking into his mobile, probably to get instructions as to what to do next. Jean Terson came over to me, looking grey faced and shaking all over.

‘I knew nothing about this,’ she protested.

There was nothing I could say to her but inside I was shaking too. I turned on my heel and walked back to the house without saying a word. Valentina was silent but she knew what had nearly happened, I could see it written all over her face. How soon before they came back with armed men, perhaps the army?

We trooped into the kitchen and sat around the table in silence.

‘We’ve got to leave. Now,’ Judy finally spoke. I nodded.

‘But what about the other mothers and children? We can’t just leave them.’

‘Let’s get a meeting together as soon as those men have left.’

‘Assuming they do of course.’