

PERFECTING THE RACE

by

Jeannette Dean

“Why are you here, you wretched creature?” she demanded, eyes bulging, the hairs in her nose quivering. She couldn’t know how ugly she was from my angle.

“I want to entertain the children.” I had long accepted that simplistic answers were the only channel when dealing with bigoted people.

The wrinkles redoubled in her turtle neck, eyes darted behind yellow-rimmed plastic specs. “How would you do that?” her nasal voice tightened in its disgust at admitting interest.

“I do a puppet show. Animal puppets. I like to make children laugh.” I never told them ahead of time that the puppets were of extinct animals, like lions and elephants, in case they took it as political. Children loved them, hungered to

know more about the animals that had disappeared before they were born.

“Hmpff,” her jowls jiggled. She glanced around to ascertain no one saw her talking to me. “How much do you charge?”

“Afterwards you give me what you think the show was worth. Before, I require a bottle of water and a loaf of bread.”

Behind her the noise grew. The children were just waking from afternoon naps in the traditional dome abode with its walled garden. The few of these that remained were allocated as Child Care Homes.

“No, you’d frighten them,” she pronounced and closed the door. At least she hadn’t slammed it, which was sometimes the case. It was the adults I frightened, never the little ones.

So, I dutifully put #23 Eye Way on the List. I didn’t like compiling it, but we had to sort them out. The children needed our protection.

That was the second of the three Homes I visited that day. Blessedly, it was the only one that went on the List. I did the show at the other two, so was pressed for time.

My transport cart is excellent, especially designed for my needs, latest technology, thus minimal time was taken between assignments. However, legless is legless, so getting around is time-consuming, takes extra effort.

They selected me because of that handicap. And my others. People don't realize that their reaction to my looks can be a mark against them.

The day was not unusual. I did reflect that my Recycle List was getting long. The Stays List was decided shorter.

John came every night at exactly the same time. That night he was a few minutes early.

"Come on in. I'll get you a drink and the pipe will be ready shortly," I smiled conspiratorially. One of the perks of the job was that they kept my habits supplied, illegal though they were.

A nod of the head as he left his shoes by the door. No smile nor words. He needed to unwind. I had cross harmonies of wood flute and mountain chants filling my little Society-issue flat. Lavender essence permeated the place. There was no choice but to relax.

We sipped the liquor from my two crystal stems, my most treasured possessions. There were few still in existence. John lay back on the batik silk cushions. My inability to use furniture meant the furnishing allowance had gone into amassing an exquisite carpet and cushion collection.

He took a long drag from the minted water-pipe, sighed. I was already fairly mellow, so just sipped and waited. He'd have received my day's report at Society

Central.

“Ah, Sonya, it is not easy, is it?” He stretched luxuriously.

I’ve always thought that would feel so good. To be able to stretch your arms above your head in one direction, legs and feet straight out in the other. Pulling and working all the muscles and bones and nerves in your body.

“You met my parent today,” his voice was flat. I studied his profile. The Zulu features were overlaid with soft olive skin and his black hair fell in limp curls, nearly hiding intense blue eyes.

“No, couldn’t be.” I knew the features of the three women I’d visited. I’d studied them like an artist. . .or a mating advisor. It was my nature to study so. And, it was my job.

“I was a war orphan. I grew up at #23 Eye Way.” Still he did not lift the thick lashes. I knew they would have revealed pain.

“Suppose I knew it would happen eventually. Pity really. She’s a cold, hard woman. But she loves kids, in her own way.”

“I could change my report,” I heard myself saying. An unthinkable utterance. But, I knew John was the only real ‘friend’ I’d ever had. As my supervisor he knew everything about me. Over the years we’d developed an ‘equality’. We had a mutual commitment to securing a caring, humane populace. And a mutual love

for the contraband they supplied me.

*“No,” his eyes bored into me. But, he didn’t seem surprised. Sitting up, he
downed the strong, precious drink in a gulp. “You just put her on the List. There’ll
be an investigation. They’ll see.” But his voice had lost its life.*

*My heart had slowed. I felt sick. “But, they must have known. Why else would
they have sent me out there?”*

His head jerked toward me. “They sent you? But, you’re a free agent.”

*“Well, I am, but occasionally they assign someone for a specific date. I don’t ask
why, of course.”*

*He lay back. “That means she was already listed,” he whispered. “And
researched. You were the final check. She will be shipped out tonight.”*

“No! Tell them that she shouldn’t be recycled. You have authority.”

“I have no authority. I’m just a functionary.”

*“John, this isn’t right. We’re just weeding out the negatives. The prejudiced and
violent, the fanatics and war-mongers, those who hurt others. Sure, she didn’t
like my looks, but most people don’t, truth be told. Her fate can’t be decided by
that!” I was horrified I’d signed her recycle order.*

*“She’ll just be a worker, John. If she’s good with kids she should be kept in
society.”*

He sat back, re-lit the pipe. We smoked in silence. It was the first time I'd questioned the policy since my indoctrination. At that point I had been disgusted with the blatant prejudice against we who were born during the decade of gene experimentation. Cleansing society meant keeping the good, kind and honest, reaching for the best of the human race. We had failed at cloning, selective breeding and gene modification. But, we could weed.

"Has it gone too far, John?"

"Next you'll be asking, 'Is this the way?'" John gave a nervous laugh. "Listen, we've got good jobs and live well. There is very little crime and no traffic jams. There's no poverty." He lifted his glass, "Any more?"

Never had we had more than one. What the hell, I thought. I dug my stash from inside the largest pillow, refilled the pipe as well as our glasses.

"When I was small she would lock me in a closet for any transgression. Twenty-four hours in the dark without food or water or clothes. And a can as toilet. It was the same for all the orphans. She hadn't meant to scar us for life." He threw the drink back with force, almost violently. I watched in awe.

"Yes, I learned to be good. To follow the rules. Not to fight. Or swear. Or touch girls."

He sat staring at me, but not seeing me. I knew he didn't think of me as a female.

I was an 'it' to him. As I was to everyone. Not even a candidate for rape. No one would imagine I had desires and fantasies. They were usually violent. With groups of men using my body, enjoying my body, not seeing the irregularities.

Since John had commenced hanging around for an hour or so each night after reviewing my daily additions to the Lists, my fantasies had changed. I had come to use him, his body, his mouth. His full lips looked soft and I could well imagine how they would have felt. I wanted to tell him, 'I'm a woman. Touch me! There'll be no punishment.' Instead, I lit the pipe.

"She was too strict then?" I just wanted him to talk. I wanted to hear everything, to understand.

He stood, took a few steps as if to pace, but my place is small and cushions were scattered everywhere. He took a deep breath and sat down.

"Can we prevent unintentional cruelty? Can we weed out everyone who has a negative effect on someone's life? No one else wanted an angry boy of indistinguishable origins. She made me work, made me fit in. Do I thank her or hate her? I'd have been recycled before reaching puberty. That is existing, not living."

My disquiet intensified when he held out his glass, staring at me with red glazed eyes. I hesitated.

“Com’on, they’ll give you more, you with your pathetic deformities. Not to me.

Nice normal me.” The smile was cold and empty.

“John,” I cleared my throat, trying to still my racing heart. “You shouldn’t’ have more.” The liquor was prohibited because it brought out the uncontrollable side in some.

He grabbed the large rainbow pillow and pulled it from beneath me as if I weren’t there. Hurt, anger, humiliation overwhelmed me. I had thought myself numb to such feelings.

He didn’t hesitate, he didn’t seem aware of me. Through the intensity of my reaction I accepted how bad his childhood had been. That it had festered inside him all those years. I felt something I hadn’t felt since indoctrination. Fear.

He felt around in the pillow. “I function, I do what they tell me. Just like I did what she told me. She had the closet.” He gave that ugly smile again. “Wonder if they’ve sealed it off. Sealed off all those hours.”

“Surely she doesn’t still use it. There have been laws against punishing children since before I was born.” I stopped. She had broken the laws with John.

He hurled his glass across the room. As it shattered his arm flew back, catching me across the side of my head.

“Stupid! Of course she does.” I cringed as much at his laughter as from the blow.

With ringing ears I righted my body. And watched him gulp the last of the golden liquid.

Just as John's hand lowered with the empty flask, the door opened. Shocked, I recognized the dark brown uniform of Sector Commander. His silver lithium rod was immediately pointed at John.

"No!" escaped my lips as the silent charge entered John's body. It reminded me of old movies of the days before stimulants and weapons were brought under strict control.

After his assistants carried John out, unconscious and limp, Commander calmly turned to me. "It's not your fault. Such negatives lay dormant in the best of us. We have been concerned about him, watched him closely. What we must research is why his sensor didn't alert us. It was your sensor that brought us here." He smiled confidently. "Luckily in time to prevent your negatives overpowering your goodness. You are not physically damaged, are you?"

I shook my head dumbly.

He gave a quick nod and stepped to the door to which I'd thought only I had the code. "You must never share your ration. Some, like John, can't handle stimulants. You are unique, Sonya, that's why you can be looked after. Our world is getting better, thanks to people like you and I."

“But,” I cleared my throat, barely able to speak. “He was my friend. His parent...”

I couldn't stop the tears, the first since childhood, since I was taken from my parent.

“We know all about it. That's why you were sent today. You have passed the test. John didn't, he hasn't evolved far enough, as we had feared.”

He stepped back into the room, leaned down and kissed my cheek. He radiated warm affection. “Don't worry. He'll be a good, contented worker, as will his parent. They will remember nothing. The sterilization and recycle process is painless. Luckily we got him in time. Can't have flaws passed on to the next generation. Our world needs workers, Sonya, and we take good care of them.”

With effort I composed myself. I was afraid my emotional reaction would be considered a flaw.

“You'll be fine, Sonya. Your new supervisor will be here in the morning to help you balance out and reset your sensor.”

As he closed the door, the lock engaged. However, I realized my door was not secure. Would never be.

John's words echoed in the empty room, ‘She had her closet.’

And they have their sensors. I perceived the enormity of the fact for the first time.

I quickly re-lit the pipe. I knew that numbing myself was the only way. And I knew that with reset would come fresh supplies. I'd be fine.

Yes, I would be just fine.

finish