

DNA EXCHANGE

The course of true love.

BY D. A. XIAOLIN SPIRES

I placed the dishes in a haphazard pile in the sink and watched as the auto-sorter pulled them into the dishwasher one by one, stacking them into supersonic racks. My mind reeled from the phone call from school. “Meiling was acting up again.” I mouthed *start* and the DishU hummed, giving off a scent of lemon in the process. The soothing movements of Smart DishU filled my eyes, mechanical limbs like spiders cartwheeling across my porcelain, singing them clean.

I was lost in thought when I heard Securo’s deep voice announce: “Meiling has arrived.” The door slammed closed. I heard heavy footsteps run up the stairs.

“Meiling, get over here,” I yelled. The footsteps paused, then I heard them in reverse. Trudge, trudge. Down and across the living room.

She had her baseball cap on, which flashed ‘Just 4 UR Evite’, the newest band sensation. Who were they again? Josh, Kick and Enlai? Or was that last week’s boy band?

“Take that thing off and look at me,” I said. She shook her head, leaving a static holotrail ghost of the projection, her eyes hidden under the rim.

I pulled off her cap. She shrieked. Her black hair flew in all directions. *Teenage years, when would they be over?*

As she thrashed, saying it was *unfair*, I saw something jiggling off her neck, swaying with her angry convulsions.

“What is *that?*” I pointed. It was flesh-coloured and squishy, a nub. It looked like a dead naked mole rat, hunched in fetal position.

Meiling’s eyes lit up, looking utterly delighted. Her tantrum stopped.

Dangling off her neck on a chain was a deformed, pale locket.

She picked up the piece, squishing it slightly. The pendant compressed under the pressure of her finger pads.

“You know you say I should stop being so materialistic,” Meiling said, smirking. “Well, I told Kyle that. He wanted to go steady with me and told me he’d buy me anything. I said, ‘I don’t need you to buy me anything, but if you’re so into me, why don’t you give me your right ear?’”

She laughed. It was cruel, the sound



of my own narcissistic self echoing in my firstborn.

“He said, ‘Ear? You mean, you want me to hear for you? I could install a chip and translate for you in Spanish class.’ And I said, ‘No, I don’t need you to do my schoolwork, thanks. I want your ear, literally.’ He smiled, thinking it was a joke.”

“His ear,” I said, incredulity cracking out of my voice.

“Yeah, mom, keep up,” she said, rolling her eyes. Her fingers worked her way into the seams and folds of the whorl of pale dough in her hands.

“Well, he did it. He gave me his ear. I thought it was so romantic, like Van Gogh from art class.”

“That’s his ear, right there?” I felt queasy, my lunch was stirring in my stomach. I saw it, the whorls, the lobe. It felt like the air sucked up all sound. Only the DishU going off in a hum.

“No, mom, don’t be dumb.”

“Don’t you call your mother that.” I reached for her pendant, but pulled back at the same time, unsure whether I wanted to touch the supple cartilage.

“He *grew it*. Really, it had another purpose, for the science fair, but he grew an extra one for me. On his arm, he’d been wearing long sleeves even in this June heat, because he wanted to surprise me. They sprouted on his forearm, right above the wrists.”

She pointed at her own wrists. I scoured them, checking for any weird nubs.

“That doesn’t make it much better.”

“He said it doesn’t have the organs to

actually hear yet, but he’s working on the eardrum and seeing if he can project aural interpretation into his room. That way we can be connected.”

I know teens have their own courtship rituals, but this was out of control.

“Give me that.” I pulled at her chain.

“No!” she screamed. She seized the chain. “This is his promise necklace.”

We struggled for five minutes.

She shouted, “You could never understand me” and “Why did I even bother telling you” and “I should’ve just lied.”

I yelled, “You just like to act out to get my attention” and “Well, now you have it and you better get rid of that gross piece of human meat off your chest.” The fresh scent of lemon continued to fill the room, a strength escalating in tune with our voices.

“Mom, you’ll never understand. You never lived with DNA exchanges and flitskin-tats, you’ll never know how much this means!” She threw herself around to rush out.

In her haste, her shirt behind her flew up and for a second, I saw an orb-like lump.

“What is that?” I asked, my voice now low, unusually calm.

Meiling knew that tone. That was the tipping point. If she pushed me over, she’d be grounded for weeks. No holocalls, no late-night trips to dessert shack, no e-cart creds.

“It’s, uh, a decorative thing. Temporary.” She pulled her shirt down.

I walked over and took a look. Her lips were quivering.

It was an eye. A single eye, protruding right above her hips, resting on her lower back like a tramp stamp.

“No, no, no...”

“Well, you know. I can’t leave him hanging. Love goes both ways. And he always said what beautiful eyes I had,” she said, squirming.

I looked into the pupil, which followed my face. It blinked. Its sinewy veins looked like DishU mechanical legs, spidery threads spreading across her back. I grabbed the holophone and mouthed “Dermatologist”, wondering how much this removal surgery would set us back. ■

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