

Carly Martin

Darwin Deferred

“I thought you’re a biologist, Audrey,” said Constance. “You should know by now that natural beauty is the stuff of cave paintings.” She tilted her head and prodded a coy grin at Audrey; seated on the other side of the stainless steel and glass desk of Dr. Constance Sapling: geneticist and modeling scout. Audrey’s mouth maintained a silent, flat line and the corners of Dr. Sapling’s mouth wilted slightly. She continued, “Not that you aren’t an exquisite woman, Audrey... it’s just that Rigel agents are so much more than, and are not constrained by, conventional biological manifestations of beauty.”

Audrey took a graded breath through stiffened nostrils. The niceties of a *genetic aesthetician* couldn’t help but ring ingenuine, she thought, before responding, “Tell me again why you think I’m the perfect candidate for this.” “Easy,” Dr. Sapling began, “You’re a seasoned biologist trained in molecular techniques with the added bonus of possessing an innate sense of physical artistry.” Constance had omitted Audrey’s third qualification, likely because it was the most difficult one to describe tactfully, but she tried: “You are also less of a... *germline* liability.” This last statement was ham-fisted and Dr. Sapling knew it, but it was the truth: no edits made to Audrey’s genome could be passed on to children. Audrey was, for all intents and purposes, infertile. Strict federal mandates banned genetic manipulation that could affect the germline: the part of the human genome that

prevails through generations. Artificial genes had to die with the human that consented to their intervention.

Audrey knew, as Dr. Sapling described, *innately*, why she was the perfect candidate for Rigel Modeling Agency. But she also wanted to see how Dr. Sapling would handle this tricky negotiation when pressed. It had been a long time since Audrey could flex any sort of leverage in a bargain, so she grasped the chance to do so now.

“But when I was a dancer, I could change out of my costume and turn off the music at the end of a performance,” said Audrey. “I’m going to have to think about this some more.”

Dr. Sapling, accustomed to this kind of waffling, remained unmoved. Of *course* she’ll need more time, she thought. “That is all completely understandable. You are 100% within your right to take as much time as you need,” Dr. Sapling replied, then thought: as much time as you can afford, to be frank.

* * *

Audrey lay prone and limp on her mothbally childhood bed, trying to focus her thoughts with her eyes forced shut.

She turned twenty-nine a month and a half ago, and moved back in with her mom a week after that birthday. Audrey had been in a grim holding pattern lately, one that ebbed between dull disappointment and complacency. She was comfortably depressed with her situation: unemployed, educated in the wrong

thing, poor, in just the company of her mother.... only one sharp tragedy stood out from this equilibrium. Audrey half-opened her eyes to look at the ceiling and placed one hand behind her head. Her gaze drifted downward and across the room to her life's framed ephemera on the surrounding walls: school portraits, ballet performance photos, old pointe shoes, a GED, and community college biology diploma. "That's everything," she breathed.

Absent-mindedly, she let her other hand rub over her belly. It would always remain naturally taut, even though her days of baring it under thin leotards were over. She pressed the hand on one side of her abdomen; it pushed back against her fingers like stretched rubber, even though a new, mushy layer of padding now separated it from the rest of the world by about an inch and a half. Her hand then traveled below her navel, over the highest arch of the padding, and down to the smile-shaped scar that clearly marked the full lower border of her belly, the remnant of a cesarean.

"That's everything," she breathed again. Her throat tightened.

"Are you decent?" A voice came from behind her door.

"Hey... yes, come in," Audrey answered.

Donna Munson, IT analyst and mother of one strode carefully through her daughter's door. She pulled up Audrey's desk chair and planted, elbows on knees, beside the bed, examining her daughter.

"Thoughts?" Donna asked.

“It went well,” replied Audrey, “Dr. Sapling really wants me, she thinks I have a lot of potential—“

“Because you *do*, love.” She looked at her clasped hands. “You are an *artist* with your body... always have been...”

“Artist first, scientist second,” Audrey remarked.

A pause.

“I hate that you regret your decision to dance for as long as you did, so few people have the talent and chance to do that. It was good for you, Audrey.” Donna continued, “You finished your education, too, in your own way... it’s all the same difference.”

“Yes I got my biology bachelor’s at *twenty nine*... useless. I’m too old for any self-respecting Ph.D program. All I’m qualified to do now is pipette shit back and forth.” Audrey’s eyes were wide open now, but she covered them and her temples with her palm. This is how every conversation with her mother went: Audrey spiraled, Donna justified. She dug deeper “And yes my body *could* dance, but it’s also useless for anything meaningful now.”

Audrey removed her hand from her face, but didn’t look at her mother; she could feel Donna’s pleading eyes begging her to look into them. Audrey, ever since she was young, hated giving her the satisfaction of eye contact in times like these. A still moment passed.

“I’m so... *so* sorry honey... you can’t still be blaming yourself for that... genes are fickle, we know that *so* well now... and those damn government regulations

don't make that fact any easier to live with." Donna's hands separated and one of them covered Audrey's.

Four months ago, Audrey was still pregnant with her then-boyfriend's baby. It was a hopeful, but melancholic time: the pregnancy wasn't planned, and it meant she had to leave her ballet company earlier than expected. When she learned of her condition she knew then her career was over. Even if everything had gone according to plan, she would still be a twenty-eight year old part-time dancer... her position, if it was still there for her after the baby, would be a courtesy at best. At least the night classes for her biology degree were winding down. Her graduation ceremony would have coincided with the baby's first month.

"It's meant to be," she remembers telling herself, "It's time to finish dancing. I need to, anyway... two new chapters of my life are beginning at the same time, and I am going to be present for both of them."

But the delivery was a nightmare. That morning, everyone learned of how Audrey is a carrier for rare genetic mutation, which, if passed on to a developing baby, allotted a 50/50 chance of postnatal survival. Audrey's first child was on the wrong side of chance. The flaw is exceptionally rare and Audrey has no family history of it, so her doctor did not think it was necessary to test for it ahead of time. "It is *2030!*" Donna had lamented in the antiseptic halls of the ICU, outside of Audrey's hospital room, "We can do *anything* to our genes... but *nooooo* not embryos... *not* to save my grandchildren... *germline purity* is priority number one."

This isn't entirely true. The federal ban did have one exception: in cases in which the faulty gene allotted a 0/100 chance of survival.

Donna rubbed her daughter's forearm. Audrey said nothing. She just lay and studied the circles her mom traced on her skin. Finally, she cleared her throat and said, "I need to be alone for a bit, mom."

"Of course, sure, Audrey... I do love you so much..." Donna finished her circling motion with a squeeze of her daughter's arm and left, closing the door gently.

Audrey curled up in her bed, alone again, but stayed like that for just a moment. A second later she let herself roll off the side of the bed and thud onto her carpeted floor, where she could fish a snack out of her purse. She unwrapped the synthetically 'peanut butter' low calorie nutrition bar and nibbled. This was a perfect example of something she wouldn't have eaten in either of her past lives: as a ballet dancer or future mother.

Audrey looked back at her purse. Now that it was emptied of some cargo, it deflated and one corner of the pamphlet for Rigel Modeling Agency waved down Audrey. Her decision had to be made soon. She unfolded it in her lap.

* * *

Dr. Constance Sapling is the original, bulwark pioneer for the realm of genetic engineering that concerns *somatic* cells: the cells of one's person that do not contribute information to their offspring. These are all the cells one can *see* on a

person: they make up skin, hair, eyes, etc. Being temporary, somatic engineering poses no threat to the germline, so there is very little government intervention in its facilitation. With the fortune Dr. Sapling accrued early on in her career from patents on the most widely used techniques for this variety of gene editing, she turned her attention to a more niche, whimsical application of her technology, and laid the foundation for Rigel Modeling Agency.

Now, in 2030, Rigel has developed into a symbol of the mixed consciousness of the synthetic biology community. This organization resembles more of an artist's collective than a modeling agency. There, "models" are scientist-designers pioneering the use of genetic manipulation for aesthetic purposes. To address the constitutive siege of strong public opinion against this operation, Dr. Sapling frequently has to emphasize that the work done at Rigel is meant to be editorial, thought-provoking performance art with the intention of providing commentary on the pressing bioethical issues of the day. All of her "models" design and publicize themselves.

Outside of her scientific career, Dr. Sapling is a season-pass patron of the City Ballet Company, and has been for decades. When her favorite principal ballerina, Audrey Munson, abruptly disappeared from its stage, she inquired into her whereabouts out of concern. Upon learning the full context of Audrey's life, Dr. Sapling saw an opportunity to expand Rigel's artistry in her, and reached out to a dancer betrayed by her own biology.

"Rigel is filled with people who are scientists first, artists second, Audrey, but you could be the first on our team with professional experience in both," an

enthused Dr. Sapling had told her potential agent in their second meeting, “You wouldn’t have to sacrifice any part of who you really are.”

“But I *would* be sacrificing the physical part of me for a message I want to tell,” Audrey had replied.

“Haven’t you already been doing that your whole life?”

* * *

Sitting on her bedroom floor, Rigel pamphlet in hands, Audrey stared at the models inside. One possessed opalescent amethyst hair and chrome fingernails. Another had ever-changing skin that shifted colors to match her body temperature. A human lava lamp, Audrey thought. The dominant feeling she felt toward these figures was a typical mix of admiration and envy in the presence of beauty. It was like any other magazine in that way. She kept turning the pages, however; she couldn’t dismiss these beauties like she could those of generic drugstore periodicals. She felt a certain magnetism toward them. Their eyes and impossible bodies read more than just sex appeal.

“They finished themselves...” Audrey whispered. “They are each an act of protest...”

Audrey finally disengaged her eyes from the pamphlet and glanced around at her walls again. She studied herself in the framed portraits; she wore ballet finery for various shows in each one. Her cheeks blushed with something like shame. After studying the Rigel models, her art seemed juvenile. She recalled the many occasions

through her career in which she dwelled on the ludicrous nature of the whole thing: this is just a very, very, difficult pageant, she would think, I am just a decadent visual *dessert* for these audiences. Her personal justification for her work had always been that her shows made audiences feel better about being human. Every time she performed, Audrey's message was: I am beautiful even though I'm human like you. "It's a display of idealized humanity for the masses," was how she described her motivation to dance.

Still on the floor, Audrey hugged her knees to her chest. She felt the skin around her scar pucker unevenly as she folded herself in half.

"I'm a failed human," Audrey had said after losing her baby, when she decided that she would never again attempt to have children. "I understand if you want to leave. I can't give you the normal *human* life I know you pictured for us," She had said to her boyfriend in the aftermath, as she cut him out of her life, sparing him the years of resentment and guilt Audrey predicted would be inevitable if they stayed together.

"Audrey, no, your body doesn't determine your humanity," he had replied. In response, she dropped her hands to her sides, closed her eyes, and said, "... But it determined us."

"You are every bit the same woman you were yesterday, Audrey." Her mother had told her on her first day home from the hospital.

“I have never been the same kind of woman as you, we just never knew,” was her reply.

At Audrey’s most recent meeting with Dr. Sapling, she had asked: “Are your models intentionally all women?”

“No, not intentionally. It’s just that the overwhelming majority of our applicants are.” Dr. Sapling continued, “It might just be that women are better equipped to view their bodies as something apart from themselves.”

Audrey looked away from the hanged memories of herself. She folded up the pamphlet neatly before turning it over to find the number of the direct line to Dr. Sapling’s office, the number that the doctor herself had scratched precisely into the glossy paper with her own personalized pen. She dialed.

A beat later, “Audrey, I’m hearing back from you much sooner than I expected. How are you feeling about my offer--”

“Yes... my answer is yes.... This is how I will finish myself.”