

THE GROWER

By Nate Worrell

The bone stalks are coming in thick as a forest of birch trees. The livers are plump and purple. The nerve vines hang on the wall like an intricate lace tapestry. The crops are gorgeous, and I'm cautiously optimistic that the actuaries will give them a top rating. We could use the extra money. But the splendor of the coming harvest pales in comparison to the gem I have hidden in the back closet.

In a small tray, under an intricate array of UV lamps, is a fully functional set of female reproductive organs. Given that it's completely illegal, I've kept it secret, trading surplus and defected organs for stem cells in midnight exchanges during my runs to the city. I feel like I've rivalled Edison in the number of failed prototypes. This last attempt has outlasted the others. It's a gift for Nancy and it's almost ready.

Nancy turns 125 this week. At first glance, she looks a century younger. But upon close inspection, perpetual youth, made possible by advances in nano-surgery and growers like me, comes with subtle signs. A hairline seam on the inner thigh marks her latest skin replacement, her ears have a bright pink tint from the recent cochlea upgrade, and the little dots above her belly button are from an intestinal enhancement.

Since I first met her, Nancy has had a recurring dream. She stands in the middle of the desert under the starlight. She holds her tummy, round as a pumpkin. It glows with a soft indigo hue, and she hears the tiny thump-thump of a heartbeat. I know when she has one of her dreams because she'll wake up with tears in the corners of her eyes. She'll kiss me and leave for her job at the penitentiary a little earlier than usual so she can swing by the incubation chambers. She'll walk through the halls, where from floor to ceiling, the fetuses rest in aquariums filled with orange amniotic fluid. She'll place her hands on the glass to feel the vibrations of the rhythmic pulses of the unborn. Soon, I hope, she will be able to feel it from inside.

I adjust the dials on the blood pumps and take one last reverent gaze at the endless rows of pipes and trays before switching to infrared light.

Nancy is waiting for me when I come out of the sanitation booth. She gives me a quick peck on the cheek and hands me a salted turkey and toast sandwich, our staple for the past month.

"Paul, the actuary is here to see you." She says in her be-careful-but-don't-panic tone, the sort of voice a mother would use to inform her children that the lizard they are playing with might bite. She's going to make a great mom

I pull her close and kiss the top of her head. I inhale the scent that is uniquely hers. It means home to me. I crave it when I'm in the exhaust saturated scent of the city. The aroma fades as she pulls away and disappears up the stairs. I head to the other room, working my jaws against the coarse bread and dry meat.

When I enter, Antonio Gonzales extends his hand. It's medium sized, bony, about the same color of the bread I'm holding. I start planning what it might take to grow one like it. Eighteen months to get it to size, color is trickier. May take a few different combinations to get that particular shade.

“Good evening Mr. Runski,” he speaks with a nasally hiss. I remain across the room, wary as a desert mouse, and keep eating. “You are lucky man to have such a beautiful wife. I’m sure the convicts love staring at her as she marches by in her security uniform.”

I squint my eyes. Maybe I’m the biting lizard.

He starts to take a step toward me, but then pauses and steps back again. His hand still hangs in the air.

“Have you seen the prices on biologics lately?” He asks. His hand burrows into his pocket like a frightened rabbit. I stay silent. I know damn well that biologic prices have dropped like shit from a pigeon’s ass. Antonio knows I know.

“You’re a good grower, but the performance of our mechanicals division is catching up with biologics. We can’t charge premium prices like we used to. We need you carry some of the weight of the price cuts.” His tongue flicks over his lips with the quickness of a diamondback. I wouldn’t be surprised if it were forked.

He pauses. I’m a statue.

“I’ll take silence as acceptance then. Also, our projection models tell us that due to increased solar activity coupled with the genetic profiles of our client base, it’s going to be a big year for cataracts. We’ll need you to get to work on some retinas right away. The details are in the tablet.” Antonito throws a metallic rectangle onto the table.

“Will that be all?” I’m getting tired of hearing his voice.

“There is one more thing,” Antonio smiles. “Your inventory reports are out of line. Your surplus and wastage amounts have been outside the norm for the past few months. We’ve seen these patterns before, and usually it is a case of evasion or fraud. I’d hate to imply you were doing any of that. Anything you care to share?”

“Go to hell.”

“Very well Mr. Runski, have it your way. Expect a hefty fine, and my inspector will be here in the morning. She is very thorough. But, I could still be convinced to look the other way.”

“What do you want?” I snap, trying not to give away that a blender is scrambling my insides.

Antonio snickers, “I’d like to spend some time with your lovely wife, take her back to the city for a while. In return, not only will I turn a blind eye, but I can help you secure top dollar on your produce.”

“Goodbye Mr. Gonzales.” I grunt, shoving him out the door. It’s all I can do to keep from busting his lip wide open.

I pour a glass of moonshine as I watch him speed away. Nancy comes down the stairs as the burn of booze start its slow descent down into my gut. She squeezes my shoulders. Her touch melts me. Always does, and I’ll never be able to grow that sort of juxtaposition of firm softness.

“He gives me the creeps. The inmates at the ward are better company,” she comments. “How bad is it this time?”

I grab the tablet and the screen flickers to life. After scanning the mandates, my legs buckle and I taste bile in the back of my throat.

“Sixty percent!” I croak, “They might as well just put a bullet between our eyes. We can’t get ahead with that sort of cut. And their new production order is impossible. They know I won’t be able to meet it, so they’ll have another reason not to pay full price. Damn those actuaries!” I throw the tablet across the room, and it cracks as it hits the wall.

“Let’s fight back then.” Nancy suggests.

“For what? The actuaries control everything. We wouldn’t know what to grow, or how much without their models.”

“I heard him say something about mechanicals, I’ve read a lot of good stories about that technology. Can we get into that?”

“Turning people into robots? No thanks. Sure, the idea of permanent replacements sounds appealing. But how do you like the idea of a million little computers running through your body, all programmed by our actuarial overlords? Besides, even if I trusted the technology, I don’t have any training. There are thousands of others in line in front of me.”

Nancy sighs and runs her fingers through her hair.

“What about his offer?”

I stare at Nancy, her onyx eyes reflect my face. In a quiet, measured tone, I tell her that I’d rather take a bath in a tub of scorpions than have her spin a minute with that grubby eel.

“I’m not afraid of him. I can take care of myself.” She takes my hand in hers. “I’m tired of struggling, of scrapping for every little thing. If this is what it takes to set us free, to be able to try to make our dreams come true, then maybe it’s worth it.”

I think about the little present growing in my lab. I consider telling her, but I want the moment to be pure and her gift still needs a few more hours to finish.

“We can find another way,” I counter, my words reek of uncertainty. She smiles at me anyway.

“I love you Paul,” she says and kisses my forehead, my nose, and then lingers on my lips. “Let’s take our minds off this whole thing for bit.”

I follow her into the bedroom.

Once asleep, I have awful dreams. I’m in a city street, fighting my way through a sea of metal skeletons. They grab and scratch at me as I elbow past. Ahead of me is a big glass box. Nancy is inside, and so is Antonio. She’s lying on an operating table, wires protruding out of her like porcupine quills. Antonio cackles as he puts on a welding mask and lights a soldering torch before disappearing in a shower of sparks. Storm clouds roll in and unleash downpour as I finally reach the case. I bang on the glass. Nancy turns her head towards me, her eyes glow red. I bang on the glass some more and it starts to crack. Then there’s a huge bolt of lightning and everything is white.

I wake up, panting and soaked in sweat. Nancy is already gone. She must have had her dream again. I hope it wasn't poisoned like mine.

A rumble outside catches my attention. I look out the window. A large semi-truck is barreling down the dirt road. I throw on some clothes and head outside just as the truck reaches the house. A woman in a black jumpsuit comes toward me, as several armed guards start to pour out of the trailer. She wears a beret with the insignia of the provincial guard on it. As I watch her walk toward me, I can tell from the lack of fluidity in her gait that she has had her muscles and bones enhanced with mechanicals.

"I'm Inspector Flynn," she declares. "Paul Runski, we have reasonable suspicion that you have committed acts of treason against the state and your fellow mankind by misrepresenting your production of biologics. My team and I are going to search the premises, it is in your best interest to not interfere."

"Does it make it easier if I bend over?"

The inspector is unflinching and humorless. She barks a command to the guards and they go to work. They split into two factions. The first group enters the house and starts ripping it apart, emptying drawers and cabinets, cutting open the couch cushions. I follow the second group to the lab, my heart feels like a machine gun.

This group is more methodical, less brutish. They plug scanners into my computers and go through a panoply of tubes, gauges, and other testing equipment. I start to calm down once they begin to pack everything up until the inspector comes to the closet door. She tries the handle, it's locked.

"Open it."

"It's just cleaning supplies."

"Open it," she commands again.

My hand hovers over the fingerprint reader. Nancy's face flickers in front of me. Her deepest dreams are behind this door. I smash the reader with my first.

"The lock is broken," I tell the inspector, shrugging my shoulders.

"Idiot," she mutters as she whips out an electric prod and zaps me in the side. I fall to the ground, convulsing in pain as the energy shoots through my body. The guards bust open the door, and moments later the inspector walks out carrying the metal case that houses Nancy's gift.

I reach for her boot. She kicks me in the gut and then steps on my neck. I fight for air.

"This belongs to us," she declares, "now we must complete the punishment for your crime."

I want to scream, but I can't. I can only manage a gurgling wail as I watch from the floor. The guards smash the trays, cut the blood tubes, and reduce months of work to shreds.

"One last thing," the inspector release her foot from my throat. I gulp in mouthfuls of cool air. "Antonio wants to let you know that he is taking wonderful care of Nancy."

A piece of broken glass catches my eye. I grab it and jab it into the inspector's leg. She howls and then whacks me in the back of the head. The world grows dark.

When I come to, the lights are flickering in the lab and I try to survey the damage. The blood tubes are empty. All the organs that aren't torn to pieces have already started to turn black and wither. The nerve vines are in crumbles on the ground. The whole scene is overwhelming. I ache for Nancy. I don't know where she is, if she is ok, what she might be doing with Antonio. I don't know what to do. But before anxiety completely paralyzes me, I notice a frayed thyroid gland lying next to a needle and some sutures. I pick it up and lose myself in the repairs.

Hours go by and the tips of my fingers are numb and my knuckles ache by the time I finish. But the little gland is bright pink and vibrant when I'm done, a phoenix that has emerged from the ash. I can fix this, I say to myself and I head to the house.

It's dark now, and when I flip on the light, it still looks like a tornado came through. I climb over the wreckage until I get to the bedroom. There's a loose board in the floor that the inspection team missed. I pry it up and in the hidden chamber is a six-shot revolver. Nancy suggested fighting back, and I had thought it was futile. Now it is my only recourse. I need to rescue my wife.

I am about to start my motorcycle when I hear the approach of a helicopter. It shines a spotlight on the front yard before settling down in a cloud of dust. Antonio emerges, locked elbows with Nancy. My hand finds the gun tucked behind me.

As they get closer, I notice Antonio's face is bandaged. While he has Nancy in one elbow, his other arm dangles in a sling. Nancy is walking tall. She seems unharmed. She is carrying a box in her other arm.

"I'm here to return someone to you," Antonio calls over the hum of engine as he approaches. As soon as he is within reach, I pull Nancy close to me. I pull the gun from my waist and point it at Antonio's head. He raises his arms.

"Paul, don't." Nancy pleads.

"Why not?"

"It seems you and Antonio have something in common."

"What could I possibly share with this varmint?"

Nancy opens her box and reveals the set of organs I crafted for her. "They are exquisite sweetheart," she tells me, "I only wish I had known about them a couple of hours sooner. You see, Antonio developed a similar prototype with his team, and I'm his first human trial."

Antonio snickers. Nancy bends his fingers backwards until he apologizes. I lower the weapon, queasiness courses through me.

"What matters the most is that I'm back now," Nancy continues, "so let's allow Mr. Gonzales have a chance to go tend to his wounds while we catch up. It's been a long day for everyone."

I just nod my head and in a matter of minutes Antonio's helicopter has disappeared into the inky night.

I pour a couple shots of moonshine to settle my nerves. Nancy tells me her story.

“I had the dream again, so I left to visit the incubation center. I was meditating in the main hallway when I heard some footsteps approach me. It was Antonio. He explained that I wasn’t the only one who frequented this place. Many women come through here, longing to be the nurturers of life once more, like how it was years ago before our genes were edited, before we had the birthing technology we have today. He said that he had a way to make it happen. I was curious, so I went with him.”

Something is different about her. I can’t quite place it. She continues.

“He showed me the womb that they had engineered. I got lost in the details, but then he offered me the chance to be the first human to test it. Naturally, I was suspicious. But then he explained that in exchange for being a test subject, we’d be taken care of. We wouldn’t have to worry about food or meeting quotas anymore. He said the procedure would only take thirty minutes, so I agreed.”

She lifts her shirt. She has a bandage running vertically up her abdomen. She rubs her finger around her belly button and a little blue light, about the size of lemon starts to glow. She looks and smiles at me, she is glowing as well, but in more metaphysical sense.

I want to be happy for her. She is making her dreams come true. But trying to swallow the fact that it will be because of Antonio and not me, is like drinking battery acid.

“After it was all done, Antonio had this belief that I owed him an expression of gratitude. He attempted to make a move on me, but that did not end well for him, as you may have observed.”

Thinking about Nancy roughing Antonio up a bit does bring a smile to my face.

“I need you with me on this,” Nancy puts her hands on my shoulders. “My eggs need to be fertilized. They can extract what they need from you, but we must go back to Antonio’s labs. He’s going to be involved in this journey.”

I stare at her stomach while mine churns. The glow is slowly dimming.

“I can’t,” I whisper. “Every time I see him, I’ll have to remember that it was him, not me that fulfilled your deepest desires. I don’t want to poison your child with my hate.”

Nancy starts to cry. “Please, Paul. I can’t do this alone. When I think about our future child, I want you to be there. I have seen the devotion and skill you put into your craft. When you are the caretaker, things don’t just grow, they flourish. I want that for my child.”

Her words hit me like a blast of desert heat. I had been so focused on the prospect of making childbirth a possibility that I never even considered what it might be like for me after the child was born. My mind flies through the phases of life: crawling, the first steps, losing the first tooth, the first heartbreak. I imagine little hands next to mine, helping me prune some tender hair follicles as they begin to grow. I start to cry as well, and I pull Nancy into a long embrace.

Several months later, we are walking through the desert at night. Everything is bathed in silver under the full moon. Sand crunches under our feet until Nancy stops.

“The baby is kicking.”

I kneel on the ground and trace a circle around her navel. A blue glow illuminates her midsection. I see the silhouette of our son.

“Hey little guy,” I talk with my lips against Nancy’s skin. I smile as his little foot twitches. He has her toes. I feel something twitch inside my own body. It’s a strange sensation, one that I almost don’t recognize. Like the smallest ember of a fire, a spark of hope stirs in my heart. I close my eyes and start to do what I do best, I help it grow.