

Iris was keeping busy with the mice until Biel came back. In Miertla, two are pregnant. Bi-sexual reproduction is actually the last true distinction between people and animals, since that freediving prodigy realized back in '88 that blue whales have innate grammar.

The prodigy claimed she recognized noun categories in her bones, the vibrating bone-patterns, no matter where she dove, it was the same, off the coast of Chile, singing underwater, in Antarctica, huge tongues lolling song off the Cape of Good Hope. Same patterns. It could be nothing but language.

Iris watched the mama mouse shake in her shoebox. She has given birth thrice and will give birth thrice more. Iris hung her hat on the rail, to shield the mama mouse from the low sun. The sun was a pink drop on the horizon, dropping quick the way spring suns do.

Mars came and sat on the steps. She had a habit of company.

Do you think this is why people tend to have more gay sex?
Your shoebox, is why?

Iris showed her the mama mouse, who is either resting or dying. Her babes look like hairy red carrots.

Oh, that does look awful. No, I think people tend to have more gay sex because they tend to be more familiar with the parts.

If that's true, what's the appeal of straight sex then? Why bother to learn?

You know why you're bothered.

I'm not bothered.

Yeah, ok.

A fine heat came up from the shoebox like a fine layer of dust settles on your hand. It felt nice, a thaw in the blood. The firstborn was pushy already, pushing her siblings, pushing at mama, but there was still another labor coming.

Six babies is, like, a cruel amount of babies.

Think of all the feet. What are yall gonna do?

Movies.

Action movie?

Yeah, I mean we're gonna fuck, not make love.

Mom would be so happy you're hooking up with Biel.

I know, right? Moms love a guy who bothers to ask them where their debt comes from.

Like it's any different from his debt.

But it is though. We have family debt, he doesn't have a family, he doesn't. But I mean, Iris said solemnly, I would make love to him.

Great, he's here!

And so he was, he was cuter, he was broader but not taller, and steadier, resembling something like a man now, she saw with cloudy terror that dissipated before she registered it. He waved, he was wearing shorts, as always, despite the breeze and the time. He had walked, they were walking to the station and then to the movies. The sun set behind them and the light was gauzy and everywhere and ecstatic for no reason, even the shadows of the street-poles were lavender and danced like moths. It was ecstatic and slightly heartbreaking to walk: their shadows stretched before them and melded at the shoulders, the way people can't.

Iris turned around: can you watch my mouse while I'm gone?

Mice! You have mice now! And I don't want to watch a birth. If I watch it's not sacred.

It's not porn, Mars. You don't have to like it. Can you just put some peanut butter in there for mama mouse?

Can you go already?

Let's go. Bye, Mars! Said Biel. What's the mouse's name?

Peanut Butter.

He laughed, she liked to hear it.

My cat's name is Elvis.

How can you have a cat, I thought you were working on the boats?

Cats love fish! There were plenty of cats around the port when I was there. But I'm not doing that anymore, I'm at university now.

Oh, me too! I hate it! Which!

There were questions the whole way there. They were old friends: but they were no longer children. They discovered things that can be discovered only by telling them, for example, that they were no longer children. And she discovered that Biel had grown, he was so practical now and he gestured to emphasize the debt flow, debt imposed and always - here he jabbed at the sky - always, the profits go up, up, up to the clouds so they can make it rain, lucky us, people, vegetable-growers and vegetable-eaters and lab-dwellers, that we can pay forever for our gifts, but he laughed easily, about these changes.

I have to accept it, and live around it.

Here the shotgun houses crowded together for protection, and someone unseen was frying fish, and the night air felt slippery with grease, and the people home from work bubbled out onto the porches like half-done chili; and Biel was like a gas too, colliding his with hers, and from each collision something emerged.

But Iris looked at the people and saw their rickety stoves and their rickety love, just like hers, and she was troubled. He looked at her like he didn't want to say it, and he said it.

It's different. You were born into debt.

Yes, and I could run away-

She was walking faster than before-

But I won't. My mom needs me and her mom is, like, psychotically old, and Mars needs me. Mars would have to work twice as much as she does, and she already overnights at the lab practically every weekend.

Iris smelled the siren-call of frying oil; it smelled fine. Biel was too busy to smell.

I can't accept debt. My most attractive quality is I don't have any debt, [Iris shook her head very smally] and my margin of freedom depends on keeping it that way. I told you I was working at the port? I was dying at the port. They stick you with a bot so you stay efficient and bots don't talk. The only way to deal is to start accruing vices or to start a family, both are debt. But I have a plan. School is just something I have to do first.

I'm in school too, you don't have to justify yourself to me.

I know, but as I'm saying it I'm not sure I believe it.

Seems a lonely road, she said helpfully.

It was getting cold but Iris was not cold. She was resentful when they got to the theater. What plan? She had questions for Biel's left knee which was very close to her which after they drudged through the exposition knocked into her right knee like a question or a nudge and then again knock, knock and she looked and he was looking at her like a purple question so they went into the all-gender bathroom and made love.

This is how they made love:

invitation

to taste

the ear, the tongue's one customer

to taste

but lightly, not insistent, insists

the goddess strange astride solid hips

astride a band of five hundred horses amassed

at a river too wild to cross

my love-madness

water insistent. I feed it to you

I do not ask to be asked. bring your calamity hair

bring your sensible tears

bring your ropes of body and terror

*be souls with me. everybody is within me
already.*

I am the field on which we meet

empty. I will feed it to you

Yo nosy! Don't read that!

Where'd you fuck?

I'm serious, it's half-baked. Here, you can read these, they're on cats.

Where?

The movie bathroom.

That's vile, you can't call that making love.

No, it's romantic because it's love because he's leaving, on Friday.

Why didn't you just fuck here?

Good point, and he's on his way now.

You're lucky mom isn't home.

Yeah, I'm so lucky that mom has to sell her soul to pay our debt- just fuck off, Mars.

Ok. How are the mice?

Iris shows her the box. Five babies are nursing and one is dead. You can tell it's dead because one red eye has been clawed to a pit.

You should throw out the dead one.
Yeah. Said Iris. Neither girl moved.

Beyond the porch the sunlight was weak and slow and cool as melting snow. Scraggly thistleweeds scratch water from the concrete; and the breeze rustled around for something to rustle, but nothing yet. The midmorning bike gangs were assembling; there was much rock-kicking and mailbox-assault and hacky-sack and fingers on windows until at last even the sleepest friends were awake and the kids, at their most powerful assemblages of fives and sevens, hit the road east, towards the Culvert and the Mud Pit.

They slalomed around the dented men and women heading west, towards the station, the city, the labs, and the promise of debt-forgiveness. Criss-cross.

I have to go to work soon.
Yeah. Said Iris. Neither moved.

And then Biel: far away still, but she knew him like retinas know a glint of light. He made way threadlike through the crowd of city-goers, seen, unseen, seen, a needle diving in and out of fabric. Iris sat on her porch with Mars, and the two were still bitter with each other.

He approached and Iris knew she would have to bite the bitter taste, because she felt bitter as Mars did. There was nothing for it. Biel sat next to the two of them on the porch, she chewed around it, how was the train, it was fine, how are you, I am good. There was nothing for it. He looked at her like, why are you being strange? So she asked:

Biel, howcome you don't have any debt if you're in school?
Mars and I are both in debt, she added.
And our debt is because mom needed support just to get by.
Oh. Yeah.

Goose-bumps on her arms. It was a stubborn morning, refusing to warm. The breeze competed with the commuters and they balanced each other, made white noise. She felt part of the world, but not part of Biel. He looked around for his words.

It's hard to admit, to you, because- well, it just is.

Mars was stubborn too and stayed put even though both Biel and Iris wished she would leave.

I mean both of you.

Biel ran his thumb in slow little circles on the peeling wood of the porch.

What I mean is that I didn't just leave the ports. I got reassigned to the Civil Traffic Messaging district, to reorganize non-Bot workers, because of what I did at the ports.

Well, what did you do?

Well. He chewed a nail, a habit she didn't know he had.

I was nineteen when I started there and I was a skinny fuck, I mean terrified, so I spent a couple months not really talking, just keeping my head down and observing what the other workers did. And nobody talked to me either. I was invisible. And at that time the workers were allowed to self-organize- I mean they worked in teams of two or four, and they were allowed to pick their partners, and the Bots were regulated to separate jobs, mostly hauling, and the humans checked the quality of the goods and organized them and so on.

Well, one day I was late to work and I had to partner with a Bot. But it turned out that we were so efficient, we finished our quotas nearly an hour early and you know on the ports we work from dawn to dusk? But I spent that last hour just sitting swinging my legs watching the ships go out to sea, and the sunset, and I felt good. The next day I partnered with a Bot again, and the same thing happened.

Mars cracked her thumbs.

I knew I was on to something. So next week when I had my monthly Progress Report with the Boss-Man, I cut a deal with him: I would tell him my idea for reorganizing the workers, and in exchange, he would offer me a full ride to university, because the surplus profits he would make from an increase in efficiency would outweigh the cost of my schooling in a month. And he did. He took the deal.

Partnering humans with Bots seems like something a Boss would have come up with on their own.

Maybe, but the Boss spends very little time on-site. That's why they do Progress Reports, they're like monitoring and meritocracy, combined. Plus, you forget, Bots are pretty new, at least to the shipping industry.

But the workers, once they were reorganized, did they get to relax at the end of the day?

Well- no.

Biel spoke to the ground.

Their quotas were extended. A lot of people rage-quit.

So. Said Mars. You sold out all the other workers so that you could get free school.

Yes.

She stood up.

They're doing the same thing, in my lab. Splitting up the teams, based on efficiency. If you start to lag you're demoted, and the lost time is added to your debt score. But it sure as hell wasn't my idea.

Oh. What do you do in your lab?

Wouldn't you like to know.

They design superpower asphalt.

Asphalt so hyperpower it will never crack.

Not even when the earth burns.

I can see now that what I did was wrong.

Yes. Said Mars. And now I'm going to work, because I know the difference between right and wrong.

How subversive.

Biel, stop. Just go, Mars.

Biel and Iris sat for a minute, and clouds fell from their unconscious into the sky. The wind made some foolishness.

Looks like rain. Want to come inside?

Yes.

Later, when they fucked, it was comfort, not poetry, and it couldn't heal. She tried to forgive him, but could not. And he did not feel a part of the world, or a part of her, but conscious only of his

shame. And he left low and shamed, back to the hostel where he'd been sleeping, and the sleet that struck his scalp was icy as tombs, and only warmed as it dripped down his ears.

Maybe you had to hurt someone in order to love them, or that maybe you could not love before you were hurt. And he dreamed of spades.

When he woke up it was Thursday and something was wrong. His groin was tight and crowded as if his jeans had shrunk in the wash, except he wasn't wearing jeans, he just felt chafed. For a minute he retreated back into sleep, but that was useless. His balls felt like one big mosquito bite. He did some investigation.

All the saggy skin around the ball area was pulled taut and shiny-red, and the testicles were swollen like mounded graves. It was as alarming as waking up to a cockroach between his legs. His veins ran blue and large, like they do on an old woman's hand.

The symptoms were familiar. There was nothing for it. He dressed and skipped breakfast and booked it to the station.

Miertla Regional Hospital #294 was one of the most efficient in the zone, so he waited in the queues and seated himself among lip-chewing moms and crying dads and babies, colds and fevers, and he felt much better now that he had addressed the situation and was once again part of the world, it was good to see all those families splayed and honest, like opening the skin and seeing there really was bone there, and at last his number was called.

He was led down a hallway to a bare room. There was nothing in the room, but one wall was a giant eye, unblinking like a lens, and this eye looked into him: then the examination was complete. Then he was led into a different room, but this one was not empty: there was a potted plant, an easy chair, and a small wastebasket. He sat down. A Nurse-Bot came into the room. It was what he had expected: they were pregnant.

Do you wish to contact your partner now and invite them to go through the following procedures with you, or do you want to go through the procedures now, and contact them afterward?

Let's do it now.

Ok. Thank you again for choosing Regional Hospital #294. Most couples follow this timeline. You will spend the next month together at home. It is normal for the man to show signs of pregnancy before the woman. It is therefore likely that your partner is unaware of the pregnancy.

He wouldn't go back to school. That would be a relief.

After the first month, both of you will be noticeably pregnant. If you haven't already put in leave at your job, you must do it by this point. Most people do not like to spend time in public while they are pregnant. Luckily, in Miertla we have long-term care facilities for pregnant couples. The one here at the Hospital is very nice, and with loans, it is accessible to everybody.

It would be worth it to take out a loan, if he could be with Iris. They could do it together. It could be like an eternal spring break.

Around the four-month mark, the fertilized zygote you are currently carrying, and the fertilized egg your partner is carrying, will leave your bodies in a synchronized birth. Many couples report that this is the most intimate experience of their lives. Of course the Bots here at the Hospital will be helping you every step of the way.

He wouldn't have to feel shame for his mistake, because he wouldn't be alone anymore. He could be intimate, just like everybody else.

Then, the embryo needs at minimum another six months of constant human contact. Essentially, either you or your partner needs to be sitting on, or touching, the embryo during this entire period, and for that reason most couples choose to remain at the Hospital for this period of their child's growth.

It was like fate: he had rebelled against taking on any debt, when maybe that's exactly what he needed to do.

Undergoing this journey together is one of the best things you will do in your life, but you can't do it alone. You need to be sure you and your partner are aligned in this decision, and if you aren't, we have a pregnancy-termination option. Of course it is expensive, but this is the purpose of state-sanctioned loans. This option is available at any point during the first month of pregnancy.

Hold on- it's actually my- Iris is calling me now. Hold on-

Ok.

I was just going to call you.

Biel, hell, I need a favor.

Her voice was strained.

Anything, what's up.

Can you pick me up and take me to the hospital? I tripped on a patch of ice and I think I broke my tailbone.

Ohfuck Jesus yeah I'll come right now.

When I fell I hit my head on the porch railing and I blacked out for a second.

Okfuck, can you make it inside? I'm on my way.

Yeah, I can focus on that. But get here soon. Mars and mom are both at work.

I'll be there in twenty minutes, you just have to hold out until then.

Thanks, Biel.

He stood dumb like an animal for a second.

I'm just mad I went and goofed the day before you leave.

It's ok. Just get yourself inside.

Ok. Bye.

Bye.

He needed to hurry, but.

Would a fall like that- would you keep the baby?

She fell on her tailbone?

Yes.

And likely suffered a concussion?

Yes.

And when was the date of fertilization?

Yesterday, or two days ago.

I am sorry, but the odds that an accident like that would terminate the pregnancy are nearly total.

Ok.

I am sorry.

He ran out the door, down the halls. Luckily the hospital was much closer to Iris's place than his place was. He could be there in eighteen minutes if he ran. There was nothing for it. He elbowed through the people, the families and children loitering in the front lobby. Once again he was separate from them. But, oh, the suffering, they must be!

