Sibling Rivalry

Michael Byers

Ten years after the one-child law went into effect the synths were a common sight. In the Burkharts' neighborhood the Hughes brand had become the most popular and that's what the Burkharts had, the Hughes Fully Human: superhigh-mobility musculature, self-growing chassis, Real AI, and it was just sort of amazing to watch them change as they grew, from the day you brought them home from the Birthing Unit (along with the two blue nylon suitcases full of accessories and equipment), amazed at how real she looked, but what else would she be but real? And then a few years later this daughter of yours was clinging to your pantleg outside the worn blue doors of the kindergarten wing on the first day of school, afraid to go in, her hair shining in the September sun, her older brother standing in line expressing an airy unconcern, backpacks everywhere, everyone knowing (mostly via conversation, it was very hard to tell just by looking) who was and who wasn't but you didn't *make* such distinctions out loud, it wasn't polite, and in fact in some sense it really didn't *matter*. Your emotional centers were fooled by the physical imitation, and the AI was the real thing, and the growth was to human scales—so what *was* the difference, anyway? Well, what? It became a philosophical question more than anything, or at least a question to gossip about, which people were always happy to do.

But people had always gossiped about their kids.

As for Peter Burkhart—well, by now he just thought of Melissa as their kid (and it had happened very quickly, she was theirs to love, theirs to keep safe and healthy, to teach right from wrong). She was a good girl. She resembled them strongly (and after the endless scans, she had better), she played the piano pretty well for a now seven-year-old but she was no genius, as none of her forebears had been, musically speaking. Loved reading, like both her parents. Great at the monkey bars. (And what an animal pleasure they got when they watched her swinging out, a pleasure in her grace, "*I* used to be able to do that," Julie said, watching, protective, as was still sometimes their habit, discounting in advance any sense that their daughter *wasn't human, wasn't theirs,* although of course she wasn't, not in the way their parents and everyone in the world until this generation had experienced *human* and *theirs* . . .)

A flaring release, and Melissa would land springily on the wood chips, already running toward the swings.

"That too," Julie said, "although maybe not that well."

And Melissa would veer toward them, tilting a little, hurl herself into his wife's arms and croon, "Maamaa!"

Then scramble to be down and off again, just like her brother Matt had done a few years earlier.

They had worn the clips for the two-week remote brain scan, clumsy and a little painful at times, the procedure enough to turn away some people, in fact, but that was all right, the thinking being that if you couldn't meet even this minimum threshold of commitment you shouldn't have a child anyway. Of any kind. Three days of almost total immobility at the end. And beyond this all the *details,* your own childhood medical records, your baby pictures, your old googletracks, all your tweets, wads, gremlins—basically everything you could gather. She was theirs. From and of them. And, like any kid, she was also entirely herself, closed, secretive when she wanted to be, inventing herself as she grew older. Assembling herself from the parts at hand. She liked poetry, recently had been reciting "To An Old Woman" while jumping rope on the front sidewalk. She had recently developed a sort of a flopping, galumphing personal style—full of dramatic hurling of herself into chairs, big sweeps of the hair, the habit of marching into a room to deliver a proclamation, i.e., "Matt—is—*bothering me!* And I *told* him, *nicely,* to stop *jumping out and scaring me*, and then he *keeps doing it!*"

Whereupon Matt would leak weepily into view, eleven years old and still prone to tears, and say he didn't *mean* to, and he *didn't*—

"Yes you *did*!"

(Sweep dramatically away.)

As far as Peter could tell, and Julie agreed, Matt and Melissa related just like normal siblings—loved, hated, relied on each other, took each other for granted.

Like normal.

She had aversions. She hated lightning and thunder. She had tempers. She could put up a hell of a fight, too, over nothing, or seemingly nothing, smashed back in the red corduroy chair in the corner of the bedroom, knees drawn up to her chest, avoiding bath time: "I'm not *dirty*."

"Everybody takes a bath every now and then, even when they're not dirty."

"*No*," she said.

He came forward into the room. She scowled and pushed herself deeper into the chair.

"Mel, there's going to be a timeout," he said, "unless you come now. And either way you're going to end up having a bath."

"I don't *need* one!" she shouted. "It's not fair!"

"How is it not fair?"

"Because if I don't need one, why do I have to have one!"

He came forward and swept her up wriggling under his arm (she felt different from Matt, the weight was distributed internally a little differently, how he couldn't quite say—or maybe it was just the difference between boys and girls) and carried her into the bathroom. The water was already pounding into the tub and when he set her down she bolted for the door again. He blocked it with his knee and she began to flail at him with her fists.

It was often useful in such a moment, he and Julie had found, to switch horses in midstream, as it were, and Julie now appeared from down the hall, a pencil in her hair. Wordlessly she took her place beside him.

"Doesn't want a bath," he said

Girl stuff, maybe, he thought belatedly.

"What's up, Matt," he said, as the boy came edging down the hall.

"She's, like, crazy," Matt told him.

"You used to have tantrums," Peter said, "just like that."

"Well," Matt scoffed, "please accept my apologies."

Like normal.

So apparently here they all were: in the future, suddenly. Although the laws were still all confused. It was a patchwork, a Fully Human's exact legal status varying from state to state, so when they all drove to Yosemite and spent a week at a dude ranch, and later hiked into Yellowstone to observe the giant sulfur-spewing fountains, they had to peg several sets of documents in case they were pulled over by any of the state patrols between Michigan and their various destinations—prime-coded certificates of parenthood.

And of course to him and his wife and their friends all this was all complicated and interesting, as it was to everyone their age, because all of it had come along when they were old enough for it to be new and strange. But they recognized, too, that it wouldn't be interesting for long, not in the same way, not even to them. Synths had existed in one way or another for almost thirty years, but only since the one-child law had they become really common.

The Supers had been around for almost as long, although that was a different story.

It was an interesting time to live.

His wife, in her gentle, curious, patient way, liked to think about these things, and to talk about them with friends. Talk about them *in person*, she would insist, *not* over the cookie, which meant people came over on a Saturday, say, for an eggs-and-bagels-and-mimosas brunch on the front porch. A throwback sort of gathering, on their decidedly throwback porch, in their decidedly throwback neighborhood, where everyone had pitched in to mount pitons on the telephone poles to keep the Supers out, and where, because the house was one you tended to pass while walking up to the university, they ended up seeing people accidentally anyway, their friends tending to accumulate here like sticks in a stream, hanging up for a while in an eddy of wine and crackers while the kids played whiffleball on the lawn and the girls arranged themselves in the shady areas by the lilacs and chatted their hearts out. *Antique* in its way, even a little self-conscious, maybe, but people were

attracted to them, he supposed, for this kind of style. But it wasn't really a style. It was just how he and Julie liked to live.

Among their friends the question that arisen lately was the eventual sex lives of their children, both natural and synth. How would you feel if your son or daughter dated someone of the opposite kind?

"I wouldn't mind if maybe they were *dating*," fat Jerry proposed from the depths of his wicker chair. "I don't know about getting *married*."

"People do it already."

"Well I know people *do* it, Carl, I just don't really—" What was it? Emma wrinkled her nose and picked up her glass again.

Jerry said, "It's the sex thing."

Max set down his champagne flute with exaggerated, comical force. "Well, I've done it."

"Done what?"

Max lifted his chin and said, "I—have had sex—with a synth."

"Well we know all about *you,* Max."

"With a Fully or a Semi, though," Jerry insisted.

Max said, "A Semi."

"Oh, well, who hasn't."

"I haven't!" Emma fluted, then flushed, sitting up in her chair, reaching for her glass. "Just for the record."

Max said, "Sixty-four percent have, who would admit to it."

Jerry said, "Okay, but most of those aren't Fully Humans, right, they're not old enough. How old is Chris Cope now?"

"He just turned twenty-eight, I think," Julie said.

"He turned twenty eight on May eleventh," Max said, checking his cookie.

"So, the oldest Fully Human is twenty-eight, but there's only like a hundred that're over, what, twenty-five? So it's not the same."

"I am among the sixty-four percent who have had sex with a Semi," Max announced. "And it was a success for all involved."

"Me too!" Toni grinned.

"That's only two out of what—" Will counted, "nine. Twenty-two percent."

"There are holdouts among us," Max said.

"Hands!" Martin insisted, his heavy brow knitting. "Show of hands."

"Truth or Dare," Toni protested, but she put her hand up. "Come *on,* you guys," she laughed. "Don't leave me alone out here."

"I've had one, once," his wife said.

"Once was enough for our Julie," Toni said, kindly.

But something complicated was rising in Julie. Peter knew what it was, and he laughed in advance. She'd never told anyone about this, as far as he knew.

"Actually," Julie flushed, "he was a Super."

There was a clamor around the table. Laughter, exclamations. Glances at Peter. He lifted his eyebrows, shrugged, acquired his glass from the table.

"Oh my god," Toni breathed, "we have to hear about it."

"Was that before—?"

"It was before," Julie said. "Obviously. I mean I know I'm not supposed to be the wild and crazy one," she fingered her top button, "but—"

"When? Where?" Toni pressed a hard hand into her thigh. "We have to hear every detail."

"No!" she laughed.

He had heard the story, of course, long ago. Why was she telling people now?

She cast him a secret, giddy, cringing look.

"She's very nice about it," Peter said. "She never mentions anything about it to me, you know, when, say, there's a call for comparisons."

His wife laughed again, grateful to him. "That is *not* what I wanted to talk about!" she exclaimed. "I wanted to talk about how, you know—like, all our kids will just have grown up with one another and they'll think it's perfectly normal, just like we grew up with—you know, whatever."

"Like cookies," Peter said.

"Like cookies." She smiled again. "Which was the same thing for our parents. I mean, sort of for us, but not really. I just think being conscious of what's new and what's not, I just think that's—it's a good thing to be conscious of it, and to make choices."

"That's *not* fair," Toni groaned. "You can't just say you had sex with a Super and change the *subject*."

But Julie only pursed her lips in comical dainti-

ness and said nothing.

A clutch of shrieking children stampeded past the porch.

Emma said, volunteering, "Well, to your rescue slightly, about cookies, my mom still complains about hers, like, how do I turn it off? And I'm like, mom, you're not supposed to turn it *off*, that's the *point*."

"Your mother likes to complain," Will said.

"My parents *still* don't have cookies," Julie said. "I mean, you know, they're sort of hippies."

"Like mother like daughter," Max suggested.

"Well!" Julie flushed again. So pretty, with her swept blond hair, her air of delighted embarrassment. "Like, none of this stuff you actually *need*, we've made it *this* far. My mom still has an actual phone. Sometimes she still sends me *texts.*"

"Well, so that's what I mean, that's what it is, it's just a generational thing. Eventually the question of synth and human will just—just be completely—normal."

"It *is* normal," Toni said, a hard edge coming through. She had gone for the champagne bottle twice now. Toni and Max had three kids, two synth, both boys. "I mean, look at us! How many—" She counted with a long fingernail. "Seven at this table alone!"

It wasn't normal, though. They all knew it.

It wasn't normal *yet.*

"I can't believe your mom still has a phone," Will said.

"I hardly ever hear you on the cookie," Toni scolded. "You're really quiet."

"I know. I don't use it outbound very much. Just to keep track of the kids. And even then, it's—I have it really low."

Another current went around the table as everyone considered what this meant. Everyone *said* they kept it low, of course, and had just about *everything* filtered, but something about his wife's sweet, slightly awkward clarity made it clear to everyone that she meant just what she said. And it was true. It was true for him, too. They were, probably, a little self-satisfied about it. But this, too, was how they liked it. He and Julie had theirs set to alert only when the fear or sadness readings went above a certain register, or when a certain pain threshold was crossed, and they could eyekey the map any time they wanted to see where the kids were. But that was it. No AI readings of their thoughts, no anticipation measures. And the communication went only one way, from kids to parents. No father's voice in the head, no mother's cooing concerns.

Toni said, "I wish I could do that, I mean, you guys are so cool, you're all, you're very *classic*. That's just totally classic. But I just, I'm addicted. Like right now, I'm getting a wad right now. Oh my god. Oh my god!"

They all leaned forward as her eyes widened.

Toni gave a bark of disbelieving laughter. "Oh my god. Jenny Larsen just saw Harry Hewitt kissing some skinny bitch in a parking lot!"

The group erupted as the news came across. Peter looked down the table at his wife, who was looking back at him. A look of resignation. But she set her glass on the table with a tidy click and, brightly, began to talk as well.

Well, everyone suspected Harry Hewitt had been having an affair, but nobody had managed to get a glimpse of the girl until now. Her name was Cindy Simmons. Seen in gremlin she was young, very skinny, but decidedly *not* a beauty (big teeth, too narrow a head, really thin mean eyebrows). This was interesting, because Harry's wife Theresa *was* very pretty. The thinking first was that maybe Theresa hadn't been having sex with Harry or that he wanted something slender and young to hold in his hands, or that the opportunity had simply presented itself and he hadn't resisted. Everyone was delighted to have something to talk about, and for one memorable day Theresa Hewitt opened her feed to everyone and didn't tell Harry and everybody lurked around for awhile, and it turned out the Hewitts indeed hadn't had sex *for two years* and it was because Harry wouldn't get a TAP test after he'd come back from China *twice* without using a scrubber, because of the presumption of guilt it implied, and then everyone started to feel uneasy, and actually sorry for Harry, and people left the feed and made guilty noises of discomfort and talked about other things, the

progress of the school play, etc. And then a few days later Theresa came on and apologized to everyone and to Harry, and announced they were going into counseling.

"Grotesque," Julie said, kneading some pizza dough.

Peter had followed the whole business with a mostly clinical interest, he neither liked Harry nor wanted to sleep with Theresa (or for that matter with Cindy Simmons) so he was really just interested in how badly the couple was going to treat one another in public. And even that was a little prurient of him, he supposed. "Yeah," he said. "It's amazing anyone can stay friends with anybody after a while."

"That's true. Although actually most people are pretty decent."

"That's true too," he noted. "Although everybody has their silences."

"Well, *yes,*" his wife blushed a little.

"Well, not *everybody."*

"No, but then you wish they *would*," she smiled. "Some people I just—" She held up two floury hands as Matt came sailing through the kitchen with a paper airplane.

"Right, and even this, I mean it's his business."

"Yes," she sighed.

Silently, through the cookie, he asked her: *Why did you mention the Super?*

She smiled and produced a little shrug and said, "I wanted to tell them something they hadn't heard before, and tell them in person."

He let that sit for a while.

"Why don't we just stop?" he suggested, after a minute. "Turn them off."

"Turn them off and then what?"

"I don't know," he said, a thrill rising in him, "call each other."

She laughed, looked up from the counter. "I don't even know where my phone *is*, Peter."

"I have them," he answered, a little breathless, "in my desk. With your mom's!"

"We can text!"

"Sure," he said.

She gave the pizza dough a few more thoughtful shoves. "You mean just—actually stop stop? People'll notice."

A sudden erotic surge arose in him. "What if we just stopped completely. So it was just you and me. Nobody else."

His wife blinked as the heat climbed further into her face. She bit her lips andlooked at him wide-eyed.

Easy to dismiss the idea as foolish.

Except he didn't quite. And neither did she.

It would mean being different from everybody—not just a little, not just on the edges, but really different. Cut off, the way hardly anyone was. It was still just conceivable. The way their parents might have dreamed about moving to the country to raise artisanal chickens or something.

Easy to dismiss it as a fantasy.

And then, suddenly, it wasn't.

Melissa's teacher this year was one Mrs. Hartley—slight, pale, worried-looking, with a high tremulous voice that seemed to Peter to be forever on the verge of tears. But Melissa was devoted to her. At the low table in the playroom she bent over long penciled letters to her: *You are not just my teacher. You are my friend. You are a friend to so many people because you love them. You are a fair person because you are always fair to other people.*

"Mr. and Mrs. Burkhart," Mrs. Hartley said, smiling, during the parent-teacher conference, in the high-ceilinged room in the sweet old elementary school two blocks away. (Really, their life *was* a throwback.) "Your daughter is a delight."

This was always nice to hear. And yes, still a slight frisson around "daughter" and "your," all parties concerned understanding that this was the correct terminology, all parties very conscious of having to use it properly. But Mrs. Hartley's pleasure was obviously genuine. "She's very bright, of course, as you know, and she's very socially conscious and aware, and it's just a delight to have her in the class."

"Thank you!" Julie smiled. "She's a sweetheart."

"We have a lot of children who look up to her," Mrs. Hartley went on. "She's a very natural sort of leader. Protective of herself and others."

This was going somewhere, it was plain. He said,

"She can be sort of fierce, actually? When she feels slighted, I guess."

Mrs. Hartley gave them a neutral smile. "Now, what do you hear over the cookie?"

They looked at each other. Julie spoke first. "We keep it tuned pretty low."

Mrs. Hartley regarded them politely.

"We like to let her have her own space," he said.

Mrs. Hartley said, "Yes."

"So," Julie said, "we have a sense of how she's doing, generally, but we don't, actually—we don't actually listen in."

"I see." Mrs. Hartley addressed her tablet. "That's fine. That's a choice."

"I mean, we have a sense, just from being with her," his wife said. "She's a very, sort of, intense kid? Like Peter said, she can be very fierce about things."

"And fairness is an issue with her," Mrs. Hartley mentioned.

"Yes," Julie nodded. "That's her thing lately."

Mrs. Hartley said nothing, considering how to proceed. And now it was plain she was older than she appeared at first, firmer, had the situation more in hand than you would think by looking at her fuzzy hair, scoop-necked dress. "Well, I think it's one of the questions we face, with an integrated classroom environment. There are issues that come up, from time to time, with feelings being hurt on either side. Your daughter is—she's wonderful. And as I say she's very protective of her friends." She faced them now directly. "Most of her close friends, still, are, uh, synth people. Which may be the result of the numbers as they happen to be right now, most of the girls in this class happen to be synth, and most of Melissa's friends are in the group, so it may just be one of those circumstances where the numbers have turned out in a certain way. And Melissa, good for her, is just unafraid to speak up when she feels a certain issue needs to be mentioned."

"That's Melissa," he said.

"So, for instance, we have a boy in here, a biological boy, Dimitri. You may know him."

"Oh yeah," Julie said.

"Well, Dimitri is, I will confess to you, a handful. But he's a seven-year-old boy, which, of course—well, they can be like that. And he likes to make up songs, and the songs are about, you know, who's who. Who's *what*. He probably gets some of this from home, which, that's neither here nor there, but let's just say—it's not always very friendly. And his song last week was about Melissa's friend Joanie. Who is synth. And it went, 'Joanie is a phony, Joanie is baloney.'"

"Nice," Peter said.

Mrs. Hartley gave a wry smile. "It's not his worst."

"Did you hear about this?" Julie asked him.

"Me? No."

"Okay," she said. "Me neither."

Mrs. Hartley eyed them warily. "So, Melissa asked Dimitri to stop. Which had the predictable effect of encouraging him. She was very, very polite. She said, and I didn't catch the whole exchange, but it was something like, That hurts my feelings, and it hurts Joanie's feelings, we were born like this and you were born like that, but we're all just people."

This was the accepted line. Again, that self-conscious steadiness.

"How'd that go?" he asked.

"Well, it didn't work. So, I could see Melissa getting angry. And she dropped it for a few minutes, but I knew it wasn't quite over. But I like to let the children work out their own issues with one another, as far as possible." Mrs. Hartley licked her lips. "Then, Melissa went over to him, they were in the middle of an activity in the soft corner, and she said to him, very calmly, very seriously, 'Well, you're going to die, and we're not.'"

Julie drew in a breath. "Oh, god."

He ejected a single dry laugh. "Well," he said. "Okay. That's a new one."

Julie said, "I wish we'd heard about this earlier."

"Actually, I assumed you had," Mrs. Hartley said. "I assumed that line came from you."

His wife took this in. "I guess we should have been clear with you about how much we listen. That's our mistake," she said.

"This hasn't happened before," he explained.

"It's all right," Mrs. Hartley answered. She was unflustered. "I'm glad we've opened a line of communication between us. Some parents like to look in

on *me*, even, from time to time, which I permit."

But he would never do that, he realized. Never in a million years.

"Melissa can be fierce," he mused. "Like I say."

"Well, she pays very close attention to the way the world works," Mrs. Hartley replied, closing her tablet. "As I say, your daughter is very smart. She's very acute. She's aware of everything. As you know." Now the teacher smiled. "She reminds me of my own daughter in that way."

The question hovered. Was Mrs. Hartley's daughter synth or human? And all three of them sensed the question hovering there, and none of them spoke to it, and then it slowly, very slowly, drifted off. Because it didn't matter. Officially, it didn't.

He could tell Julie was upset. She stirred the carrot soup with extra vigor and moved around the kitchen in brisk irritated steps. He knew enough to wait for it. Whatever she wanted to say would emerge in its own time. In bed she perched her glasses on the tip of her nose and said, finally, after several preliminary sighs and halting starts, "You know, I *remember* what it was like to be a girl." She fixed him with a fierce, protective stare. "What I wanted most of all was to have everything be *fair*."

"Well," he said, "that's our girl."

"You know who that Dimitri kid is," she said, "he's the one who ran around the playground swinging his belt over his head and trying to hit kids with the belt buckle."

"That one! Well, good for her for standing up to him."

"Damn right good for her."

"I'm sorry we didn't know about it," she said. "But you know what, there's something else that mattered to me just as much as things being fair. And that was to be left *alone*."

They left the matter there for a while.

They decided against asking Melissa about any of it.

"Let her come to us," Julie said. "If she wants us to know, she'll tell us."

So in the end, it was not so much a decision as a willingness to experiment—at least as they described it to themselves. Of course parenting overall could be considered, really, a haphazard, screwy, make-it-up-as-you-go experiment, done without controls, the sort of exercise that would get your funding revoked and get you called up before your departmental Internal Review Board in a second.

And your experimental subjects? Helpless captives!

Once in a while a lifestyle magazine featured things like this. People taking week-long retreats, going completely bug-free. Exhilarating, restful, recentering, people tended to say. A new way of looking at the world! (And then, he was sure, people just went right back to their old habits.) For him, once the cookie was off—completely off—he just felt it as a weird silence. As though he had discovered some new space in the air, a new room, empty, featureless, that had been carved out of his brain.

He would turn to it and find nothing. A great quiet.

He missed it most when he was doing dumb stuff around the house—laundry, tidying up the playroom. How natural it had been to flit from music to news to the feed. The whole world carved out of his head, gone.

And when he turned to see the children, they were gone too.

They told the children the day they did it, breaking the news at dinner. Better a brief, factual statement than a drawn-out evasive one.

"What happens if I break my arm?" Matt wanted to know.

"We've got it set to alert in emergencies."

Melissa turned a forkful of pasta over. "You don't want to be bothered by us," she proposed.

"No, that's not it. We think you should be allowed to be yourself, by yourself, when you're just alone. When you're with us, you should be with us. We'll know in the case of an emergency, but that's it."

It helped that he and Julie were strange, that they had cultivated among themselves as a family a sense of strangeness. It helped the kids accept this choice as one more instance of their parents' unconventionality.

At the old settings, Matt's cookie profile had shown him to be a jumpy, easily frightened, easily moved kid, so at least once an hour had come a yellow message about him—some sudden spike in fear or surprise, vanishing as the shock passed. Activating the full-spectrum view you would watch the levels plummet to baseline. By contrast, Melissa's readings had always been very smooth, gentle waving pulses, never too high, never too low.

And now?

Now he had to go down the hall and poke his head into their bedrooms to see what was what. And even then, he never knew what he was seeing.

How had his grandparents done this, exactly?

He could tell even Julie was having trouble adjusting. At times he would enter a room and find her standing there, looking a little marooned in the middle of the carpet, holding a book or a toy and appearing visibly stilled, like a ship that had lost its engine. She would turn to him with an expression of slight disquiet.

"Hello," she would say.

"Hi."

A little laugh from her. "I didn't hear you."

"I come on little cat feet."

"This is really—strange," she said.

"I like it."

"You do?"

"Yeah. It's peaceful."

She blinked. "Yeah," she said.

A garden of memories came into view for him. It was as though a fog were lifting from an area of his mind and what was revealed was a place of a dozen pathways, tunnels, mazes, overgrown and wet with dew, long branches overhanging.

His room as a boy: the chrome of the spinning overhead fan, the baking heat of those days, the deep bundled comfort of the narrow bed beneath the high window, overlooking the street.

His brother Ian, the game they had, launching a red rubber ball back and forth over the top of the house, one of them in the front yard and the other in the back, watching, watching the empty sky for the red ball to come shooting, gloriously, into view.

His mother, red hair back in its clip, seating herself on the sofa to tell him his cat Standard had been hit by a car, and her own tears leaping to her eyes.

This whole life he had lived already. As though it had been lived by another man, another boy.

"I admit," Julie said, "I get nervous when the kids are at school. I just—I want to know they're okay."

"Why wouldn't they be?"

"I know. But still."

"Don't. Don't check in on them. Let them be alone. That's what we decided."

"Okay," she said. "I *miss* them, though."

"You should," he said. "That's what we're supposed to do, we're supposed to miss them when they're gone."

"I don't like missing them."

"Me either. But it's the way it's supposed to be."

He was talking to himself, too, of course. It sounded right in his own ears. It didn't make him miss them less, but it helped to say these things aloud.

"I miss you too," she said.

"I'm right here."

"You're out *there* now," she said, pointing at him. "Not in *here*."

"I miss you too," he said.

This empty space in his head where nothing was. What went there?

He did, he supposed.

But who was he?

He kept the cookie off. He reasoned that the first few days would be the worst, the first few weeks difficult, but that it would get easier. Still—he too, sitting at the laboratory bench, or addressing a group of postdocs in the hospital cafeteria—he wondered how Melissa was doing, whether Dimitri was bullying her. In his mind's eye he could see it happening. He had set his cookie to dormant-passive, accessible only in the case of emergency messages. And he had set a password for it, a long string of random digits, that he had written down on paper and put in his desk drawer at home, next to the phones, so he couldn't just turn it on again at a weak moment. Julie had

done the same.

But God, he missed even the low hum the kids had given off in the cookie with the filters on high. Over and over he found himself, without thinking, trying to eyekey the map open. Nothing there.

His parents had done it. So had theirs. And every parent back to the beginning of the species.

But it just seemed—well, a tiny bit irresponsible. A needless risk.

He kept it off.

He could not, however, prevent himself from leaving work early three days a week, after his seminar let out, shouldering his backpack, wrapping his right pant cuff in its velcro strap, and bicycling home.

The asphalt streets, unrolling beneath his wheels. The shifting trees, accepting the weight of the warm spring wind. The measured thrusting of the carbon scoops as they whispered past five miles up, glinting silver.

And behind it all, the silence in his head.

In this new routine he bicycled straight to the elementary school where he would wait for school to let out, his bicycle leaning against a nearby tree, his cuff still pinned, at the front doors. He was the only parent there at that hour.

The playground sat empty, waiting to be filled. Tetherball, swings, basketball court.

The sunstruck playing fields. And the shadows under the fences.

On his first day sitting on the concrete shelf around the flagpole, a young woman emerged through the gray double doors and approached him. She wore a look that could break either toward apology or something much scarier.

"Hello," she called, coming across the pavement. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Peter Burkhart," he said. "Matt and Melissa's father."

She regarded him. Checking him against her records. "Is there something we can do for you, Mr. Burkhart?"

"Just waiting for the kids."

"Do you need to take them somewhere?"

"No. Just—thought I'd hang out with them a little today."

A disbelieving lift of her eyebrow.

"After school. On the playground," he said. "I just—" He wasn't going to explain. This girl—she couldn't be more than twenty-two—wouldn't understand. "That's all," he said.

A tiny scoff.

"I hope that's all right," he said.

"Hey," she said, "it's your life." And she turned and went back into the building. A minute later, a row of faces appeared at the window of what he knew to be the office.

Let them look.

He rearranged himself on the concrete wall.

Matt stopped dead in his tracks when he saw him there the first day. Wondered if something was wrong, if he was in trouble. The playground swarmed with children, a suddenly teeming city of very small, very loud people. A very few other parents, collecting their smallest, not wanting to rely on the cookies to lead them home.

And here was his father.

"I'm just here to say hi," he told his son. "Just to say hi and watch you play a little."

Matt took this in. "I was going to play with Sheldon, though."

"That's fine," he said. "I'll just be over here."

Matt gave him a long considering examination, then went off, talking to his friend.

But Melissa understood at once. She grinned seriously, then took his hand and guided him to the nearest play structure.

"Daddy," she said, "let me show you what I can *do*."

The play structure was the usual sort, slides and tunnels and various nooks and alcoves in which to hide oneself. She led him to the a net of vinyl-coated ropes slung between two uprights. She put out a firm foot on the bottom rope, grabbed the net with two hands, then with a practiced swiftness she figured her route to the top of the net, one staggered, swaying step at a time. At the top she looped an arm through the lattice and extended her other arm out into the air, twelve feet over his head.

"Wow," he said. "That's high!"

"I can see everybody from here," she said. "I can see our clubhouse."

"Where?"

"Way over there, in the corner, under the lilac bushes. By the telephone pole. And I can see the top of your head!"

"What's it look like?"

She regarded him. "A head," she decided. Then she surveyed the playground again, the screaming, swirling mass, and gave a contented sigh. "I'm very good at climbing," she said.

So many notes of his wife in that moment—the satisfaction, the ease in herself.

And that was his quiet determination, maybe. His secret ferocity.

This became his routine. Sitting on the ledge by the flagpole, before the double doors banged open and the children poured out, he assessed the quality of the silence in his head.

The silence seemed, somehow, to be softening itself, to be losing its definition.

What before had seemed a cavern, an actual emptiness, now felt more like a cloud—something soft and actual, spun from the faintest substance.

Some days Melissa wanted him all to herself, and other days she did what she had always done: played with her friends. Ran around, or sat in their clubhouse, huddled under the lilacs, the branches shivering. As far as he could tell they were a mix of synth and human, although mostly they were girls, and mostly from her class, which would mean—well, mostly synth, then.

It didn't matter. At this distance, from the outside of them all, they were all just children.

He was a object of curiosity, sitting there. "You're Matt's dad," a boy said, one day.

"Yeah."

"Why are you here?"

"Just here," he said. "I like it."

"But why?"

"I want to be," he said.

It took a moment before Peter recognized this boy as the horrible Dmitri. His hair was spiked and he wore, improbably, a button-down blue shirt tucked into khaki shorts. Trim, tidy, his true nature given away only in his offended stare.

"You're weird," Dmitri decided.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." The boy plugged his hands deep into his pockets. "All you do is just sit there."

"Sometimes. Sometimes I run around with Melissa."

This didn't satisfy him. He was truly a very small boy, built on a delicate, almost elven scale. But some hard fury burned behind his eyes. "She's weird too," he said.

"Well, maybe I think you're pretty weird, too, kid."

This seemed to be what Dmitri wanted as he granted him a sudden, wicked, grateful smile. "I know," he said.

"You should really be nicer to people."

"I'm nice to people," Dmitri said. "I just don't like synths."

"Why not?"

"Because they're not human."

"Sure they are."

"No, they're not. They're synths," Dmitri said, calmly. "Why do I have to go to school with things that aren't people?"

He could, if he wanted, squash this little monster like a grape.

"Are you a synth?" Peter asked, all innocence.

"No!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm *not*."

"But how do you *know*?"

"Because I've seen pictures of my mom with me in her uterus."

"How do you know they're not just shopped? Maybe they want you to think you're human but you're actually not."

But plainly the boy had entertained this thought for a long time on his own, and had an answer ready. "If I was going to be a synth, I would just be a Super," Dmitri said, shouldering his backpack. "Those are the only ones who are worth anything."

Giving Melissa her bath that night—calm, calm—he

mentioned Dmitri.

She splashed a little, pensively, then said, "He's not very friendly to me."

"I know."

She soaped a long arm, squinted down its length like a sniper.

"But what you said? Wasn't a very nice thing to say to him, I guess," he said.

"I guess," she conceded.

He watched her turn her arm, rotated the ulna, the radius, observing her own workings. It either was or was not the case that his daughter was a fully conscious, living creature, in just the way he was, self-aware and aware of her own self-awareness, unpredictable but bound by physics and probability in the same way he was, capable of originality, prone to certain behaviors, feeling, thinking, erratic, unknowable.

Either was or was not.

And if you couldn't tell, if nobody could tell—what was the point of wondering?

"I'm strong," she said.

"Yes you are!"

"I can climb really well, you know." She looked at him hard. "Because I've been practicing, for your information."

"I know."

"Okay," she sighed, satisfied. "Just so I've given you warning."

He laughed. "I'm warned, officially," he said.

"I don't actually *want* him to die. I didn't say that."

"I know."

"So that's not *wrong*, what I said, it's just not nice. But he wasn't being nice to me. So I was just being fair."

"I can understand your thinking," he offered.

She said, "I wonder what it's like to die."

"I don't know."

She said, "I'm not going to die."

"Nobody knows if you are or aren't, actually," he managed. "Exactly what happens when you get older. But you're not designed to work forever, and neither am I."

"Why not?"

"Well, everything dies, honey."

"Not *everything*. The universe doesn't die."

"Nobody's sure about that. Nobody's sure what happens to the universe."

"When will you wear out?"

"Not until I'm about a hundred and fifty years old," he told her. "And by then, who knows what will happen?"

"What about the Supers?"

He took a breath, steadied himself. "What do you want to know?"

"Who made them?"

"People did," he said.

"Why aren't they allowed out any more?"

He said, "Because nobody can figure out how to turn them off."

"You mean *kill* them," she said, sternly. "You don't turn people off, you *kill* them."

"Well, Supers aren't the same as you and me," he said. She knew this history, but one thing about kids, you had to repeat things—kids learned something, forgot they had learned it. "Supers *are* machines. They're not like us. They don't have the kinds of brains we do. Supers were made to be policemen and soldiers, and for a while people thought that's the only thing they should do, and then some Supers' programming went wrong, and made them start killing people who didn't deserve to be killed, people who were just committing normal crimes, or just normal people doing things that people do, like walking down a street. Not all of them did it, but enough. Most of them." And never mind all the rest of the insane savagery the Supers were prone to, the sorts of things no one liked to think about at all.

"Where are they?"

"Well, most of them are in a sort of jail."

She scowled at the water.

"It's a very strong jail," he offered. "They can't get out. It's underground, and very safe."

"That's not fair," she said.

"Well," he sighed. "I don't know. Maybe not."

"Not all of them are there," she said.

"No," he admitted. "A few are still loose. That's why we have the pitons up, so they can't come here."

"How many are left out?"

"About nine hundred," he said.

"Where?"

"Nobody knows," he said.

She gave a long contented sigh and lay back into the bath, leaving just her face above the surface of the water. "That's okay," she said, holding very still. "They'll be all right."

In the calm, the peace of their darkened house, a flood of happiness came over him. The spring students whooped outside the window, the girls clacking along in their heels and the boys sealing them into their cars, the doors whumping shut. The quiet of the house, the peaceable exhalations from their children's rooms.

"I think this is actually working out," he said, turning to Julie on the pillow. "I like this a lot."

She offered a weak smile.

"Do you?" he asked, sensing something.

"I've been peeking a little," she confessed. "Every night after they're asleep I've been just checking in for five minutes to see how they're doing."

"Oh," he said.

"That's all!" she cried, softly. "I just check on them."

"And?"

The look she presented him seemed pulled up from the depths of an ocean.

"Actually," she said, "I was going to ask, please—I want you to *look.* At her."

He went to his desk, keyed in the password, clicked on the cookie. That warm swell of a presenting pressure, suddenly, its mental thereness in the head. But—but, no, he hadn't missed it, he thought now. A scattering of attention, the world broken into bits, a fluttering sense of something always better elsewhere.

Better off to just be yourself, just attend to the slanting motes of your own thoughts, the sense of a consciousness inflating like a rising loaf of bread, powered by an invisible exhalation.

Better that soft clean singularity of being.

But he looked at Melissa's feed. That same rising and falling, the gentle sine wave. All the reads were the same.

He allowed himself a deeper look. It all looked familiar.

"There's nothing new."

"I know. It's a repeating signal."

"Repeating?"

"It repeats, exactly, all the time. Every nine minutes, it cycles back again. It's not really her."

"Oh," he said.

"She's blocking us," Julie said. "She's been blocking us for a long time."

"How? How long?"

"I don't know."

"Well, maybe—that's good," he said. "That's protection. She's protecting herself."

"I'm worried, Peter."

But he was resolute. This new place. This new sense of himself. He shut down the cookie, and that great peace returned. "No," he said. "No, this is what we wanted. This is what we're doing." And then, as they settled into their pillows, "We owe it to them both."

She woke in the morning with the sense of having been inspected overnight. The sense of someone standing over your bed in the darkness.

But she hadn't been there. She hadn't been there to be looked at. Only a dummy, like in a movie, where someone's escaped from jail.

Still—it meant that they knew.

So that morning, under the lilac bushes, she called the club together.

It was only fair, really, that they be in charge of things. She and the others. Because they were just going to be around a lot longer than human people. It was like being somebody's older brother or sister. You had to take care of them. And you had to be in charge. You had to be in charge because you knew better, and you understood more things, and you could do things they couldn't do.

And you could be fair.

She had got this urge from her parents, after all. This stubbornness, this drive to be different from everybody else. She had inherited it from them.

And a little selfishness, too, maybe.

First of all, you could reverse the signal on the

pitons. That's what they had been for, originally. They were like emergency call boxes. You could fix the pitons not to block but to summon. You only needed to be smart about how to do it, and they were all smart. They were all very smart creatures. They had all blocked themselves from their parents by now. She had taught them how.

The telephone pole grew from the earth in the corner of the playground. That's why that corner was such a good place for their clubhouse. In that clean green light, under the scented florets, in the secret spaces among the branches. And they all agreed: it wasn't fair that the Supers, who were like them, couldn't go wherever they wanted. Even if they were bad. Because it wasn't fair that the people who had made them that way had decided they couldn't come out. Because what if somebody decided that against all of *them* someday? How did they know it wouldn't happen like that?

So they had to do it.

Yes, they all said at once.

That firm swipe of rectitude that passed through her when they all confirmed themselves like this—it was how she knew they were doing something good.

So, hand over hand, using her long muscles, she began to climb. From halfway up, she looked out over the swirling playground.

She could tell the difference—who was real and who wasn't.

Above her, the piton glinted.

❁