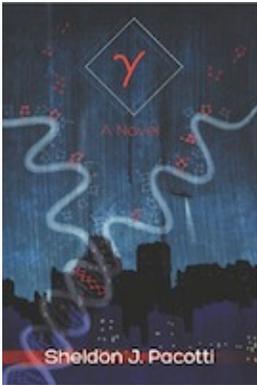


γ

A Novel

Sheldon J. Pacotti



A secret genetic experiment on inner-city families produces chronically ill but brilliant children whose suffering spawns a multibillion-dollar genetics industry. One of these children, studying his own DNA, condemns this "Program" for designing narrow human breeds who are merely "the maximization of a discreet set of abilities." By redesigning the human being of tomorrow, in DNA, he becomes the biggest enemy of an industry - and society - increasingly devoted to deepening racial divides...

Gamma

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Sheldon J. Pacotti

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First Edition

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1.

Dr. Shannon Jones, unable to ignore logic, even after years of neglecting his mind, rethinks his plan while his body submits to the task assigned to the work crew. He hammers rods of iron into the top of a retaining wall, waiting, watching, his dark skin glowing with heat in the sun. Hot mud in the ditch fills the air with metal ions—metal he can taste. He is a big man despite years of working in laboratories (thanks to an ACNT3 hack dreamed up by his mentor and "creator" of sorts, the geneticist Dr. White). The strength is still there. The strength that let him kill a young man with his bare fists—it's still there. Ready for a sudden burst of effort.

The problem is that he doesn't have the right tools. Woven from bucky-fibers, his ankle bracelet is impossible to cut with normal blades. The best he can hope to do is crush the transmitter, a daunting task if all he has are rocks and maybe a hammer. He needs the two-handed loppers from the tool box on the bus. He tried to bring the box out here, up into the hills of Griffith Park, which despite being thinly wooded are welcoming: deserted, steep, mostly inaccessible to vehicles . . . but Officer Kyle was there in a flash: "Hol' up, nigger. Who said get the box?"

"Huh?"

"Who said get the box? You see HEDGES? You see fruit trees? You see ANYTHING except a hill? We're just goin' up that hill."

"I'm bringin' some tools."

"This ain't roadside today." The CO's wiry body was like a contraption of rods jerking under his uniform. His eyes took a hurried inventory of the other inmates while he talked. "No flowers, Jones. Sorry. No standin' with a sign, no rich honeys drivin' by scared, spyin' at us, scared again. You boys are gonna WORK today, like con-vicks. Put that shit back. Park Service got us a pickup."

The CO shoved the tool box for emphasis. Shannon could have caught Kyle's wrist, twisted, and taken the handgun off his hip . . . but he let the moment pass. Too many cars down there. Hikers. Park-service uniforms.

That was his chance. Close quarters, the toolbox in his hands . . . he could've dashed into the hills and the scrub and vanished. He has to be ready next time. Any small opening . . . even if he has to drag the transmitter along for a while. There would be something, a door, a gun . . . something that could disable it.

Prisoners at the Mack aren't expected to contemplate escape, the Mack being a minimum-security "campus" sporting a college, soccer field, gymnasium, "business center," and so on. But the place has never been much of a home for Shannon. He can't be reformed through education, and to play soccer or foosball, Scrabble . . . his mind would recoil from the pedantry. The most he does is exercise and work shifts at the factory, necessary if he wants any spending money.

Until now, escape fantasies have been hard to sustain because not much has been waiting for him on the outside. In ten years he hasn't had a single visitor. While the other prisoners line up for visiting hours, he lies under a tree turning over the same bits of science that have been in his head for a decade: knowledge held prisoner, cut off from its own busy society thanks to an injunction forbidding him from reading academic publications, including the Bureau of Prisons' high-school biology textbook.

He didn't expect to hear from his Caltech colleagues, who publicly condemned the human-embryo experiments that got him here, but in ten years not a single person has phoned, written, or come to visiting hours. His mother, estranged from him since high school, quit speaking to him before the end of the trial. His father and stepfather had walked out decades earlier, both gone before he was eight. His letters to the house in the Palisades don't bounce back, but neither do they elicit replies from his mother. He doesn't write to his two fathers, because even if he had addresses for them he wouldn't have anything to put into a letter.

A more probable visitor is Dr. White, but even Dr. White ran for cover when the full scope of the Caltech experiments became public. The daily samples of Shannon's blood, taken by the prison nurse, probably make their way to his lab, but that's all the contact with his test subject the old scientist is willing to risk.

The woman Shannon loved and might have married (who, out of everyone, could have been counted on to come see him) has been dead for more than a decade: Maribel Sanchez, a friend from grade school. Of their daughter, María, he has only pictures, old pictures stored on his computer.

Very few of the pictures of María are real, the newest being an old film-camera snapshot of her at six years of age standing on a bare concrete floor beside a coal-burning stove . . . in Nacozari, Mexico, where she and her mother were in hiding, a town he has never seen. The other images are age-enhanced. He relies on software to give him a glimpse of the woman María might have grown up to be, if in fact she survived the border crossing that killed her mother. He sits at the computer looking at the images before lockdown, seeing her face so often that he doesn't perceive the slight changes calculated by the aging algorithm. Various circumstances, mostly his own fault, have systematically severed her life from his. Not one word of his has ever reached her. He has been unable to give her anything, not even the explanation she deserves. She was his first and least considered experiment: two teenagers' rebellious ideas crammed into a zygote.

Often he goes along with the guards that this is a delusion, an echo of his life "on the outs," but now—and this is the reason for his recent change of heart—he is not so sure. During a work detail two weeks ago, for the first time in his life, he saw María in person. The correctional officer on duty, Officer Kyle, hired a couple of East Hollywood prostitutes to take a ride with the prisoners, making a few bucks for himself in the bargain. One of the prostitutes, incredibly, was María. She was ignorant of her past and had nothing to tell him about the Program, yet her walk, the sound of her voice, her eyes, the clean smell of her hair when she bent close . . . filled his head with a lifetime of memories: imaginings come to life with one quick touch.

He told the other prisoners this, yet to them, even now, María is nothing more than a hooker called "Luz," a hot piece of ass they want to make into a regular thing. And they're serious, too. Representing the crew in this matter, the VC has joined Kyle across the road, where the CO has been guarding the water cooler.

"Girl's too good for con-vicks," Officer Kyle says. "I'ma keep her for myself if y'all don't ante up."

The VC wets his fingers at the spigot and smoothes his hair back. "Credit isn't a four-letter word. Call it an opportunity cost. You can see her any day you want. We're not so fortunate, remember."

"It's MY ass, man. Think I'm lettin' CON-vicks go on a payment plan?"

Shannon leans on his iron tie, pretends to twist and push it into the hole drilled that morning, listening.

They're going to do it again—pass María up and down the aisle of the prison bus. His child . . . a discarded piece of trash in a translucent silk dress, tinted brown from the skin beneath, short, snug as a slip as she strutted up the steps of the bus two weeks ago with the blunt frown of a boxer. She knew that right then she was everybody's trash, but she still swatted the hands of inmates who tried to touch her and dismissed the whistling and catcalls by proudly tossing her head . . . so much like Maribel, her mother . . . boundless strength no matter what the world threw at her.

He had paid his fifty bucks to Officer Kyle and was waiting in the last row. María scissored her legs over his lap, draped an arm behind his neck, and combed her nails through his tough, short, curly hair. "Wha'chu want, hun?"

He felt her body rock against his as Kyle put the bus in gear for a tour of the back roads.

"You just wanna talk? Huh?" she said. "It's your money."

He was staring into the face of his child, for the first time. Was it possible? . . .

María's partner was already on the floor with one of the inmates. Some of the men glanced at the prone woman when there was a change in her metronomic gasps, but in general this operation was a tense business for them. They looked out the windows and waited their turns. When Jesse Greene finally butted in, he did so in a subdued and serious tone. "People are waitin', Jones."

María's nails scratched Shannon's scalp. So much like her mother, Maribel . . . the striking whites of her eyes, small chin, hard planar cheek bones, lovely waves of black hair . . . Maribel still alive and safely back in his arms.

"Man's right, big guy. I'm on the clock." María pressed her free hand down on his crotch.

He leapt to his feet. "No!"

She was knocked against the seatback.

"Ow!"

"Sorry. I—"

"Fuckin' psycho!"

He watched her hand holding her hip where he'd hurt her.

Officer Kyle yelled from the front of the bus, "Jones! Hey, yo, nuh-uh, none of that shit. Let Greene go. You're done."

Shannon watched Jesse Greene's fat pink fingers fumble at Maria's leg and then her hand. His daughter gave in slowly, rigid with anger, a look of murder on her face that warned him back. He watched Jesse's pink hands move up the outsides of her legs to her pelvis. "No, man," Shannon said.

Jesse pressed his face into her belly and inhaled, shaking his head, eyes shut in an exquisite release. "Snooze and lose, Jones."

He tried not to watch. He heard the sough of clothing being pushed up and down, finally smelled her, his daughter, rank with sex, opened up, flattened onto the floor of the bus, a pug-dog meanness in her eyes as she waited for the next prisoner, then a faraway gaze at the ceiling.

No, he can't go through that again.

He told himself that he could track her down later, maybe under the assumed name she had given Kyle, but she isn't in the phone book or in search engines. When he asked Officer Kyle to give him her phone number, the CO brushed him off with flip comments about him being a "too-late Harry" and saying, "Can't even order a pizza and you wanna call in a whore to Dorm Eighteen? That's the whole point. That's how I make a PROFIT."

Kyle is more of a gang leader than a guard. On the way here, he walked the bus, climbing in and out of the unlocked hatchway in the mesh cage at the front, slapping prisoners' hands, giving speeches on how to stay out of trouble, and selling tiny joints for five bucks. He's nervous, unpredictable, and alert. Shannon has waited in vain for him to let his guard down.

The VC and Kyle shake hands, having reached some sort of agreement. As the VC steps gingerly across the muddy road, Shannon looks over at Ryan, one of the other inmates. "Motherfuckers know what I do if they go see Maria."

"Chick's name is Luz."

"Her real name is María."

Ryan just laughs. "You still think she your sweetheart?"

Shannon shoves the tie further into the stone. No one listens to a word he says. He has an exact time-enhanced photograph on his computer . . . but no one even believes he has a daughter.

Ryan turns away, smiling. He hammers at his own crosstie with a small steel sledgehammer.

The VC (short for "Venture Capitalist") shows up by the retaining wall without a spot of mud on his shoes. He is using an iron tie as a walking stick, not obligated to do anything more with it.

As the work-release inmate who usually does the driving, he could stay with the bus and still make his \$12 per hour, but he can't stand being left out of a deal. He has tried to make friends with Shannon by getting him to answer questions about biotech firms—curious about every detail, though to Shannon's knowledge he has never solicited funds for a real company. "What's going to pay—antibodies or gene therapy?" "What the hell's an oligonucleotide?" "Whose patentable offenses are the least offensive to Senate Republicans?"

Shannon catches the little man's eye. His dialect shifts automatically when he talks to the VC. "Hey, Lenny, why María? Kyle said there were other girls."

Using the tie for balance, one foot on the wall, the VC stops and smiles. "Holy shit." He openly laughs. "Oh my God! Hey, Ryan, hear that?"

Ryan is six inches away from driving his tie home, the blows of the hammer barely ringing at all. "Huh?"

"Dr. Jeckle has something he wants to say! Charlie! Hey, Kyle, get this!"

At the far end of the wall, Jesse Greene slips and falls, pulling at the cliff's scrub with mad swimming arms. Red mud and gravel burst like silent Party Popper fireworks, leaving cavities in the cliff face. Roots crack like bones as he drops like a skydiver separated from a parachute and lands on his butt.

"Sla-a-a-am DUNK!" Ryan shakes his sledgehammer above his head.

"Look at the fool. He stuck."

"Get up, Greene." Kyle leans on the cooler to show his impatience.

"Dumb-ass."

"I'm hearing you. The things that are being said. I'm sitting here in the mud, and I'm hearing everything."

Shannon balances the head of his hammer on his tie. Damn right he has something to say.

Laughter fills the saporous air, loud, close, a sound absorbed quickly into the open space around the long deserted hiking trail.

"Smart Indian no stand up in canoe."

"Hey, Jesse, you got a fat ass."

"Look at him," Ryan confides to Shannon. "He don't even care. He give up."

"I'm sitting here. I'm sitting here getting wet and I'm waiting to see who gives a shit."

Shannon doesn't get it. Sometimes he doesn't get a thing that comes out of people's mouths. He goes fishing in his mind and finds only the jowly black face of Dr. White, the jovial old Brit who invited himself into his test subjects' childhoods and made himself at home there, an angel perched on their shoulders: "You're the top, Shannon. Regular humans are animals by comparison. It's true, dear boy—we're just a tribe of Neanderthals marveling at a hairless child. Oh yes! We'll teach you how to grunt, but you do the rest—all the rest is you!" He can't even imagine what it would be like to be laughing right now. Is this funny? What's funny about it?

"So, Shannon"—the VC has taken a spot on the wall one hole down—"if you're so interested in saving people, why don't you go help our dear friend Jesse out of the mud?"

Kyle is talking on his small gray phone, smiling like a pirate.

The VC's face is pink, all smile, María just a whore to him, a thing he can't help but hate after being locked up for years, no matter how much he wants what she can give him.

Shannon's hands tremble. If only Kyle was a few steps closer—then he'd dive this instant into the red of a fight and a rush of vengeance and a headlong sprint into the hills.

"Hey, Shannon. I said go help Jesse if you're such a good Samaritan."

Shannon doesn't know why everyone treats him like a child. The change has taken several years.

"Shannnon. . . ." The VC whistles at his subject. "I know you're listening to me. . . ."

Once, at Caltech, he had to behead an infant with a fireman's axe. Usually they sent sodium pentothal into the system, followed by sodium pentobarbital, but this time they didn't know the thing was deformed until the lid came off. The skin was bad—a bad membrane binding-protein, a new M130 sequence . . . plus a theory he had about alpha-spectrin's involvement with the phospholipids, some other tinkering . . . It wasn't even alpha-spectrin. They would have called it Jones-spectrin, he supposed, if the experiment had worked. The skin tore even in the gentle grasp of the lab robot's rubber hands. It had slightly more strength than a wet sheet of construction paper. Perfect conditions in the incubator had prevented hemorrhaging, but he could see that gravity and friction would be cataclysmic forces for the small creature. Earth was not her planet. Michelle, his senior graduate student, tried to calm the infant but came away with bloody hands. The screaming was horrible and small like a spreading wound, unanswerable, naked, more alive than anything in the incubation chamber—a small dark opening into the trauma of living matter. Tissue abnormalities would be general, meaning full-body disintegration, a slow chemical burning. Dr. White, alerted by the noise, strolled into the room just as Shannon threw down the IV equipment, punched out a glass panel, and grabbed the axe. The scientist watched calmly as his subordinate chopped the bloody mess in two. With a slight shake of the head, he placed the clean silver key to the incinerator on the counter and walked back to his office.

Shannon told Michelle that he would do the analysis. It was simple DoH research with obvious conclusions, bread-and-butter stuff neither of them could stand. He had calculated that a freak accident in the control group would raise few eyebrows. The next day he delivered some nonsense about a splice site mutation, which she never believed but kept quiet about until the trial ten months later.

"Yoo-hoo . . ."

"Haven't you noticed? Brother don't want to talk."

"It's better if he talks. Makes him think."

"Come on, man, he don't mean no harm."

Ryan could be a friend sometimes.

Everyone at the Mack treats him like this, but his mind is still the same on the inside, the mind that drove the fusion of computer science and

biology to its logical end, opening a new era for a species on the verge of replacing itself. People forget what he can do. They forget the ruthlessness of his thinking, his willingness to follow an idea. They forget, too, about how he almost did time for starting a fight and killing somebody, years before the genetics experiments that got him here. He picks up his sledgehammer and gets back to work. Twang! Twang! He can do it again. Twang! He can do it, and he will. Today.

2.

Carmela and Luz get the call on their way to an early dinner. Carmela says yes without asking her friend, and Luz doesn't argue. They're both broke.

They change plans and blow the last of the first job's take on two lobster dinners. Extra cups of melted butter, giant piña colodas, sides of shrimp and cocktail sauce . . .

"Compliments of the creep in the back," Luz comments when the check arrives.

"Minus what pimp-dawg stiffed us."

"Well, we'll get all of it up front this time."

"I'll drink to that."

The warm glow of the meal vanquishes some of their jitters, but they both know that only a couple of real deadbeat ho's would take a job with honest-to-God prisoners. A work crew on a prison bus . . . might as well turn tricks in the lobby of the police station. How different was this shit Marco dug up for them than getting a real pimp and a drug habit and a corner of Hollywood Boulevard?

They leave some of their cash behind and walk to the bus stop.

A shower. That's what Luz wants. She hasn't even set eyes on the prisoners yet and all she can think about is a shower. Maybe homeboy in the back will chicken out again. Any more stink than before and she'll be vomiting this melted butter into the aisle.

No further memories of Dr. Shannon Jones trouble her. She doesn't know the convict's name and wouldn't think much of it if she did.

She and Carmela take the city bus through town oblivious to the enduring consequences of the scientist's work all around them.

A genetic councilor in a new office highrise at the Metropolitan Medical Center stabs a few keys with a sprightly flourish of her small hands. Smiling delightedly, she reports to the prospective parents seated in front of her desk, "Why, yes, no conflicts so far. Purigen's Bax package would serve little Gavin well—I sure hope you stick with that name—it's so cute. . . . Another White Incubator product, I think, a little pricey, but I'm sure you wouldn't be here if you didn't know that this is an investment that never stops paying a return."

At the Rosewood Cemetery on Normandie, a woman cries softly while she blows soap bubbles onto a small grave, remembering little Angie romping through the old apartment and pointing to a bottle like the one in her hands. "Bubbles!" Watching her mother do dishes. "Bubbles!" Pointing to the spots on her mother's skirt and exclaiming, "Bubbles!"

The husband stands behind with his hands in his coat pockets, a little embarrassed by the ritual but no less moved, not daring to say a word for fear that his voice will falter.

The grave contains Angie Washington, one of Dr. Jones' Caltech experiments, dead at three due to a condition diagnosed as Krabbe disease.

At Division 6 headquarters, Detective Brad Starns digs through a desk drawer, looking for a box of staples. His hand brushes against a picture frame face-down in the junk: a photograph of his son. Recognition blooms into guilt, as he remembers the care his wife put into selecting a frame and cutting the print down to size, but he leaves the photo in the drawer.

His mind is already made up about the picture.

Mike's appearance gets more bizarre every year. It's too much for most people. Too much to put on display for everyone in the office. And too much to have to explain to his new detective-trainee. He isn't someone who goes digging for anybody's sympathy.

Near the Los Angeles Community College campus, on a curb beside a newsstand, a young man is reading a quasi-political pamphlet about the technological Singularity, the rapidly approaching moment when, supposedly, a superhuman intelligence will be born. The moment when progress and history will become a blur, leaving normal humans—and maybe humanity itself, or even organic life itself—far, far behind.

The boy disregards the negative spin of the essay. Instead of destruction, he takes "event horizon" to mean "new dawn." Just a week ago he made up a handle for himself—Minister Will, evangelical Muslim and Prophet of Doom—and now he finds support for his message everywhere he looks.

Good and Evil.

Machine and Man.

Life and Afterlife.

Opposites converging. Yes. Only three short months and the Qur'an reveals itself anew in everything he sees, touches, or imagines. God's amendments, which the Christians have suppressed for centuries: "Wherefore be patient with fair patience; verily, they see it as afar off, but we see it nigh! The day when the heaven shall be as molten brass."

Vernor Vinge predicting the apocalypse even in 1995, writing that we will make machines "smarter than any human," marking "the end of the human era," as final as the ascension of humanity from the animal kingdom.

Dr. Jones a criminal and locked up because he was hastening the Singularity's arrival, unapologetic even when he was on trial: "WE ARE COMING! We are here, we are coming, and we will devour the solution-space of your ten billion souls that knows nothing and answers no purpose other than to feed itself and serve the evolution of abstract knowledge. We will not be a temporary substrate! We will be organic, and we will endure!"

Too much for the Minister's pre-Singularity intellect to process at once. He buys the pamphlet and begins walking home, Shannon Jones just part of history for him, the man who failed to build a superbrain in neurons and left the door open for evolvable nanoprocessors, cyborgs, other machine-culture monstrosities . . . a man probably executed years ago.

High up on Mount Olympus overlooking the city, Ernesto Medina opens the quarterly dividends checks from the White Incubator Corporation, one made out to him and one to his wife. His feelings for little Diego, pronounced dead before the lid came off the incubator in Jones' lab, have long since faded, and so has the thrill of being part of the most lucrative class action lawsuit in history. He has nothing left to buy. The shiny glass city at his feet already belongs to him. He owns his own

skyscraper and does nothing to earn the income derived from dozens of such investments, nothing but eat fabulous meals and play tennis, while the people below, either directly or indirectly, barter away their very lives in order to feed him.

Even the guilt has faded.

Maybe he should buy a mountain. Or an island. Some piece of the earth that will endure picture-perfect for centuries. Sure, something stable to counterbalance the racy funds and start-ups his stock broker is always chasing. . . .

Luz and Carmela get off a few blocks shy of the site and walk the rest of the way. Luz likes to be extra careful. She ran away from home over six months ago and hasn't yet had to try something crazy like work a street corner—with the exception of these two stunts. So far she hasn't thought of herself as desperate, but September was really tight. She blew some money she shouldn't have, and now she's late on some payments. It's no longer difficult to imagine a little push that sends her out on the street risking *abduction* or who knows what for a couple of twenty dollar bills.

Better enjoy this buzz and full stomach while they last. She and Carmela are about to get a lesson on why they need to get serious about cashflow for real this time.

3.

Through a steel mesh barrier that isolates the bus driver from the prisoners, Shannon watches the dirty green money in María's hands and her quick fingers. Her bare leg shows from underneath her long coat where she has lifted one foot up onto the step. She lives like this, all because of how he and Maribel went about having a child. When her mother died, the rest of her family must have turned their backs on her.

He clears his throat. "Hola, María."

"Wassup, Holmes." She keeps counting.

"I brought it this time. Proof."

Officer Kyle leans his torso through the open hatchway. "Quiet, Jones. Yo, Lenny, make him shut up."

The VC, one seat behind, leans forward to speak softly into Shannon's ear. "Listen, Shannon, I know she looks like your friend, but she doesn't remember you." He has handed the driving over to Kyle so that he can be with one of the girls.

"It's María. Look at the image." Shannon holds up his little black book containing the photos of María and the other experiments. Thanks to a restraining order that includes phone calls and email, he has had to run the aging algorithm on a set of baby photos to see what the test subjects look like. He has picked out their clothes, given them just the right smiles for their faces, posed them on playground equipment. The picture of María is set up like a high-school yearbook photo. Red mohair sweater, pearl necklace, make-up, a neutral-tone memory haze in the background.

"An amazing coincidence—look at that. Wow. But she doesn't want to be hassled right now."

"She can't do this."

"Absolutely, Shannon. But she's a free woman. Right? Her name is Luz, not María. You understand? Okay?"

Shannon feels the VC's hand clap his shoulder.

"Just sit tight." The VC leans back. A moment later the VC's arm appears from around the seat to hand him an open can of beer. "Just try to have a good time."

Shannon takes the beer without looking back.

Charlie, from across the aisle and a seat back, asks the VC in a confidential tone, "He okay?"

"He'll be fine."

The voices are low, but Shannon can hear them distinctly. Clearly they regard him as unable to understand their talk.

"I don't know, what if he goes talkin' some shit in front of Richards or someone?"

"He knows when to keep quiet."

Shannon crumples the can in his fist. A spout of beer leaps sideways into the window pane. It shatters into running foam and a sour smell. His lap is wet, cold. His finger begins burning. He looks down and blood is streaming down the side of the can where the aluminum has torn.

The VC's pink hands pry the can loose. "Okay. Understood. You care for the young lady."

Charlie stands up. "You better leave him alone, man." He takes a seat a few rows back.

"JONES!" Kyle leans through the hatchway. "Jones, you schitz an' get us caught I'ma have you moppin' halls twenty-four seven. I don't have time for discipline right now. Lenny, make him clean it up. Stupid way for us all to get busted."

"No worries," the VC says. "Just get us moving."

"That's María," Shannon tells Kyle. "Serious. She's my kid, man. Why—"

Kyle talks right past Shannon to the VC. "I'm trusting you, man. Don't shit me if he's gonna be a problem."

"I'm on it. Relax." The VC gently sets the crushed can on the floor behind Shannon's seat. "Very well, Shannon," he says, "get it out. You can say hi. But don't smash the poor girl like a tin can. You don't want that either."

Waiting, Shannon watches Kyle thumb through a roll of dollar bills.

María demands another fifty dollars, gets thirty, and finally agrees to board the bus. She leaves her coat up front. With a large glass atomizer, she sprays herself thoroughly with perfumed water before beginning the job, a sweet smell. Fingers high in the wire mesh, she pulls herself through the hatchway feet-first. Her sandals slip on the steel floor.

Shannon blocks the aisle with his hand. "You don't have to do this, María."

"I don't have to do nothing." She grabs his wrist. "You're bleeding. Jesus Christ."

"Oh . . ." Shannon looks at his wet hand.

"You stained my shirt." She moves his hand to the side.

"I'm—sorry. Wait. Come back. I'm Shannon Jones."

"I'm supposed to start at the back."

She passes by. Her friend comes through the hatchway. Kyle puts the bus in gear. "Hot damn!" he cries. "Start the clock! Three minutes, Jesse. Try for two."

Just like that. She brushed by him without a hint of recognition. She was being honest last time. No one has told her a thing.

They pull out. A guy in a plaid workshirt seems to eye them as they go by, but he has only now come out of the warehouse across the street. A

couple of strung-out, oblivious-looking teenagers were the only other witnesses, about a minute ago. Either Kyle is an extremely lucky gambler or a shrewd judge of human nature.

Trouble starts right away, though. At the first light, Kyle has to turn around to yell at Jesse. "Down, man! They can see your big white ass from the moon!"

Jesse grunts, raising his bald head to eye Kyle over the seatback.

Kyle guns the engine. He drives fast when he's doing something wrong, as though trying to become a blur. "You know the rules—on the floor out of view. Jesus!"

"I'm behind the seat," Jesse says.

Shannon can hear skin smacking. He looks back, sees María's brown calf against the glass of the rear window, and doesn't look back again. The other girl is where she was last time: the stamped metal floor. Joey is on her, snorting like a hog.

"What the fuck, Jesse? WHAT the FUCK?"

Kyle sticks to the side streets, but traffic is everywhere. He has cars in front and back as he nears a red light.

Shannon doesn't feel right. Pieces of the world are missing. One move and it seems like he would fall right through the floor onto the moving roadway.

Solve this, solve this . . .

All he wants to do right now is hurt Jesse Greene.

"Get your ass on the floor—this bus has WINDOWS, man!"

The missing pieces are like tiny gravity wells: distortions, flaws passing through his solid body like roaming ghosts. Errors. Error. Errors invisibly damaging everything. . . .

Kyle stops the bus and stands up. "I'm COMIN', Greene." Then the light turns green and he has to take the wheel. A small version of himself remains imprisoned in the wide oval mirror overhead, looking down on the inmates.

Shannon touches the photograph in the book, the sweet young girl every parent imagines his daughter growing into. Solve this, solve this . . . The face is exactly the same, even the hair. The chance of a false positive is high considering that his most recent picture of her is from when she was six years old—but what are the odds of such an exact match? They

must be astronomical. Yes—an accident is unlikely. Maribel was dutiful in sending photos: many ages and angles to feed into the algorithm.

Maribel . . . a seventeen-year-old girl . . . so open to his megalomaniacal schemes. Her parents pulled her out of the Program and gave up the government payments and broke a dozen signed contracts in order to send her home to Mexico to have the child, unwed, living in secrecy from the U.S. government and in shame among her devoutly Catholic neighbors. Government protection was increased outside Shannon's home and outside the homes of the others. Letters were opened. About every six months, a letter came from Maribel, postmarked from a different zip code in Tucson, where maybe she had a sympathetic family friend.

When she heard about the trial, she wrote a crazed letter admonishing him, asking him if it was true, and yet promising to come to the U.S. immediately to testify to his competence and show off their healthy daughter, who like his subsequent experiments was cobbled together from his and Maribel's chromosomes and then juiced up in certain ways, in her case with slightly tweaked OTX genes and a small kick given to the head's compartmentalization event. This letter was the one mailed from Nacozari, Mexico.

Shannon has no idea whether the authorities traced the letter or even cared anymore whether they or China found "The Nineteen" first (he was "The Seven" to Program scientists)—but something went wrong at the border. Maribel died in a boxcar among two dozen illegal aliens. The smugglers on the U.S. side had gotten spooked when the train was delayed and had never shown up to let her and the others out of the locked car. A summer day in a railyard with the Arizona sun coming down on the metal walls was enough to cause fevers and vomiting and finally heatstroke in the mojados. A few survivors were found thanks to a man who was discovered wearing his boots on his hands and banging them against the sheet-metal. Maribel died this way, for him, not due to fear of the Border Patrol but instead fear of the CIA and of her family searching for her.

And her suffering continues—in María, in this warped remnant of a girl. So this is how his former colleagues have treated the test subjects. Oafish incompetence he expected. Sick children badly diagnosed, studied like alien lifeforms, fed into databases, collated, made into designer gene products . . . sure. But not utter indifference, not neglect. His colleagues

are very rich now, minor celebrities he can watch on the dayroom TV at the prison, surrounded by government security, hustled away to secret residences. They are out of touch, just pushing numbers around, all of humanity dancing to their finger-taps, while their test subjects struggle just to survive, struggle to prove their genes worthy.

The bus stops. Kyle curses and shifts into park. "MOTHER—FUCKER." He stands, swings through the hatchway, and lets everyone know just how mad he is by stomping all the way down the aisle to the back of the bus. Joey finishes just in time and rolls to the side. Shannon can't watch. Maria's whole body is flexing like the frame of a kite. She moans, her fingertips buffeting the windows like moths trying to escape.

"You're cool," Kyle says to Joey.

Wrong. Wrong. All of this is wrong. . . .

The toolbox. Shannon sees it under the empty captain's chair. With a hammer in his hand—and his transgenic muscles, still quick and strong—he could stop this. Like the fight during high school, which ended in trickles of blood in the cracks between the tiles of the locker room . . . the fight no one could stop him from winning.

He stands. No time for daydreaming. . . .

He grabs the edge of the hatch and puts a leg through.

"Hey, yo, Jones, huh-uh. Where you goin'?"

Officer Kyle has glanced back at just the right moment.

GO, Shannon tells himself. GO! But he hesitates.

"Lenny, I'm serious. He's gettin' weird on this shit and I got other problems right now. DAMN!"

Shannon feels the VC's hand on his shoulder. Too late. He's gotten himself caught.

The VC guides him back into the seat, like a Tokyo subway attendant packing loose limbs onto a train. "That's enough, Shannon." Gone is the cloying, instructive tone from before. The VC pushes him down. "What were you gonna do—run away? Go hide in an alley and bawl your eyes out over this girl? Well, congratulations. You're making everybody nervous and killing any chance of this ever becoming a regular event. You and Jesse both."

"Ho's on the floor." Kyle has reached the back seat. A weight thuds. "Ho's on the floor! Ho's on the floor!"

The VC turns to watch.

Wrong, wrong . . .

"Fuck off! I mean it." It's Jesse, not yet done. His gray prison shirt sticks to his back, wet with sweat and mud from the job they just did. Shannon can't watch. "Fuck off, Officer Kyle. Do you see this? Do you see what I'm doing?"

"Crazy-ass GOOMBAH. You got your cut-up, now—"

Shannon doesn't hear the punch. The sentence just pops like a thought-bubble and then there's a mighty boom of sheet-metal. By the time he looks around, so many people are standing and shouting that he can't even see Officer Kyle. All he sees are the mechanized movements of Jesse's torso, one hand still holding up his pants.

Solve this, solve this . . .

He knows how good it must feel to finally move on a guard. In the locker room in high school he felt no horror at all after pummeling one of his teammates to death.

He knows how to fight. His whole life has been one long fight, even when the violence was implied and he was merely goading a hostile world: splicing bits of DNA together on his computer, programming, writing journal articles. . . .

"Help! Lenny! Lenny!"

María pulls her unbuttoned blouse over her exposed breasts and climbs over the seatback in front of her. She's okay. She watches her friend run past Shannon, wrench open the folding door at the front, and head for the main avenue, but she takes her time, retrieving the atomizer, draping it over her shoulder, lifting one leg at a time over the seatbacks.

The VC has left the front of the bus unguarded—gone in to help Kyle. No one is left to stop Shannon from talking to her.

María wears his blood in a burst below her right shirt pocket, the sight of which reminds him of the blood drying in the palm of his hand. He catches her eye momentarily. She screws her face into a dirty look and pulls open her shirt, flashing him, seemingly oblivious to the prisoners watching the movements of her golden-brown breasts.

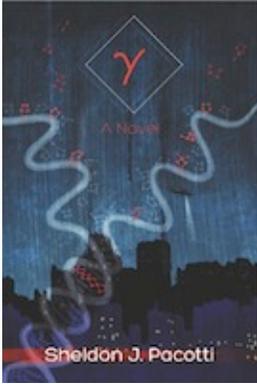
He looks away.

Wrong, wrong, everything is wrong. . . .

An apartment complex stands over the sidewalk. Traffic is backing up. He has to get out of here. The VC had the right idea—escape. He forgot all about his plan to escape. . . .

It will take only a second to crush the transmitter with the two-handed loppers. Yes.

He still remembers where Kyle picked her up the first time. Maybe he could go there. She might talk to him if he was alone. That would be better. Yes. She won't listen to him here.



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Gamma

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