

The Lawgiver

Keith Laumer

“You’re no better than a murderer,” the woman said. “A cold-blooded killer.” Her plump face looked out of the screen at him, hot-eyed, tight-mouthed. She looked like someone’s aunt getting tough with the butcher.

“Madam, the provisions of the Population Control Act—” he started.

“That’s right, give it a fancy name,” she cut in. “Try and make it sound respectable. But that don’t change it. It’s plain murder. Innocent little babies that never done anybody harm—”

“We are not killing babies! A fetus at ninety days is less than one inch long.”

“Don’t matter how long they are, they got as much right to live as anybody!”

He drew a calming breath. “In five years we’d be faced with famine. What would you have us do?”

“If you big men in Washington would go to work and provide for people, for the voters, instead of killing babies, there’d be plenty for everybody.”

“As easy as that, eh? Does it occur to you, madam, that the land can’t support the people if they’re swarming over it like ants?”

“See? People are no more to you than ants!”

“People are a great deal more to me than ants! That’s precisely why I’ve sponsored legislation designed to ensure that they don’t live like insects, crowded in hives, dying of starvation after they’ve laid the countryside bare!”

“Look at you,” she said, “taking up that whole fancy apartment. You got room there for any number o’ homeless children.”

“There are too many homeless children, that’s the problem!”

“It says right in the Good Book, be fruitful and multiply.”

“And where does it end? When they’re stacked like cordwood in every

available square inch of space?”

“Is that what you do? Heap up all them little bodies and set ‘em afire?”

“There are no bodies affected by the law, only fertilized ova!”

“Every one’s a human soul!”

“Madam, each time a male ejaculates, several million germ cells are lost. Do you feel we should preserve every one, mature it *in vitro*—”

“Well! You got your nerve, talking that way to a respectable lady! You—a divorced man. And that son of yours—”

“Thank you for calling, madam,” he said, and thumbed the blanking control.

“I ain’t no madam . . . “ The voice died in a squeal. He went to the small bar at the side of the room, dispensed a stiff shot of over-proof SGA, took it down at a gulp. Back at the desk, he buzzed the switchboard.

“Jerry, no more calls tonight.”

“Sorry about that last one, Senator. I thought—”

“It’s all right. But no more. Not tonight. Not until I’ve had some sleep.”

“Big day, eh, Senator, ramrodding the enabling act through like you did. Uh, by the way, Senator, I just had a flash from Bernie, on the desk. He says there’s a party asking for you, says they claim they have to see you —”

“Not tonight, Jerry.”

“They mentioned your son, Ron, Senator.”

“Yes? What about him?”

“Well, I couldn’t say, Senator. But Bernie says they say it’s pretty important. But like you said, I’ll tell him to tell them not tonight.”

“Wait a minute, Jerry. Put this party on.”

“Sure, Senator.”

The face that appeared was that of a young man with a shaven skull, no eyebrows or lashes. He gazed out of the screen with a bored expression.

“Yes, what is it you want?” the senator demanded, with no attempt to be conciliatory.

The youth tipped his head sideways, pointing. “We’ve got somebody with us you ought to talk to,” he said. “In person.”

“I understand you mentioned my son’s name.”

“We’d better come up.”

“If you have something of interest to me, I suggest you tell me what it is.”

“You wouldn’t like that. Neither would Ron.”

“Where is Ron?”

The boy made a vague gesture. “Spy, zek. We tried. It’s your rax from here on—”

“Kindly speak standard English. I don’t understand you.”

The youth turned to someone out of sight; his mouth moved, but the words were inaudible. He turned back.

“You want us to bring Rink up or not?”

“Who *is* Rink?”

“Rink will tell you all that.”

“Very well. Take my car, number 763.”

He went to the bar, dispensed another stiff drink, then poured it down the drain. He went to the window, deopaqued it. A thousand feet below, a layer of mist glowed softly from the city lights beneath it, stretching all the way to the horizon 50 miles distant.

When the buzzer sounded he turned, called, “Come in.” The door slid back. The boy he had talked to and another came through, supporting between them a plump woman with a pale face. The men were dressed in mismatched vest-suits, many times reused. The woman was wrapped in a long cloak. Her hair was disarranged, so that a long black curl bobbed over the right side of her face. Her visible eye held an expression that might have been fear, or defiance. The men helped her to the low couch. She sank down on it heavily, closed her eyes.

“Well? What’s this about Ron?” the senator asked.

The two men moved toward the door. “Ask Rink,” one of them said.

“Just a minute! You’re not leaving this woman here.”

“Better get a medic in, Senator,” the shaved lad said.

He looked at her. “Is she ill?” She opened her eyes and pushed her hair out of her face. She was pale, and there were distinct dark hollows under her eyes.

“I’m pregnant,” she said in a husky voice. “Awful damn pregnant. And Ron’s the father.”

He walked slowly across to stand before her. “Have you any proof of that remarkable statement?”

She threw the cloak open. Her body looked swollen enough to contain quadruplets.

“I’m not referring to the obvious fact of your condition,” he said.

“He’s the father, all right.”

He turned abruptly, went to the desk, put his finger on the vidscreen

key.

“I’m not lying,” she said. “The paternity’s easy to check. Why would I try to lie?” She was sitting up now; her white fingers dug into the plum-colored cushions.

“I assume you make no claim of a legal marriage contract?”

“Would I be here?”

“You’re aware of the laws governing childbirth—”

“Sure. I’m aware of the laws of nature, too.”

“Why didn’t you report to a PC station as soon as you were aware of your condition?”

“I didn’t want to.”

“What do you expect me to do?”

“Fix it so I can have the baby—and keep him.”

“That’s impossible, of course.”

“It’s your own grandson you’re killing!” the woman said quickly. “You can talk about how one of your compulsory abortions is no worse than lancing a boil, but this”—she put her hands against her belly—“this is a baby, Senator. He’s alive. I can feel him kicking.”

His eyes narrowed momentarily. “Where is Ron?”

“I haven’t seen him in six months. Not since I told him.”

“Does he know you came here?”

“How would he know?”

He shook his head. “What in God’s name do you expect of me, girl?”

“I told you! I want my son—alive!”

He moved away from the desk, noting as he did that the two men had left silently. He started to run his fingers through his hair, jerked his hands down, rammed them in the pockets of his lounging jacket. He turned suddenly to face the girl.

“You did this deliberately—”

“Not without help, I didn’t.”

“Why? With free anti-pregnancy medication and abort service available at any one of a thousand stations in the city, why?”

“Not just free, Senator—compulsory. Maybe I think the government—a bunch of politicians and bureaucrats—has no right to say who can have a child. Or maybe the pills didn’t work. Or maybe I just didn’t give a damn. What does it matter now?”

“You’re not living naked in the woods now. You’re part of a society, and that society has the right to regulate itself.”

“And I have a right to have a baby! You didn’t give me—or anybody—

the right to live! You can't take it away!"

He took a turn up and down the room, stopped before her. "Even if I wanted to help you, what is it you imagine I could do?"

"Get me a birth permit."

"Nonsense. You don't even have a contract, and the qualifications—"

"You can fix it."

"I believe this whole thing is no more than a plot to embarrass me!"

The woman laughed. She threw back her head and screamed laughter. "Ron was right! You're a fool! A cold-blooded old fool! Your own grandson—and you think he's something that was just thought up to annoy you!"

"Stop talking as though this were a living child instead of an illegal embryo!"

Her laughter died away in a half titter, half sob. "It's a funny world we've made for ourselves. In the old days, before we got so Goddamned smart, a man would have been proud and happy to know he had a grandson. He'd look forward to all the things he'd teach him, all the things they'd do together. He'd be a little part of the future that he could see growing, living on after he was dead—"

"That's enough!" He drew a controlled breath and let it out. "Do you realize what you're asking of me?"

"Sure. Save my baby's life. Ron's baby."

His hands opened and closed. "You want me to attempt to deliberately circumvent the laws I've devoted my life to creating!"

"Don't put words to it. Just remember it's a baby's life."

"If I knew where Ron was . . ."

"Yes?"

"We could execute a marriage contract, postdate it. I could manage that. As for a birth permit—" He broke off as the girl's face contorted in an expression like a silent scream.

"Better hurry up," she gasped. "They're coming faster now . . ."

"Good God, girl! Why did you wait until now to bring this to me?"

"I kept hoping Ron would come back."

"I'll have to call a doctor. You know what that means."

"No! Not yet! Find Ron!"

"None of this will help if you're both dead." He keyed the screen, gave terse instructions. "Handle this quietly, Jerry, very quietly," he finished.

"Damn you! I was a fool to come to you!"

"Never mind the hysterics. Just tell me where to start looking for

Ron.”

“I . . . I don’t have any idea.”

“Those friends of yours: what about them? Would they know?”

“I promised Limmy and Dan I wouldn’t get them mixed up in anything.”

He snorted. “And you’re asking me to break my oath to the people of this country.”

The girl gave him an address. “Don’t put them in the middle, Senator. They were pretty decent, bringing me here.”

“The obstetrician will be here in a few minutes. Just lie there quietly and try to relax.”

“What if you can’t find Ron?”

“I suppose you know the answer to that as well as I do.”

“Senator—do they really . . . kill the babies?”

“The embryo never draws a breath. Under the legal definition, it’s not a baby.”

“Oh, Senator—for God’s sake, find him!”

He closed the door, shutting off his view of her frightened face.

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Red light leaked out through the air baffles above the bright-plated plastic door. At the third ring—he could hear the buzzer through the panel—it opened on a shrill of voices, the rattle and boom of music. Acrid, stale-smelling air puffed in his face. A tall man with an oddly trimmed beard looked at him through mirror-lens contacts. A tendril of reddish smoke curled from the room past his head.

“Uh?”

“I’d like to have a word with Mr. Limberg, please.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Limberg. Limmy.”

“Uh.” The bearded man turned away. Beyond him, strangely costumed figures were dimly visible in the thick crimson fog, standing, sitting, lying on the floor. Some were naked, their shaved bodies decorated with painted patterns. A boy and girl dressed in striped tunics and hose undulated past arm in arm, looking curiously alike. The youth with the shaved head appeared, his mouth drawn down at the corners.

“I need to find Ron in a hurry,” the senator snapped, skipping preliminaries. “Can you tell me where he might be?”

“Rink had to blow her tonsils, uh?”

“This is important, Limmy. I have to find him. Seconds may be vital.”

The boy pushed his lips in and out. Others had gathered, listening.

“Hey, who’s the zek?” someone called.

“It’s Eubank.”

The youth stepped out, pulled the door shut behind him. “Look, I want no part, follow?”

“All I want is to find Ron. I’m not here to get anyone in trouble. I appreciate what you did for the girl.”

“Ron’s a pile, as far as I’m concerned. When I saw Rink meant to go through with it, I sent word to him. I didn’t know if it reached him or not. But he screened me about half an hour ago. He’s on his way here now from Phil.”

“Oh the shuttle, I suppose. Good. I can contact him en route—”

“With what for fare? I heard you kept him broke.”

“His allowance—never mind. If he’s not riding the shuttle, how is he getting here?”

“Car.”

“You must be mistaken. His license was lifted last year.”

“Yeah. I remember when—and why.”

“Are you saying . . . suggesting . . .”

“I’m not saying anything. Just that Ron said he’d be at your place as quick as he could get there.”

“I see.” He half turned away, turned back to thank the boy. But the door had already closed.

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“Please try to understand, Lieutenant,” Senator Eubank said to the hard, expressionless face on the screen. “I have reason to believe that the boy is operating a borrowed manually controlled vehicle on the Canada autopike, northbound from Philadelphia, ETD forty minutes ago. He’s just received some very shocking news, and he’s probably driving at a very high speed. He’ll be in an agitated condition, and—”

“You have a description of this vehicle, Senator?”

“No. But surely you have means for identifying a car that’s not locked into the system.”

“That’s correct—but it sometimes takes a few minutes. There are a lot of vehicles on the pike, Senator.”

“You understand he’s under great stress. The circumstances—”

“We’ll take him off as gently as we can.”

“And you’ll keep me informed? I must see him at the first possible instant, you understand?”

“We’ll keep you advised.” The police officer turned his head as if looking at someone off-screen.

“This may be something, Senator,” he said. “I have a report on a four-seater Supercad at Exit 2983. He took the ramp too fast—he was doing a little over two hundred. He went air-borne and crashed.” He paused, listening, then nodded. “Looks like paydirt, Senator. The ID checks on the hot-list out of Philly. And it was on manual control.”

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The officer used his screamlight to clear a path through the crowd to the spot where the heavy car lay on its side under the arches of the overpass. Two men with cutting torches were crouched on top of it, sending up showers of molten droplets.

“He’s alive in there?” Senator Eubank asked.

The lieutenant nodded. “The boys will have him out in a couple of minutes. The crash copter is standing by.”

The torches stopped sputtering. The two men lifted the door, tossed it down behind the car. A white-suited medic with a bundle under his arm climbed up and dropped inside. Half a minute later the crane arm at the back of the big police cruiser hoisted the shock-seat clear of the wreck. From the distance of 50 feet, the driver’s face was clay-white under the polyarcs.

“It’s Ron.”

The medic climbed down, bent over the victim as the senator and his escort hurried up.

“How does it look?” the lieutenant asked.

“Not too good. Internals. Skull looks OK. If he’s some rich man’s pup, he may walk again—with a new set of innards.” The man broke off as he glanced up and saw the civilian beside the officer. “But I wouldn’t waste any time taking him in,” he finished.

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The duty medtech shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir. He’s on the table

right at this moment. There's no way in the world for you to see him until he comes out. He's in very serious condition, Senator."

"I understand." As the tech turned away, Eubank called after him: "Is there a private screen I could use?"

"In the office, sir."

Alone, he punched his apartment code. The operator's face appeared on the screen. "I'm sorry, no—Oh, it's you, Senator. I didn't know you'd gone out—"

"Buzz my flat, Jerry."

The screen winked and cleared. After 15 seconds' wait, the image of a small, sharp-eyed man appeared, rubbing at his elbows with a towel.

"About time you called in, John," he said. "First time in thirty years I've let myself be hauled out of my home in the midst of dinner."

"How is she?"

The elderly man wagged his head. "I'm sorry, John. She slipped away from me."

"You mean—she's dead?"

"What do you expect? A post-terminal pregnancy—she'd been taking drugs for a week to delay the birth. She'd had no medical attention whatever. And your living room rug doesn't make the best possible delivery table! There was massive hemorrhaging. It might have been different if I'd been working in a fully equipped labor room, but under the circumstances, that was out of the question, of course, even if there'd been time."

"You know . . . ?"

"The woman told me something of the circumstances."

"What about the child?"

"Child?" The little man frowned. "I suppose you refer to the fetus. It wasn't born."

"You're going to leave it inside the corpse?"

"What would you have me do?" The doctor lowered his voice. "John, is what she said true? About Ron being the father?"

"Yes—I think so."

The little man's mouth tightened. "Her heart stopped three and a half minutes ago. There's still time for a Caesarian, if that's what you want."

"I . . . I don't know, Walter."

"John, you devoted thirty years of your life to the amendment of the enabling act. It passed by a very thin cat's whisker-. And the opposition hasn't given up, not by a damn sight. The repeal movement is already

underway, and it has plenty of support.” The doctor paused, peering at the senator. “I can bring the child out, but John, a lot of this is already in the record. There’d be no way of keeping it out of the hands of the other side: *your* law, violated by you, the first week it was in force. It would finish you, John, and Population Control, too, for a generation.”

“There’s no hope of resuscitating the mother?”

“None at all. Even today people sometimes die, John.”

“I see. Thank you, Walter. You did your best.”

“About the child . . . ?”

“There is no child. Just an illegal pregnancy.”

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“You may go in now,” the nurse said. Ron was on his back, his shaven head protruding from the bloated cocoon of the life-support tank. His eyes opened as his father bent over him.

“Dad—I was a damned fool. Knew I was going too fast . . . “

The senator leaned closer to catch his whisper.

“I had to try . . . to get back in time” He paused and his eyelids flickered. “Limmy told me . . . she went to you. I knew . . . you’d take care . . . my wife.”

“Easy, Ron, easy. No need to talk now—”

“When Rink told me . . . about the baby . . . I ran out on her. She handed me a contract, all made up. But I couldn’t see it, bringing a child into this mess. I thought . . . when I left she’d go in and have it taken care of. Then I heard . . . she didn’t. It . . . did something to me. I still had the papers. I registered ‘em in Phil. I used your name to get the birth permit. You don’t mind . . . ?”

“Ron . . . “

“I wanted to be there. Too late; damned fool. I always was a damn fool, Dad. It’ll be different, now. A lot different. Being a father . . . not so easy, eh, Dad? But good. Worth it. Worth everything . . . “ The boy’s voice faded.

“Better to let him rest now, sir,” the nurse whispered.

The senator rose stiffly. At the door, he looked back. Ron seemed to be smiling in his sleep.

“Did you say something, sir?” the nurse asked. He looked down at her bright face. “What is there to say?”

Her eyes followed him as he walked away down the bright-lit corridor.