

The Newest Profession by Phyllis Gotlieb

Melba took her walks Upstreet in the bluing part of the evening during the few moments before the lights came on, and turned back downward before they had reached their peak. In her mind her hair was a long ripple, and her neck, wrists, fingers waited for jewels to add facets to the rising brilliance.

The streets were nearly bare now, shops idle. She got the occasional mildly curious, mildly contemptuous glance; she was hardly visible in the dark uniform cape, empty hands hidden behind its slits; she was a big girl in good proportion, but her face, without makeup, faded in the dimness, and her fair hair was cut mercilessly straight around at earlobe length. The long, strong legs in flat-heeled shoes paced evenly: Their only ornament was a small pedometer on a fine chain about one ankle.

When she crossed the road and turned downward there was a shadowland to pass before safety: The keepers of the shops and the servants of the rich who bought from them lived in narrow streets; they did not trouble her, but their children absorbed and vented the attitudes they did not express. When the wind howled up the street from the west and folded back her cape on the expanse of her belly, children young enough for tag and hopscotch yelled names they had likely not thought of by themselves. "Bitch," "cow," "brood mare" were mild enough; tripping and stone-throwing were not.

The stone that hit this evening landed on her temple and made her lose balance. She did not fall this time but turned her ankle and knocked her shoulder against a lamppost. The policeman who came from shadow-they always turned up afterward, never before-reached an unnecessary hand to steady her and said, "You all right, miss?"

"Yeah."

"There's a cut on your forehead and I--"

"I'm late already and I can walk. You want to give me a ticket or somethin'?"

The hand pulled away, and she went on, limping slightly. Maybe the damn pedometer had gone bust.

Children, back of her, being called to supper, yelled:

Monster, monster, suck my tit!

Dunno if you're him, her, it!

*Himmerit! Himmerit!*The words slurred. She knew. It was *her* and it would never suck.

She looked outward at the bloody Sun splayed on the horizon, gross as her belly. Way out beyond Downstreet the spaceport blasts sparked, then warehouses, repair shops, hostels climbed.

Out of shadowland into near darkness. Retired Astronauts' homes and Hospice-safe enough, window lit here and there, harmonica whispering of cramped quarters in rusty scows that crossed the voids, words no cruder than the children's song. Safe enough for her to give in to the pressure pains and bend over, straighten up.

Next door, NeoGenics Labs, Inc. Home.

* * * *

"Three minutes late," said the Ox in the Box, not looking up.

"Yeah. Tripped over my feet." Stiffly she bent to unhook the pedometer, not broken, and showed it at

the wicket. "Two km."

The Ox looked up. Her name was Dorothy, and she and Melba were not at odds, merely untalkative. A stout woman in her forties, graying black hair chopped short and brushed flat back. Sterile or sterilized, sometimes she flushed in heats that no chemical seemed to cure. "You didn't get that thing on your head from tripping over your feet." She rang for a doctor.

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When Melba reached the dining room with a patch on her head and a tensor round her ankle everyone else was half through. She picked up her numbered tray and the whitecapped jock dished out a rewarmed supper from under the infrared. "Bump into a door?"

"What else?"

She took her seat beside Vivian. There were no rivals for it. She was Number 33, Table 5, and there were never more than fifty eaters. Alice, Pam, and Del glanced up and went on shoveling in. Vivian said, "Upstreet again."

"I like the lights, Viv."

"Second time this month. What was it this time?"

"Kids."

"Whoever made up that shit about sticks and stones will break my bones knew at least half of what he was talking about. What did the Ox say?"

"Nothing. Just got the doctor. She's okay." Melba pulled herself as close to the table as her belly would allow and stared at the little card on the tray: Meal 200 grams, starchy vegetable 150 grams, green vegetable....

Pam said, "She knows you could knock her here to hell and gone with your belly."

Melba shrugged. That was what passed for wit here, and she had little of it herself.

Vivian laughed, but she was a nervous laugher and Melba not easily offended. Viv was the smallest and liveliest of the lot, and Melba liked her for making up what she herself lacked. Her hair was black and curly, with the barest hint of premature gray at the temples; her eyes were Wedgwood blue and her lips a natural red envied by a company of women forbidden cosmetics for the risk of dangerous components.

Melba always ate quickly and finished first, in contrast-as they were contrasting friends in every way-to Viv, who was picky. Her tray was empty by the time the jock came to replace it with the pill cup.

Viv's nostrils flared: she was not among the few who were allowed three cigarettes a day and flaunted their smoke after supper. There was more harmless dried herb in it than tobacco, but it smelled like something she loved. However, she was one of the favored allowed a cup of tea to wash down her pills.

Melba drank a lot of milk fortified with yet another drug or vitamin. She turned the medicine cup into her hand and stared at the palmful of colored pills. "Ruby, pearl, emerald-and what's the yellow one again?"

"Topaz-or vitamin D. Only a semi-precious stone. Still think you'll get to wear them?"

Melba smiled her long slow smile. "I hope."

Viv shook her head. A room with fifty women in cone-shaped denim dresses. Metal chairs; metal tables with artificial-wood tops; institutional-cream walls. "Maybe you will. Maybe."

Because the money after all was tremendous. What did not get put into surroundings went to equipment, technical expertise, and the bodies of the women.

It was Melba who waited for Viv, after all, while she lingered over her tea. Pam and Del left to play euchre; Alice, yawning, deflated her cushion ring and went to bed: she was only two weeks postpartum. One or two of the jocks hung around, mildly resentful of the still cluttered table. They were men chosen for low sex drive and lack of aggressiveness. There was no sexual activity allowed the gravid women, except in their dreams, and none on the premises among inbetweeners. Whatever there was had been made difficult enough by propaganda harping on dozens of forms of VD, major and minor.

"Goddamn nunnery," said Viv.

Melba didn't mind. She liked the money. She was big, healthy, slow-thinking, and did not have much trouble pushing back her feelings. Others put up and shut up with resentment. They all knew none was considered very intelligent. No one within their hearing had ever called them cows or sows, but the essence of the words hung like a cloud, drifted like fog. The women turned their backs on the jocks, the Psychs, the Ox, and told each other the stories of their lives.

Melba said softly, "You didn't take your water pill again."

Viv gave her a look of mingled guilt and reproach. "How'd you know?"

"Saw you palming it."

"They make me feel sick."

"I don't like that rotten milk either. You get high blood pressure and you're out."

Viv had a tight water balance. Her belly specialized in dry-worlders; Melba, who bred underwater life, drank all the time, thirsty or not.

"I don't care. This one's my last."

"Not if you don't watch out. I'll be in emeralds and you'll be lying sick somewhere."

Viv, cyclonic, turned bright red and stood up quickly. Melba grabbed her by the arm. "I'm sorry, Viv, I'm sorry! Please! Take the pill."

Vivian sat down slowly. Melba's eyes were full of tears. "I'm sorry, Viv. I don't mean to be so dumb."

"Oh, for Chrissake, don't call yourself dumb. You've got a mind like one of those mills you read about that grinds slow but fine."

"Yeah, and they rot to pieces and everybody says what beautiful scenery. Don't forget the pill, Viv."

"And you never give up, do you?" Viv sighed, fished the pill from her pocket, and swallowed it with the dregs of her tea. "Four male, three female." Her belly was a small polite bulge with the third. "In a thousand years they might fill a planet. In the meantime I'm tired."

Melba had never asked if Vivian went down to the creche, nor often what she did with her spare time, besides visiting library and bookstore. Most women here were of a class to whom steady high unemployment and the debilitation of the nuclear family gave little choice. Men in this stratum had even

fewer opportunities. The Y chromosome could be found in any healthy man.

But few women went down to the creche though none failed to promise herself to do it. Not many boasted of affairs, either with men or other women, or discussed what they did with their time, even when they visited their families, so that they were in the peculiar situation where few knew what others were doing, but all knew what everyone had done before she came to NeoGenics. Loose talk was discouraged by the Company, to preserve they said, anonymity. Nevertheless, Melba, though she did not know if Viv had seen those children, down in the huge rooms of tanks and enclosures, knew that the age limit was thirty, Viv was twenty-eight, and that both she and NeoGenics agreed that seven would fulfill her contract.

“You're lucky you've only got a couple of weeks.” Viv slowed her walk to match Melba's, careless of the grateful clatter of table-clearing back of them.

“Yeah, but I still need the two males, and they're not the kind of little mousy thing you grow.”

“Hey, don't insult my kids!”

“I'm not, Viv. I hope they look something like you.”

“Then go down and see!”

Melba shuddered. “I'm scared. I'm scared to think what mine look like.”

“Being scared is like calling yourself dumb. Working at being a cow.”

Difference. They got on each other's nerves, but they got on. Viv wanted to go to a good school and learn everything she could absorb and then go out and teach anyone who would listen.

“Well, I kind of want to be a cow,” Melba said mildly. “I want a nice place with a lot of good stuff in it, and I don't care if I don't spend the money usefully.”

“And be a fine lady? Oh, Melba, I'm so tired of hearing that!” She leaned against the dirty cream-colored wall of the corridor and looked up at tall Melba. Her eyes were not quite like the Wedgwood in the store windows: that did not have the fine glaze. “I bet you think men will come along and load you with diamonds-if you can get a plastic job on your belly that makes you look like a virgin!”

“But I can't learn things in a school like you.”

“Will I really be able to sit in a school after seven births, when my metabolism's shot and my patience is gone-and I'm hyper enough already, not just from blood pressure? It's a dream, Mel, like everybody else has. Did anybody who's been here ever come back or call or write to tell how she's done?”

“They want to forget the place. You can't blame them for that.”

“It's also because they go out and find there's no other place. They're dead at thirty, with the guts eaten out of them; they run through the money; the plastic job bags out on them; they're ruined for having kids of their own.” She looked away. “I have met one or two ... not too keen on remembering or recognizing. They're cheap whores, or if they're lucky they get a job selling secondhand in a basement. What the hell. You aren't listening.”

“But I am, Viv. I won't let it happen to me.” She added, “And don't be scared I'll end up some junked-up whore either.”

Vivian laughed. "I admit I can't see any pimp beating up on you."

Melba thwacked her watermelon-belly with thumb and finger and laughed with her.

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Melba lay in bed and reread the letter.

Now the plant got retooled your father went back to work so we hired on Karl Olesson to get in the vegetables. With what we use and what we pay him theres not much left from what gets sold. Wesley has run off with that Sherri in the drug store that I always said was cheap. He left in the middle of the night or your father would of slammed him. He left a note which I wont repeat what he said about your father. He didn't even say Love. Half the radishes got cracked on account of the wet. Noreen is pregnant again and won't say who but I wouldn't let your father touch her on account of the one that died. Even though it was a blessing God forgive me. They don't dare give us a cross eyed look in town because I know all about THEM. She could have an abortion but she says she wants something to love. I don't know where she got that idea at seventeen. Her having something to love means I get to take care of it while she runs with dirty bikers. I just cant stand it. Its a good thing your father is working again he just sat and moped and all I got from Wesley and Noreen was a lot of mouth. You dont say much in your letters but I guess you can't help it if it's Govt work. It's hard enough writing to a P.O. number you dont even know what city it's in and I don't know what you're doing. I wish you would just get married. I dont see why not. Everybody used to say Noreen was beautiful and look where it got her so beauty isn't everything. I hope what your doing is respectable. It's enough to drive you crazy around here. I guess that is all for now. Write soon. Your loving Mother. Your father says him too.

ps I'm glad you could spare the money because we needed it.

She folded the letter away with all the others and reached to turn off the light. The intercom buzzer sounded and she switched on.

"Mel-" the voice was Vivian's but so slurred it sounded dead drunk. Viv did not even like whiskey.

"Viv? What's the matter, Viv?"

"Mel...? Come, Mel..."

She pulled her awkward terrible shape out of bed and knotted the rough terry robe. Viv's room was three away. In the few seconds it took to reach it a terror seized her, and she slid the door with shaking hands.

The lights were on. Vivian, still dressed, was lying diagonally on the bed. Her eyes were open and glazed. The left one turned out slightly, and from its corner tears were running in a thin stream; the side of her mouth dragged down so far her face was distorted almost beyond recognition.

Melba knew a stroke when she saw one. She did not ask whether Vivian had called the doctor but slammed the buzzer and yelled.

Viv raised her working hand a little. "Be all ri..."

"Oh God Viv, why didn't you take those goddamn..."

But the one comprehending eye Vivian turned on her was terrible. "Never meant-"

Melba grabbed at the hand. "Oh, Viv-"

"So sorry..."

"Don't talk. Please don't talk."

"Stay, Mel..."

"I'm here. You'll have help soon."

The hand was moist and twitching. It wanted to say something the mouth could not speak.

"Now ... who ... will love..."

"Everyone loves you, Viv. I and everyone."

"Don't mean ... mean, the children, Mel ... the chil..."

Stretcher wheels squealed around the doorway and attendants lifted Vivian in her blanket. Her hand pulled away from Melba's and her eyes closed.

"Stroke," one of the men muttered.

"I know." She had seen her grandmother taking pills by the handful, and dying too. But her grandmother had been seventy-five.

"Good thing you found her when you did."

"Yeah."

The room was empty. Very empty. The pot of russet chrysanthemums sat on the windowsill like setting suns between the muddy blue drapes. The colored spines on the orderly bookshelves blurred into meaninglessness. Melba pulled herself up and shuffled back to her room.

Two or three heads popped out of doorways. "Viv took sick," she muttered. "I dunno if it's serious."

She lay on her bed and turned the light dim. The sea beast swam in her belly. She had become so used to its movement, the fact that she noticed it now surprised her.

Big, slow thing, like me.

Vivian, all tight wires and springs, had broken.

She'll be through here. Maybe crippled-and oh, I said-

Floors below there was a white room where doctors worked on that frail pulse. Deep below that there were tanks where monstrous children turned in sleep so that terrible worlds could be reaped and mined. *Forthem*. They would not care. They had the four females and two males they would breed to build their stone gardens. She beat her fists once on the unresounding drum of her belly.

Buzz

Her hand, still clenched, punched the button.

"Melba?" The Ox's rasp voice, expressionless.

“Yeah.”

“Wake you?”

“No. What-” Her throat went dry.

“She's dead, Mel. Thought I'd tell you first.”

“I-thanks, Dorothy.”

“For goddamn bloody what!” the Ox snarled and slammed off.

She sat like stone. She had expected it. What else with her luck could happen that she could find a friend, one friend worthy of respect, and have that good fortune taken away? She was ashamed of her selfishness, and yet the fact of death was too painful to go near.

She lost track of time, mind blanked out, until her diaphragm buckled sharply, and she fell back on the bed, choking. Then, as if a dam had burst the waters rushed out of her, and her throat opened in an uncontrollable and unending howl.

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First there was the tube in her nose. Then the cone over her mouth, oxygen tasting like dead air already breathed by everyone in the world. Tubes in the wrist and belly. Shots in the buttocks.

Tubes ... and pain ... in the belly?

She opened her eyes. Nurse pulling off EKG cups pop-pop. Scraggy-beard face of A. J. Yates. Her doctor. Old Ayjay.

“We had to do a Caesarean,” he said. “She was a damn big walloper.”

She closed her eyes and dreamed of walking Upstreet with her long hair blowing in the wind. Jewels on neck and wrist, wings on her heels, bells on her toes.

You know that's silly, Mel, said Vivian.

“What?”

Ayjay: “I said you know we can't let you go through more than one other now you've had the cut. It'll have to be the male, and it'll have to be good.”

Yes. They guaranteed their product: they had tried a male once before, and aborted because it was malformed.

“But the males are a lot smaller, so it shouldn't be too much strain. Maybe we can try for twins. Um-hum. It's an idea. Hum-hum. We'll think about it later. In the meantime, you're in pretty good shape. When you graduate after the plastic job you'll be in fine shape.” He stood.

“Viv. Isn't.”

“Um, well ... oh, I'm glad you reminded me. The inquiry's in four days, and we'll have to get you up a bit for that, as a witness, but we'll take care not to tire you.”

Bye-bye, Ayjay. Her eyes closed.

That's a damn dumb idea, said Viv.

“What?”

“Drink this,” said the nurse.

She drank and ran her hand over the bandaged hump, the still huge and swollen womb that slid and shifted as if another fetus were waiting there to be born.

Wings on heels, bell on toes. Twins! *Dumb.* Her eyes closed.

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Four days of hell. The walls were sickly green. “Why do I have to go to the inquiry?” she asked the nurse.

“You were her closest friend, weren't you? They'll want to know anything you can tell them about her behaviour. If she ate or drank anything out of the way, like that. After all, she's only the second death we've had here, and the way we take care of them nobody should die.”

In hell it is life everlasting. *You didn't take your water pill again.*

“Will I have to go under the scanner?”

“Of course. You aborted just after I came, didn't you? And you went under when you were questioned at the tissue conference. It's in your contract. Didn't you ever read it?”

Melba said, “I only asked a polite question, Nurse.”

The nurse gave her a look. She gave the nurse a look.

“I'm sorry. I have other patients to care for.” Whirl away of white skirt.

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On the third day, a reprieve. The Ox tippy-toed in, bearing a painted china mug filled with delicate flowers. The Ox, a friend. The friend.

“Oh, that's lovely, it smells so good. Dottie, did you think of watering Viv's flowers?”

The Ox looked down. “I took the pot to my room. You can have it when you get out, if you like.”

“Oh no, you keep it, please. She'd have been happy...”

“Melba, don't cry now. Wait till after tomorrow.”

“Dottie, I'm scared shitless. I'll have to go under the scanner, and I don't know what to say!”

“Tell the truth, whatever it is,” the Ox said grimly.

“I'm afraid they'll twist everything around.”

“They won't twist you,” said the Ox.

* * * *

But she did not believe that when the jock came for her with the wheelchair. At the tissue conference they had had her almost believing she was some kind of criminal. Viv had pulled her out of that, but there was no...

"It's only one o'clock. I thought the Conference was at two."

"Yeah, but I'm available and so's the chair. What's it to you?"

"I've got a damned sore belly and I feel like a gutted fish. I'm not sitting around in a wheelchair doing nothing for an hour." She needed the hour to think in, but she had been thinking for four days.

"Okay, okay, I'll come back when your ladyship is ready."

A thought ripened. "No. Wait."

"What now?"

"As long as we've got this time I want you to take me down into the creche."

"Aw, come on! First you're too sick and weak to sit in a wheelchair, an' now I'll end up bringing you up in no condition to testify at all an' I'll have *my* ass in a sling for it. I haven't even any authorization for that."

"You don't need authorization. *I* have read my contract and it says I have the right to see the whatsits."

"Conceptees."

"Yeah. So let's get going."

It was shamefully easy to bully a jock. "Listen, if there's any trouble I'll swear under the scanner that I insisted and I'm to blame."

But it was he who insisted on phoning the creche first and was not happy to be invited to come down.

Nor was she, in truth. It was hard sitting in the wheelchair, even though her body did not look the way it had done after previous births, as if a volcano had erupted from it. The pain, in a different place, hurt as much. But she was doing something, besides having babies, that pushed at her from inside.

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The white-coated woman, surprisingly, had a kind face.

"You are feeling better now, my dear?" She had sharp foreign features and some kind of accent; her hair was tightly curled blond, dark at the roots.

"Not much. I just thought ... I'd like to see..."

"Your friend came here often, and looked at many of the children. Yours too. Down this way."

A cold knot in the chest.

Her youngest, twice the size of a normal newborn, slept in a small tank of its own, but the others, chasing through the cool and weed-grown water, seemed far too big even to have been born of woman.

These were not freaks. Freaks were warped and ugly caricatures, and these were a different species. Very dark red, hairless, their lidless eyes had no discernible expression, and no glance rested on her. The noses and chins were flattened back; the creatures had no fins, webs, or scales, but long, firm

rudder-tails like those of tadpoles, and their limbs fitted close to their bodies for streamlining. She felt no pity or horror. They were purely alien. She wondered if they could see beyond the glass and water.

“Can they live outside the tanks?”

“Only for a moment or two.”

Upstreet. Downstreet. Undersea. Another direction. Another dimension.

“They don't look much like me.”

“Only about the forehead and cheekbones. A good model.”

“Oh yeah. What will happen to them?”

“They will mature in a few years, and if they breed well they will make up a little colony and be sent to supervise underwater installations on a world where the seas are suitable for them.”

Servants or slaves?

“When you get a male.”

“A viable one. Those are more difficult, but by the time these mature we will probably have developed modified sperms to fertilize them with, so they can breed their own males.”

“Oh,” said Melba. So much for twins. “Are you allowed to tell me your name?”

“Of course. Natalya Skobelev. So you will know whom to ask for when you come down again.”

Again.

“You got twenty-five minutes,” said the jock.

“I want to see-to see Vivian's...”

There were hours to crying time.

“Oh my God! Monkeys!”

“No, no! Arboreal hominids, with one more step to reach humanity!”

That would be some step. But she looked closer. They peered back at her, taut wiry bodies dancing on the branches of the desert tree in the enclosure. *Vivian!*

These were tailless; they had tiny capable hands and prehensile big toes. Their bodies were covered with light down but there was dark curly hair on their heads, and they had small sharp noses and neat red mouths. Vivian looked from their blue eyes.

They blinked. Melba scratched at the glass and they giggled as if they had been tickled and sucked their little thumbs.

“They look much more like her,” she whispered.

“We used more of her genetic material.”

“And what kind of work will they do?” she asked dully.

“Feed on and harvest medicinal herbs, at first. Then like yours, they will find other things to do as they choose, I hope. Build civilizations in seas and deserts.”

Was this woman here to tell fairy tales? A publicity hack? But her sincerity seemed not only genuine but passionate. NeoGenics was a business that grew servants and slaves. Yet ... slaves had become free.

“Maybe they will. Maybe.”

“Time's up,” said the jock.

“I know. Thank you for showing me around, miss.”

“Remember: Natalya Skobelev, my dear. It is not an easy name.”

“I won't forget it.”

* * * *

She felt shrunk and distorted, but the scanner did not register that. There was no broadcasting of any sort in the auditorium, and no public audience except for the carefully picked jury of six unbiased civilians. Plus the coroner, a group of company officials, and two lawyers.

She let the preliminaries run over her head. A great deal of explication. What NeoGenics had wrought, for the benefit of the jury. Circumstances leading up to, unknown. What medical staff had done for the stricken patient. Useless. All evidence given under the scanner. No one else looked frightened or sickly.

Finally she was helped to the stand and fastened to the scanner.

“Note pseudonym: Ms. Burns.”

“Melba Burns. Toast.”

“Ms. Burns, do you swear to answer truthfully according to your knowledge?”

“Yeah. Excuse me, yes.”

“You have been employed by NeoGenics for four years and three months, during which time you blahblahblah?”

“Yes.”

“Control set,” said the woman at the scanner console. The Ox slipped in and sat in the back row, a patient block of stone in her good dress, flowered navy, incongruous out of the grey uniform. No reassurance there.

Melba could not see the console screen, nor the one that was projected in back of her; the framework about her head prevented that. There was no chance of conscious attempt to control the lines of blips. She did not believe she could do it, and would not try. She was here to betray, and that was the end of it.

The lawyers were a Mutt-and-Jeff pair: the big one to protect the Company's interests, the little one acting for Vivian's relatives, to make sure the Company could not prove she had reneged on her contract, and refuse to pay out the money owing her.

Lawyer Number 1 said, “Ms. Burns, to our knowledge the deceased, Vivian Marsden, considered you her closest friend here.”

“I hope so. She was mine.”

“I know the company does not encourage confidences among their employees in order to protect their anonymity in the community, but-” syrup mouth, “I am sure there must have been some confidence exchanged-”

Number 2: “That is an improper question.”

Mutt raised an ingratiating hand. “I am not asking the witness for gossip about personal details confided by deceased or gathered from others. I also wish to keep this questioning period brief because of the personal suffering of the witness.”

Number 2: “Very sound and thoughtful.”

Melba did not care. The *arboreal hominids* leaped from branch to branch, giggling.

“But the basic question rests on the physical condition of the deceased, Vivian Marsden. Not what has been reported on by medical staff, but what may have been observed by the witness, or told her by Ms. Marsden. Whether she looked ill or complained of feeling ill. Whether ... she might have been harming herself, unknowingly or not, by taking unprescribed drugs, alcohol, tobacco, or ignoring dietary regulations?”

Number 2: “Mr. Coroner, my friend is asking the witness to condemn the deceased out of hand!”

“But that does seem to be the point that must be addressed,” said the coroner. “Ms. Burns, will you try to answer the question as simply as possible, even though it is a complicated one?”

“Again, was Vivian Marsden taking unprescribed drugs, or alcohol, or tobacco, or not eating properly?”

Melba wet her lips. “She didn't when I was with her, and she never talked about it. She hated alcohol. I know she missed cigarettes, but she didn't smoke.” Her heart was in her gut. She glanced at the Ox. The woman's face was flushed, and her eyes full of pity.

The little lawyer said dryly, “I think it has been established by general inquiry that no one has more exact information.”

“There is another direction to travel,” said the Company man, just as dry. “Ms. Burns, is there anything necessary to the state of her health that Ms. Marsden *neglected* to do?”

Melba stared ahead and breathed hard.

“You must answer, you know,” the coroner said gently. “It concerns the health of all the other employees of the Company.”

Melba did not need the screen to know that her heartline blipped like mad. “Sometimes she put her water pill in her pocket after meals. She said she didn't like taking it because it made her feel sick.”
Forgive, forgive!

“Ah. You mean the diuretic.”

“Whatever took away the extra water she wasn't supposed to have.”

Number 2 said quickly, “That is no proof of the cause of an aneurysm. She may have taken the pill later.”

“Or not at all. It is suggestive. How often did this happen, Ms. Burns?”

Melba found herself grinding her teeth. “No more than twice a week that I knew. I kept an eye on her to see what she did with it, and when I noticed her hiding it I made her get it out and take it while I was watching her.”

“She could have found ways to avoid ingesting it if she were determined. Hidden it under her tongue, vomited it up-”

Melba snarled, “Oh, for God's sake!”

“Please restrain yourself, Ms. Burns, and strike those last two remarks. What deceased *did not* do cannot be accurately inferred from what she was observed to have *done* by an untrained witness.”

But the lawyers, ignoring witness and coroner, were engrossed in each other, doing some kind of mating dance.

“I suggest that we ask permission to recall the pathologist to enlarge on his report.”

“I agree. Absolutely. Mr. Coroner, may we call the pathologist to witness?”

“You may,” said the coroner. “Is Dr. Twelvetrees present? Ms. Burns, would you please stand down now?”

The millstones ground. “No!” Melba cried. “It's not right!”

“Ms. Burns, I know you are distraught.”

“If that means I'm upset, I'm damned upset. And maybe everybody thinks I'm stupid. But I'm not crazy. Sir, please let me speak for one minute!”

The coroner sighed. “If you have a contribution to evidence, Ms. Burns, go ahead. But please keep your remarks brief and to the point, as the lawyers are supposed to do.”

There was a mild snicker. Melba despised and ignored it. “Maybe I can help bring out evidence.” She took breath. “I thought we were here to find out just why Vivian died but this fella here acts like she fell in a ditch when she wasn't looking, and this other one is trying to put her on trial for murdering herself. I've answered all the long questions as well as I could, and now I'd like to ask two short questions.” She pointed. “This guy.”

“You wish to address the Company lawyer?” He scratched his head. “This *is* an enquiry and not a trial. Go ahead, but-”

“I *will* keep it short. I want to ask, Mr. Lawyer: did Vivian Marsden have high blood pressure before she came to work for you when she was nineteen? And would she have been cured of it after she left?”

Silence fell with a dark gray thud. A man slipped out of the room, and no one blinked. The lawyer opened his mouth and shut it again. Then, “After all, Ms. Burns, everyone knows there is some risk.”

“Yeah. I guess that's all. Only ... the last words she ever said to me were: *Now who will love the children, Melba?* and I didn't even know what she was talking about. I'm sorry I took up your time and I'll stand down now. Please ask that lady in the corner if she'll take me back to my room. I don't feel well.”

“You did good,” said the Ox.

“Yeah. And a lot of good it'll do. Everybody will be mad at me for telling about the pills.”

“Between you and me, I think a lot of people knew she was trying to hide them, but nobody else made sure she took them, the way you did, so they can be as mad as they like.”

* * * *

She dreamed, a layered and complex dream of creatures in tanks, and children screaming dirty words in the streets, and worlds where the children of NeoGenics stared with empty eyes and died sterile. And her sister Noreen giving birth to a....

The door chimed.

“Come in,” she said in her dream. Noreen's child was....

“It's over,” said the Ox. “Death by misadventure. Nobody to blame, officially. Vivian's heirs will get their money.”

She rubbed her eyes. “I hope they don't throw it around.”

“No use being so bitter.”

“I have no friend.”

“You can count me as kind of half of a friend. I wouldn't mind.”

“I'm sorry, Dottie. I'm behaving like a crud. You are a friend.”

And Skobelev. She would be useful if old Ayjay got twins on the brain again.

“There were some jury recommendations. You interested?”

She said drowsily, “I guess so.”

“About giving the public greater access to information about our beloved Company. Knock off some of the name-calling and stone-throwing. Not fast and not much, but some. And letting government health organizations have a hand in the choice of breeders. The shit hit the fan when they found Twelvetrees. He'd run out to dig up Viv's county health records-which he should of done in the first place and found cases of blood pressure in the family history.”

“Huh. I was trying to say they'd given her the high blood pressure.”

“They brought it out by accepting her without investigating enough. And there were one or two things you said that they needed to hear. Well, I guess I better get back to work, but like you, I have one more question. Now you got your brains working, the way Viv always said you ought, what are you going to do with them?”

Melba smiled. And she had not even cried yet. “Gimme a chance, Dottie. They're still awful creaky.”

* * * *

I did pretty clumsy, Viv, but it was the best I could. You never belonged here. You should have had a man who could give you proper kids, and I'll never know why not. I don't know why I didn't either, except the home I came from isn't the kind I'd want to have. Maybe I never thought I was good enough to make a better one, but I dunno. The old man's a bastard, but he's proud of working, and Ma won't let herself be shamed. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? But kids can't find enough work to be proud of now, and we're not ashamed of the same things. Poor

Noreen. She really is stupid, God forgive me. One thing I can do with the money is get her out of there. Maybe in some kind of shelter, Dorothy'd know, but not around this place. So her baby could at least have a chance to be a person.

Viv? We had all those, and what will they do? They should have had worlds that could grow them by themselves to make their own dumb mistakes, not the ones we make for them ... but I can do something for Noreen....

And if I'm very good and very lucky there'll still be some money to throw around. Aw, Viv, you know there's nothing much wrong with that either. Better than wait until....

... Emerald, ruby, diamond ... and the yellowish one. Topaz. Long hair for fingers to tangle in and kind of go shivering down my back ... ah....

Where'd I find a fella like that, Ma? Well, I'm not preg all the time, and I've seen other eyes on me besides yours. Looking for different things. And maybe....

* * * *

She slept without a dream.

About the Author

Phyllis Gotlieb (1926-) is a lifelong Toronto resident who has published seven novels (six of them science fiction), four volumes of poetry, and a story collection; she has also co-edited an anthology of Canadian science fiction. Her work often uses science fiction to consider and comment upon human nature