

## THE CUTIE

By Greg Egan

'Why won't you even talk about it?'

Diane rolled away from me and assumed a foetal position. 'We talked about it two weeks ago. Nothing's changed since then, so there's no point, is there?'

We'd spent the afternoon with a friend of mine, his wife, and their six-month-old daughter. Now I couldn't close my eyes without seeing again the expression of joy and astonishment on that beautiful child's face, without hearing her peals of innocent laughter, without feeling once again the strange giddiness that I'd felt when Rosalie, the mother, had said, 'Of course you can hold her.'

I had hoped that the visit would sway Diane. Instead, while leaving her untouched, it had multiplied a thousandfold my own longing for parenthood, intensifying it into an almost physical pain.

OK, OK, so it's biologically programmed into us to love babies. So what? You could say the same about ninety per cent of human activity. It's biologically programmed into us to enjoy sexual intercourse, but nobody seems to mind about that, nobody claims they're being tricked by wicked nature into doing what they otherwise would not have done. Eventually someone is going to spell out, step by step, the physiological basis of the pleasure of listening to Bach, but will that make it, suddenly, a 'primitive' response, a biological con job, an experience as empty as the high from a euphoric drug?

'Didn't you feel anything when she smiled?'

'Frank, shut up and let me get some sleep.'

'If we have a baby, I'll look after her. I'll take six months off work and look after her.'

'Oh, six months, very generous! And then what?'

'Longer then. I could quit my job for good, if that's what you want.'

'And live on what? I'm not supporting you for the rest of your life! Shit! I suppose you'll want to get married then, won't you?'

'All right, I won't quit my job. We can put her in child care when she's old enough. Why are you so set against it? Millions of people are having children every day, it's such an ordinary thing, why do you keep manufacturing all these obstacles?'

'Because I do not want a child. Understand? Simple as that.'

I stared up at the dark ceiling for a while, before saying with a not quite even voice, 'I could carry it, you know. It's perfectly safe these days, there've been thousands of successful male pregnancies. They could take the placenta and embryo from you after a couple of weeks, and attach it to

the outer wall of my bowel.'

'You're sick.'

'They can even do the fertilisation and early development in vitro, if necessary. Then all you'd have to do is donate the egg.'

'I don't want a child. Carried by you, carried by me, adopted, bought, stolen, whatever. Now shut up and let me sleep.'

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When I arrived home the next evening, the flat was dark, quiet, and empty. Diane had moved out; the note said she'd gone to stay with her sister. It wasn't just the baby thing, of course; everything about me had begun to irritate her lately.

I sat in the kitchen drinking, wondering if there was any way of persuading her to come back. I knew that I was selfish: without a constant, conscious effort, I tended to ignore what other people felt. And I never seemed to be able to sustain that effort for long enough. But I did try, didn't I? What more could she expect?

When I was very drunk, I phoned her sister, who wouldn't even put her on. I hung up, and looked around for something I could break, but then all my energy vanished and I lay down right there on the floor. I tried to cry, but nothing happened, so I went to sleep instead.

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The thing about biological drives is, we're so easily able to fool them, so skilled at satisfying our bodies while frustrating the evolutionary reasons for the actions that give us pleasure. Food with no nutritional value can be made to look and taste wonderful. Sex that can't cause pregnancy is every bit as good, regardless. In the past, I suppose a pet was the only way to substitute for a child. That's what I should have done: I should have bought a cat.

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A fortnight after Diane left me, I bought the Cutie kit, by EFT from Taiwan. Well, when I say 'from Taiwan' I mean the first three digits of the EFT code symbolised Taiwan; sometimes that means something real, geographically speaking, but usually it doesn't. Most of these small companies have no physical premises; they consist of nothing but a few megabytes of data, manipulated by generic software running on the international trade network. A customer phones their local node, specifies the company and the product code, and if their bank balance or their credit rating checks out, orders are placed with various component manufacturers, shipping agents, and automated assembly firms. The company itself moves nothing but electrons.

What I really mean is: I bought a cheap copy. A pirate, a clone, a lookalike, a bootleg version, call it what you will. Of course I felt a little guilty, and a bit of a miser, but who can afford to pay five times as much for the

genuine, made-in-El Salvador, USA product? Yes, it's ripping off the people who developed the product, who spent all that time and money on R & D, but what do they expect when they charge so much? Why should I have to pay for the cocaine habits of a bunch of Californian speculators who had a lucky hunch ten years ago about a certain biotechnology corporation? Better that my money goes to some fifteen-year-old trade hacker in Taiwan or Hong Kong or Manila, who's doing it all so that his brothers and sisters won't have to screw rich tourists to stay alive.

See what fine motives I had?

The Cutie has a venerable ancestry. Remember the Cabbage Patch Doll? Birth certificate provided, birth defects optional. The trouble was, the things just lay there, and lifelike robotics for a doll are simply too expensive to be practical. Remember the Video Baby? The Computer Crib? Perfect realism, so long as you didn't want to reach through the glass and cuddle the child.

Of course I didn't want a Cutie! I wanted a real child! But how? I was thirty-four years old, at the end of one more failed relationship. What were my choices?

I could start searching again for a woman who (a) wanted to have children, (b) hadn't yet done so, and (c) could tolerate living with a shit like me for more than a couple of years.

I could try to ignore or suppress my unreasonable desire to be a father. Intellectually (whatever that means), I had no need for a child; indeed, I could easily think of half a dozen impeccable arguments against accepting such a burden. But (to shamelessly anthropomorphise) it was as if the force that had previously led me to engage in copious sex had finally cottoned on about birth control, and so had cunningly decided to shift my attention one link down the flawed causal chain. As an adolescent dreams endlessly of sex, so I dreamed endlessly of fatherhood.

Or—

O! The blessings of technology! There's nothing like a third option to create the illusion of freedom of choice!

—I could buy a Cutie.

Because Cuties are not legally human, the whole process of giving birth to one, whatever your gender, is simplified immensely. Lawyers are superfluous, not a single bureaucrat needs to be informed. No wonder they're so popular, when the contracts for adoption or surrogacy or even IVF with donor gametes all run to hundreds of pages, and when the child-related clauses in interspouse legal agreements require more negotiations than missile-ban treaties.

The controlling software was downloaded into my terminal the moment my account was debited; the kit itself arrived a month later. That gave me plenty of time to have chosen the precise appearance I wanted, by playing with the simulation graphics. Blue eyes, wispy blond hair, chubby, dimpled limbs, a snub nose . . . oh, what a stereotyped little cherub we built, the

program and I. I chose a 'girl', because I'd always wanted a girl, though Cuties don't live long enough for gender to make much of a difference. At the age of four they suddenly, quietly, pass away. The death of the little one is so tragic, so heartbreaking, so cathartic. You can put them in their satin-padded coffins, still wearing their fourth-birthday-party clothes, and kiss them goodnight one last time before they're beamed up to Cutie heaven.

Of course it was revolting, I knew it was obscene, I cringed and squirmed inside at the utter sickness of what I was doing. But it was possible, and I find the possible so hard to resist. What's more, it was legal, it was simple, it was even cheap. So I went ahead, step by step, watching myself, fascinated, wondering when I'd change my mind, when I'd come to my senses and call it all off.

Although Cuties originate from human germ cells, the DNA is manipulated extensively before fertilisation takes place. By changing the gene that codes for one of the proteins used to build the walls of red blood cells, and by arranging for the pineal, adrenal and thyroid glands (triple backup to leave no chance of failure) to secrete, at the critical age, an enzyme that rips the altered protein apart, infant death is guaranteed. By extreme mutilation of the genes controlling embryonic brain development, subhuman intelligence (and hence their subhuman legal status) is guaranteed. Cuties can smile and coo, gurgle and giggle and babble and dribble, cry and kick and moan, but at their peak they're far stupider than the average puppy. Monkeys easily put them to shame, goldfish out-perform them in certain (carefully chosen) intelligence tests. They never learn to walk properly, or to feed themselves unaided. Understanding speech, let alone using it, is out of the question.

In short, Cuties are perfect for people who want all the heart-melting charms of a baby, but who do not want the prospect of surly six-year-olds, or rebellious teenagers, or middle-aged vultures who'll sit by their parents' deathbeds, thinking of nothing but the reading of the will.

Pirate copy or not, the process was certainly streamlined: all I had to do was hook up the Black Box to my terminal, switch it on, leave it running for a few days while various enzymes and utility viruses were tailor-made, then ejaculate into tube A.

Tube A featured a convincingly pseudo-vaginal design and realistically scented inner coating, but I have to confess that despite my lack of conceptual difficulties with this stage, it took me a ludicrous forty minutes to complete it. No matter who I remembered, no matter what I imagined, some part of my brain kept exercising a power of veto. But I read somewhere that a clever researcher has discovered that dogs with their brains removed can still go through the mechanics of copulation; the spinal cord, evidently, is all that's required. Well, in the end my spinal cord came good, and the terminal flashed up a sarcastic well done! I should have put my fist through it. I should have chopped up the Black Box with an axe and run around the room screaming nonsense poems. I should have bought a cat. It's good to have things to regret, though, isn't it? I'm sure it's an essential part of being human.

Three days later, I had to lie beside the Black Box and let it place a fierce claw on my belly. Impregnation was painless, though, despite the threatening appearance of the robot appendage; a patch of skin and muscle was locally anaesthetised, and then a quickly plunging needle delivered a pre-packaged biological complex, shielded by a chorion specially designed for the abnormal environment of my abdominal cavity.

And it was done. I was pregnant.

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After a few weeks of pregnancy, all my doubts, all my distaste, seemed to vanish. Nothing in the world could have been more beautiful, more right, than what I was doing. Every day, I summoned up the simulated foetus on my terminal — the graphics were stunning; perhaps not totally realistic, but definitely cute, and that was what I'd paid for, after all — then put my hand against my abdomen and thought deep thoughts about the magic of life.

Every month I went to a clinic for ultrasound scans, but I declined the battery of genetic tests on offer; no need for me to discard an embryo with the wrong gender or unsatisfactory eye colour, since I'd dealt with those requirements at the start.

I told no one but strangers what I was doing; I'd changed doctors for the occasion, and I'd arranged to take leave once I started to 'show' too severely (up until then I managed to get by with jokes about 'too many beers'). Towards the end I began to be stared at, in shops and on the street, but I'd chosen a low birth-weight, and nobody could have known for sure that I wasn't merely obese. (In fact, on the advice of the instruction manual, I'd intentionally put on fat before the pregnancy; evidently it's a useful way to guarantee energy for the developing foetus.) And if anyone who saw me guessed the truth, so what? After all, I wasn't committing a crime.

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During the day, once I was off work, I watched television and read books on child care, and arranged and rearranged the cot and toys in the corner of my room. I'm not sure when I chose the name: Angel. I never changed my mind about it, though. I carved it into the side of the cot with a knife, pretending that the plastic was the wood of a cherry tree. I contemplated having it tattooed upon my shoulder, but then that seemed inappropriate, between father and daughter. I said it aloud in the empty flat, long after my excuse about 'trying out the sound' was used up; I picked up the phone every now and then, and said, 'Can you be quiet, please! Angel is trying to sleep!'

Let's not split hairs. I was out of my skull. I knew I was out of my skull. I blamed it, with wonderful vagueness, on 'hormonal effects' resulting from placental secretions into my bloodstream. Sure, pregnant women didn't go crazy, but they were better designed, biochemically as well as anatomically, for what I was doing. The bundle of joy in my abdomen was sending out all kinds of chemical messages to what it thought was a female body, so was it any wonder that I went a little strange?

Of course there were more mundane effects as well. Morning sickness (in

fact, nausea at all hours of the day and night). A heightened sense of smell, and sometimes a distracting hypersensitivity of the skin. Pressure on the bladder, swollen calves. Not to mention the simple, inevitable, exhausting unwieldiness of a body that was not just heavier, but had been reshaped in about the most awkward way I could imagine. I told myself many times that I was learning an invaluable lesson, that by experiencing this state, this process, so familiar to so many women but unknown to all but a handful of men, I would surely be transformed into a better, wiser person. Like I said, I was out of my skull.

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The night before I checked in to hospital for the Caesarean, I had a dream. I dreamt that the baby emerged, not from me, but from the Black Box. It was covered in dark fur, and had a tail, and huge, lemur-like eyes. It was more beautiful than I had imagined possible. I couldn't decide, at first, if it was most like a young monkey or a kitten, because sometimes it walked on all fours like a cat, sometimes it crouched like a monkey, and the tail seemed equally suited to either. Eventually, though, I recalled that kittens were born with their eyes closed, so a monkey was what it had to be.

It darted around the room, then hid beneath my bed. I reached under to drag it out, then found that all I had in my hands was an old pair of pyjamas.

I was woken by an overwhelming need to urinate.

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The hospital staff dealt with me without a single joke; well, I suppose I was paying enough not to be mocked. I had a private room (as far from the maternity ward as possible). Ten years ago, perhaps, my story would have been leaked to the media, and cameramen and reporters would have set up camp outside my door. But the birth of a Cutie, even to a single father, was, thankfully, no longer news. Some hundred thousand Cuties had already lived and died, so I was no trail-blazing pioneer; no paper would offer me ten years' wages for the bizarre and shocking story of my life, no TV stations would bid for the right to zoom in on my tears at the primetime funeral of my sweet, subhuman child. The permutations of reproductive technology had been milked dry of controversy; researchers would have to come up with a quantum leap in strangeness if they wanted to regain the front page. No doubt they were working on it.

The whole thing was done under general anaesthetic. I woke with a headache like a hammer blow and a taste in my mouth like I'd thrown up rotten cheese. The first time I moved without thinking of my stitches; it was the last time I made that mistake.

I managed to raise my head.

She was lying on her back in the middle of a cot, which now looked as big as a football field. Wrinkled and pink just like any other baby, her face screwed up, her eyes shut, taking a breath, then howling, then another breath, another howl, as if screaming were every bit as natural as breathing. She had thick dark hair (the program had said she would, and

that it would soon fall out and grow back fair). I climbed to my feet, ignoring the throbbing in my head, and leant over the wall of the cot to place one finger gently on her cheek. She didn't stop howling, but she opened her eyes, and, yes, they were blue.

'Daddy loves you,' I said. 'Daddy loves his Angel.' She closed her eyes, took an extra-deep breath, then screamed. I reached down and, with terror, with dizzying joy, with infinite precision in every movement, with microscopic care, I lifted her up to my shoulder and held her there for a long, long time.

Two days later they sent us home.

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Everything worked. She didn't stop breathing. She drank from her bottle, she wet herself and soiled her nappies, she cried for hours, and sometimes she even slept.

Somehow I managed to stop thinking of her as a Cutie. I threw out the Black Box, its task completed. I sat and watched her watch the glittering mobile I'd suspended above her cot, I watched her learning to follow movements with her eyes when I set it swinging and twisting and tinkling, I watched her trying to lift her hands towards it, trying to lift her whole body towards it, grunting with frustration, but sometimes cooing with enchantment. Then I'd rush up and lean over her and kiss her nose, and make her giggle, and say, again and again, 'Daddy loves you! Yes, I do!'

I quit my job when my holiday entitlement ran out. I had enough saved to live frugally for years, and I couldn't face the prospect of leaving Angel with anybody else. I took her shopping, and everyone in the supermarket succumbed to her beauty and charm. I ached to show her to my parents, but they would have asked too many questions. I cut myself off from my friends, letting no one into the flat, and refusing all invitations. I didn't need a job, I didn't need friends, I didn't need anyone or anything but Angel.

I was so happy and proud, the first time she reached out and gripped my finger when I waved it in front of her face. She tried to pull it into her mouth. I resisted, teasing her, freeing my finger and moving it far away, then suddenly offering it again. She laughed at this, as if she knew with utter certainty that in the end I would give up the struggle and let her put it briefly to her gummy mouth. And when that happened, and the taste proved uninteresting, she pushed my hand away with surprising strength, giggling all the while.

According to the development schedule, she was months ahead, being able to do that at her age. 'You little smartie!' I said, talking much too close to her face. She grabbed my nose then exploded with glee, kicking the mattress, making a cooing sound I'd never heard before, a beautiful, delicate sequence of tones, each note sliding into the next, almost like a kind of birdsong.

I photographed her weekly, filling album after album. I bought her new clothes before she'd outgrown the old ones, and new toys before she'd even touched the ones I'd bought the week before. 'Travel will broaden your

mind,' I said, each time we prepared for an outing. Once she was out of the pram and into the stroller, seated and able to look at more of the world than the sky, her astonishment and curiosity were sources of endless delight for me. A passing dog would have her bouncing with joy, a pigeon on the footpath was cause for vocal celebration, and cars that were too loud earned angry frowns from Angel that left me helpless with laughter, to see her tiny face so expressive of contempt.

It was only when I sat for too long watching her sleeping, listening too closely to her steady breathing, that a whisper in my head would try to remind me of her predetermined death. I shouted it down, silently screaming back nonsense, obscenities, meaningless abuse. Or sometimes I would quietly sing or hum a lullaby, and if Angel stirred at the sound I made, I would take that as a sign of victory, as certain proof that the evil voice was lying.

Yet at the very same time, in a sense, I wasn't fooling myself for a minute. I knew she would die when the time came, as one hundred thousand others had died before her. And I knew that the only way to accept that was by doublethink, by expecting her death while pretending it would never really come, and by treating her exactly like a real, human child, while knowing all along that she was nothing more than an adorable pet. A monkey, a puppy, a goldfish.

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Have you ever done something so wrong that it dragged your whole life down into a choking black swamp in a sunless land of nightmares? Have you ever made a choice so foolish that it cancelled out, in one blow, everything good you might ever have done, made void every memory of happiness, made everything in the world that was beautiful, ugly, turned every last trace of self-respect into the certain knowledge that you should never have been born?

I have.

I bought a cheap copy of the Cutie kit.

I should have bought a cat. Cats aren't permitted in my building, but I should have bought one anyway. I've known people with cats, I like cats, cats have strong personalities, a cat would have been a companion I could have given attention and affection to, without fuelling my obsession: if I'd tried dressing it up in baby clothes and feeding it from a bottle, it would have scratched me to pieces and then shrivelled my dignity with a withering stare of disdain.

I bought Angel a new set of beads one day, an abacus-like arrangement in ten shiny colours, to be suspended above her in her cot. She laughed and clapped as I installed it, her eyes glistening with mischief and delight.

Mischief and delight?

I remembered reading somewhere that a young baby's 'smiles' are really caused by nothing but wind — and I remembered my annoyance; not with the facts themselves, but with the author, for feeling obliged to smugly



disseminate such a tedious truth. And I thought, what's this magic thing called 'humanity', anyway? Isn't half of it, at least, in the eyes of the beholder?

'Mischief? You? Never!' I leant over and kissed her.

She clapped her hands and said, very clearly, 'Daddy!'

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All the doctors I've seen are sympathetic, but there's nothing they can do. The time bomb inside her is too much a part of her. That function, the kit performed perfectly.

She's growing smarter day by day, picking up new words all the time. What should I do?

- (a) Deny her stimuli?
- (b) Subject her to malnutrition?
- (c) Drop her on her head? Or,
- (d) None of the above?

Oh, it's all right, I'm a little unstable, but I'm not yet completely insane: I can still understand the subtle difference between fucking up her genes and actually assaulting her living, breathing body. Yes, if I concentrate as hard as I can, I swear I can see the difference.

In fact, I think I'm coping remarkably well: I never break down in front of Angel. I hide all my anguish until she falls asleep.

Accidents happen. Nobody's perfect. Her death will be quick and painless. Children die around the world all the time. See? There are lots of answers, lots of sounds I can make with my lips while I'm waiting for the urge to pass — the urge to kill us both, right now; the purely selfish urge to end my own suffering. I won't do it. The doctors and all their tests might still be wrong. There might still be a miracle that can save her. I have to keep living, without daring to hope. And if she does die, then I will follow her.

There's one question, though, to which I'll never know the answer. It haunts me endlessly, it horrifies me more than my blackest thoughts of death:

Had she never said a word, would I really have fooled myself into believing that her death would have been less tragic?