

KATE WILHELM

FORGET LUCK

Tony Manetti had not been assigned to cover the colloquium at Michigan State, but the day before it was to start, his editor had a family crisis. Tony would have to go. A suite was already reserved in the magazine's name at the Holiday Inn; a rental car would be waiting at the Lansing airport.

Tony had called Georgina twice, leaving the message that meant she was to return the call when her husband was not around, but she had not called back. Already on her way from Berkeley, he decided. Of course, she thought Harry would be covering the conference, and accordingly had not been in touch with Tony. Five nights, he kept thinking five nights, and days, of course.

When he checked in at the motel, Georgina had not yet registered. He paid scant attention to the academic papers the desk clerk handed him; the speakers would all make certain Academic Currents received a copy of their papers. He checked the schedule. That evening, Saturday, there would be opening ceremonies, then people would drift away to eat and drink. On Sunday there would be a brunch, several luncheons, teas, more eating and drinking, and on Monday the attendees would start lecturing one another. He planned to miss it all. He could read the papers any time, and if anything interesting happened, someone would tell him all about it. He planned to be in upper Michigan with the gorgeous Georgina.

She had not checked in yet when he came back down, after leaving his gear in his suite. He went to the bar, crowded with academics, ordered a gin and tonic, and looked for a place to sit where he could keep an eye on the lobby.

Someone said, "Ah, Peter, good to see you again." A heavysset bald man was beckoning to him.

"Dr. Bressler," Tony said. "How are you." He looked past him toward the front desk where people were checking in in a continuous flow.

"Very well, Peter. Here, take a seat."

"It's Tony. Tony Manetti." Bressler had been his teacher for a term at Columbia; Tony had seen him twice, once in the hall and once in class, and every time they met at a conference, Bressler called him Peter.

"Yes, of course. You're the FBI fellow."

"No sir. I work for Academic Currents, the magazine." A new group had replaced the old; she was not among them.

"Of course. Of course. Peter, you're just the sort of fellow I've been looking for, someone with your training."

Bressler was in his sixties, a contender for the Nobel any year now for his past

work in genetics, and he was more than a little crazy, Tony had decided six years ago in his class. A redhead appeared. He strained to see. Wrong redhead.

". . . a bit of a problem getting blood . . ."

He thought of her legs, a dancer's long legs.

". . . can't seem to get even a drop. One can't very well simply ask for it, you see."

He had been to the upper peninsula once in late summer; it had been. misty and cool, romantic, with a lot of shadowy forest.

". . . have to think they're onto me. I simply can't account for it in any other way. Four accidents in the last two years, and some of my finest: graduate students. . ."

Admit it, he would say, your marriage is a sham. I can move out to the west coast, he would say. I don't have to stay in Chicago; I can work out of anywhere.

". . . really substantiates my theory, you see, but it also poses a severe problem."

Tony had hardly touched his gin and tonic; it was simply something to do while he waited. He tasted it and put it down again. Bressler was gazing off into space, frowning.

And then she appeared, clinging to the arm of Melvin Witcome, smiling up at him the same way she sometimes had smiled up at Tony. Melvin Witcome was some kind of special course coordinator for the Big Ten, a man of power and influence; not yet forty, independently wealthy, handsome, suave, Phi Beta Kappa, with a doctorate in charm or something he was everything Tony was not. He watched Witcome sign the registration, watched him and Georgina take their computer keys, watched them point out their bags to a bellboy, then board the elevator together. He was not aware that he had stood up until he heard Bressler's voice.

"I don't mean to imply there's any immediate danger. Sit down, Peter."

He sat down and gulped some of his drink. It was a mistake; they simply happened to arrive at the same time; they were old friends; she had not expected Tony to be there. He finished his drink. She had not expected him to be there.

"You're not going to the beastly opening ceremony, are your?" Bressler placed his hand on Tony's arm. "Let's go have some dinner instead. I want to pick your brain. You're a godsend, Peter. I was desperate for guidance, and you appeared. A godsend."

He had talked to the class about angels, Tony remembered then. Something about angels. Tony had tuned out. He had tuned out most of that year, in fact.

Bressler's voice had grown a bit shrill. "No one knows how humiliating it is to be considered a weirdo. A weirdo," he repeated with bitter satisfaction. "Simply because you have come upon a truth that others are not yet willing to accept or even to see."

"Angels," Tony said

"Excellent, Peter! Ten years or more and you remember. But, of course, they prefer to see angels. Come on, let's go have some dinner."

Tony stood up. It had been six years ago; he didn't bother to make the correction. When they emerged from the dim bar, a mirage of pine forest danced in the street before him. A taxi drove through the dripping trees, and Bressler waved it over.

They had flaming cheese, and retsina with lamb kebabs, and ouzo with honey-doused walnut cakes. Bressler talked without letup throughout. Tony listened sporadically, brooding about the gorgeous Georgina.

"Of course, we all knew you were very special," Bressler said, then sipped his Greek coffee. "Your job is proof enough. I know people who would kill for your job. Rumor was you saved Bush's life or something, wounded in the line of duty, permanently disabled and quite justly rewarded, all that."

What really had happened was that when he was twenty-two, with a bachelor of science degree, he had applied to the FBI, along with his best friend, Doug Hastings, and to their surprise, they both had been accepted. A year later, his first real assignment had taken him and a senior agent out to do a routine background security check. A nothing assignment, until a fourteen-year-old boy with no hair had used him for target practice. Tony would have been quite seriously wounded, even shot dead, if he had not bent over at precisely the right moment to free his pants leg from the top of his sock. As it was he had been shot in the upper arm. Then, two weeks after being declared fit to resume a life of fighting evil, he had been shot again. The second time had been from the rear, and the only people behind him that day had been two other special agents and their supervisor, a unit chief.

He rather liked the version Bressler was voicing, and, as he had been enjoined never to reveal the truth of the matter, he remained silent, impassive, inscrutable. And, he was afraid, ridiculous. The second time he had been approaching a Buick in a crouch, and when he realized it was empty, he had stood up and started to turn to say the coast was clear. The bullet had gone through his arm instead of his head. The other arm this time.

"Must be like being a priest, once a priest always a priest. One doesn't forget training like that. Once FBI, always FBI; isn't that right?"

Tony finished his ouzo. The last time he had seen his former best friend Doug Hastings, Doug had said, "Keep away from me, jinx. Orders. Okay? No hard

feelings ?"

"Well, no one expects you to talk about it," Bressler said. He waved his tiny cup for more Greek coffee. "But you have had the training. Put your mind to it, Peter. How can I get blood samples from those people?"

Cautiously Tony said, "I need time to think about it."

"Of course, of course. When we go back to the hotel I'll hand you the reports, my notes, everything. It was providence that sent you to me, Peter. I had a feeling. Are you ready?"

What he would do, Tony had decided, was gather up the papers already in hand, check out in the morning and beat it.

Back in his suite, he gazed morosely at the stack of papers; the desk clerk had handed him another pile, and Bressler had added his own bulging package. His head was aching with a dull distant surf-like monotony; he had had more to drink that evening than he generally consumed in a year, and he was not at all ready for sleep. When he found himself wondering if Georgina and Witcome were in a suite like his, with a couch like his, the same coffee table, the same king-sized bed, he began to shuffle papers. Not Bressler's, he put them aside and looked over a few others. But bits and pieces of what Bressler had said floated back to his mind, not in any rational coherent way, in phrases. He suspected that Bressler had talked in disconnected phrases.

Then, because it was his job to condense ten, fifteen, twenty pages of academic papers to a paragraph that would make sense to a reader, even if only temporarily, he found he was doing the same thing to this evening with Bressler.

Genes were the secret masters of the universe. Tony blinked, but he was certain Bressler had said that. Right. Genes ruled the body they inhabited, communicated with it; they ordered black hair, or red. And silky skin, and eyes like the deepest ocean. . . He shook himself. Genes were immortal, unless the carriers died without progeny. They decided issues like intelligence, allergies, homosexuality. . .

He closed his eyes, trying to remember where the angels came in. Sixty-eight percent of those polled believed in angels; forty-five percent believed in their own personal guardian angel. That was it. For guardian angel read genes.

Everyone knew someone or about someone who had had a miraculous escape from certain death or terrible injury. The sole survivor of an airplane crash; the infant who didn't freeze when abandoned in zero temperature; a highway accident that should have been fatal. . .

"Forget angels, forget a sixth sense, an intuitive avoidance of danger. Think alleles, the right combination of alleles. Genes are the secret masters and a particular combination of alleles, a particular gene, or more than one possibly, comes into being occasionally to rule all the others, for what purpose we can

only guess. These very special genes can cause other genes to do their bidding, cause a change in metabolism that keeps a freezing infant from dying, regulate heart and lung functions to allow a drowned boy to be revived, alter every tissue in the human body and permit it to walk away from an impact that should have killed it outright. . ."

Tony yawned. There had been more, three hours' worth more, but he had condensed, combined, edited, and had made it coherent. He wished he had some aspirin. What he had done was compact a yard of garbage into a small neat package, but it was still the same garbage. He took a shower and went to bed, and felt lost in an acre of hard, cold, polyester loneliness.

He was up and dressed by seven-thirty, determined to be gone before West Coast people, Berkeley people, before Georgina was awake. He ordered breakfast, and while waiting for it he stuffed papers into his briefcase, leaving Bressler's stack to be turned in at the front desk, to be put in the man's message box, or thrown away, or whatever. When those were the only reading material remaining, he glanced at them.

The subject reports were on top. Everett Simes, at eleven, had been found in a snowdrift, body temperature sixty-three. He had survived with no ill effects. At nineteen he had fallen off a two-hundred-foot cliff and had walked away from the accident, no ill effects. Vera Tanger had survived an explosion in a restaurant that had killed everyone else there; she had survived having her stalled car totaled by a train. Carl Waley, two miraculous survivals. Beverly Wang, two. Stanley R. Griggs, two.

He replaced the papers in the folder when there was a knock on his door. His breakfast had arrived, and looming over the cart was Dr. Bressler, nearly pushing it himself in his eagerness to gain entrance.

"Peter, I'm so glad you're up and about already. Did you read my material?"

Tony motioned to the waiter to unload the cart by the window, signed the charge, and waved him away without speaking.

"Do you have another cup lurking under there?" Bressler asked. The waiter produced another cup and saucer. "And you might bring another pot of coffee," Bressler said. He settled down at the window table and began to lift lids off dishes.

They shared the breakfast; Bressler ate only the finger food since he had no silverware. Sausage was finger food. He talked constantly.

"The subjects I'm after all had at least two escapes," he said. "Often three or even four. But two is sufficient. I excluded those with only one reported escape. One could be considered coincidence, but two, three, four? Forget coincidence. No one knows how many possible subjects are out there; not all accidents get reported, of course. I settled for five who live close enough to New York to make it possible, I thought, to extract a sample from them. Hair

follicles, saliva, blood, skin scrapings. You know, you're a scientist. But four times in the past two years the graduate students I sent out had accidents of their own. One lost the hair brush he had stolen when he was mugged. Another was chased away by a ferocious dog; he fell and broke his leg trying to elude the beast. One never could get near the subject; she was as wary as a Mata Hari." He smiled at his little rhyme. "My students are showing some reluctance concerning further attempts."

Tony emptied the coffee pot into his cup.

Bressler looked at it in disappointment. "Have you come up with an idea?" he asked then.

"Ask outright for a sample," Tony said. "Offer to pay five bucks a spit. Align yourself with a doctor, a clinic or something like that, and offer free checkups. Find their dentists and pay him to collect a sample. Hire a mugger and have him do a scraping before he snatches the loot. Hire a flock of guys in white coats to swarm over an apartment building, or an office, or wherever the hell the subject is, and say you're checking for an outbreak of plague. Hire some prostitutes, male and female, to seduce them one and all." There was a tap on the door; he went to open it. "There must be a thousand ways you can get what you're after." He admitted the waiter with another pot of coffee.

When they were alone again, Bressler was beaming. "See, that's what I meant. A man with certain training. I tried some of those ideas, of course, but some are quite ingenious. I couldn't do anything that even suggested harm, naturally. Heaven alone knows what the repercussions would be if the genes thought they were under attack. It's bad enough that they know they have been discovered." He poured coffee for them both.

Tony gazed at him in disbelief. "The genes know you're after them." he said after a moment. "The genes are taking defensive measures."

"No doubt about it. They know." He put one finger in his coffee, then used the moistened tip to pick up toast crumbs, which he ate.

"What will you do with the data if you get it?" Tony asked.

Bressler looked very blank. "Do? You mean like the agriculture bioengineers? Breeding potatoes with enough poison to kill off the potato bugs? Strawberries that grow and bear fruits in subfreezing temperature? I don't plan to do anything except publish, of course. Those genes have absolutely nothing to fear from me, Peter."

"I understand," Tony said. He looked at his watch and stood up. "Gosh, I've got to run." He picked up Bressler's papers to hand back to the man.

"Keep them, Peter. Keep them. I have copies. I know you haven't had time to think this through. Read them, then get back to me. Will you do that?"

"Sure," Tony said. "I'll get back to you."

By the time he had checked out, and was on the road, he was grinning broadly. Bressler wouldn't get in touch with him, he thought. He wouldn't know who to get in touch with, just Peter somebody. His grin faded as he realized he had no destination. Not the upper peninsula, those cool misty dark romantic forests. Not alone. He had no one he had to go back home to; no one expected him in the office ever. He drifted in, drifted out; eventually he would lug in the ton of scholarly papers he had collected, turn in his column on the symposium, and be free until the next one. He remembered Bressler's words: people would kill for his job.

He was exactly what the job description stated: special assistant editor responsible for a column devoted to academic symposia, colloquia, conferences, meetings of all sorts that involved two or more university-level representatives of two or more universities, wherever such a meeting was being held -- Paris, Hong Kong, Boston, Rio. . .

Sometimes he wondered how high the supervisor who had shot him had risen, or if he had been tossed overboard. Tony had never doubted that it was an accident, but a trigger-happy unit chief was not a good idea. He knew it had been the supervisor if only because neither of the other two agents had been even chided for carelessness. Sometimes he wondered how the agency had managed to get him, Tony, into Columbia on such short notice, and see that he got a master's, and then this plum of a job. It was understood that the job required at least a master's degree.

Sometimes, more ominously, he wondered if one day they would reel him in and demand. . . . He never could finish the thought. Demand what?

Signs had been warning him that if he wanted to go to Detroit, to get in the right lane. He eased into the left lane.

That night he sat in a screened porch on a pseudo-rustic cabin and watched the sun set across Lake Michigan. Mosquitoes worked on the screens with chainsaws trying to get in. He had spent all day driving aimlessly, talking himself out of the notion of Georgina. She was too old for him, at least forty to his thirty-one. He had been flattered that an older woman had found him attractive. She had been grateful when he mentioned her various papers at various conferences, and had in fact helped him write her notices. Her return rate for his calls had been no more than one out of six, but, she had explained, her husband was so jealous, and always there.

Then, to escape the reality of love lost, he had turned to the fantasy of master genes ruling the universe. Pretend, he had told himself, pretend it's true, that life-saving intuition, coincidence, messages from the collective unconscious, good luck, guardian angels can all be attributed to a single source, and that source is genetic. Then what? He knew, from the various conferences he had attended, that the genotyping success rate was accelerating at a pace that astounded even those participating in it. So, he had continued, pretend they find such a master gene, isolate it, then what? The answer had come with

surprising swiftness. Breed a master race, supermen.

He grinned at the idea, as he watched the last cerise band in the sky darken. When it merged into inky black, he went inside his cabin and regarded with some fondness the bulky pile of Bressler papers. He began to read through them.

Bressler had a list of thirty or forty possible subjects, each one with an impressively complete dossier. He had done his homework. They were scattered throughout the states; the five he had targeted were all within a hundred miles of Manhattan. Every subject had escaped death at least twice; all the escapes had been reported in various newspapers, which were referenced in footnotes.

Tony scanned the dossiers briefly, then went to the summaries. Bressler had anticipated the few questions Tony had: none of the parents showed any of the survival traits of their offspring. A higher than normal percentage of the subjects were single children of their biological parents, although there were step-brothers and sisters. Few of the subjects showed any other unusual traits; they were a good cross section of the population, some very bright, some dim, laborers, professionals, technicians. . . . The one thing they all had in common, it appeared, was the ability to survive situations that should have killed them. And five of them, at least, were too elusive to catch and sample.

He felt almost sad when he closed the folder. Poor old guy, spending the past six years or more on this. He remembered something Bressler had said in the restaurant, "How many more do you suppose there are? We'll never know because no one keeps track of those who don't board the airplane that crashes into the ocean. The ones who stay home the day the mad bomber wipes out the office building. The ones who take a different route and miss the twenty-car pile-up and fireball. The ones who. . . But you get my point. We can't know about any of them."

The ones who bend down to straighten out a pants leg and don't get shot through the heart, Tony thought suddenly. The ones who stand up and turn around and don't get shot in the head,

Oh, boy! he thought then. Folie a deux! He went out on the porch and gazed at the lake where uneasy moonlight shimmered. After a moment he stripped, wrapped a towel around his waist, and went out for a swim. The water was shockingly cold. He could demonstrate to Bressler just how nutty his theory was, he thought, swimming; all he had to do was keep going toward Wisconsin until cold and fatigue sank him like a stone. Another time, he decided, turning back to shore.

In bed, every muscle relaxed to a pudding-like consistency, he wondered what he would have done if Bressler had asked for a sample of his blood. His entire body twitched and he plummeted into sleep.

The next morning he found himself driving back to East Lansing. He listened to talk radio for a while, then sang harmony with Siegfried on tape, and tried to ignore the question: Why? He didn't know why he was going back.



There was no vacancy at the Holiday Inn. The desk clerk kindly advised him to go to the Kellogg Center where someone would see that he got housing.

He never had driven through the campus before; it appeared to have been designed as a maze, with every turn taking him back and forth across the same brown river again and again. The grounds, the broad walks, the streets, the expanses of manicured lawn were almost entirely deserted and eerily silent. When he approached the botanical gardens for the third time, luck intervened in his wanderings; he spotted Dr. Bressler strolling with another man, both facing away from him. He parked, opened his door to go after Bressler, hand back the package, be done with it. Then he came to a stop, half crouched in his movement to leave the car. The men had turned toward him briefly, and the second man was his old long lost pal, Doug Hastings. They walked to a greenhouse, away from him. He drew back inside the car.

He drove again, this time to Grand River, the main street in East Lansing. He turned toward Lansing. Without considering why he was doing this, he stopped at a shopping complex that covered acres and acres, miles maybe, and took the Bressler papers into an office supply warehouse store where he used a self-service copy machine and made copies of everything. He bought a big padded envelope and addressed it to himself, in care of his mother in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, put his copies inside, and mailed it at a post office in the sprawling mall. Then, finished, he returned to the Michigan State campus, and this time he found the Kellogg Center building on the first try.

Kellogg Center was the heart of the conference; here the academics met and talked, ate lunch, many of them had rooms, and the conference staff people manned a table with receptionist, programs, nametags, and general information. In the lobby Tony chatted with several people, was asked to wait a second while someone dashed off to get him a copy of a presentation paper; someone else handed him another folder. He was waiting for either Doug Hastings, or Dr. Bressler, whoever came first.

Someone thrust another folder at him. He took it, and let a woman draw him toward a small alcove; then he saw Bressler enter, followed seconds later by Doug. He turned his attention to the woman whose hand was heavy on his arm. "Will you attend our session this afternoon?" she was asking. "It's at three."

"Oh, Peter!" Bressler called out, and came lumbering across the hallway toward him. Doug Hastings turned to the reception table and began to examine the schedule.

The woman looked bewildered as Bressler reached them and took Tony's other arm, dragged him away. "Peter, do you still have my material? I thought you left already. They said you checked out."

Tony was carrying several folders by then, and a manila envelope, as well as his bulging briefcase. "Sure, it's in here somewhere," he said. He opened his

briefcase on a small table, added the new papers to the others, and drew out Bressler's package. "I'll get to it in the next couple of weeks."

"No, no," Bressler said hastily, snatching the package, which he held against his chest with both hands. "That's all right, Peter. All that material to read.

You don't need to add to it." He backed up a step or two, turned, and hurried away.

Tony was closing his briefcase again when he heard Doug's voice very close to his ear. "Well, I'll be damned if it isn't Tony Manetti!"

Doug grasped his shoulders and swung him around, examined his face, then wrapped him in a bear hug. "My God, how long's it been? Eight, nine years? Hey, how you been doing? What's going on? Looks like you're collecting bets or something." Talking, he drew Tony toward the front entrance, away from the others milling about. "How about a cup of java? Some place less crowded. Hey, remember when we used to duck out of class for a beer? Those were the days, weren't they?"

They never had gone out for a beer together; Tony hadn't been a drinker then any more than he was now. "You an academic?" he asked on the sidewalk.

"No way. Assignment. Listened to a bunch of guys and gals explain the economic importance of joint space exploration. Whew! Heavy going."

For the next hour, in a coffee shop, Doug talked about his life, and asked questions; talked about the past, and asked questions; talked about traveling, and asked questions.

"You mean you get their papers and don't go to the talks? What a racket! Let's see what you've got."

Tony handed over his briefcase, and watched Doug go through the contents.

"You're really going to read all that stuff? Read it here?"

"Not a word. They'd want to talk to me about it if they thought I'd read the material. I save it for home."

"You know, I thought that was you the other night, going out with a big bald guy?"

Tony laughed. "Old Bressler. He's into angels. Spent too much time looking in an electron microscope or something, I guess." He added sadly, "He gave me some stuff to take home, and then grabbed it back. Around the bend, poor old guy."

Later, answering another question slipped into a monologue, he told Doug that he had had a heavy date Sunday and Sunday night, and talked dreamily about a moonlight swim.

Doug leered. "Girl on every campus, I bet." Soon afterward he glanced at his watch and groaned. "This job ain't what I thought it'd be," he said. "You going back?"

"Just to pick up my car. I've got what I need."

They walked back to the Kellogg Center, where Tony got into the rental car, waved to Doug, and took off. He worked at putting the pieces together on the way to Lansing Airport. They must not want Bressler to publish a word about what he was up to. And Doug would report that there was no reason to reel in Tony, who didn't suspect a thing.

At the airport, he turned in the car, went to the ticket desk to change his reservation, and sat down to wait for his flight back to Chicago.

They probably didn't believe a word of it, he mused, and yet, what if? They would watch and wait, let the genius work it out if he could. But they would be there if he did. Right.

He was remembering incidents from his nearly forgotten childhood. At seven he and his stepbrother had played in the barn loft, and he had fallen out the highest window, gotten up, and walked away. Neither ever mentioned it to anyone; they had been forbidden to play up there. At twelve he and two other kids had been in a canoe on the Delaware River when a storm roared in like a rocket ship. The canoe had been hit by lightning, two kids had died, but he had swum to shore; he had not told anyone he had been there, since no one would have believed him anyway.

Now what, he wondered. Visit his mother, of course, and read all the Bressler material. After that was a blank, but that was all right. When the time came he would know what to do. He felt curiously free and happy, considering that he was simply following orders, was little more than a slave.