

Spontaneous Generation

By Shikhar Dixit, illustrations by Duncan Long

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The pen wounds in ways the sword can only dream about. It is the sword's most fervent wish to slice with the brutal subtlety of the pen, so that its victim scarcely knows he has been struck.

It was hard to look away while Laura drew. She knew how to build light and depth, shadow and meaning, all from the crumbling powder of charcoal, the quivering, spreading streak of black India ink. To watch my own face grow from a handful of curving lines and points -- to watch it upside-down as I sat across from her -- to see tones of reflected daylight bloom on my cheeks and that spark of soul in my pupils as she rubbed round and round with her thin black stick. . . . It was mesmeric.

Upside-down, me with more life in my eyes than I could feel. Did all that emotion really belly-crawl through the creases in my skin?

The first thing she ever said to me: "Did you know that black can glow?"

She straddled a drawing bench beside me, her oversized sketchpad braced against its neck. To me, a single male college student, she was immediately a prospective date. I surreptitiously measured her features -- the full, pale face, blond-streaked brown hair and dark-brown eyes like uncracked walnuts. Her figure leaned towards heavy, but pleasantly so. She bulged in all the right places. On her thick left ankle, a tattooed serpent crawled from a worn hiking boot to her knee and disappeared into the leg of her baggy shorts. She wore her makeup well, with the same subtle craft she applied to her drawings, enhancing rather than exposing her cheekbones. I considered her a possibility.

"Like your hair," she continued, reaching out with a finger to flop a wayward strand of it from my face. "It actually glows. If you hit it with a short or long-band UV light before turning out the lights, you'd see it glow in the mirror -- if you knew how to see something like that."

I smiled at her while trying to untangle the meaning of what she'd just said. Across her pad stretched the sinuous, naked form of our last model, captured utterly and with an air of flippant delight the model himself had lacked. The drawing was better than the reality.

"I'm Ralph." It felt a lame response, but she took my proffered hand in her cool palm and squeezed in a way I imagined suggestive. Whether or not she was really suggesting anything I could not tell. Her every gesture was like that, composed of more than a single meaning. Even the simple toss of her head, the flight of her hair from her eyes, was a stew of contradictory statements.

"Laura," she said without smiling, still managing to look amused, as if I'd done something particularly silly.



I saw her later the same week, seated in the back of my overloaded Intro to Marine Biology class. Even from the doorway, I could see that she was doodling at her foldout desk at the rear of the auditorium. I made my way back and plopped into a seat next to her, embellishing a loud sigh I hoped would get her attention.

"Hi, Ralph," she lilted without turning to glance at me.

And then she really surprised me. The shock of what I saw made me tremble. On the open notebook page before her she had rendered my face, in vivid detail, from the point of view from which she might behold me now, if only she'd turn to look at me. There was no mistaking the curve of filled seats on my opposite side, nor the mini-poster on the wall just behind me -- the one bearing a cross-sectional diagram of a manta ray.

From then on, my attraction to her was marked with a delicious splotch of fear.

Within three weeks, we were fast school-friends. She turned out to be in all five of my classes. On the first day of each, there she sat, an empty seat to at least one side of her, already sketching me in those immediate surroundings. It began to seem natural.

We met for lunch at the cafeteria daily. Mostly she talked, in the same bizarre fashion I'd noticed that first day, and I listened. The more she spoke about her strange theories, her archaic knowledge, the more I understood.

"Anything in conventional reality can be changed if you can hold it in your head. That's the problem with us. We can't really hold everything in our heads. A

human being can't conceptualize all the parts of another person, how the muscles connect to tendons, tendons to bones. How the body metabolizes complex sugars into glycogen, then into energy. How the basic units of our chemistry break down into atoms, then into quarks. We simply can't split our attention up and hold all that in our heads long enough to change it. We can't even hold the structure of a single subatomic particle in our consciousness.

"We need machines to hold all that data for us. But machines don't have consciousness.

"So we need a short cut."

"Short cut?"

"You gonna eat that?" She pointed at my fudge nut brownie.

I saw an identical brownie a few weeks later as she flipped through the pages of her sketchpad.

One Thursday afternoon I walked into Basic English Lit. a half hour late. As I bounced up towards my seat beside Laura, Professor Neary stopped me with a gruff "Halt!"

I turned to face him.

"Sir, if you insist on interrupting my class with your delays, I insist that you share with me your reasons for this tardiness."

I thought about lecturing him about college, the freedom to choose, and the freedom to choose to be late. Debating with myself as to what excuse I should present, I must have taken too long. "Sir, what is your *name*?"

"Ralph."

"I presume you have a family name? A last name?"

I searched my memory and could not immediately find it. A tense moment later it was off my tongue. "London."

"Well, Mr. London. What kept you from walking through those doors with everyone else? Is it likely that you are illiterate and could not read the proper

class time on your schedule? No, that can't be. You've obviously managed to arrive on time before now, and certainly an illiterate could not have gotten into *this* school! So, please share with us, Mr. Ralph London. What kept you?"

"Accident," I blurted.

A sound carried through the room, just below the snickers of my fellow students. A rushed scratching. So familiar, the sound, that I knew immediately where it must be coming from. I could not, however, turn to look. For the first time, an uncomfortable shifting in the pit of my stomach told me how frightened I was.

How could one not be frightened by this arrogant terror of a man, stripping me utterly before the class?

Accident. It resonated through me, straight to my core.

"Dear God, man." Professor Neary rushed over to me, catching my elbow. "Someone please help this gentleman to the clinic. I need a volunteer!"

Somewhere behind me I could hear the creak of the seat as it was relieved of its burden. Footsteps echoed as the person descended from the rear of the auditorium.

"Can you stand, Mr. London?"

Struck by sudden dizziness, I fell into his arms. Hot liquid surged into my eyes. I swiped at it, clinging desperately to Neary for balance. Through my blurred vision, I caught the sight of crimson smeared across my hand.

Then another pair of hands had me, supporting me beneath my armpits.

"C'mon, Ralph." Laura's hot breath expanded in my ear. "Let's get you patched up."

Laura came along when I took my car to the Toyota dealership. The body shop was around back.

My Corolla was navy blue, a 1984 model, now sporting a crunched front end. Laura sat in the passenger seat with her sketchbook propped on her knees. I never looked at it any more. When she had it opened, I never let my eyes stray from her face. I simply didn't want to *know*.

"The hand that wields the pen rules the world."

I snorted, caught her frown from the corner of my eye as I pulled in front of the garage. When I turned to look at her, she was scribbling more furiously than ever.

"Is something wrong?" I asked her.

With a shrug that struck me as forced, artificial even, she muttered something under her breath I couldn't quite catch.

"What?"

"This drawing's not coming out right."

But I wouldn't look at it. I just climbed out of the car and went to find the head mechanic.

One evening, we agreed to do something outside of school. The mechanics had masterfully restored my car, so I drove us to a theater off campus. We sat in reclining seats, munching popcorn and trying not to let our feet touch the sticky floor.

The film was an ill-conceived sequel to a *tour de force* horror film. The kind of garbage put on celluloid merely for easy profit.

Laura seemed to be enjoying it.

I took her hand in mine. She turned to look at me, into my eyes. For once, the sketchbook was put away. I leaned a fraction of a centimeter towards her.

She leaned twice as far towards me.

We halved the distance between our faces. Her hot breath, redolent of popcorn and Pepsi, soothed my face. The hairs prickled across the back of my neck. We kissed. My insides tingled. I felt her tongue graze my own.

We watched the rest of the film curled together, the popcorn abandoned on the floor.

When I told her what I thought of the movie, she shuddered in shock.

"What? What's wrong?"

"I-- I liked it." She said this with a gasp I couldn't quite interpret.

"Well, different strokes and all. We can have different opinions."

She fell silent.

As I pulled into resident parking, she placed her hand across my knee. "Come over?"

I quivered, my body flashing with a surge of pleasurable heat. Following the stirring in my groin, I nodded.

Her dorm was an all-female one, so I needed to sign in downstairs before she led me, by the hand, up the stairs. Passing one room, I heard groans of ecstasy creeping through the cracks under the door. I told myself, *Be cool. You don't know what she really wants.*



It was a total disaster. I groped clumsily, trying to stimulate the right places, wanting simultaneously to be stimulated. Trying to adjust a position, I accidentally knocked her into her side-table. Its edge opened a cut across her cheek.

She huffed angrily and hissed, "Forget it! Just -- we'll do this some other time. I'm . . . just tired."

I dressed as she cleaned her wound in the bathroom.

My hand was on the doorknob, ready to provide me an exit from this humiliation, when her arms snaked around my sides. She hugged me tight and I could feel the tears soak through my T-shirt. I turned around. An oversized Band-Aid clung to her face. Her wet eyes pulled at something in my heart and I let her haul me back towards the bed.

"Stay? I'm really, really sorry I snapped. Please stay tonight?"

Grateful that she'd asked, I nodded and pulled my clothes back off. We crawled into her bed and I wondered aloud where her roommate was.

"I don't have one any more. She left."

"They didn't replace her?"

"You with all the questions! Just hold me."

I let her snuggle into my arms. We looked into each other's eyes until my consciousness sagged. Her eyes stayed wide open, with a kind of desperation, as mine closed.

We toiled around campus one wintry day, blowing plumes into the crisp air. There was a Starbucks on College Avenue where Laura picked up a foamy concoction. Unleashed, the aroma of sweetened almonds buffeted me. We walked like acquaintances, a zone of personal space between us. We looked nothing like lovers.

Laura stuck her nose into a discount clothing store while I stood about on the sidewalk, checking my hair in the window glass. I was a statue, a Grecian soldier stripped of paint. I could imagine not having arms, not having a head. Could visualize tourists gawking at my flaccidity at the Museum of Natural History.

"Whatcha doin'?"

I turned. It was Robin, a lithe redhead from Western Civ. class. She was a close friend of Laura's -- at least that was what Laura always told me. To me they seemed distant as whirling galaxies. I usually whispered jokes to Robin under my breath as Laura, seated on my other side, scrupulously scrawled notes, filling page after page. Jolts of attraction seized me in Robin's company, made me want to move closer and smell her hair, feel the heat rising off her skin. I wanted this now, with a brutal desire to destroy everything else: my relationship with Laura, my schoolwork -- my life.

"Checking myself for drool." I smiled, knowing the expression was collapsing under its own weight, like a giant star, like a black hole. Its gravity would not pull her in, just leave me empty, alone, wondering what it would be like to kiss her.

"You're droolin' all right," she sighed. Close, and I inhaled the shockwaves of some perfume, potent and dizzying, lost in its inebriating deluge so that I didn't

notice Laura immediately, standing just behind Robin. Her expression -- the anger and sadness mixed in her eyes, the surprised O of her mouth like a child whose favorite toy has disappointed her -- vanished smoothly. The mark of an exceptional actress, I thought.

"Hi, Robin," she said, her voice remarkably even.

Robin turned, a decidedly tighter smile upon *her* face. "Hi. . . ."

Laura lifted a hand in greeting, the one clutching the sketchpad.

That was how Laura threatened me. That casual wave of her drawing materials.

This is not to say that we didn't have feelings for each other, something like love. She liked to ruffle my hair as I told her jokes, to clear the crystals of sleep from my eyes when I awoke, confused and unable to remember my name. These little gestures were akin to buffing the mold from those Grecian statues.

I became a better lover. The trick is not to rush, not to apply pressure as one would to a wound. Delicacy, subtle control, and the artful maneuvering of the tongue will bring orgasm to the patient and relaxed subject. Urgency and love, they have nothing to do with it. Like the razor contrasts in rendering chiaroscuro, it is all about technique. You begin with a point, extend into a line, and unhurriedly tweak and regulate the pressure. A lover is not a bicycle pump, but an airbrush.

One night -- early morning, actually -- as I walked out of Laura's room to grab a Coke, I caught a glimmer of something stashed in her closet.

I don't understand how I could have missed the scent of all that oil, the thickly applied paint, fumes from the turpentine.

Lined up in a neat row, three full-size paintings. Directly before me, a perfect rendering of my Toyota. To its left, another perfect rendering of my Toyota . . . crumpled from the accident.

Neither compared in quality or detail to the one farthest to the left. A full-size -- life-sized! -- oil canvas of my nude body, every hair and wrinkle of my anatomy represented with exquisite precision.

Even with my knees turning to liquid, I felt the urgency to hide this discovery. I slid the door shut, frightened now that I might turn to find Laura standing there. I prayed that the gap in the closet door was perfect -- exactly as I'd discovered it.

I sneaked quietly out into the night.

It's nothing, I told myself. Nothing at all but a gift so simultaneously vast and sharp as to create the illusion of omnipotence.

Nothing.

A bad habit I engaged in more and more frequently was the gradual unraveling of a loose thread from my jacket with a nervous forefinger. I would tug, draw, wrap, tug, draw, wrap, until my first two fingers began to turn blue, then purple. A tingle would surrender to complete numbness before I detached the string with a snap and tried to steady my hands on the table. I sat doing this one morning in English Lit. A wave of murmuring swept to the back of the class, alarming words drifting into my ears.

"For you," Laura said beside me.

"For me what?" I only half-listened, only half-cared. I wanted two things then: to be between the sheets with Laura engaging in uncomplicated coitus, or to be fleeing the campus, crossing state lines, national borders, even fleeing the planet, across light years of empty space. No distance seemed great enough.

A professorial gentleman -- not Prof. Neary -- walked in and took up the customary post behind the lectern. The clearing of his throat brought about absolute silence. Finally, I realized that everyone in the room except me knew what he was going to say.

"I have a bit of sad news for you all today. Professor William Neary -- er -- passed away late last night. There will be a memorial service for him tomorrow morning in the Morrow building. I know this must be difficult for some of you." The man regressed into spasms of throat clearing. Then, "My name is French Lansford and I will be covering this course until a replacement is hired. His Early Medieval Literature class will be covered by Doctor Pierson. As for today, the class is excused."

As students began to gather their things, Lansford added that there would be 24-hour crisis counseling at the clinic and Mars House facilities.

I had already distinctly heard the word "suicide" uttered a handful of times as the sweat broke out across my forehead, my fingers aquiver, digging at more fabric to unravel. An occasional palpitation, and shortness of breath, forced me to remain seated as Laura covered my hand with hers. "I love you," she said.

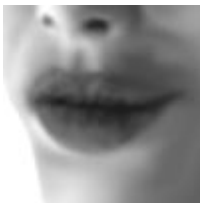
In the attic of a local club, I scratched at my whiskered chin with one hand and tugged at my coat with the other. Laura stood across the crowded room chatting up a blondish fellow as he fiddled with the back of an amplifier.

As the sound checks echoed off the sloped walls, I stood, deadened to my core, waiting like a dutiful boyfriend for my girl to finish flirting with the hardbodied musician.

An odor, familiar and comforting, grew from a faint scent to aggressive desire as Robin brushed up to me from out of the throng. "Hey!"

"Hey."

"What's up? You here with Laura?"



I nodded across the room and watched a silent O form on Robin's lips. "C'mon, buy me a drink," she sighed, taking my hand and dragging me to the bar.

All around us the lights died, and a heavy thunder ripped through my eardrums. A moderate-tempo electronic beat quickly drowned beneath a grinding guitar riff. Robin swung her hips rhythmically, yelled "Rum an' Coke!" I led her over to the bar and dropped a five on the counter, snatching glances over my shoulder in fear of Laura.

A sweet high voice poured its agony into the room, words like wounded petals searing me with their desperation. I turned to find a slim redhead in a black cutoff onstage, visible in swiftly darting gaps in the crowd. The lyrics and vocal melodies brought tears to the rims of my eyelids. Robin moved up against me. "They're called Tapping the Vein."

I bobbed to the music, my life forgotten, my fragile existence meaningless before this beauty -- the auditory equivalent of Laura's drawings, but kinder, more empathetic. The heaviness in my ribcage soothed me. Robin laid her head against my shoulder. Our bodies touched, bounced lightly off each other and merged again, locked into the sum of the parts of Tapping the Vein.

Laura stood to my left, a sudden thorn in my attention.

Her eyes focused their narrow slits upon Robin. I looked at the backpack slung over her shoulder, felt its threat, its vital heat. Inside lay her shortcut, and she would soon wield it.

Before I could do anything, Laura vanished into the crowd. I pulled away from Robin, from the beautiful music, and plunged into the same dark.

I was the sword chasing the pen.

Can the masterpiece destroy the painter?

I wounded her once, that first night, when her head bounced off the table. She didn't foresee it. She could not control it.

And for all her fervent sketching, she could not control me.

I chased her down the stairs and out the front door. I burst into the frosted night several yards behind her. I became a blur of motion, pistons pumping away beneath the layers of my manufactured body, my emotions cut loose by the savage atmosphere in the bar. My lungs sucked and processed the air smoothly, ejected the carbon dioxide in level, unhurried exhalations.

I caught up with her two blocks later. She ducked into an alley and crouched, working clumsily to loosen the straps on her book bag.

"Don't do this." It was meant to be a plea, but I felt a streak of cold rationality in my words.

She yanked the sketchpad out, grabbed a pencil, and flipped to a blank page.

"You haven't got the right to do this. Professor Neary, my accident, now Robin?"

Terror. Nothing else came from her but the stink of fear. All the talking she did, she never heard a single word anybody else said. Was this her shortcut? A self-centeredness so complete that it could pull the strings of the universe?

She began scribbling onto the page.

I crossed the remaining yards in a sprint and tackled her, knocked the pencil

from her hand. The sketchpad crumpled as it fell beneath her, as she rolled over it to escape me. I drew back my fist and rammed it into her nose. Beneath her whimpering, heaving, scrabbling, thudding, . . . the crack of cartilage. I hit her again.

Her head bounced off the wall with a crack.

Laura lay still, her empty vacant eyes exposed, neck bent at an awkward angle. A blossom of inky liquid expanded around her head. A black halo.

Hands shaking, I stood on paper limbs, picked up her pad, and flipped the pages. Myriad images of me: eating in the cafeteria, paying the man at the garage, making love to Laura expertly--

--and with a flip, Robin.

Robin sitting patiently beside me, listening to Laura pontificate on the universe. Robin gazing adoringly up out of the page. Robin laughing in an ice cream parlor, grinning a best-friend smile.

And I remembered that Robin wasn't there on the first day of classes.

Flip.

Professor Neary, reflected in a mirror -- all of it so flawlessly rendered, the reflections stained by the dusty glass, the cracks and fissures of his aging features -- drawing the barber's razor across his throat.

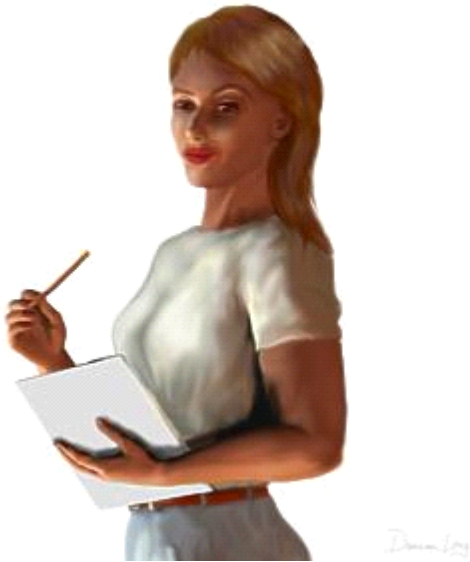
Flip. The next-to-last page in this sketchpad, the rough scribbles of a barely commenced illustration -- Robin's sexy silhouette poised with arms outstretched before the twin orbs of oncoming headlights -- the bare-bones sketch spattered with specks of blood and pressed with bits of crushed asphalt and gravel.

Laura's last drawing.

I ripped it out and tore it to shreds.

At times, Robin and I are connected over a bridge that other people don't seem to recognize. Sentences that begin on my lips are completed on hers. Thoughts are voiced in unison and entire conversations held without words. Our attraction to each other is so potent that we can locate each other, to the millimeter, across the span of a city.

She snuggles against my shoulder as I steer the Corolla out along I-80. The fruity smell of her hair is a supreme comfort. She wants to settle someplace warm, where there are no sub-zero nights or chilling rains.



We were not born; we have no parents; our dorm rooms and college enrollments were magically slipped into the universal machine. We have fingerprints not recorded by any government agency, and uncertain blood types.

I have identification with the name Ralph London on it, she with Robin York. We have valid New Jersey driver's licenses, and no memory of how we got them. We are infants if judged by the amount of time we've walked the earth, and we know nothing about *reality*. That familiar ground walked by others is alien territory for us.

We have no past, just one shared year that was shaped for us by a lonely woman who held the keys to creation. But between us lies all the familiarity of a long-shared history and magnetic attraction, and the love that Laura could never manage to draw out of thin air. Ahead of us lies our future, the future that we're going to create together.