

The Summer of the Seven

by Paul Melko

Paul lives in Ohio with his beautiful wife and two children. He tells us that, though he used to spend his spare time in the garden, now that the fuzzy bunnies have armed themselves with SIG 510 assault rifles, he can only watch from the back door. What they are using as fertilizer to grow their enormous carrots, he doesn't want to know. "Summer of the Seven" is the third in his series—that includes "Strength Alone" (Asimov's, December 2004)—concerning post-human teens coming to grips with their identity.

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In the summer of our fourteenth year, we weren't the only one to live with Mother Redd on the farm in Worthington. That was the year the Seven came to stay.

"After lunch, you'll need to clean out the back bedroom," Mother Redd said that morning at breakfast. One of her was busy frying eggs at the stove, while another was squeezing orange juice. Her third was setting the table. We had just come in from chores—picking diamond flowers, plucking sheep cloth, and, secretly, milking the beer bush for a few ounces of lager—and were lounging around the kitchen table.

Meda, my true sister and our pod's interface, asked the question we were thinking. "Who's coming to stay?" It wasn't a visit. For a visit, we wouldn't bother to clean out the bedroom; we'd just pull out the beds from the couch in the downstairs den and let the visitor sprawl around the first floor. Or, if it was more than one person, we'd lay quilts and pillows in the great room.

One of Mother Redd gave us a look that said we asked too many questions. "A guest," she said.

We all shrugged.

We spent the morning on calculus and physics. We were doing word problems: if you fired a cannonball from a train car and it lands on another train car, how fast are the train cars traveling apart after five seconds. Stuff like that.

Why would anyone mount a cannonball on a train car? I sent.

Strom laughed. Bola, who understood force and motion intuitively, flashed us the image of the cannonball and its graceful trajectory. Then he added air currents, and gravity perturbations and other second-order forces. As he added in tidal effects and the pull of Jupiter, Quant sent, *Seven and a half centimeters per second.*

"At least let me write something down before you give me the answer," Meda said. She had the pencil, but Quant was solving the problems in her head.

"Why?"

“For the practice!”

“Why?”

Meda groaned. My sister is always so expressive; there’s never any doubt what she’s—or we’re—feeling. That’s why she was our interface.

“We have to show our work on the tests! We can’t just write down the answer.”

Quant shrugged.

Sometimes Quant won’t be with us, I sent.

Moira!

I felt Quant’s surprise and a moment’s fear; we’d been together for almost fourteen years. Being cut off from the rest of us was what we most often had nightmares about. And if one of us had a nightmare, we all had it.

“Okay.” I sent a smile and reassurance to Quant, and she relaxed and returned focus to the problem set. We worked through the rest of them on paper, Quant guiding us through the equations to the answer she already knew.

After lunch, we trudged up to the back bedroom and started moving boxes. We couldn’t just throw the junk out the window and then haul it to the trash heap; Manuel had found a pipette set, and there were frames and pictures in some of the boxes. We had to be careful.

“What’s this?” Meda asked, holding up a photo in an old plastic frame.

We saw the image through her eyes, well enough for me to recognize Mother Redd, a younger woman than she was now, and a quartet. Her hair was brown and bobbed, not gray and long as she wore it now. And she was slender in the picture, not anything like the plump, huggable women we knew.

“That was before—” Meda said.

Yes.

Mother Redd was a trio now, but once, a long time ago, she had been a quartet. She had been a medical doctor, a famous one; we’d read a few of her papers and barely understood them, even though we were the highest order—a sextet—and specialized in math and science. Then one of her had died, leaving her three-quarters of what she had been.

Again, the fear of separation rippled through us, emotions that we would have to learn to check. Strom shivered, and I touched his hand. To lose one of ourselves, to become a quintet....

Meda looked closely at the picture. I knew what she was wondering, though I could only taste the curiosity. Which one of Mother Redd had died? I didn't think we could tell; she had been identical quadruplets. Meda put the picture away.

"Look at this," Quant said. She held up a tattered and old biology book. The date inside was 2020.

"That is so old!" Meda said. "Older than pods. What could that have that's any use?"

Quant thumbed through the pages and it fell open at a colored plate, a bisection of the female body.

"Now that's sexy," Manuel said. Arousal mingled with embarrassment. The stupidest things triggered desire in our male components. I sometimes wished that we were an all-female pod like Mother Redd, instead of an equally mixed sextet.

He turned the page, and there was a dissected frog, with overlays, so that you could flip from the skin, into the musculature, and then the internal organs.

"The spleen's in the wrong place," Bola said.

We had built frogs in biology class last year. Ours had been the best jumper.

As we were stowing the last of the boxes in the barn loft, we heard the whine of a jet car.

"Folsom 5X," Bola said. "Six-prop hydrogen burner."

It was actually a Folsom 3M, a converted older skybus, but we didn't have time to razz him for his mistake. The skybus landed on the airpad behind the farmhouse, and we ran to meet it.

Mother Redd waved us back, and we saw why. The bus had already discharged its passenger and was whining back into the sky. Another pod stood there next to Mother Redd, its interface shaking hands.

"Hi, I'm Apollo Papadopoulos," Meda said. "Welcome to—"

The newcomer turned to us, and we counted: a seven-person pod, a septet. Our greeting hung in Meda's mouth. We gaped in wonder, stunned by the sight. We were a sextet; our order was only six.

* * * *

"Everyone knows that the higher the order, the stronger the pod," Quant said.

"That's not true," Meda said.

We'd gotten over our voicelessness and had managed a polite greeting to Candace Thurgood. Meda had shaken hands with the leader of the septet, one of six

identical females, skinny, blonde-haired, green-eyed girls. The seventh member was a male, taller, just as skinny and pale in skin and hair. We're three females and three males; Meda and I were identical female twins, while our other pod mates were of different genetic stock.

Then Strom came up with the idea that we still had chores in the barn, and we made a quick exit, watching as the seven of Candace and the three of Mother Redd walked to the house.

Yes, it is!

No, it isn't!

I shushed them with a whiff of baby pheromone, a poke at their childish behavior.

We all knew the history. The first pods had been duos, created almost fifty years ago, the first to use the chemical memory and pheromones to share feelings between two separate humans. Since then, the order of the pods and complexity of the chemical signaling had grown. We were a sextet, the largest order we'd ever seen. All our classmates were sextets. Everyone in the space program was a sextet.

"Because sextets are the largest order. They're the best," Strom said.

Not anymore! Candace is a seven, a septet!

It made sense. Genetic engineers were always trying to add to the power of an individual. Why wouldn't they try to build a seven? Or an eight?

"They succeeded in building one, finally."

"How old is she?"

"Younger than us. Maybe twelve."

I hope she's not staying all summer.

But we knew she was. We wouldn't have turned out the guest room if she wasn't.

Maybe we can make her leave.

I said, "We have to be nice. We have to be friends."

We have to be nice, but we don't have to be friends.

Why be nice?

I looked at Meda, and she said, "Oh, all right. Let's go be nice. At least there isn't eight of her."

Though how far away would *that* be?

* * * *

We tried to be nice.

I was the one who'd advised it, and even I chafed at the manners of that arrogant septet.

"Fifteen point seven five three," Candace said, while we were still scribbling the problem. One of her was looking over Quant's shoulder as we sat at the great room table.

I knew that, Quant sent.

Still, Meda wrote the problem down and we worked through to the answer, while Candace tapped seven of her feet.

"Fifteen point seven five three three," Meda said.

"I rounded down," she said. "One of us—" She nodded at the identical girl to her left—"is specialized in mathematics. When you have seven, you know, you can do that. Specialize."

We were specialized too, we wanted to say, but I sent, *Humble*.

She's specialized at being a git.

"You're very smart," Meda said diplomatically. I hadn't even had to remind her.

"Yes, I am." She was standing so close that the pungent smell of her chemical thoughts tickled our noses and distracted us. It was almost rude to stand so close that our memories mingled. We couldn't understand her thoughts, of course, just a bit of self-satisfaction from the pheromones. The chemical memories that we passed from hand to hand, and, to some extent, by air, were pod-specific, most easily passed by physical touch at the wrists, where our pads were. Pheromones were more general, and indicated nuance and emotion. These were often common across all pods, especially those from the same creche. So even though our thoughts didn't mix together, it felt weird for her to be so close.

She doesn't know any better, I sent, touching the pad on Manuel's left wrist.
She's young.

We knew better at that age.

We should try to be friendly, I sent.

"Do you want to go swimming this afternoon?" Meda asked.

Candace shook her head quickly, then she paused for a consensus. We

smelled the chemical thoughts, pungent and slick in the air, and wondered why she had to consense on going swimming.

“We don’t swim,” she said finally.

“None of you?”

Another pause. They touched hands, tap, tap, tap, pads sliding together.
“None of us.”

“Okay. Well, we’re going swimming in the pond.”

The smell was stronger. The heads turned inward, and they held palms together for ten seconds. What was so complicated about going swimming?

Finally, she said, “We’ll come and watch, but we won’t swim in dirty water.”

Meda said, “Okay,” and we shrugged.

After physics, we studied biology, and, in that, Mother Redd instructed us closely. The farmhouse was not just a farmhouse; attached were a greenhouse and a laboratory with gene-parsers and splicers. The hundred hectares of woods, ponds, and fields were all Mother Redd’s experiment, and part of it she let us work on. We were rebuilding the local habitat, reintroducing flora and fauna in a close facsimile to what had been there before the Exodus and the Gene Wars. Mother Redd was building beaver pods. She was letting us build pods of ducks.

Candace followed us to observe our latest version of duck: a clutch of ducklings that had been gengineered to share chemical duck memories, supposedly. There’d been success in modifying some mammals for chemical memories, but none for other classes of *Chordata*. We were trying to build a duck pod for the Science Fair at the end of the summer.

We’d released our ducklings—two different modified clutches—by a pond on the farm, and every morning, we went and watched how they worked together.

Bola slid between the reeds while the rest of us hunched down and listened to his thoughts on the wind. The chemical memories were fragile and diffused over distance, but still we could understand what he was seeing and thinking if we concentrated.

“Where are the ducks?” Candace asked.

“Shh!”

“I don’t see them.”

“You’re going to scare them!”

“Fine.” The seven of her folded her arms across her chests.

An image flitted across from Bola of the ducklings poking at the edge of the pond with their bills. They were still covered in yellow fluff that wasn't quite feathers yet.

“See? One of them saw that patch of moss and the others came over right away!”

Maybe she signaled with sound.

Maybe it was random.

We'd mounted pheromone detectors around the pond to pick up any intrapod memory-sharing among the ducks. So far, we'd measured nothing, so we were using observation to try to prove that the ducks were thinking as one.

“Here, ducky, ducky!”

“Candace!” Meda yelled.

The duck, about to climb into her hand, scattered with its siblings.

“What?”

“Will you leave our experiment alone?”

“I was just going to hold it.”

“We want them to be wild, not bonded to a human.”

“Fine.” She turned and left, and, in disbelief, we watched her go. This was supposed to be where we spent *our* summers. This was *our* farm.

It's going to be a long summer, Strom sent.

* * * *

We went swimming by ourselves that day, and, when we got back, we found Candace in the lab building her own duck.

Great.

“Look!” she cried. “I'm building a duck too!”

We didn't want to look, but I suggested we at least feign interest.

She showed us the gene sequence she was using, a modified string used with the beavers.

“We've tried that already,” Meda said.

“Yeah, I know. I looked at your notes. But I'm adding a different olfactory sequence.”

She looked at our notes! Our notes were on our locked desktop.

I advised calm, but Meda's face twitched with rage.

"Good luck," she grated, and we left.

In the barn, Meda railed, too angry for chemical thoughts. Her emotions filled the loft and caused the pigs Mother Redd was building to oink and stamp at us. "She's stealing our project, and she's stealing our notes. She has got to go!"

"She just wants to fit in," I said.

No one else was buying that.

"We should give her the benefit of the doubt," I said.

Manuel growled, and snaked his fury through the air.

"Anyone can enter the engineering competition at the Fair," I said.

We need to do something.

What?

No one was looking at me.

We need more ducks.

How many more?

A lot.

They all turned to me, and I smelled the consensus like fresh bread. I could have held out, but I didn't. I wanted to win the competition too.

"Fine."

* * * *

We snuck all the incubators we could find from the lab into the barn. Candace had already tagged a couple for herself. Then we built a dozen more from spare parts.

For the genes, we begged cutting-edge sequences from Professor Ellis at the Institute—mammalian, reptilian, avian—anything that we could jam into the anatine DNA. We cooked eggs instead of doing our chores. We even cooked while we studied. By the time we were done cooking, we had over a gross of duck eggs incubating.

We figured that at least some of them would show *something* interesting that we could report at the Fair. Candace couldn't keep up with our volume of output either. We had her licked, no problem.

* * * *

“Which egg has which genes?”

“Um,” Meda said. Mother Redd was surveying the rows of duck eggs. We’d hidden the incubators in the empty stalls, but you couldn’t miss the electric wires we’d strung across the rafters.

One of her eyed the code violations and tsked.

“None of these are marked,” she said.

“Um,” Meda said.

“Where’s your control variable? Where’s your lab books?”

We didn’t bother to “um.” Embarrassment coursed among us. I expected a well-deserved lecture, but instead Mother Redd said, “Come on. There’s someone in the house I want you to meet.”

We climbed down from the loft and followed Mother Redd across the yard to the house. I tried to force down the I-told-you-so deep inside.

Strom and Bola both threw me guilty looks.

Some scientist we were.

Candace and another pod were in the great room. The other pod was a quintet, in his thirties. One of him was examining one of Candace with a stethoscope; another tapped another of her on the chest.

“Doctor Thomasin. This is Apollo.”

Four pods in the great room, large though it was, made the place pretty crowded, especially when one of us was a seven. We hung against the wall, and let Meda shake hands with Doctor Thomasin’s interface.

“Ah, Apollo Papadopoulos! A pleasure to meet someone with your strong lineage.”

“Um, thanks, I guess.”

Who cares what our lineage is? We had been designed and built, then raised in Mingo Creche. As far as we knew, our lineage was just the result of some scientists somewhere mixing eggs and sperm together.

“I’m Candace’s doctor. I built her,” he said.

Several of Candace blushed.

He was young to be a human gengineer. But he must have been good to have succeeded at a septet.

Compare his and Candace's face, Bola sent.

I saw it the way Bola saw it: Thomasin was a genetic donor for Candace. He could have been her biological father if she'd been born that way.

Weird. We had no father or mother, though we understood the concept. Mother Redd took the title, but she was more a mentor than an actual mother to us.

"Congratulations," Meda said, though it seemed odd even as she said it.

"Thank you."

He turned and started discussing something regarding nanosplicing with Mother Redd, so we snuck out with Candace on our heels.

"Isn't he great?" she said.

"You have a nice father," Meda said, before I could cut her off.

"He's not my dad! He's my doctor."

"You look—"

Meda!

"How're your ducks doing?" she asked.

"I think they're gonna hatch soon!" she said. Bola pointed out that it was a different one talking than before; she'd changed faces when we changed topics. Meda was always our face; she did all our interfacing with other pods. "I've been varying the heating and light to simulate a real mother sitting on the eggs."

"Great," Meda said.

Another of Candace spoke up. How many faces did she use? "Did you know we had our first period? That's why Doctor Thomasin was here."

"Um." It was our turn to flush. I felt Strom's shock. He turned away from Candace and looked across the yard at the barn. Meda, Quant, and I had all had our first menses. We'd all had to deal with it, as well as wet dreams and all the other drawbacks of male and female puberty. But some things were best left within the pod.

"You know what that means, don't you?"

"Yeah, I think so," said Meda. "We're half female, you know."

"No. That isn't what I mean. Doctor Thomasin made me so I can breed true."

"What?"

"You know why all pods are gengineered."

“Yes!”

“If I breed with another of my type of pod, I can birth six members of a septet.”

“If you breed with a six male, one female septet?”

“Yes!”

“Why do you need a septet? You just need one male to inseminate all of you and one more female to carry the seventh.”

They have a male, Manuel sent.

That is so gross.

“Biological diversity, of course!”

We all felt foggy, the smell of confusion circling among us.

“But—”

“If *you* breed,” she went on, “you’ll just have normal human singletons who will still have to be coalesced into a pod. It won’t happen naturally. With *me*, my children will be *born* as a pod!”

“But—”

“It’s so much more stable biologically, don’t you see?”

“But—”

“Until pods can reproduce more pods, we’re just a genetic dead-end. This is all part of Doctor Thomasin’s work.”

“But—”

“But what?”

“You’re just a new breed. You’re still human.”

She stared at us with her fourteen green eyes. “I’m more than human, Apollo.”

“So you can only have babies with a pod just like you, another of Dr. Thomasin’s septets. You can’t have babies with just anyone.”

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at. Don’t be silly! Procreation doesn’t have to follow love. I’ll have children for the sake of the species regardless of who I bond with,” Candace said.

“Did Doctor Thomasin pick your mate yet?”

“No. I guess not. Maybe.”

She paused to think. This time we saw the interface cycle into the pack and another of the identical females take her place.

Why is she doing that? Manuel asked.

Identity crisis, Bola replied.

“Even if he has,” the new face said, “that’s fine. Besides, any mate will have to be one that he made. No one else has succeeded in building a septet.”

“So you don’t know other septets?” we asked.

“No. Not really. But there are others like me, I guess. And I’d mate with whomever was necessary, to propagate the species.”

“Pods aren’t a separate species. We’re all human beings,” we said.

“Of course we’re a separate species!” she replied. “Pods are much better than singletons. It’s obvious. And I’m much better than a sextet or a quintet or a quartet.”

“We’re all human,” we said again.

“Well, *you* may be human, but I’m another species,” she said, walking off.

I’ll say.

* * * *

We rotated the eggs every day. We measured the humidity with a wet bulb. We determined temperature with sensors that logged to our desktop. The damn alarms kept failing and waking us in the middle of the night. We couldn’t just roll over and go back to sleep, since the ducklings might really be freezing to death. After fifteen days of incubation, we opened the vents on the incubators and lowered the temperature a half a degree.

Mother Redd’s words had stung us, and we started keeping better records. We marked the eggs with their genome tag, at least the ones we could remember. We tracked temperature and humidity hourly and graphed the data.

We watched the brood by the lake meticulously, though the pheromone sensors never picked up a whiff of chemical thought and our lab books were line after line of “No sign of consensus.”

We avoided Candace when we could, which was tougher than it would seem on a farm of over a hundred hectares. Mother Redd had given her chores that seemed to overlap ours.

Candace’s arguments, however, were something we couldn’t avoid. I found myself researching her ideas. She was wrong about a lot of things and right about a

lot of things too.

The classical definition of “species” still stated that pods were human. If Meda, Quant, or I had a child with an unmodified human, the child would be human. We weren’t a new species. However, we weren’t entirely standard human either. We had been modified by our predecessors to have pads on our palms that could transfer chemical memories among our podmates. We had glands at our necks to send pheromonal emotions and crude thoughts. We had enhanced olfactory capability to decode the scents. Unless closely inspected, we would not look any different than a human from a century ago.

But the fact that we were a pod, that we functioned as a single being in the fabric of our society, indicated that we were a radically different *type* of social organization, created by our biological technology and artificially sustained. If there were no creche-system and no genetic modification of embryos to add pod traits, pod society would disappear in a few generations, replaced by normal humans. Candace was right; if the Overgovernment fell and society crumbled, then pods would fall apart. There would be no pods without constant social manipulation. We were the most advanced animal on the planet, but behind that façade was a framework of scaffolding and wires.

There were three million pods in the world, which amounted to just over ten million people. Three decades ago, there had been over ten billion humans on the planet. The cataclysm was far from over. We pods had inherited the Earth, not because we were superior, but because we had failed to leave or die or advance with the rest of the Community. It was a fragile ecosystem we had inherited. Our own biology was fragile, and perhaps more desperate than we knew.

We spoke to Mother Redd.

“How stable is our society?” Meda asked one evening as we cleaned up after dinner. Candace was out turning her duck eggs.

“We have a representative democracy implemented by consensus-formed legislation. It is more stable than most,” she said.

“No. I mean biologically and societally. If we lost our scientific knowledge, what would happen?”

One of Mother Redd stopped her drying to look at us, while the other two continued with the pots.

“A sage question. I don’t know, but I expect that the next generation of humans would be normal. Perhaps we could form pods; perhaps the genetic changes we have implemented would breed true.”

“Do we know if they will?”

She smiled. “Perhaps you should do a literature search.”

“I did! I couldn’t understand the results.” Biology wasn’t our strongest subject. Physics and math suited us.

“Technology gives us our individuality. That is the problem. And, given that, we will not willingly give up our individuality, we can’t see the path back,” Mother Redd said. “We have passed our own singularity, just as the Community did. And you have hit upon the greatest problem of our world. How do we propagate?”

There were some who said the Exodus—the near instantaneous vanishing of all the billions of Community members—was a technological singularity, the transmogrification of normal humans to post-humans. Mother Redd was saying that the pod society had created its own parallel singularity, one we could not reverse without losing our identity.

“Candace is the future, isn’t she?”

“Maybe. Doctor Thomasin’s ideas are radical. Perhaps reproducing septets are the answer. There are others researching it, including ethicists.”

“Why?”

“If our society and our biology are unsound, we cannot allow them to advance.”

“But—”

Candace bounded in then, shouting, “One of my ducklings is hatching!”

We all went out to watch the wet and lizard-like bird peck its way through the shell. Our mind was on Mother Redd’s words, and we kept touching hands, swapping thoughts, as we considered them. I realized then, as we watched the ducklings hatch, that there were those who were considering the elimination of pod society and biology as a desirable path into the future.

* * * *

Doctor Thomasin visited again the next day. He was visiting every week now, examining Candace for hours. That evening, after he left, Candace hadn’t shown for dinner, so Mother Redd sent us up to fetch her.

“Candace?” Meda called, as she knocked on the door.

“She needs to check the temperature on the ducklings, too,” said Bola. We pretended we didn’t care about Candace’s project, but clearly we did.

We just don’t want the ducklings to die!

“Yes?” Her voice was soft, and male. When had her male component done anything but stay in the background?

Meda pushed open the door.

Candace was sprawled on the beds, her faces flushed, her shirts wet at the pits. The room reeked of heavy thinking.

“Are you okay?”

The male was the only one sitting. “We’ll be okay.”

“It’s dinner time.”

“We’re not feeling too well. I think we’ll pass.”

One of the females opened her eyes.

Didn’t she have green eyes before?

Yes.

“Do you want us to check on your ducklings?”

“What ducklings?” she asked.

“Your Science Fair project!”

She grasped wrists, consenting.

“Oh, right. Thanks.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Really.”

Maybe Doctor Thomasin gave her a vaccination.

She’s old enough to make her own vaccinations.

We ate quickly, then went out to the lab to feed and check Candace’s ducks. Ours were still a few days from hatching.

Her ducks had a fine layer of down and weren’t too noisy nor too active, so the temperature was probably okay. We dipped bits of bread in water and dropped the food in the hutches.

Don’t let them imprint on us.

Why not? That would be funny.

Because they wouldn’t survive in the wild if they did. They need to imprint on each other.

Like we are.

We shared a glance. We were indeed imprinted on each other.

* * * *

Two days later, our own eggs began to hatch. Twelve hatched that day, which wasn't so bad. Twenty-five hatched the day after. Then fifty-some the day after that. We were too frazzled to notice when the last fifty hatched.

The barn suddenly became a duck maternity ward, with assembly lines for soaked corn meal, temperature and humidity checks, and bedding manufacture.

We quickly found that the chicken brooders we'd planned to use for the ducks were too small, and had to build half a dozen more out of plywood and chicken wire. We kept one as a spare so that we could move a clutch at a time to clean the brooders.

"We should have kept better track of the gene sequences that we used," Strom said. He was scooping duckling after duckling from one brooder to another. He held up one that had a lizard's tail attached to its fluffy bottom.

Bola looked into the emptied brooder and held his nose. We all felt his revulsion though we couldn't actually smell what he smelled.

"How long until they can forage on their own?"

Six weeks.

Not soon enough.

* * * *

We had so many ducklings to take care of that we couldn't spend a moment watching for pod-like behaviors. Candace, however, loved to stop by the barn and provide details of her latest experiment and success.

"I separate one duckling," she explained to us, "and feed it a bit of food. The other ducklings start quacking within seconds."

"They smell the food," we said.

"Maybe. But it also works for pain stimuli."

"Pain stimuli?"

"Sure. When I pinch one of the ducklings, the others start making noise."

"You're pinching your ducks?"

"Just a gentle pinch. Besides, it's for science!"

"Right."

"I've got video of the process. It's very compelling," she said.

"You'll have a good presentation at the Science Fair then," we said.

“You have an awful lot of ducks.”

We turned and stared at her, all six of us.

“We know.”

“This one has Dalmatian spots.”

“We know!”

Her eyes are green again.

She looks pale.

“Are you still sick?”

She swapped faces, something she did all the time now. “A little still. Allergies, maybe.”

“What are allergies?”

“Reactions to air-borne particles and pollen. It used to be very common. Doctor Thomasin thinks I have it, and it just manifested when I came to the farm.”

“Hopefully he’ll fix that in the next batch of septets he cooks up,” Meda said.

“Yeah, I guess.”

As she walked away, Quant showed us memories of her when she first arrived. *She’s grown fifteen centimeters in a month.*

Growth spurt.

Bigger boobs. This was followed by a pheromone leer from Manuel.

“Stop it.”

There’s something wrong with her. Changing interfaces, allergies, forgetting things.

The rest of my pod shrugged at me.

What can we do?

Talk to Mother Redd.

We didn’t have time to ponder Candace’s allergies and growth chart, and we never talked with Mother Redd. The ducklings needed their food.

* * * *

Two weeks later, we started letting the ducklings roam the farmyard for food.

Look! They re-form into the same subgroups if we separate them!

I didn't understand until Bola shared his memory of what he saw. Bola's specialty was spatial, and, in an instant, I saw how the nearly identical ducklings coalesced into groups when we removed them from the brooder.

It could be the group they imprinted to.

Perhaps imprinting is a crude form of pod-building.

Strom scattered the ducklings and we watched them re-form into their subgroups. We marked a few of them with paint on their backs and did it again and again, showing how a single group of six re-formed every time.

It seemed that we were on to something.

Unfortunately, so were the six ducklings with the paint on their backs. They followed Strom wherever he went. When he broke them apart, they re-formed and headed straight back to his ankles.

They've imprinted on you.

"Didn't they imprint on themselves already?" Strom asked as the ducklings clustered on his feet.

Apparently not. Dad.

Strom answered that with a sardonic smile.

* * * *

Once we moved the ducklings to the lake, we actually had time to do our chores and study. One hundred and fifty ducks, less the six that would not leave Strom's feet, made for a crowded, messy lake, and we still had to drag out bags of bread so the birds wouldn't starve.

Candace continued to have luck with her clutch of ducks, while we showed mannerisms that could easily be attributed to other ducklike behavior patterns.

"This fair project is gonna suck," Quant said. "We've got nothing."

Negative results are still results.

"Negative results don't get the blue ribbon."

Before we knew it, the Science Fair arrived and we drove over to the county fairgrounds with Mother Redd and Candace in the farm bus. We left the ducks, though Strom's six quacked pitifully.

"Can't we take the aircar?" Meda asked. "And can't we drive?"

"No."

The county seat was a good 100 kilometers away, a mere hop in an aircar, but

two hours in the old bus. It was a tight fit with three of us in it. We opened the windows, and that helped.

In the three decades since the Exodus, there'd been little need for the roadway infrastructure. With the smaller global population, farms that had been critical to feed the masses had gone fallow. We passed orchards where the clear lines of trees were now the start of a chaotic forest, carefully tended hybrids gone wild. It was a bumpy ride, over a decaying road.

"It's hard to imagine what was here twenty years ago," we said to Candace.

She looked at us blank-eyed. "Yeah," she said, though we didn't think she knew what we'd said.

"Are you nervous?"

She shrugged.

"Do you want to borrow a brush?" we asked. Her hair was straggly.

"I'm okay!" she shrilled. "Leave me alone."

Just nervous. We had butterflies too.

"Sorry."

One of Mother Redd was driving, and the other two glanced at us. Manuel shrugged to show our confusion at Candace's overreaction, and Mother Redd turned back to the road.

Bola read the schedule for the Fair, while we watched the countryside.

One hundred junior presentations.

That was a lot. That was one for every student pod in the county. He read off some of the presentation titles.

"Hyper-efficient Hydrogen Engines with Platinum Catalyst."

We did that in Third Class.

"Vaccination Study for Rhinovirus AS234."

The cure for the uncommon cold, Strom sent.

"Cold Fusion Yields in Superconducting Amalgams."

That'll never work.

Nothing with avian genetics except for us and Candace.

"Harumph."

On our side of the bus, we passed a large tract of overgrown houses, small three-story homes, with just a few meters between them.

“Look at those. So many people in such a small space.”

Mother Redd said, “Each of those housed a family, just four or five people.” She must have smelled our puzzlement. “It’s hard to believe that the population of the Earth dropped by three orders of magnitude in the course of just a couple of years. You two were born just after the most cataclysmic events in human history. Before the Exodus, pods and multi-humans comprised less than a tenth of a percent of humanity. Now we are the stewards of the entire world. It is a grave responsibility.”

Quant slid across the aisle to catch a glimpse of the Ring. Candace flinched as Quant neared her, and glared at us. The sky was pale blue and cloudless, and there, arcing across its dome, was the Ring, the symbol of the Community and now a lifeless reminder of their former glory.

“They failed,” said Candace, not her face, but the male. “They’re a dead-end.”

“So are we,” Meda said. “According to your theories. We can’t breed true.”

Don’t bait her, I sent. She’s not feeling well.

Meda glared at me. “Sorry, Candace,” she said. “Do you want to talk ... or something?”

She didn’t turn; her eyes remained on the Ring.

It isn’t worth trying, Manuel sent bitterly.

I couldn’t really argue with him, and we turned away to watch the desolate countryside slip by.

The Science Fair was held in a huge building that dated to the previous century. It was crowded, almost like school, pods shoulder to shoulder with other pods; it was nearly impossible to think with all the interference in the air. We felt so crowded after the summer on the farm with just Candace and Mother Redd. It would be good to get back to school in a few weeks.

We found the junior pavilion, registered, and then wandered the Fair. Our presentation wasn’t until the afternoon, and Candace’s was right before ours.

Stealing our thunder again.

* * * *

The junior pavilion was packed at three o’clock that afternoon, and not just with us student pods. Mother Redd was there and so was Doctor Thomasin. We recognized several professors from the Institute, including Doctors Thackery and

Charona.

We were in the biology section, so we sat through a dozen mice-in-maze and build-a-better-chlorophyll presentations until Candace's turn finally came.

She climbed the steps to the speaker's platform, looking pale and slouched.

She's still sick, we thought, touching palms so we didn't disturb anyone nearby.

She plugged in her cube and the screen behind her erupted with the title of her project.

She misspelled ruficollis!

"Shh!"

"Sorry."

"I-I-I.... "Candace started. "I'm, I'm Candace Thurgood."

Then she changed interfaces in front of everyone and started again.

"I'm Candace Thurgood, and my presentation is..." She looked at the words on the screen behind her and paused.

She changed heads again, and this time I smelled the thoughts swirling around the auditorium.

"I'm Candace Thurgood and this is the title of my pr-pr-presentation."

She was shaking. Her face shone with sweat. She tapped the cube and the page started showing video of her ducks. If she was supposed to be narrating what was happening, she wasn't. She was just standing there.

Oh, no. She's frozen up!

Sixty seconds passed, and, finally, Doctor Thomasin stood up.

Candace stared at him as he climbed the steps; I smelled his calming scent from where I was. But I smelled Candace's fear too. She ran before her doctor reached her, dashing down the steps on the other side of the platform, heading for the door.

Let's go! I sent. *We need to help her.*

"The next presenter is Apollo Papadopoulos."

Our presentation is next!

But, she needs....

We reached consensus and walked up to the platform.

* * * *

It was just us and Mother Redd on the bus back to the farm that evening.

“I want to help look,” Meda had said as we climbed aboard.

“Doctor Thomasin is doing everything that needs to be done.”

“Okay.” I was sure she caught our sullenness, mine especially. It weighed heavy on me that we had not gone after Candace. For all her annoying habits, she was still a friend going through a crisis, and no blue ribbon was worth a friend’s pain.

She’s not our friend.

I turned on Manuel and let loose with my anger. He shirked back from me, but held his call for consensus.

Even if she isn’t our friend, she still needs our help! I sent.

I threw my ribbon at him. It missed and sailed to the front of the bus. Mother Redd glanced at it, then at us, but I didn’t care, even when Strom filled the air with embarrassment.

No one else stood up to help in that whole auditorium. No one. We should have.

More embarrassment from Manuel and the others.

She was scared. And she ran, because there was no one to help. And now she’s missing!

Finally they agreed. We sat in silence the rest of the way home.

At the house, there was a taxi bill in the house email account that we saw when we walked in the door.

“She’s here. She took a taxi,” Meda said.

We checked her room, and the rest of the house, but there was nothing. We checked the barn and the labs. Mother Redd called Doctor Thomasin, and we started to check the lake, but stopped when Strom’s duck quacked to be let out. Then the clutch rushed off toward the lake.

“Where are they going?”

“Apparently they aren’t imprinted on Strom anymore.”

Candace wasn’t at the lake either. We stood, looking in six directions for some sign of her, some clue to where she was hiding.

I hope she's okay.

“Look!”

There coming out of the forest was a flock of ducks—our ducks; *all* our ducks.

“What are they doing?”

They waddled right up to us and began swarming around our legs.

“Oh, great. More imprinted ducks.”

They began to quack, not individual dissonant sounds, but in unison: Quack, pause, quack, pause, quack, with the tempo slowly increasing.

Then they rushed back toward the forest. We followed.

A flocking pod?

We followed the flock into the brush, struggling to keep up with their orderly and low-to-the-ground progression. They were waddling through the brush more easily than we were walking.

Ahead, the woods broke into a clearing, and there was Candace, lying on the ground.

“Oh no!”

She was pale, every one of her, clammy to the touch. Her breathing was shallow.

Look how thin her face seems.

Her skin looks like paper. We could see the blue veins at her temples.

The ducks clustered around us as we checked her.

Let's get her back to the house.

We found an easier way back, and carried her to the house, three at a time, leaving the male for last. We hated breaking her up like that, but she was unconscious, and we had to get her to the house.

“Goodness!” Mother Redd said when she saw us. She directed us to the lab. It jolted us to see her behaving as a medical doctor; we thought of the quartet she had been as a doctor. The trio she was was an ecologist. I guess she was still a doctor, even though she had lost a quarter of herself. I wondered how much medical training had been lost when her fourth had expired. “Lay her on the table. Get the rest of her.”

When we got back with the next three, Mother Redd had already begun running tests on her: hormone levels, blood tests, gene maps. When we got back with the last one, Mother Redd was on the vid to Doctor Thomasin.

“Her gene map has deviated from her norm. She appears to have applied transmogrifying sequences to herself, as recently as a week ago. The result is shock, renal failure, and seizures. Possibly shared memory degradation. I’ve called an ambulance.”

His face looked shocked. “Why would she do such a thing?”

He’s misleading us.

I don’t know why I thought it, but as soon as I did, the consensus formed behind it. None of us had had an inkling of his prevarication, but now it seemed obvious. We were built for intuitive leaps.

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Meda said, “How would her own doctor not know she’s monkeying with her genome? She’s been sick all summer.” She said it softly, but loud enough for Mother Redd to hear.

One of her turned and looked directly at us. We met the gaze. She nodded slightly.

To Doctor Thomasin, she said, “The ambulance is already here. We’re going to the county hospital.”

“I’ll meet you there.” He signed off.

Mother Redd said, “Wait in the house, please.”

“But—”

“Wait in the house.”

We did, and, to pass the time, we ran searches on the legal and medical ramifications of postpartum genetic manipulation. Our children were built; it is a fact of our society. But the individual—the pod—is sacred, once it has pod-bonded. For his own reasons, Doctor Thomasin, who had built Candace, saw the need to change her still, to modify his creation.

It’s wrong.

There was no doubt in our mind.

When the ambulance arrived, Mother Redd directed it to the Institute hospital instead of the county hospital.

* * * *

Mother Redd relented and allowed us to come with her as she followed the ambulance in the aircar. She wouldn't let us drive, though we were checked out on the car, and had about ten times better reflexes than she did.

We sat in the waiting room while she consulted with the physicians at the Institute. We'd been in the Institute hospital only rarely; we'd had a single anatomy class the year before in one of the auxiliary buildings. Most of our classes were in engineering science, and we were rarely sick enough that we couldn't fix ourselves.

It was late, but we couldn't sleep. We kept checking with the floor AI to see if Candace's condition had changed. It hadn't.

Manuel gazed out the window at the dark buildings. The Institute looked desolate, and I doubted that anyone was on campus, certainly not students, and probably not teachers. Fall classes didn't start for another three weeks.

A door banged. We looked up, and there was Doctor Thomasin, pushing out of the stairwell. He'd run up the six flights of stairs instead of waiting for the elevator.

Without thinking, we formed up behind Strom, our defensive position.

He did a double take.

"I thought you took her to the county hospital," he said.

"We know what you did. Mother Redd knows," Meda said.

"What are you talking about?" Now that we knew how he lied, his bluffs were transparent.

"You have been modifying her DNA all summer. You almost killed her."

"It's some problem with the DNA, sure. But *I* didn't modify it. Where is she?"

He tried to step around us, but we repositioned ourselves in front of him.

"Get out of my way, student!"

"We're not your student. We're human beings with full rights, just like Candace. But then you don't care about that, do you?"

For a second, I thought that he was going to strike at us, and I felt Strom determine the best defense, the best offense. For a moment, we were a matrix of possibility, a phalanx of potential.

"Gorgi, you better go."

It was Mother Redd, standing in the doorway of Candace's room.

“I just need to see her.”

“No.”

“I was just trying to make her *perfect*, don’t you see?”

“I see.”

“I have a responsibility to the future,” he said. “We need to become a viable species. We’re on the cusp. We’re as near extinction as we’ve ever been, and *I* have got to save us!”

“Saving the human race through Candace is not your responsibility,” Mother Redd said.

“*You* were responsible for Candace,” we said. “But you failed.” We were suddenly aware of all our responsibilities, to our friends, to ourselves, to our ducks: duties and relationships interwoven.

Doctor Thomasin looked at me. “I wanted to build something as good as you,” he said.

“You did.”

He held our look and we smelled his thoughts. After a moment, he nodded, then turned away.

* * * *

We saw Candace once after she left the hospital. She came to the farm, and we showed her the duck pod: one hundred and fifty-seven ducks forming a single entity. We told her that we were going to publish a paper, and we wanted her to be coauthor.

“No thanks. I don’t have anything to contribute.”

We nodded, embarrassed. We’d forgotten that she’d lost a huge amount of pod memory with the last genetic modification.

“What are your plans then?”

“I’m thinking about medical school. I’ll have to start a lot of studies from scratch, but I think I’d like to do that.”

“That sounds good. You’ll do well.”

Her interface and Meda hugged, and then she finished packing her stuff. On the air pad, we said another awkward good-bye. We made sure she had our ID so she could write, but I had a feeling that she wasn’t going to. I doubted that she wanted to remember this summer at all.

We watched the air car rise and depart.

Time to check the ducks.

It's always time to check the ducks!

So we did.

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