

If We Can Save Just One Child...

by Robert Reed

Robert Reed's knack for extrapolating the social implications of new science is once again on display in this new story, a smart look at what the future might hold If This Goes On....

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Schoolyard

One man looked out of place. Twenty years on the job and a software package from one of the new security companies told the Physicality Facilitator to ignore everyone else on the schoolyard and focus his full attention on the fellow who was sitting apart from the other adults. The suspicious man was middle-aged, dressed in slacks and a sweat-dampened dress shirt. He had his rump perched on a concrete retaining wall, his face betraying a less-than-comfortable expression. Following standard protocols, the PF took photographs from several angles before asking the software for final interpretations. Moments later, the PF found himself with a thorough analysis of the man's posture and face, six stars on the seven-point scale lighting up.

Three weeks later, that popular and wildly profitable software would receive what was dubbed an upgrade. But in reality, the product was so flawed that its owners would have to obliterate half of their previous work, replacing a stew of cranky algorithms and flawed databases with tools that were still inadequate, but measurably better than the awful predecessor.

"Hello, sir," the PF began with a loud, overly friendly voice. "And how are you today?"

The man on the wall looked up, mildly surprised.

The PF introduced himself without extending his hand. Then with a smile worthy of a yearbook photograph, he asked, "Do I know you, sir?"

"I don't know what you know," the stranger replied. "Or what you don't know, for that matter."

The response was unexpected, and a blatant challenge. The PF stiffened his smile. "If I might ask, sir. Are you here to pick up a student?"

“Yes.”

“Which child?”

The yard was littered with waiting parents and nannies, day care services and several older siblings. But the instructor knew most of those faces, or at least he could see nothing alarming in the other people’s body language. Sitting alone was a problem. Not conversing with the other parents was a signal. Not that anything would come of this, the PF reasoned ... but still, in these grim times, someone in his position had to ask all the right questions.

The stranger glanced at the old brick schoolhouse. With a tight, quiet voice, he reported, “I’m waiting for my son.”

“I need a name, sir. Please.”

“Olsen. Pepper Olsen.”

The PF fed the name into his reader. Then with an exceptionally serious tone, he warned, “We don’t have any children named Olson.”

“Try an ‘e’ and a ‘n,’” the man muttered.

This time the PF was rewarded with the image of a smiling first-grader and links to a pleasant-faced woman who looked somewhat familiar. “Does his mother normally pick him up?”

“My wife does. Yes.”

“And she’s not here today?”

The man—Mr. Olsen, presumably—gave the world a mocking glance. With his gaze fixed on his accuser, he said, “No. She’s stuck at home.”

“I see.”

“I don’t usually pick up. But my wife, Pepper’s mother, is sick today. And for some reason, she doesn’t think people would appreciate seeing a woman barf on the playground.”

“Sir,” said the PF in a slow, injured tone. “I have to ask these questions. This is what I do. What every teacher does.”

“Fine.”

“Can you tell me, sir? Why isn’t your image in our files?”

“Because I haven’t found time to come in and prove my identity and get my official picture taken.” Then with a loud, exasperated voice, he added, “The school year’s what? Two weeks old?”

Other parents heard him, or at least they noticed his smoldering tone. The nearest people stopped trading gossip, turning to watch the familiar instructor and a gentleman nobody recognized.

“We need your face on file, sir.”

The man sitting on the wall pulled his arms around his belly. Softly, but firmly, he warned, “I’m not feeling that great myself.”

“That’s too bad,” the PF volunteered.

That particular security software had several major flaws, one of which was confusing physical distress for criminal intent.

The PF spent several moments examining the student’s full file. Pepper and his family had moved into the district during the summer. As it happened, there was a father on the very short list of people permitted to pick him up after school. “What’s your name, sir?”

“Gary Olsen,” the man replied instantly, probably anticipating the question.

But that proved little, since the father’s name was a matter of public record. “Now please describe your boy to me.”

“He’s six-foot-nine. And blue. And when’s he’s pissed off, he starts spitting plutonium.”

That didn’t help at all. The PF said as much with his silence.

“Okay, let me try again.” The man gave a detailed description of his son. And then on his own, he asked, “Do you know what Pepper’s wearing today?”

“No, sir. I don’t.”

“Well I don’t know either. I left for work before the kid crawled out of bed.”

The PF was struggling with his own calculations. Did he press this business any further, and if so, using which officious route? Seven years ago, on one of the best days of his life, he happened to notice a young man lurking at the edge of this very same schoolyard. A routine call to the police proved his intuitions valid: The lurker was a registered sex offender, and by walking beside the soccer field, he had broken the terms of his probation.

But that was ages ago. These days, simple sex offenders were the least of his problems.

If you were a child, these were desperately dangerous times.

The stranger—Gary Olsen—eased himself off the wall and took a careful breath. “How much time before the dismissal bell?”

“Two, maybe three minutes.”

“Listen. I know you’re trying to do your job. But you need to realize that I’m working hard not to crap my pants here. I don’t know why you think I’m worth the attention, but if it’s important to you, haul me to the office. Now. Lock me in the bathroom, and then you can run to room 113 and find Pepper and bring him back. Then with the principal’s help and a couple calls to your district office, maybe we can get our mess taken care of. Does that sound like a plan to you?”

The PF didn’t consider himself as having a temper. And that’s why his present anger bothered him so much. This Olsen fellow almost certainly had reasons for being here. But the PF had never seen six stars out of seven from the personality assessment equipment, and he had to wonder if there were a second, secret agenda at play. Not that he could prove it, of course. But justice required that something was accomplished, and twenty years of teaching gym class had taught him a few useful tricks. That’s why he smiled—a forced and oversized but exceptionally sneaky smile. “I’m sorry, Mr. Olsen. Have a nice evening with your son. And please, wish your wife a speedy recovery.”

The sick man bent forward, green in the face now.

Then the bell sounded, and moments later, a young boy matching the picture in the database sprinted outside with the rest of the first-graders. By then his father was standing alone in the open, right next to the bright white

lines that marked the kickball area. “Dad? What’s up? Where’s Mom?”

The PF couldn’t hear the man’s response, but he felt the heat when a last long glance was thrown his way.

Mr. Olsen wasn’t any threat.

More than likely.

But because it was his job, the PF filled out the standard form used to report suspicious occurrences, and he sent his work to a national clearinghouse where the paranoia of a world was gathered together—twenty thousand forms on the average school day, each one searched for patterns, tendencies, and the scent of even one worthwhile clue.

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The Pool

“Did you see what they found?”

“Found?”

“In Thailand. You hear the big news?”

Two mothers were visiting the water park, sharing the shade of a single enormous umbrella. It was a Saturday in June; schools had just let out for summer. The women were acquaintances whose paths occasionally crossed at the grocery and church. One was large and loud, the other as small as some children and naturally quiet. But they shared all the topical fears of their day. News from Thailand? That could only mean one thing!

“Did they find children?” asked the little woman.

“Eight of them,” her companion said with disgust.

“No, I hadn’t heard—”

“Still babies,” the big woman added. “Caucasian. In some sort of jungle compound, from what I saw on the Web.”

“Whose children are they?”

“A couple keepers have been arrested.”

“No,” the little woman explained. “I mean, where did they come from? Does anyone know?”

“Nobody’s admitting anything. Not publicly, at least.” Pausing for a moment, the big woman scanned the crowd until she found her daughter—a substantial girl in her own right. “They’ve already done the usual tests. Put the kids’ DNA on the Websites. But how many people know their own genetics?”

“I do. I had my DNA mapped...”

The confession took a moment to be noticed. “Yours, or your kids’?”

“All of us have,” the little woman admitted.

Her companion found that intensely amusing. But she managed not to laugh, throwing a joke at herself instead. “Nobody wants my chromosomes. Good God, I can barely get my husband interested in this cranky old body.”

But the small woman had always been pretty and quite sensitive about her looks. “This is a real fear of mine,” she offered.

“It shouldn’t be.”

“Ever since that time in Russia....”

What an awful business that had been! Two years ago, a routine drug arrest in Moscow led to a warehouse where thirty blond toddlers were living in pens. Or chicken coops. Or in some stories, prison cells. The girls were two and three years old, and each one had the same beautiful face. Subsequent tests determined that they were genetically identical, but with the shortened telomeres and the occasional mutation common among cheaply rendered clones.

The subsequent investigation proved that the poor toddlers were being groomed for sale to highly motivated customers.

That’s when the nightmare began.

“I know it’s not likely,” said the little woman. “The odds of that happening to my family ... or to me....”

“Very, very unlikely,” the big woman promised. “Besides, gene thieves aren’t sophisticated. If they want to make a profit, they need young DNA. But inside you and me is nothing but muddy old genetics, and our telomeres are already gotten too short.” She threw out a big laugh, adding, “It’s sad to hear, but they’d throw our junky old cells out with the trash.”

“Unless somebody made a mistake,” the pretty woman argued, her voice soft and sorry. “If they aren’t sophisticated, like you said, then they could easily clone the wrong skin cells.”

“Sure, that’s possible. I guess.”

“I believe in taking precautions.” She tried deflecting her acidic fears with her own laugh. A tight, unconvincing laugh, as it happened. “I mean, what if those babies in Thailand turned out to be me?”

“What would you do about it?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugged. “If I had legal rights and they would let me ... I guess I’d try to help the poor girls somehow.”

“With money? Or would they come live with you?”

“I really don’t know,” she admitted. “I’d have to pray about it. Of course. And then I’d do whatever’s right.”

“Who wouldn’t want to do what’s right?” asked the big woman.

Yet the world was full of evil people. After a few moments of dark reflection, her friend begged, “Can we please change the subject?”

“Thank goodness, yes.”

Two hours later, the fearful woman was sitting alone, napping until the umbrella’s shade pulled away from her tiny, lovely face. When she woke, she noticed two police officers talking to a young boy. With pride, the boy was showing off a fresh scrape on his leg, and then with a matter-of-fact gesture, he pointed the officers toward the smallest slide.

The woman instantly shouted for her two children.

Her oldest was a girl at least as pretty as her mother. She looked a little worried, but impressed. “It’s inside the tube,” she reported. “Down at the bottom of the slide.”

“What is?”

“The thing.”

“What thing?” the woman asked.

“It’s sandpaper, I guess. Stuck there with glue.”

She began to tremble.

“Some kid did it,” the daughter offered. “Wanted to be an idiot, I guess.”

“Where’s your brother?”

“How would I know?”

“Did you get scraped?”

“No, Mom.” Then after a watchful pause, the girl asked, “What is the matter with you?”

“Find your brother, meet me at the gate. Right away.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Lifeguards had turned off the slide’s water, and the more athletic officer did her best to climb down to the abrasive pad. But she didn’t remove the object. Instead she climbed back out and called for a biohazard team. And then the public address system screamed to life, offering a few apologies and then a warning that for the next little while, no one would leave the grounds.

A blond boy and a brown-haired man were standing nearby. “Did you see it, Dad?” asked the boy.

“Nope.”

“You didn’t get cut?”

His father looked himself over. “Guess not.”

“But you went down that slide.”

“I don’t remember. Did I?”

“You did. I saw you.”

His father didn’t speak.

“Just before the kid got scraped.”

“Pepper,” said the man quietly, but with feeling. “This is nothing, believe me. Some kid’s dumb-ass prank, and it doesn’t mean anything.”

“But, Dad—”

“Son,” said the man. “Shut it.”

The boy nodded, quietly accepting that nugget of parental logic.

That’s when the man glanced over his shoulder, staring for a moment at the prettiest face in the crowd.

When he looked away again, the woman sobbed. She dropped into the nearest folding chair, feeling a great weight bearing down on her racing heart.

* * * *

The Fair

“I promise. This is going to be a waste of time.”

Silence.

“I don’t even know why I’m here. And I’ll be damned if I see why you got pulled in on this.”

“My son—”

“Pepper, is it?”

“Where’s my boy?”

“His mom’s sitting with him now. I can let you see him, maybe in a few minutes. Just as soon as we get our business done.”

The subject didn’t ask, “What business?” Nor did he offer any of the other obvious, urgent questions.

Interesting.

“My name’s Steve,” said the investigator. He gave the files another cursory glance. “And you’re Gary?”

“Yes.”

“Your wife’s name—”

“She’s my ex-wife,” the subject said, with feeling.

“Sorry to hear that.”

Silence.

“So you came to see the State Fair, Gary? You and your son did?”

“Yes.”

“How is it?”

“Excuse me?”

“I haven’t come here in years. Is it any good?”

“Bad food. Dangerous rides.” The subject managed a smile. “Yeah, it’s pretty much like always.”

“How old’s the boy?”

“Thirteen.”

“And you?”

There was a pause. Then with a loss of patience, the subject said, “You know how old I am. You’ve got my files in front of you.”

“Fifty-five.”

A pause. "So what do they say?"

The investigator lifted his gaze. "What does who say?"

"My files."

"This and that. Not much, from what I can tell."

Silence.

"Know why you were picked up, Gary?"

"I can guess." The subject had a tight, smart face, and he was definitely restraining his emotions. "Something happened at the Fair tonight. Didn't it?"

"We're still trying to decide that."

"But you, or somebody else, felt an obligation to round up every person of interest. Is that right?"

"You know how it goes." The investigator shrugged and managed a put-upon expression. "We look at the databases, and the AI hunts for tendencies, and of course there's about a thousand cameras scattered around the Fair grounds—"

"Was I someplace I shouldn't have been?"

"Damned if I know. I'm not even sure why you got swept up in this nonsense."

The subject shifted in his chair, volunteering nothing.

"I see two past incident reports," the investigator mentioned. "At your son's school, and less than a year later—"

"Does that matter?"

"Incident reports? They can matter, yes."

"No. You said, 'Less than a year later.' As if that's an important detail."

"Oh, that's, no, not at all." The investigator was honest, admitting, "It's

just that two incident reports are more likely to trigger an AI's attention. About five times more likely than a single hit. But of course, other factors come into play here."

"Like what?"

"During the second incident...."

"With the crazy woman," the subject volunteered.

"Yeah, she does come across that way. I guess. Although I think 'neurotic' is the more accurate description."

"She pointed her finger at me."

"She thought you were acting suspicious."

"Of doing what?"

"There was an abrasive pad—"

"For cleaning dishes!"

There. Real emotions started to boil. With an agreeable nod, the investigator said, "Sure, it was a nothing incident. Just some unidentified kid and his mom's scouring pad, plus some glue. The kid probably just wanted to make his world crazy for a while."

"I was not a suspect."

Gary Olsen had been a suspect, but only briefly. The investigator said, "Tsk," while staring at the subject. "Actually, I've got to tell you. It's not those two incidents that got the software's attention. It's your job."

The man flinched.

"If I'm not mistaken, you're a trained biologist."

"I have a degree in limnology," the subject replied. "Do you know what that means?"

"Water stuff."

"Not genetics."

The investigator shook his head. "Fish don't have genes?"

The man took the Lord's name in vain.

"I know this doesn't seem quite right, Gary. But it's just the way these stupid systems work. You have two prior interviews, plus a specialty implicated in a series of horrible crimes that are occurring worldwide."

Again, the man swore.

"Hardly fair, but my hands are tied." With some subjects, he might have shown his hands. But this fellow didn't seem likely to fall for cheap theatrics. "I've got a girl from the Fair who's got a deep cut in her leg, and she's claiming that some strange man jabbed her with medical equipment."

Silence.

"You wouldn't know anything about that, Gary?"

"No."

"If we showed her your picture, and a few other photos too ... just to play by the rules ... do you think she'd pick your face out of the pile?"

"I have no idea what she might or might not do."

"I guess you wouldn't know, would you?"

Suspicious silence.

"Limnology, huh?"

"I quit the field years ago."

"Why? Got tired of water?"

"No," he said in a smoldering tone. "I didn't make tenure at the university and decided to change careers."

"Probably smart."

The subject paused before saying, "It's all in those files. I'm sure. Today I sell real estate."

“Hey, so does my sister-in-law,” the investigator offered. “Tough business these days. She says we’re in a big down cycle.”

The subject sighed. Then he looked at the floor, a contemplative mood ending when he asked, “How many cases of bootleg cloning are there? In the average year, worldwide?”

“I’m really not sure, Gary.”

“On average, three-and-a-half,” the subject offered.

“Which means—?”

“Two to five cases every year, and not even for a decade now. And the total number of Americans who have had their DNA stolen is exactly five. Five. Which puts this panic into a different light, if you actually bother to think things through.”

“If I was smart, you mean?”

The subject saw his misstep, but he couldn’t stop himself. “I’m not talking about you. I mean everybody. When another illegal cloning operation is discovered, it gets attention from every medium. The crime is sensational, and nobody’s sure how to react, and when you see images of little kids being raised for some purpose or another that has to be immoral—”

“The sex industry is the usual client,” the investigator interrupts.

“And that’s a very narrow, very select market,” the subject pointed out. “Some pedophiles will pay a fortune for four or six or a dozen kids with the same looks and mannerisms. Sure. That’s what keeps this tiny industry alive.”

“We can’t say it’s tiny,” the investigator countered. “We don’t know how big it is, since we can only count the cases we actually uncover.”

“Right.” The subject was red-faced, agitated to the point where he made fists in his lap. “There could be a thousand cloning farms scattered across the world—secret facilities selling tens of thousands of infants to an underground world of sick men and sick women who not only can pay the enormous costs of cloning, but then manage to keep their huge, same-faced families a secret from neighbors and friends and everyone

else in their twisted lives.”

The investigator remained silent, waiting for whatever came next.

“Hey, I want this business stamped out,” said the subject, spit flying for his quivering mouth. “More than anybody else, I want it gone. We’d have a lot healthier world if people started to consider the genuine dangers. But as long as the public fear is stirred up by these rare incidents ... these awful but very rare crimes ... we’re going to keep making ourselves crazy about things that happen a lot less often than ... well, than people getting killed on faulty amusement park rides....”

“Now you’re the one sounding a little crazy,” the investigator mentioned.

“No, I’m just a neurotic,” the subject snapped. “You blame me?”

“Hey, Gary. Play along here. I’m just doing my job.”

The subject nearly said something else, but caught himself. Then another thing occurred to him. Looking hard at the investigator, he said, “You already showed her my picture. Didn’t you?”

“That girl? Yeah, a colleague of mine did that chore about an hour ago.”

A look of undiluted disgust came into the subject’s face. “What did she tell you? Did she pick me out of the lineup?”

“Actually, she picked me.” The investigator had to smile and shake his head. “No, we don’t think this kid’s very credible. She was doing something she shouldn’t have been doing, and she got hurt, and now she’s telling a dumb story. But really, you can never be sure about appearances. That’s why I decided that you and I should enjoy this little chat....”

* * * *

The Sandbox

When Evan was at a very delicate age, his older brother tormented him with the idea that he was a clone.

“You were born in Brazil,” his brother claimed one day, pointing with authority at a random, erroneous point on a brightly colored map of the

world. "You and your clone brothers ... you were being raised by cannibals."

"I wasn't."

"Oh yes, you were," the eleven-year-old warned him. Then with a grim smile, he added, "Those cannibals had you living inside cat cages. You couldn't move, and they force-fed you all sorts of goodies."

Evan was a pudgy, desperately insecure child.

"Know what veal is?"

"We ate it last night. Right?"

"That was veal made from a fat calf. But you were going to be a special meal for somebody else's family."

"I was not!"

"Sure, you were."

The boy considered his dire situation. "Then how did I get here?" he asked.

His tormentor licked his lips and giggled. "We bought you, of course. And next Christmas, we're having you instead of an old turkey."

It was the worst kind of lie, and his brother was punished severely for what he had done. But that early horror left its mark. Or perhaps something in Evan's nature assured that regardless of what happened in his childhood, he would grow up scared and unhappy. Maybe the story was a convenient excuse. Whatever the reason, twenty years later he was slender and strong, but preyed upon by doubts and black fears. Even on his best days, he suffered from the enduring conviction—indeed, the muscular hope—that the world was rich with evil.

During college, Evan gravitated toward the conservative groups still in the fight against immoral biological sciences. He marched with Christians, chanted with Muslims, and for an entire semester, he allied himself with a band of zealots who used cloning as an excuse to make pipe bombs that were detonated only in empty fields. Plainly, the cause was a mess, and its warriors were unfocused and unable to achieve even tiny victories. The old ideas about bioethics had evaporated. Virtually every type of research was allowed now. Around the globe, the elderly and sick were routinely given

tissues and organs grown from stem cells that might or might not belong to them. Athletes, even weekend amateurs, routinely doped themselves with extra muscle and lung tissue. The wickedest nations, where almost anything was legal, allowed the wealthy and self-obsessed to make clones of themselves. Even one of the girls that Evan dated in college—a good little Southern Baptist from Alabama—confessed that what he loved best about her body had been cultivated in a sterile laboratory.

The only true taboo left was cloning people without their consent.

Genuine incidents remained quite rare. But Evan possessed both the focus and imagination to see patterns where others saw happenstance. To him, it was self-evident that there were wicked people and slick organizations that existed for no reason but to steal away a person's genetics. What Evan believed as a boy still held its grip on him. There had to be an underground market, and one or many governments were involved in the trade. Anybody with a clear gaze and the right frame of mind could see the threat, and the only way to fight the war was to remain solitary, strong and secure, waiting for the opportunity to do some genuine good.

Evan had worked out a routine that felt responsible as well as just. This led to a few uncomfortable moments. Strange men would say, "What are you looking at?" An old woman once warned him that he was making her nervous. And once, an off-duty policeman found him near a schoolyard and misunderstood Evan's pure intentions. No, he wasn't interested in little boys. He was watching for people who might want to steal a child's genetics. But there was no way to admit his true purpose. So he spun a lie about looking for a niece who was supposed to be here with his sister, and he gave them names and described them, and then asked the officer if he'd seen either one.

An incident report may or may or not have been filed.

Evan didn't bother to check.

But after that scare, he was more cautious about his work. Using hidden cameras, he photographed thousands of suspects, and with software linked to a multitude of databases, he identified hundreds of people who proved their innocence without having to say one word.

Then came a warm spring afternoon at a popular playground, and the gray-haired gentleman who was watching a special boy.

The boy was amazing, yes—wiry and strong, and in ways that Evan

could only marvel at, fearless. He was perhaps ten years old, wearing a wide smart grin, and he would scramble up the side of a shelter standing in the center of an expansive sandbox. The shelter had a passing resemblance to a castle. Written signs and audio overseers warned the boy that he was using the structure improperly. But the climb was just a minor accomplishment. Once on top—three meters off the ground, nearly—the boy would assume a tucked position, the balls of his bare feet set against a horizontal pipe. Then he would lift his hands, and with a smooth, seemingly effortless motion, he would leap backward, the bare feet snapping as the legs soared above his twirling body.

Somehow, that young acrobat landed upright in the soft sand, facing the shelter, unharmed and perfectly in balance.

Several adults and half a dozen kids watched the show. One young woman chastised the boy for endangering others. But words couldn't stop him. Again and again, he climbed high and made the same leap, each time lifting higher and landing closer to the edge of the sandbox, the final jump putting him within arm's reach of a steel fence.

A gray-haired man happened to be sitting on a nearby bench, one arm thrown protectively over a blond boy with a passing resemblance to him.

That was his grandson, Evan learned in time.

Later that day, a pair of face-recognition packages produced the same name—Gary Olsen—and with that name came an empty criminal file. But a resourceful man has countless avenues, and through means not entirely legal, Evan recovered both a thorough biography of the fellow as well as three old incident reports—a string of telltale clues whose cumulative effect was to make him lie awake through the night, enjoying his extraordinary luck.

* * * *

Saving One Child

Three careers and two failed marriages might have embittered most men. But once he reached retirement age, Gary discovered that he still had his health, and for no obvious reason at all, he acquired a late-in-life capacity for happiness. His abrasive humor was still present, but tempered with a measure of wisdom and a practiced capacity for knowing how to act in public. Maybe being a grandfather was the secret. Certainly he pulled all

the pleasure he could out of that experience. And he liked to believe that he was a better father now, too. Although maybe that's because Pepper was an adult, responsible in his own right and far smarter than his father could ever pretend to be.

Of course Gary could be happy for a much less noble reason: His days weren't filled with work that he despised, and his personal peace stemmed from that.

Whatever the cause, each day was a little celebration.

Most mornings began with a walk on a bikeway that on Sunday mornings, like today, was almost empty.

Gary noticed the young man at a distance—a solitary figure that in some fashion or another looked as if he should be alone. There was a lonely quality to the silhouette and its patient, nowhere-to-be gait. At closer range, the man seemed a little peculiar. Why was that? Because he stared in Gary's direction but didn't quite look at him? Or was it the way he kept his shoulders hunched, hands meeting in the front pocket of a sweatshirt that looked unbearably heavy for what was proving to be a warm, sultry morning?

Gary never suspected that the man would produce a pistol.

And even when it was in plain view, held firmly in both hands, the weapon had an unreal quality. Surely, it was a toy. A prop. Somebody's misguided attempt at humor, and Gary just happened to be an accidental witness to something of no real consequence.

Then the young man said, "Mr. Gary Olsen."

And recited his address.

And then with a dry, slightly nervous voice, he said, "I know what you've done. And I know what you are."

Too late, Gary realized that at this point on the path, no homes or traveled streets were in view. And since it was Sunday, and early, there was absolutely no reason to hope for somebody passing by soon.

Like bad men in old movies, the stranger pointed with his gun.

He intended to herd Gary back into the trees.

When the adrenaline struck, Gary's heart nearly burst. Then from some reservoir of courage or stubbornness, or most probably fear, he told his enemy, "No. I'm not doing that."

"Then I'll shoot you here."

"I would," Gary managed. "Because I'm not going anywhere with you."

The stranger had not imagined events happening quite this way. He took a few moments to consider his prospects, licking at his lips while dipping his eyes. Then he whispered, "Fine. I will."

Gary nearly collapsed. But he forced himself to breathe, looking at his enemy's very serious eyes, and with a plaintive voice asked the simple, boundless question, "Why?"

"Why?"

Gary nodded. "Why do this to me? What's your reason?"

The stranger seemed offended. "I have a very good reason."

"Don't I deserve to know?"

The young man saw the logic, or at least in his position of total power, he could afford to say, "I guess so."

Gary waited.

And with perhaps half a dozen sentences, a life story was told to him—a fanciful tale of conspiracies and farflung enemies, none of it bearing any resemblance to anything genuine and very little that was sane.

Deny any portion of the tale, and his enemy would shoot him. Gary was sure of it.

For a few moments, he couldn't speak. Or think clearly. Weak legs bent, and he settled on the pavement, on his knees, bowing his head while he managed a few ragged breaths. Then with a choking voice, he said, "You're right, yes. You caught me." And he lifted his head, meeting the stranger's gaze.

The pistol dipped.

“I do steal people’s DNA. For years and years now.” Gary felt detached, like an observer, never quite certain what words his own mouth would say next. “But you have to understand ... I don’t work for a secret organization. No, no. I work alone. For my own reasons—”

“What reasons?” his enemy snapped.

“Sometimes...” The voice failed him now. What could he possibly say that would help? “Sometimes,” he muttered again. Then, “Some people ... you know, children...?”

The pistol lifted again.

“Children,” Gary repeated. Then his voice recovered its purpose, and he asked, “What if there’s a boy, and he has enormous talents and all kinds of potentials ... but his home life is miserable. You know? Bad parents and poverty, and if he grows up at all, he’ll be too damaged to become half the success he should have been.”

Just slightly, his enemy’s expression changed.

“I find those boys,” Gary lied. “I find them and steal a few of their cells, and I clone them. But I make only one clone for each boy. And I’m very careful to give them full-length telomeres and no serious mutations. Because if you’re going to save somebody’s life, that’s what you need to do.”

“Save what life?”

“The boy’s,” he repeated. Then he managed a smile, adding, “Each baby is adopted by good people ... responsible, caring parents ... and while their older twins are dying of drugs and ignorance, those lucky few get a second chance at the success they deserve.”

None of this was what the stranger expected, and he didn’t know exactly how to respond.

“I know, it’s all illegal,” said Gary, his smile collapsing.

He was about to be shot; he felt certain.

But then he muttered, “It’s just that ... if at the end of the day, if I can save just one child....”

There was a long pause.

Then that sick young man dropped his gun, and screaming softly to himself, he ran up the path and out of sight.