

SEX AND VIOLENCE

by Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress shows us why we can't live without...

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"The central problem of evolution is this," Dr. Shearing said, chalk poised before the blackboard. Bio 101 slouched, sprawled, and yawned in its collective seats. "Natural selection works fine once you have organisms to select *from*. But how did that first self-replicating organism get itself assembled? In fifty years of lab experiments—fifty years!—we haven't succeeding in infusing life into any 'primordial-soup' chemicals. Let alone in joining the minimum thirty-two amino acids needed for a self-replicating proto-cell." He paused dramatically. "So where did that first natural-selection candidate come from? *Where?*"

Ordered on eBay, Jim Dunn text-messaged to Emily McLean across the aisle. She giggled.

"Of course," Dr. Shearing continued, "There's always the theory that life on Earth was seeded from the stars, by a cloud of drifting spores called panspermia—"

Canned sperm, ya? Emily texted, giggling harder.

"—and that we descendents of alien spores in fact are, after three and a half billion years of evolution, aliens to Earth."

HE'S pretty alien, Jim texted. *Wanna get coffee?*

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"They test *how?*" [Mghzl] [said] to [his] [lab assistant].

"Matter-based, which is strange enough, but ... look." The other displayed all the relevant data on the [not translatable] of a [also not translatable].

"Sugar-phosphate double helix and amino acid pairs? You're *sure?*"

The [lab assistant] [nodded]. The fabric of space-time rippled slightly.

“When?”

“Forty point sixteen [time units] ago. It could have been an accidental escape or...”

“Or a deliberate release,” [Mghzl] [said] bitterly. “I suspect ... you know what I suspect. What have they evolved into?”

The [lab assistant] displayed an image on [his] [not translatable]. [Mghzl] recoiled. The energy of the recoil, traveling in all directions, made a tiny tear in space-time which immediately underwent a flop transition into a new orientation within one six-dimensional Calabi-Yau space. “They look like *that*?”

“Yes.”

“Have they spread beyond the one planet?”

“Not yet.”

[Mghzl] [sighed]. “Begin an [official investigation] into the spore release. And send an [exterminator/cleanser/cover-up team]. We can’t have uncontrolled [vermin-like beings] infesting that part of the galaxy.”

The [lab assistant] hesitated. “I would like...”

“Yes?”

“I would like to ... to study them.”

[Mghzl] [blinked]. “Why?”

“For my [hopelessly untranslatable term]. They ... I know this is incredible, but currently they’re evolving through mating by direct physical joining with direct exchange of bodily tissues.”

[Mghzl] [shuddered]. Space-time warped in several dimensions. “No!”

“Yes.”

“How could evolution ... oh, all right. Study them. But only for one [long unit of time], and only if there’s no spread of the infestation.”

“Agreed.”

“After that, the [exterminator/cleanser/cover-up team].”

“Yes. Thank you, [honorific involving terms not only untranslatable but capable of undermining human civilization].”

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“Thirty-two modules to make a proto-cell,” Emily recited, squinting at her notes.

“I think it’s ‘molecules,’” Jim said. God, she had such a body.

“Do you think it’ll be on the test?”

“Dunno.”

“We should study together—your notes are better than mine.” She smiled at him and tossed her hair. One strand fell into her coffee cup. Neither of them noticed.

He said, “Yeah, let’s study together ... you taking Bio 102 next semester?”

“No, I’m a business major. But I have to pass this or I’m toast.”

“I’ll help you pass.” Their eyes locked. Pheromones shot out energetically. [Notes] were [recorded]. The college cafeteria grew warmer.

She said huskily, “What’s an amino acid?”

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Jim and Emily lay in bed, smiling at each other. Her long hair spread in silky tentacles across the pillow. She didn’t yet know it, but one of Jim’s sperm had just found one of her eggs and was burrowing inward with ferocious violence.

“We’ll miss the exam,” she said.

“Screw the exam.”

They smiled at each other. This post-coital glow, so strong, must be love. The attraction between them grew even more intense. [Notes] were

[recorded] at an even more furious pace. Energy from the [recording process], unprecedented in this star system, reached a critical mass and flowed outward through all seventeen dimensions of space-time, forward and backward, at the speed of light. Through space, through time.

Sol grew .00001 degree hotter (Kelvin). The Van Allen Belt shivered. Thirteen tiny flop transitions occurred in the blink of an eye.

And in the early Precambrian, thirty-two molecules jolted and joined.