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SEA-SECTION

JUSTIN HOLDSTOCK FINALLY decided the hell with Doctor's Orders when he heard one of the attending obstetricians ask, "What is that in there? A lobster?"

Head up like a hound about to go on point, Justin did the unthinkable: He looked. Not just looked, but looked over the carefully erected barricade of sterile drapes that divided his wife Jennifer into the Amazing Talking Head on one side and No Man's Land on the other. S.O.P. for Caesarian sections, yes, a textile admonition to be respected (if not feared) by all law-abiding fathers-to-be who didn't want to find themselves either losing lunch or garnering an unscheduled nap on the O.R. floor. Marriage counselors were forever urging couples to open up to one another, but not like this.

But Bluebeard's wife had also been told not to look, Pandora had been forbidden to peek, and by the Great Horned Steinem, Justin Holdstock was no sexist. Besides, when a member in good standing of the medical profession is supposed to be birthing your firstborn and starts making crustacean-related comments, then the time for blind obedience is past.

He looked. "That's not a lobster," he said, remarkably calm for a man who has just gotten a look at what makes his darling wiley tick (and tock, and swoosh, and lub-dub, and the whole symphony of internal plumbing). "That is a trilobite."

"A what?" the obstetrician asked. The one holding the still-squirming segmented body, that is.

"A trilobite," Justin repeated. "An extinct Paleozoic ancestor of modern crustacea. And," he added, "I fail to see why you are fooling around with such things when you're supposed to be birthing little Jeremiah." For the Holdstocks had gone to the technocave of the ultrasonic Sybil and there received assurance that all the auguries (and the fetoid wingle-dangle) pointed at this baby being a boy.

"Mister Holdstock," said the obstetrician, standing tall and aiming the trilobite at the plaintiff's heart. "I do not make a practice of smuggling lobsters into the O.R. Not to Caesarean sections, anyway, although sometimes when I have to perform a holistic hysterectomy I--" He made an exasperated noise and dropped the critter into a waiting stainless steel pan where it clanked around in a mournful manner. "The point is, I did not bring that thing in here; I found it in there." And his gore-bedewed rubber glove indicated the still-agape aperture of la bonne femme Holdstock.

"What?" Now Justin did show the first signs of an impending swoon. He wheeled violently from the doctor's dramatic j'accuse pose, planted both hands on the

side of the operating table beside his wife's head and said, "Jennifer, what did you have for dinner last night?"

"Why do you want to know?" Jennie demanded petulantly. She was still nursing a grudge over the fact that she had wasted all those weeks going to LaMaze classes, hearing a bunch of bimbos in Birkenstocks rhapsodize over becoming one with the pain, only to wind up spread-eagled on this damn table, slit open like a tax refund, and stuck full of more diagnostic equipment than a Porsche getting a tune-up. Thanks to an excellent anesthesiologist she was becoming one with a whole lot of chemicals instead of her authentic womanhood. Now she'd have to take up ceramics instead. And to think her baby sister dropped those ugly brats of hers one-two-three, after maybe fifteen minutes of labor, like some refugee from a Pearl Buck novel!

"Maybe you'd better show him the rest," the assisting obstetrician murmured.

"What rest?" Justin was on point again.

"Over here, sir," said a nurse at the foot of the table.

"No, dammit!" the chief ob-gyn cried, having as loud a hissy fit as a surgical mask would allow. "He is not allowed on this side of the drapes!"

"I demand to see what you're talking about!" Justin discovered that it was impossible for him to throw up and holler at the same time and resolved to use this knowledge. "This is my son we're talking about here, and if something's the matter -- "

"What's the matter?" Jennifer yelled. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, dear," the nurse taking the head-end of the table cooed by rote. "You just relax."

"-- I am going to sue!"

And there was silence in the O.R. for the space of a moment as the dreaded s-word worked its arcane sorcery.

"Oh, what the hell," the obstetrician said, shrugging green-gowned shoulders. "Let him see."

"Over here, sir," the nurse said, motioning for Justin to join her.

He did so slowly, cautiously, hoping that what he was about to see would not be too bloody. There was just so much you could ask of a man who's only had one cup of coffee. The nurse was still beckoning him. She stood before a table well removed from the Main Event. On it were arranged several stainless steel pans similar to the one which had received the trilobite. Justin looked into the first of these. Something with tentacles looked back.

"Squid," said the nurse. "Though damned if I know why it's stuck in that shell." Something oozed its way out from under the squid. "Snail," the nurse remarked. "There's some worms in there too, somewhere, and there was an ememonee -- nannynemonee -- an anemomonee -- an anem-o-ne," she articulated in triumph.

"And a starfish," Justin said, voice flatter than a chipmunk trying to cross the track at the Indy 500.

The nurse cast a sideways glance into the pan. "So it is."

"Nurse!" shouted the obstetrician. Something long and flippety-floppety was doing the hootchie-kootchie in his gloved hands. The nurse got one of the empty pans under it just in time. It twitched and writhed like a fish out of water, which it was, even if it looked eely in the extreme.

Next came the clams.

"What is going on here?" Justin bawled, or tried to. It came out at whimper-volume and soon dwindled to a piteous mewling.

"Uh," said the obstetrician, who had his hands full with the appearance of a fish who looked like he had robbed a sporting goods store of its entire supply of ping-pong paddles.

"Sir, what do you do for a living?" the assistant ob-gyn asked.

"I'm a commodities broker."

"And, um, you get a lot of exposure to radiation with that? Toxic chemicals? Known mutagens?"

"Only the Wall Street Journal. God damn it, why is this happening?"

Making one last valiant try in the name of Rational Cause, the assistant ob-gyn ignored the question in favor of inquiring, "Maybe you lived in New Jersey?"

"No! And we never lived near Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Bikini Atoll, or any movie house running an all-night Godzilla marathon either! Now you tell me what this is all about!"

"Jesus Christ, how the fuck many legs does this thing have?" his harried colleague sighed from the region of South Jennifer. Something went *clang!* into a pan, then scrabble-scrabble-scrabble.

"Don't you know what's causing this?" Justin asked, his eyes narrow.

"Oh, well "The very idea of being caught without a ready answer held a more primal terror for any medico worth his sal volatile than even the threat of a lawsuit. "It's probably all her fault," the assistant said.

"It is not!" Jennifer decreed. "Whatever it is, it isn't!"

In vain.

"I told you you should have had that pregnancy test earlier!" Justin snarled. Even though the doctor was currently scooping scorpions out of Jennifer's abdomen, Justin suddenly felt much better about the whole situation. Having someone he could blame for it all worked wonders. "God knows what you ate or drank or smoked or snorted during those critical first two weeks!"

"And God knows how you spent those critical first two years at Yale fucking up your germ plasm!" Jennifer countered fiercely. "Better living through chemistry my ass! Did you think you were made of mitochondria?"

"Unworthy vessel!"

"Semen third class!"

"I want a full investigation!" Justin told the room.

"I want a divorce," Jennifer announced from the far side of the drapes.

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," said the anesthesiologist, who was by nature and avocation a fairly laidback kinda gal.

"Huh?" said Jennifer.

"She means what goes around comes around," Justin said smugly. "I told you not to eat that third cheese straw at the Wilberforce's cocktail party, but would you listen? Oh, nooooo. I bet lab tests will prove this is all on account of excess calcium."

"That might explain the clams," said the chief obstetrician, "but not all these cockroaches. And the grunion."

"Keep going, I think I see a frog," said the nurse at his elbow.

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," the anesthesiologist repeated as if it were her mantra. "The biological development of the individual in this case the human fetus -- repeats or summarizes the evolutionary history of that individual. Which is why my cousin Eugene has gills; but then again, his mother came from Philadelphia."

"Yeah, that's right!" Jennifer cried. "The human embryo goes through different developmental stages where it looks like a fish, then an amphibian, then a reptile--"

"That'd be Cousin Bruce," the anesthesiologist supplied.

"-- then a bird, and finally a mammal. It climbs the evolutionary ladder from

lowest life-form to highest. I remember that from ninth grade biology!"

"So do I!" said the assistant ob-gyn brightly.

"But that's only supposed to happen in the embryo itself," Justin moaned. "What is it with this -- this mob scene?"

"Eeeeeee-yuck, I hate snakes," said the chief obstetrician, holding something at arm's length.

"Wimp," the nurse sneered, dropping it into a vacant pan.

The assistant shrugged. "Everything's committees these days." A flight of doves startled everyone into silence, but the attendant pediatrician had the presence of mind to open the O.R. door and release them.

"We're getting closer, Mrs. Holdstock," the obstetrician said. He tried to keep it light and cheerful, but the sound of his teeth grinding was perfectly audible and even a little crunchy. "I think I've got hold of a lemur."

"Awwwwwww!" All previous hostilities were forgotten as the aforementioned creature was indeed produced, flooding the room with immense waves of ecologically correct adorability.

"Keep it away from the snake!" someone shouted.

The sight of the lemur with its large, intelligent, stereoptic eyes did something to Justin. Warm fuzzies begat warm fuzzies and he fled back to his assigned place on the North Jennifer side of the drapes. Holding his wife's hand -- being careful of the IV feed, of course -- he whispered to her, "Don't worry, darling, if they're up to lemurs, we'll be seeing little Jeremiah real soon now. Everything's gonna be all right."

"But what happened to me?" Jennifer insisted. "How did it happen? Why?" She sounded just like some of his clients when the market went yeek-crash-thooooom.

"Honey, none of that matters," he purred in her ear. "All that matters now is --"

"It's a boy!" the obstetrician announced.

"I'll take that," the pediatrician said, swiftly and smoothly stepping into his proper role in the ordained scheme of things.

"We'll clean up," the nurses chirped as all the absent normalcies came clicking back into place.

"I'll just run some of this stuff down to the cafeteria, what say?" said a helpful orderly, gathering up the various fauna-filled trays and wheeling them out of the O.R. on a gurney. (The lemur was exempt -- in this world you can be

cute or you can be gumbo, but not both.)

"-- that we get our version of this story to the networks first," Justin concluded.

"I love you, darling," said Jennifer, misty eyed. "And I want Geena Davis to play me."

"Uh-oh," said the chief obstetrician. He paused, sew-'er-up tools in hand, and stared at something that only he was positioned to see.

"Is there some problem we can sue you for later, Doctor?" Justin asked calmly.

"You want to shake a suture there stitching me up?" Jennifer suggested. "I'd like to hold my son."

"Not... just...yet," he replied. His hands were trembling. He could not look away. His dreadful fascination was so compelling that, as happens at the site of all disasters, he soon drew a crowd. Within seconds Jennifer found herself all alone on the boring side of the drapes.

"What is it?" she clamored. "What's going on?"

"Oh...my...God." The nurse held her fingers to her lips -- actually her rubber gloves to her mask.

"Possibly," the pediatrician conceded.

"Is that the head?"

"Are there five fingers on that hand?"

"Is that a hand?"

"Are those wings?"

"Can I keep the lemur?"

"Is it all right if we name her Julie if she's a girl and Jason if she's not?" asked Jennifer.

"Better make a third choice," the chief ob-gyn panted, up to his elbows in history. "Just to be sure."

"Is Darwinism covered by my medical insurance?" asked Justin.

"Ontogeny anticipates phylogeny," said the anesthesiologist.

And somewhere once more it was Surf's up! as the next wave broke on the shores of some dim, ancestral sea.

