

If Only We Knew

by Jerry Oltion

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Uncertainty we have always with us, but some have a good deal more than others....

When the ultrasound technician gasped in surprise, Robert knew something was amiss. He'd already begun to suspect that echocardiograms weren't standard for life insurance applicants, despite Dr. Sorenson's good-natured assurance that this was "just a routine check to make sure everything's where it ought to be." Something in the doctor's voice had rung hollow, and now the technician's little gasp confirmed it.

"I don't like the sound of that," Robert said.

"It's all right," she replied automatically. "I mean, it's, well ... could you lean a bit more toward me? Thank you."

She had been holding the probe against his rib cage just below his left armpit, and he had been trying not to flinch at the way it tickled against his bare skin; now she slid it an inch or two toward his nipple and looked up at her monitor again. Robert craned his neck to see the image, too. It was surprisingly sharp, a black and white motion picture of his heart beating in real time, the chambers pulsing rhythmically and the valves flapping back and forth with each contraction. The technician pressed a key on the keyboard below the monitor and the image froze for a second—apparently she had just taken a snapshot of his heart—then she moved the probe down his chest, and the plane of focus slipped down with it from the top chambers into the bottom ones, then past another set of valves into the...

"Aren't there supposed to be just four chambers?"

She nodded.

"So, is that some kind of reflected signal, then?"

"I don't think so." She took another snapshot and moved the probe down under his armpit again. "Take a little breath and hold it, please."

He did. The only sound in the room was the ultrasound unit's cooling fan and his own heartbeat, increasing in tempo. The screen showed three distinct chambers in a row, each with little tunnels in the walls: presumably

arteries and veins carrying blood to and from the rest of his body. The technician recorded that view, then slid the probe farther toward his back, and three more chambers slid into focus beside the first.

“I’ve got a six-chambered heart,” Robert said.

The technician recorded that view as well, then lifted the probe away from his chest. The image on the screen washed away in static. “That appears to be the case.”

“How, uh, how common is that?”

Her expression as she looked down at him on the examination table—like a B-movie heroine trying desperately not to scream as the monster rises out of the swamp—made him wish he hadn’t asked.

“Just a moment,” she said. She stood up, her stool rolling back to bump against the wall beside the door. “I’ll go get the doctor. Don’t go anywhere.”

She slipped out and closed the door behind her, leaving him alone with the ultrasound machine and his own astonishment. He hadn’t really expected to find any trouble today; he was only there to qualify for life insurance. He was twenty-four and had never been seriously ill, and until a few minutes ago he had never felt better. He and Elaine had been married for six months, and they were deliriously happy to be so; happy enough to decide to start a family soon. Hence the insurance. He wanted to make sure she and the children would be provided for if anything happened to him.

The ultrasound probe dangled near the floor where the technician had left it. Robert pulled it up by its cord and examined the business end: just a smooth gray surface, slightly rounded so it would slide over a person’s skin, and covered with conductant gel. The stuff smelled faintly of shampoo.

He pressed the probe against his side where the technician had been holding it and was rewarded with a fuzzy image of his heart on the screen. He pushed more firmly and the image cleared up, so he traced the six separate heart chambers again. He found what he assumed to be his aorta rising from the top chamber and followed that as it looped around and headed downward, but he couldn’t see it behind his heart so he moved sideways and followed his pulmonary arteries into his lungs. He couldn’t actually see his lungs, but he could see the arteries branching out into smaller and smaller clusters, except for the one that led to the cylindrical blob directly beneath his breastbone. He wondered what that was. He had a

fair grasp of anatomy from high-school and college biology classes, but he didn't remember any cylindrical organs between the heart and the lungs.

Nor the doughnut-shaped thing just below that. The conductant didn't spread far enough to let him get a good image of it, so he took the bottle from its holder next to the monitor and squirted a dollop of gel on the probe, then tried again. It was cold at first touch, but it warmed quickly, and the image was much better. Now he could see the striations running around the doughnut, like strips of muscle or gill slits or radiator plates or something.

The door opened again and Dr. Sorenson entered, with the technician hot on his heels. The doctor was at least two decades older than Robert, his hair going gray where he hadn't already lost it, and he wore a frown as comfortably as he wore his lab coat. Robert nearly dropped the probe, instinctively expecting to be scolded for playing with it, but the oddity of the situation overwhelmed his normal reaction, and he managed to keep the probe centered on his chest.

"It's stranger than you thought," he said, nodding toward the screen.

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The doctor found three more unidentified organs and several anomalies in Robert's liver, kidneys, and intestinal tract. Robert had stopped looking at the screen after a while, just lying back on the exam table and listening to the doctor and the technician exclaim in wonder at each new discovery. He hardly felt the probe against his skin anymore, even when the doctor slid it along his sides. Elaine couldn't touch him there without provoking the giggles, but there was no danger of him giggling now.

"How can this be?" he asked.

"It's obviously some kind of mutation," the doctor replied without looking at him. "Did your parents work in a chemical plant or a nuclear facility before you were born?"

"Mom's a schoolteacher," Robert said. "And Dad's a car salesman. Besides, a mutation this extreme would have left me dead during gestation. This is a whole sequence of changes, not just one flipped bit of DNA."

"Mmm." Dr. Sorenson rocked the probe back and forth across Robert's breastbone. "I'd like to get some x-rays. There's something odd about the rib cage as well."

Not “your rib cage,” Robert noticed. Already it was “the rib cage.” He raised up on his elbows and faced the doctor. “I’m not sure I can handle any more today. This is a bit of a shock, you know.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Dr. Sorenson said. He lifted the ultrasound probe and set it on the equipment tray beside the monitor. “I’m sure it would be. It’s, uh, certainly not what you expected when you came in, is it?”

“No.”

The doctor pushed a button on the machine’s keyboard, and an image of Robert’s six-chambered heart popped up on the monitor again. He pressed the key a few more times, cycling through the snapshots he and the technician had taken. “The good news is, you’re apparently in fine health despite all these ... anomalies. Whatever their cause, they seem to be working together as well as the standard equipment.”

“You’ll certify me for the life insurance, then?”

The doctor frowned. “I’m afraid I couldn’t do that. Not without a great deal more information.” He paused, looking from Robert to the technician and back. “You, uh, never had any indication that something might be different? Special abilities, or different range of hearing, or ... I don’t know. Anything out of the ordinary?”

“You mean, can I leap tall buildings in a single bound? I’m afraid not. My hearing has always been pretty good, and my eyesight is 20/15, but that’s about it. I’m not any stronger or better at sports than the average guy.”

“How did you do on your SATs?”

“Huh?”

“Your college entrance exams.”

“Oh. Okay. Pretty well, actually. But I’m not a genius.”

Dr. Sorenson clicked his tongue a couple of times. “I’d like your permission to show these results to a couple of specialists, see if they’ve ever seen anything like this before. There may be some precedent I’m not aware of.”

“No,” Robert said. “I mean, not yet. I just—” He lay back on the table.

“Once this gets out, I’m not going to get a moment’s rest. The AMA is going to get involved, and the CDC, and maybe the FBI and the CIA and who knows who else? I wouldn’t be surprised if the INS got in on it.”

“The INS?”

“Immigration and Naturalization Service. They could argue that I’m an illegal alien. Right now is a really crappy time to be different in America.” A bead of sweat ran down his forehead toward his left eye. He wiped it off, then held his wet hand awkwardly above his chest.

The technician had been standing beside the doctor, looking over his shoulder and staying out of his way. Now she picked up a towel from the equipment tray and handed it to Robert. “You can use this to wipe off the gel, too,” she said.

“Thank you.”

The towel was institutional white and scratchy, but Robert took it gladly and began rubbing at his chest and sides. He sat up and said to the doctor, “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t let the insurance company know about this, either. Just tell them I don’t qualify.”

The doctor considered that for a moment, then nodded. “All right.”

“The longer you keep this to yourself, the more we’ll both learn about it,” Robert told him. “The moment this blows up on us, we’ll both be out of the loop.”

“Oh, come now.” The stool squeaked as Dr. Sorenson shifted his weight. “You’re talking like this is some kind of threat to national security. You’re a medical curiosity, certainly, and if we can learn how you got to be that way we might gain some insight into how the human body works, but you’re hardly a menace to society.”

“Tell that to the Homeland Security guys when they come to take me away. But until then, word of this doesn’t leave this room. Is that clear?”

“Yes, but it’s unnecessary. You’re overreacting.”

“Maybe. I hope you’re right. But for now I want to play it safe.”

Robert finished wiping off the conductant and dropped the towel on the exam table’s paper cover, then stood up and took his shirt off the peg

by the door. The technician turned away, apparently trained to give patients their privacy when dressing and undressing, but the doctor didn't care. He watched Robert pull his t-shirt over his head, obviously looking for anomalies in his bones and musculature as well.

"Will you come back and let me take some x-rays?"

Robert tucked the shirt into his pants. "In a day or two. Right now I just want to go stare at my navel for a while, okay?"

Dr. Sorenson took a deep breath, then quietly said, "Okay."

Robert let himself out. The technician was still looking away.

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Elaine didn't get off work at the bank until five. Robert should have gone back to his own job at the bookstore, but he drove home instead and called his boss and told her that he wouldn't be in today. Then he opened a beer and sat at the kitchen table and looked out the window into the back yard until the beer was gone.

The wall clock read three fifteen. It would be four fifteen in New Mexico. School had been out for forty-five minutes. He picked up the phone and dialed his parents' house, and his mother answered.

"Is everything all right?" she asked when she realized who was calling in the middle of the afternoon.

"I don't know." And he told her what he had learned.

He had expected her to say—had desperately wanted her to say—"I had no idea," but instead he heard the creak of a chair as she sat down hard, and then she said, "Your father and I argued over whether or not we should tell you."

"Tell me what? That we're from Alpha Centauri?"

"That you were adopted."

"Oh, Jesus." Of all the explanations he had hoped for, that was the farthest from the one he wanted. It was no answer at all, and it left him even more alone than before. "Do you know who my re—my biological parents are?"

“No. The adoption agency didn’t give out that kind of information.”

“Can we find *out* who they are?”

“I don’t know.” She took a couple of deep breaths—he could hear her exhalations into the mouthpiece—and then she said what he’d wanted to hear all along. “We didn’t know there was anything different about you. The doctor said you had a heart murmur, but it didn’t seem to cause you any trouble, so we didn’t pursue it. You were just a healthy baby. That’s all we wanted, and all we cared about.”

“But you decided not to tell me I was adopted.”

“You were ours. We talked it over and decided that it was better not to confuse you with the idea that you weren’t our natural child. Children are so sensitive, and we didn’t want you to think we—”

“Mom, I’m twenty-four. You could have told me anytime in the last ten years. Well, maybe the last five.”

“Maybe. By then there didn’t seem much point in dropping a big surprise on you.” Her voice was growing husky as she tried not to cry. “I’m sorry. We didn’t want to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me.” The truth of those words lifted a little of the weight off his mind. “Honestly, that’s not the issue here. In fact, at least it helps explain how I could be so different inside.”

“I suppose.” She sniffed. “Does the doctor think you’re, you know, okay?”

“As near as he can tell. He doesn’t really know what to make of it, either. I’m going to go back for some more tests just to make sure, but I feel all right.”

That seemed to calm her down a little. His health and happiness were her primary concerns. They talked for a while longer, and he felt better by the time he hung up, but he could imagine the night she and his father would have after she told him. Probably like the night he and Elaine would have.

He didn’t bring it up as soon as she got home. He took her jacket and hung it on the coat rack, and he asked her how her day went, and he waited

until she asked about the doctor appointment before he told her.

She smiled. "Well, that would explain a lot of things."

"Like what?"

"Like why we never do things the same way. You really are from another planet."

"You think?"

"I think you're playing a rather silly joke, is what I think. Seriously, how did it go?"

"I am serious." He looked straight into her green eyes. "Nobody wishes this was a joke more than I do, but it's not. I poked around with the ultrasound machine on my own when the technician was out of the room, and it's real."

"Wow." She put her arms around him and pulled him into a hug. They stayed like that for quite a while before she released him and stepped back. "So do you think you're really ... an alien?"

"There's got to be a more believable explanation." They were standing in the kitchen. He got another beer out of the refrigerator, pulled off the cap with the opener he'd left on the counter, and gave the bottle to Elaine. "I mean, it's a little hard to believe that space aliens just dropped me off at an orphanage in Santa Fe."

"Maybe you got lost. Wandered away from the ship while the adults were taking biological samples or something."

"That's just about as hard to believe."

He watched her sip the beer, watched her swallow. Did it taste the same to her as it did to him? Did she see the same color when she looked at the bottle? Did she see *him* the same way she had seen him a few minutes ago? How could she? They were having at least a quasi-serious conversation about the possibility that he wasn't human.

"The doctor thought it was mutations."

She considered it, but not for long. "Naaaah. The odds of that many things changing all at once and still producing a healthy person are

practically nil.”

“Yeah. That’s what I said, too. But that doesn’t leave us much else to work with.”

“A genetics experiment?”

“Twenty-four years ago? We can barely clone a sheep even now.”

“Hmm.”

They talked it over all evening, but by the time they switched out the light and went to bed they were no wiser. Robert lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, half expecting the darkness to explode into the flashing blue and red lights of police cruisers as the government came to take him away for interrogation, and half expecting the otherworldly brightness of a Spielberg mothership come to take him home. Elaine lay beside him with an arm draped over his chest, no more asleep than he, but neither of them spoke. There was no more to say.

Morning came with the surreal realization that nothing had changed. Something should have, Robert was sure. A person didn’t discover surprises that earthshaking about himself and then just go on about his life. But he had work to do at the bookstore, and he couldn’t really leave his coworkers in the lurch simply because he had an existential crisis. And Elaine was just as needed at the bank.

He got through the day on automatic. By mid afternoon, he surprised himself by forgetting about it for whole minutes at a time, but he spent his breaks in the biology and medicine sections, looking for books that might shed any light on his situation. He didn’t have any luck.

He called Dr. Sorenson’s office that afternoon and made an appointment for the next day. Elaine went with him this time, and they spent the whole afternoon in the radiology lab while Robert underwent x-rays, CAT scans, and MRI scans of every inch of his body. Dr. Sorenson burned dozens of DVDs of data, and he once again asked Robert to sign a release allowing him to share the information he had gathered with specialists who might know more than he did, but Robert wouldn’t agree to it. “Learn what you can on your own first,” he told him. “If you get stumped, then maybe we’ll bring in more people, but for now I don’t want this to get out.” He looked meaningfully at the x-ray tech as he said that. This was a different woman than the one who had run the ultrasound machine. Now there were three strangers who knew about him.

That night in bed, he asked Elaine, "Do you think we should run?"

She was staring at the ceiling now. He was looking at her, admiring the way the covers followed her curves and wondering how much longer he would be able to enjoy such simple pleasures.

"Where would we go?" she asked. "We would have to start all over."

It was such an easy phrase to say, but he could imagine how difficult it would be to actually accomplish. He didn't know the first thing about how to establish a false identity, or how to evade a dedicated search if the government really wanted to track him down. And if he ran and they did catch him, then it would be almost impossible to convince them he was innocent. Innocent of what, he had no idea, but that was what scared him. What would they think he knew, and how far would they go before they believed that he didn't know anything?

"Maybe Dr. Sorenson will figure out what the deal is," he said.

"Yeah."

They lived with that fiction for three more days, days in which Robert alternated between fear of discovery and fear that he wouldn't be discovered, that no answer to the question of his origin existed. By Tuesday morning, when Dr. Sorenson called him at work, he would have talked to a veterinarian if the veterinarian had had answers.

Sorenson had none. "I don't know anything more than I did before," he said. "You're different inside, and it all seems to work together, but I don't have the expertise to figure out what it all does or why you're this way. If you want to learn anything, you're going to have to let me consult with people who might know something."

"Who would that be?" Robert asked.

"Charles Magnessen at the National Register of Pathological Anomalies, for one. He runs a clearinghouse for physiological oddities like yours. It's mostly bifurcated tongues and extra ribs and things like that, but he may have seen some of these extra organs of yours, either one at a time or together. That could tell us how common it is, which is more than we've got to go on now."

"And what happens when he reports it to the Pentagon?"

“He’s not going to report it to the Pentagon! If he tells anyone, it’ll be other doctors at the NRPA, and your identity will be removed from the data.”

My identity *is* the data, Robert thought, but he knew what Dr. Sorenson meant. He considered the risk of exposure versus the risk of dying of curiosity, and finally said, “Okay, go ahead and do it.”

He was standing next to the cash register while a customer waited for him to finish his call and ring up a set of Harry Potter books. When he hung up, the customer, a woman in her midforties or so, said, “Sounds mysterious.”

“I’m an international spy working undercover,” Robert said. “We’re taking down a money laundering operation in Moscow.”

“Right.” She smiled. He smiled back, thinking: If only you knew.

If only anyone knew.

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Dr. Magnessen didn’t know. He was plenty interested in finding out, but his interest didn’t require Robert’s actual presence. Dr. Sorenson had already done all the tests Magnessen could think of. He examined the data and asked dozens of questions by phone—most of which Robert couldn’t answer—then, with Robert’s permission, he consulted with still more experts in abnormal physiology, all of whom were just as stumped as he.

Several of the experts had questions of their own, and some even advanced theories, which Robert quickly shot down. He hadn’t suffered a major viral infection when he was young, and he hadn’t been injected with any experimental vaccines. He couldn’t disprove the theory that his biological mother had been abducted by a UFO, but he shot that down all the same.

“What if it were true?” he asked. “Then what? Nothing, unless the aliens want to come back and claim me. I want a more useful answer.”

Up to that point, he had avoided looking into his adoption records. He didn’t know why, but he supposed it was out of loyalty to the parents he had known all his life. If he tracked down his birth parents, what would that do to his relationship with his mother and father?

Elaine offered to do the research for him. When all the medical experts came up blank, he turned her loose on it, hoping that what she discovered wouldn't rock his world yet again.

It took her a week on the internet and on the phone, but with Dr. Sorenson's backing, she was able to convince the New Mexico adoption bureau that Robert had a medical need to know. He was home when the reply came; he went into the garage and sanded old paint off a bookcase he was restoring while she took the call.

She came out a few minutes later, a long expression on her face. "They don't know who your parents were," she said. "You were a foundling, left on the doorstep."

"God damn it." He kicked the bookcase. He caught his toe on the corner and winced in pain, but he kicked it again anyway. "This is too fucking much. *Somebody* has to know how I got this way."

Elaine took his hands in her own. "It doesn't matter. You're the same person you've always been. Nothing has changed."

"Everything has changed," he said.

"No it hasn't. Only your self-image. The rest of us still see you the same way we always have."

He pulled his hands away. "You can't speak for anyone else."

"I just did."

"Well, you're wrong. Dr. Sorenson certainly sees me differently than before."

"He sees a patient. One who's worrying about nothing."

"Having my insides all stirred around isn't nothing!" When she stepped back, he took a deep breath and said, "Sorry. I'm upset."

"And I'm telling you you don't have to be. So what if you're different inside? What does it matter? You're still my husband, and you're still—"

"What about children?"

“What?”

He reached out and took her hands just as she had done with him a moment earlier. “What about our children? If we can even have children. What if they inherit this ... this *condition*?”

“So what if they do? It didn’t kill you.”

“But we don’t know what it might do to them. My genes mixed with normal genes could create monsters.”

That made her pause. She looked away, and her hands quivered in his. But she looked back at him and said, “If that happens, we’ll know long before it’s born. If there’s a problem so severe that life for the baby wouldn’t be worth living, then we abort the pregnancy.”

“Oh really? Just like that.”

“No, not ‘just like that.’ It would be hard. We would have to consider all sorts of things that we’d rather not think about, but that already happens to parents who aren’t even expecting problems, and they get through it. It may happen to us, but if we aren’t prepared to make that decision, then we shouldn’t have been thinking of having children even before.”

The garage seemed such an incongruous place to be having this discussion. Elaine’s car—a six-year-old Saturn—filled the left-hand bay, and a pile of boxes that they had no room to store anywhere else filled the other half. The workbench took up what space was left at the front of the garage, and the pegboard above the workbench held the tools that Robert used to fix whatever needed fixing around the house. There was nothing up there to help him now.

He said, “I was prepared to deal with the possibility that we might have a genetic problem when the chances of that happening were no worse than average. Now we know they’re a lot worse. It changes the equation.”

“Not fundamentally.”

“No,” he admitted. “Not fundamentally. But it changes it.”

Elaine’s expression hardened. “Look, I know you’re upset, but my ability to procreate is on the line here, too, and you’re trying to decide for both of us.”

He didn't have an answer. Maybe she was right, but he still felt like the creature from the Black Lagoon. What hope did they have of a normal child?

"Actually, you're trying to decide for the whole human race," she said. "These differences of yours could be important. What if your organs are better than everybody else's? What if they're immune to diseases? You could be the next stage of human evolution. Do you want that to be lost forever?"

"I'm not the next stage in evolution," he said. "I don't know what I am, but I just want to be normal."

She shook her head. "Nobody is normal. The definition of what's human covers a whole spectrum of differences."

"Not this kind of difference," Robert said.

They looked at one another in silence for long seconds before Elaine said, "How do you know?"

They left it at that. Elaine went back in the house, and Robert continued sanding the bookcase until there wasn't a speck of paint left on it. The wood underneath was solid oak, and when he wet a finger and rubbed the moisture into the grain, it glowed with inner warmth.

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That night, he called the Pentagon. He found a phone number on their web site, but when he dialed it he got a recording and a phone tree that seemed endless. He punched in dozens of numbers, always choosing the option that sounded most like it would lead to a human operator, but after fifteen minutes of frustration, he hung up and went to bed.

Elaine was already there, curled up for warmth. He lay beside her, staring up at the splash of silver on the pebbly ceiling from the streetlight and wondering what to do next. Call the National Guard? How about the *National Enquirer*? Go talk to a priest? Or go out in the back yard and shine a flashlight straight up?

He shivered. Silly as it seemed, that would be the scariest option of all. If he got a response, then he would know for sure that he wasn't human.

How would he know for sure if he was? Elaine's question still haunted

him, and her answer scared him almost as much as calling down the mothership. Maybe his genes would be good for humanity, but maybe not. It was an experiment fraught with risk. So was any child, but still.

Elaine stretched her legs, then brushed up against him as she repositioned herself. The simple touch of her naked body against his made his skin tingle, and a moment later he felt the first stirring of arousal. He willed it to go away, but the more he concentrated, the harder he got.

Betrayed by his own body at every turn. He no longer knew who—or even what—he was, but that didn't matter to his genes. They didn't worry about existential angst, only existence.

How many other people lay awake tonight, wondering who they were? Even the ones who were normal inside couldn't answer that question. All they could really say with any certainty was who they wanted to be.

His erection reached full height. Elaine, with the unerring instinct of millennia of evolution, slid her hand up his thigh and murmured sleepily, "Hmm, what's this?"

"I guess it's just me," Robert said, and he rolled toward her instead of away.