

Intolerance by Robert Reed

Sometimes we'll assemble an issue of F&SF with a particular theme in mind, and sometimes a theme will find us. This month it seems like most of the stories have some consideration of parent-child relationships to them--perhaps none more so than Robert Reed's closer for the issue.

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"Hey, I'm speaking to you. Yes, you, my friend. Are those mammoth ears attached to some kind of neural network? Can you comprehend simple slow diction? I wish to be released on this approaching corner. Pull over, yes, thank you. And will you help me with these damned straps? Mechanical strength is not my strength, as you can plainly see."

The cab driver is a stocky fellow, sweating rivers despite the chill of the vehicle's air conditioning. He turns to stare at his only passenger, jaw locked and his fleshy cheeks coloring. But he says nothing. He forces himself to remain silent, one broad hand reaching warily for the straps' latch.

"You've grown weary of my company," the passenger observes. "You want me gone. You want me out of your life. Well, I will abide in your heartfelt wishes. Never again will our paths cross, my friend. Until I rule the world, of course, and then I will personally crush the likes of you."

The hand jumps back.

"The likes of me?" the driver whispers. Then louder, he asks, "What the hell do you know about me?"

"You judge," says the shrill little voice. "Despite a lifetime of red meat and cheap beer, you have survived into your early fifties. The gold band on your finger promises a wife, but the absence of prominent digitals implies that she isn't cherished. Nor are there any bright-faced children worthy of a father's pride. Judging by the name filling up your license, you are Serbian. A genuine doormat race. The trace of an accent tells me you came to this country as a teenage boy, probably during your homeland's last civil insurrection. And judging by the little talismans scattered across your dashboard, you belong to some kind of fossilized Christian faith. Which makes you both extremely superstitious and mindlessly conservative ... two very nasty qualities for our modern world, I believe...!"

The driver squelches a curse.

The passenger laughs. "Does my little rant bother you? It is a problem, I can tell. That grunting, sweaty, swollen, and outmoded body of yours conveys volumes. Your animal wishes are obvious. Right now, this moment, you are picturing my frail body tossed beneath the next beer truck, crushed and dead. Is that what you wish, sir? There is no point lying here, or in diluting the truth."

A thumb strikes the latch and the restraining belts fly off. Then the curbside door opens, and the driver asks, "What the hell kind of creature are you?"

"A creature of ideas," the passenger exclaims with a toothy smile.

"Get out."

"I am doing just that. As fast as I can."

"Out!"

"But before I go ... let me tell you something true, my dear friend. We know exactly how the universe began, and when and how it shall end. Humans taught themselves these great lessons. The gods never helped us. And for each of us--for the universe and for humans alike--what lies between birth and death is an unrelenting tedium spiced with the occasional sweet novelty."

The driver mutters under his breath, and the taxi door slams shut.

"My pack," the passenger cries out. "Or are you a thief?"

A window drops, and out tumbles a small transparent backpack. Then with a choked voice, the driver screams, "Monster," as he pulls away from the curb, wringing all of the speed from his vehicle's fuel cells, leaving behind a whiff of perfumed moisture that lingers in the bright sunny air.

The monster stands alone on the sidewalk, laughing quietly. Less than a meter tall and not quite eighteen kilos, he wears blue running shoes adorned with daisies and white socks with frills and a stained Pooh shirt and dark blue shorts that bulge with the diaper. His skin is pale and smooth. His knees bow out a little bit. He seems to be thirty or thirty-two months old, except in the face. The brown eyes are busy and smart, while the tiny mouth wears a perpetual smirk, as if the world around him is both humorous and contemptible, in equal measures.

Inside his backpack are supplies for his day: a folded reader and an old-fashioned cell phone, several spare diapers and wipes, snacks on edible plates, a press-wrapped change of clothes, and a police-grade taser. His electronic money is tucked inside his current diaper--the first place a thief would look, but he has already peed enough to fend off those with weak wills.

The monster--he goes by Cabe--slips on the pack's plastic straps and sets off, walking north with a determined gait. The pack rattles softly. The daisies on his shoes flash random colors with each step. Other pedestrians take note. Those few who recognize him pretend not to notice. But others see a child, and they can't help but smile at his cuteness, instinct leading the way while the brain sluggishly notes the little details that are wrong. Then instinct fades into a clumsy puzzlement, and sometimes, intrigue. People are generally idiots, but they are not entirely uninformed. What this creature represents is new and will remain new and fresh for some time. But in another ten years, or twenty at the most, the costs will tumble, and all but the very poorest of these drudges will be able to choose from a menu at least as wondrous as the one within reach of these stubby little fingers.

The block ends with a red light and a collection of placid, sheep-like office workers. They speak to headsets, or they don't speak at all. He pushes between their legs, reaching the curb before the light changes. Conversations die away. Faces stare down at the top of his head. Then a phone sings the big crescendo from Beethoven's Ninth, and with a loud clear voice, he says, "Shit."

The eyes around him grow huge.

He slips off the backpack and yanks out his Benny-the-Robot phone, looking at the incoming number before flipping it open. "What?" he snaps.

"Where are you?" a voice asks. A woman's voice.

"Nowhere," he replies.

"I was wondering if you were free," the voice continues.

"Barely free. And it takes all of my considerable talent to remain this way."

She says, "Lunch, darling?"

"No."

"My treat."

"It wouldn't be mine," he snarls.

Silence is wrapped in a sharp pain. Then she says, "Cabe--"

And he disconnects, instructing his phone not to accept another call from that number. The traffic light has turned green. But most of the pedestrians remain on the curb, confused but exceptionally curious.

"None of your business," he growls.

Faces tilt up now, and everyone crosses in a rush.

Cabe sits on the curb, stuffing the phone back where it belongs, preparing to wait through another red light. But the traffic is light. An empty bus and a pair of old hybrids roll past, and he steps out early.

Dominating the next corner is the city's main library--a grim concrete building with tall windows on the ground floor, allowing passersby to stare in at the derelicts and mental patients who keep the chairs filled. Outside stands one of the resident librarians. A nervous man with a strong union and dreams of a pension, he is smoking, probably enjoying one of the new therapeutic cigarettes made from biogenetic tobaccos. Red eyes see the tiny figure approaching. The man takes a couple of puffs, bracing himself for whatever happens next. What sort of cutting insult will be thrown his way? Or worse, will the creature ask for help in some ridiculous research project? But Cabe surprises the librarian, waving once in his general direction before turning, little legs carrying him toward the west.

Beside the library stands an even older building--an ensemble of brick and mortar that currently serves as the downtown YWCA. Cabe usually approaches from a different direction; passing by the main entrance has its risks. But the only soul paying attention is an old man sitting on one of the concrete stairs. The monster gives him a little nod, and the man smiles and says, "Good day," while waving one of his bony hands.

Around the corner waits a world of mayhem and shrill nonsense syllables, clumsy running and random tantrums.

A three-meter fence surrounds the playground, but that overstates the security measures. From the shade of a stunted crab apple tree, Cabe examines the assorted faces, spotting one that he doesn't know and that will probably serve his purpose.

"Ugh!" a boy shouts at him, brown fingers wrapped in the chain link.

"Ugh yourself," Cabe mocks.

A girl joins ugh-boy, older by a year and far more verbal. She regards the newcomer with a deep suspicion. Grabbing her companion with a protective arm, she shouts at Cabe, "Go away."

Ugh-boy squirms in her grip.

"Hello, Lilly," Cabe purrs. "And how are you on this very sweet day?"

"You're bad," she tells him.

"Indeed," he agrees.

The ugh-boy pulls free of his protector, and then losing interest in the drama, wanders off to toss rocks at an inviting square of pavement.

"Go away," Lilly repeats.

"But I shall not, my dear."

The girl sighs.

"Who are you?" a new voice calls out.

Behind Lilly is a woman. She is nineteen or twenty, by appearance, and she has a pretty enough face, legs that couldn't be any longer, and a young and nervous little voice. She is new, probably no more than a week or two on the job. And she is exactly the kind of person busy parents wish to have watching their offspring--a nurturing, nervous girl who will rush to the aid of any lost bunny.

"Hello?" she says to the bunny standing on the far side of the fence.

Cabe changes his expression.

She kneels, smiling tentatively. "What's your name?"

He says, "Cabe," with a delicate sniffle.

"Cabe?"

He nods, pushing out his lower lip.

"Are you in our toddler class, Cabe?" And when he doesn't answer, she asks, "Did you wander out here on your own?"

He pretends as if those words are too complicated. A baffled look fills his pale round face.

"Where are your parents, Cabe?"

Now the tears come, bubbling from deep inside.

"Oh, dear," the woman whimpers.

But Lilly is made of sterner stuff. She stares at Cabe, her tiny jaw set, eyes like little guns shooting at him.

"Mommy," Cabe sputters.

"Oh, honey."

"Where's my ... mommy...?"

A tall gate waits just a few steps away. It takes just a moment for the young woman to use her passkey and rush outside, and with every instinct on overdrive, she kneels and scoops up the boy in her arms, squeezing to reassure and to make absolutely certain that he won't slip away from her caring grasp.

Again and again, Cabe says, "Mommy," while he pushes his crying face into her chest.

"Where is your mommy?" she asks.

"Gone."

"Gone where, darling?"

"Gone, gone!"

The words have an impact, visceral and disarming. She leans into his body and starts to weep for herself. Others notice their little show. Lilly has never stopped staring at Cabe, mouthing the word "Bad" from time to time. But the approaching adults are the ones who will stop the fun. So with a final low sob, Cabe says, "I'm hungry," and moves his mouth to the right.

Like most of the daycare staff, the young woman is dressed for comfort and ease of motion. She's wearing a loose-fitting, relatively low-cut shirt. It is the simplest trick in the world to reach down, yanking on the shirt and bra in one motion, exposing a breast. Then he takes the pink nipple as if he has never been so famished, and he sucks with urgency. But it isn't until he uses his tongue and mutters the words, "Yes," and then, "Sweet," that the woman finally appreciates what is happening here.

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"Next time, we will press charges."

The Y director accompanies him down the concrete steps. She is furious, but only to a point. Both know this is a game. Law enforcement won't gladly arrest him. No prosecuting attorney wants to see Cabe sitting in the courtroom. He can field a team of powerful lawyers, and his gifts of persuasion are the stuff of legend, whether used on a hardened judge or a hapless jury. Besides, case law and the statutes are changing daily, and it is a giant question as to how he can be charged.

"Get out of here!" the director warns.

He laughs at her and blows a kiss.

"So what'd you do wrong?"

The old man is speaking to him. He was sitting on a high step when Cabe walked past the entrance, and now he's sitting on the lowest step.

With a quiet laugh, Cabe says, "I did nothing of significance."

"The lady seems to hold a different opinion."

"And boys are entitled to a little fun."

"Well, nothing wrong with that logic," the old man concedes.

Cabe sits on a higher step, keeping their eyes at the same level.

With the first glance, the man appears frail. Feeble. He has thin white hair, long but combed, and the speckled skin of an unreformed sunbather. His clothes are worn and a little too large for his wiry frame, hanging on him as if illness or time has eroded away a much larger body. But his frailty doesn't extend deeper than his skin. He winks at the person sitting near him, a bright smile framed by a handsome, surprisingly boyish face. His breathing is slow and comfortable. Judging by his bare arms, his muscle tone is that of a hardened athlete. And his voice has strength and clarity, particularly when he asks his companion, "So how old are you, really?"

Cabe just smiles.

"The original rejuvenators came on the market what? Ten years ago? But they take you back only a few years, and then only if you're past fifty or so." The man nods, considering the possibilities. "Of course the second-generation bunch is better. But even the Novartis package has that ugly habit of goosing the wrong genes and giving you cancer, or shutting down essential genes, leaving you dead."

With perfect white teeth, he grins. "No, you're using the third-generation stuff. Probably the BioBorn package, since it's the oldest and the best."

"But the third-generations haven't been approved for the marketplace," Cabe mentions.

"What does that mean?" the old man asks. "That word 'marketplace'? If a product is real, and if you know where to look for it, then for enough money, it is very much in your reach."

Cabe throws a tiny hand into the air, making a grabbing motion.

"But now how old are you? That's the question of the moment." The man winks and sits back, eyes narrowing as he says, "Reversion of the body is an accelerated process. Ten times faster than normal growth, give or take. And since you seem to be what now? Two and a half? And since the third-generation rejuvenators started leaking out a couple years back ... my first inclination is to guess that you're in your early twenties...."

"Your first inclination?" Cabe coaxes.

"But that's not particularly sensible, now is it?" A low laugh. "What grown male is going to let himself shrivel up? I mean in all the important departments. Plus that assumes you went on the rejuvenators the first day they poked their heads out of the lab, which doesn't seem likely. And even then, if you started in your twenties, you couldn't have been at this particular age for more than the last few weeks. Which you haven't been. From what I see, you're pretty comfortable inside your current skin."

"What can you see?"

A brighter laugh erupts. "You're a smart kid, regardless of your years."

Cabe cannot disagree.

"So I'm thinking ... and I have some experience in this business, I'll warn you ... I'm thinking that when you were six or eight or ten years old, your parents started buying neurological enhancements. Pfizer has a neural growth package they sell to handicapped kids and head-injury victims. Does some incredible things with ordinary people, I've heard."

"Maybe I'm just smart on my own," the tiny creature offers.

"Yeah, but more than anything, you're wealthy," the old man counters. "First, last, and always, you've got a world of money. Rejuvenators, enhancements. These are pricey miracles. Which makes me guess that there's a fat trust fund or two involved."

Cabe says nothing, watching his companion with fresh caution.

"Neurological enhancements, and then you had yourself declared a functioning adult. Legally speaking. And afterward you joined an experimental program that you yourself funded, and you began to undergo a comprehensive rejuvenation." He winked before asking, "Now that's the general order of things, isn't it?"

Cabe asks, "How old am I?"

"Eleven years, three months."

Brown eyes widen while the toddler's mouth pulls into a little knot.

The man erupts into hard laughter, shaking his head as he admits, "Oh, I already know who you are."

Cabe McAllister. Heir to the brownie mix fortune. You were nine years old when you petitioned for a provisional adult status, and except for two temporary reversions to child-status--both to help defend against pending legal charges--you have lived as an adult for the last two years."

Cabe holds his breath for a moment. Then with a tight slow voice, he announces, "I have a security system. With a word, I can have a platoon of security people standing on your chest, probably inside five minutes."

It is a bit of an exaggeration, but only a bit.

Yet the threat has little muscle. The old man shrugs him off, asking, "What do you think? Just because you change your appearance, and then spend a fortune to keep your current face out of the media ... do you really believe that the whole world isn't eventually going to hear your story...?"

Cabe stands up.

"Don't go," the old man says. "Sit down."

"This is a ridiculous game," Cabe complains. "You knew who I was when I first walked past here."

"Well, I should damn well know who you are," is the reply.

"What does that mean?"

The handsome elderly face grins at him, bright teeth catching the sun as he says, "When we were five years old, we went to the same school. Remember the Academy at Greenhaven? Cabe McAllister and Jonah Westercase. Brownie mix and concrete. Two little boys, spoiled and wealthy, and during that long-ago year, we were the best of friends."

They find a bar at the north end of the same block, claiming a booth and drinking cold root beers while bringing each other up to date. Cabe sits in a booster chair and lifts his mug with both hands, explaining, "This is a great age. The best. I get to do what I want, whenever I want. Most of the world doesn't know me from the average little diaper-jockey, which I like. And I get to say anything. People tolerate almost any shit from a toddler, even when they realize, intellectually realize, that he isn't what he looks to be." He smiles for a moment. "And the expressions I see on those faces ... well, it's worth all the bullshit that comes with this little body."

"I can believe it," Jonah says.

The foamy mug is lifted, sipped, and dropped with a hard thunk. "But what about you? What's your tale of body and soul?"

A shrug of the shoulders. "Like you, I got the neurological enhancements when they came on the market. A million, two million dollars' worth of work, and then I was almost nine, reading at a graduate school level, and I announced to my folks that I wanted to be a legal adult, provisionally speaking--"

"They let you?" Cabe asks.

Jonah rolls his eyes. "When haven't we gotten our way?"

They laugh and sip their sweet dark drinks. But then Cabe stares up at the bar, watching the drunks who can't take their eyes off these odd interlopers.

"But why hurry the aging process?" he finally asks.

"Why not?" Jonah grins. "At first, I just wanted to look and function like an adult. Which is easy enough, since the rejuvenators aren't just rejuvenators ... working in either direction, as they do. But what age is the best age? I mean, if we live in a world where you can pick your body's maturity, why do convention and commonsense imagine everyone is going to end up looking as if they're thirty-five? In a hundred years, is everyone going to be the same damn age? I don't think so. I think there's a lot to be said for other stages of life. You're an example of that. And how about the elderly? Not that the old farts are particularly wise people, of course. They aren't. But our culture tells us to listen to our elders, and that's what I wanted to be. An elder. I wanted to be able to make my little pronouncements, and people who didn't know me would think, 'My goodness, what a sharp old granddad he is.'"

Cabe sits back in the hard plastic seat, ready to pose another question. But the phone rings inside his backpack, and he pulls it out--

"Cute toy," Jonah declares.

And he runs a check on the caller's number. Then he cuts the connection and slips the phone back between a pair of clean diapers.

"Wrong number?" his friend inquires.

He says, "Probably." Then he stares at the weathered face, asking, "But how did you get so old so fast?"

"Easy enough," Jonah promises. "Inside, I'm in my early twenties. Fit and clean and ready to start living. But the skin and hair ... well, there's an old set of technologies, and maybe you've heard of them...."

"Cosmetics?"

"Exactly."

Cabe laughs quietly, one hand fiddling with a tiny pink ear.

"The hair is dyed, and the skin ... well, that's more complicated. Every couple weeks or so, I have it damaged. UV light and some nicely caustic chemicals give me this look." Then he winks, adding, "There's some ladies I know ... they say I look a lot like my old grandfather, and I fool around like him too...."

Cabe dips his head, not quite laughing.

"Your folks fought your adulthood. If I remember the rumors right."

"My father contested my petition. My mother fought him."

"Wait, that's right." Jonah squints for a moment, and then adds, "She supported your bid, didn't she? Now that I think about it."

"She wasn't critical to the process," says Cabe.

"No?"

"We always get what we want," he reminds Jonah. "Without either parent helping, I would have won the fight."

Jonah waits for a moment. Then he asks, "So who called just now?"

"Nobody."

"You could just let it ring," he suggests.

Silence.

"Or not carry a phone." The laugh is young and a little bit teasing. "There's about a thousand better ways to handle your communication needs."

Cabe regards him for a moment, and then speaking to his root beer, he says, "Go blow yourself."

"If only I could," Jonah replies.

Then both of them are laughing, and for that instant, in the gray light of a dusty old bar, they look and sound rather like eleven-year-old boys, happily trading insults and giggles.

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"How did you find me?" Cabe finally asks.

"Maybe I just stumbled across you."

"Maybe," he allows, pushing the half-empty mug into the middle of the table. "But you were sitting on the precise block which I'd be strolling along. Which makes this seem like a carefully planned event."

"I might make the effort to track you down ... an old buddy of mine from the Greenhaven days...."

The brown eyes widen while the tiny face seems to grow even smaller. Then after an uncomfortable pause, Cabe announces, "I have something to do."

"Too much root beer?"

"Yes."

He climbs off the booster chair and then out of the booth, dragging his pack by the strap. But he doesn't manage one step before Jonah is beside him, remarking with a curious tone, "A lot of two-year-old bodies can hold it."

"Why diapers?"

"To complete the illusion, I'm guessing."

"No," Cabe says. Insists. "It's just that a person of my size can't navigate his way through your average public toilet."

"Sure. Of course."

The men's room has a stall and a grimy urinal, plus a sink cleaned with every full moon. As the door closes behind them, each looks at the other's face, negotiating the terms for this peculiar moment.

"So do you lie down when you do it?" Jonah inquires.

"No, I stand. And I do it by myself."

"Then I'll let you," his one-time classmate replies, vanishing inside the stall and locking its door.

With crisp, efficient motions, Cabe drops his shorts and old diaper, the Velcro straps crackling as they come undone. He retrieves his electronic money and slips on a fresh diaper and then pulls another tool out of the backpack--the Chinese-made taser--dressed up to look like a tiny tube of ointment that he

slips with his money into the crack of his bottom. Finally he retrieves his little reader, having just enough time to pose a few questions to a favorite search engine.

The big toilet flushes with a roar.

Out comes Jonah, throwing a mysterious wink in Cabe's direction. Then like a boy would, he runs cold water over a few fingertips and wipes his hands dry with a single brown paper towel. "So what's your mom think?" he asks, pressing the towel into the tiniest possible wad.

"Think about what?"

"This." Jonah points to the pack and his tiny companion. "I mean, she was all for you becoming an adult. That's what you told me. But then you went and did this business with your body."

"It's my business," says Cabe.

Jonah opens the restroom door for both of them. "Did I say otherwise?"

"She was all right with it," Cabe reports.

"Yeah?"

"Yes," he says, the word sharp and final. Then he pauses for a moment, surveying the long bar. A narrow grin builds, and setting out toward a couple of the barflies, he calls out, "Gentlemen."

The drunks are giant men wearing sharp beards and dirty leather vests and several pounds of cheap jewelry; youthful fat is spread thin over a wealth of youthful, steroid-laced muscle. Riding on their bare arms is an assortment of vicious and obscene brands. Until this moment, they looked sleepy and inert up on their high stools. But it's as if cold water hits their faces, and they sit up straight now, eyes bulging as they gawk at the swaggering little creature.

"I have a wager with my friend here," Cabe announces. "He claims you're out of work due to the vagaries of the new economics. Hard luck cases, and I should feel pity for you. While on the other hand, I believe that you are just a pair of lazy idiots, and you have consumed your adult lives pickling in whiskey and your own well-deserved despair.

"Now which of us is right, sirs? Will you tell us?"

Jonah hangs back.

"Or don't you understand my question?" Cabe persists. "Do you not comprehend English? Should I employ a more guttural tongue?"

One of the drunks manages a low curse.

More than anything, the men are confused, glancing at Jonah while trying to take a better measure of the situation.

"Gentlemen," says the older voice. "I am sorry. Very sorry. My grandson is a rude little boy, and I would like to apologize for both of us."

The mood still teeters between resignation and vengeance.

Then Jonah adds, "And please, let me buy you your next drinks. And those after that, too."

He throws a wad of bills between the giant men, winning enough time for them to slip out the front door.

A wide smarmy grin fills Cabe's face.

Bending low, placing himself in front of his companion's face, Jonah says, "You really are just an evil crap. Even when you were five years old, it showed. Evil and cruel, and god-awful vicious. And you know what else? Back then, all I ever wanted was to teach you a lesson, even for just half of the bull that you pulled on me, mister."

* * * *

The grin dissolves.

Cabe starts to fiddle with his backpack, reaching for the reader. But Jonah snatches the pack up, saying, "You're tired. It's heavy. Let me carry it for you."

"With a word--"

"You'll call in your security people. I know."

Cabe stares at the man looming over him, one hand reaching back, fingers trying to find the taser.

"I know your story," Jonah rumbles.

Both hands drop. "What story?"

"My mom ran into your mom last week. In Alaska, at a fund-raiser."

"What fund-raiser?"

"Bring back the Stellar Sea-cow, or something like that." Jonah laughs in disgust. "Anyway, they hadn't seen each other for a few years. They used to be halfway friendly, back when we were classmates. And my mom has a talent. Unlike some of us, she can make people like her. Perfect strangers will confess and confide in her. So when she asked, 'How's Cabe doing now?' ... Well, that's all it took to get the story flowing...."

The little body walks a few steps, pauses and then walks again, following a slightly different path.

"Stop," Jonah commands.

"Why?"

"Just stand here. While I'm talking, stay put."

Again the boy reaches for his taser.

"Your mom did support your bid for adulthood. Yes. But your father was right. You weren't ready, not in any sense. And it wasn't just being a prick that got you in trouble, was it? Today a lot of lawyers are able to afford enhancements to their own children, all because of the ugly legal work necessary to keep you out of some species of prison."

Cabe looks up and down the sidewalk. They are close to the city library again. Directly behind him is a long alleyway blocked at the far end by a delivery van. Just now, no one else is close by--except for the librarian who has come out to enjoy another much-needed cigarette.

"Your poor mom," says Jonah. "She decided that she'd made a ton of mistakes, and it was just a matter

of time before the courts ganged up on her only child. There was one way left to protect the world from her boy, from that little monster, and to protect her little monster from the world.

"The legal grounds were shaky. But there was an answer. Difficult and very expensive, but doable.

"Your mother found a judge and bribed him, and he handed down his sentence, and that's when you had no choice but to undergo the reversion therapy. This look of yours ... it wasn't your choice at the beginning. What you are today ... it's just the point you reached before you bought another judge who would suspend the process, at least for these last few months...."

Cabe pulls out his taser and shouts the single code word that will bring his security people.

Jonah shakes his head now. "Unless of course I've compromised the transmitter inside that new baby molar of yours...."

"Did you?" the boy mutters.

Then he thinks of another, more pressing question. "Why did you come to see me today?"

"Why?" Jonah gives a big laugh and steps closer. "In theory, because my mother asked me to find you. To see if I could talk some reason into your bullish head. Convince you to accept your sentence and go marching off to prison. For everybody's good, and all that crap."

Cabe steps toward the library, but Jonah blocks his way.

"But what I decided to do ... I decided that it would be better ... more fun, and more satisfying ... if I just gave back a little of what you gave to me when we were kids. The way you used to tease me. Or worse, those times you paid those older, poorer kids to beat on me...."

Jonah says, "Everybody else in the world is afraid to smack a two-year-old turd. But I know what he is, and believe me, I can do all the ass-whipping that I want--"

Cabe aims the taser and fires, pumping Jonah full of a withering dose of electricity. The prematurely old body stiffens and then drops hard to the pavement. Then Cabe turns and runs. He fully expects footsteps to follow him. How much damage could that little spark-box manage? But nobody comes up from behind, and the librarian is stubbing out his butt and walking in his direction, his expression puzzled, and then alarmed.

Cabe stops, turns.

Jonah is still facedown on the sidewalk

The boy returns, deciding to retrieve his backpack, and that's when it occurs to him that something is very wrong, and wrong in ways he never anticipated. The bony body isn't moving, not even to breathe. Cabe has to reach under a motionless shoulder to retrieve his bag. And then the librarian is kneeling beside him, trembling hands examining the fresh corpse.

"Murderer," says the tobacco-roughened voice.

Cabe retrieves his phone, making the only call left to him.

Into the waiting silence, he says, "Mother."

He has never felt so scared, not once in his life. The world suddenly seems full of menacing giants, and he sputters, "Mommy," as he collapses onto the pavement, too breathless to speak again or even cry.

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There will be light, where he is going. And there will be windows of a narrow sort. Sterile bioelectronics will give him a combination reader and display screen, and the doctors promise enough coordination to use the tools within his reach, including making calls to the world outside his prison cell. The procedure is exceptionally rare, but nothing about it is impossible. Indeed, one of the attending nurses jokes with him, claiming that nothing could be more natural, in a backward way, than what is happening to him now.

The operating room is crowded and sterile, busy and exceptionally quiet. Cabe sees taut white sheets and robotic limbs, and for a moment, he finds his mother's face floating on a small pillow, her eyes half-open and blind from the anesthesia. But his neck is too weak to hold his head where he wants it to be. Then the nurse turns him around, cuddling with him while machines and surgeons recheck the placement of his new placenta. "Honey," she says, and wipes at his forehead and the area around his mouth. "You are so darling," she tells him. "I can't see why this is necessary ... you seem like such a dear...."

"This isn't at all necessary," he agrees.

Surprised by the clarity and strength of his voice, the nurse blinks.

"This is a travesty," he growls. "A vicious injustice!" Then with a near-wail, he adds, "As soon as I find a worthy attorney, I promise, I will destroy all of you bastards!"

But the nurse ignores his fuss and fury. She even manages to laugh at Cabe, winking when she says, "I saw your parents talking about this. How they made you finally agree to the procedure ... by fooling you like they did...."

The closest surgeon says the nurse's name, in warning.

"What's that?" Cabe asks. "Fooled me how?"

She glances at the surgeon, begging to say it.

"What do you mean, madam? Explain yourself!"

No one tells her to stop. So she looks down at Cabe, explaining, "Your friend wasn't really your friend, you know. Jonah was just some actor hired and coached by your parents to play the role. And you didn't kill him, even by accident. A neurotoxin dropped him into a coma. He's somewhere in Europe, I guess ... wealthy now, and performing Shakespeare in the park, or some such pleasure...."

Cabe stifles a scream.

But really, can he be surprised by any of this?

"Your parents wanted you to stop fighting the court's judgment," the nurse confides. Then with a quiet and impressed voice, she adds, "They must love you very much. Particularly your mother, who must be some kind of saint for agreeing to this ... this procedure...."

Again, he is lifted.

Mechanical hands carry him to the far end of the table, and he is turned until the top of his head is pointing at his unconscious mother. Cabe can't help but stare at her tanned legs and what is between them, pulled open by hormones and clamps. And then he is being carried closer to her ... and as they begin to shut down his lungs, preparing him to be immersed in the ugly salty fluids, Cabe cries out to everyone in earshot, "This is not done. Don't think otherwise, my fools!"

Even as the strong hands shove him into the wet choking darkness, he tells them, "I still have means and a mind!

"You stupid clowns!

"I will escape this trap! You will see! You will see!"