

ORCHIDS

by **Karen Traviss**

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[*When our publisher found this beautiful and heart-rending hard sf tale in the queue at the [Critters Workshop](#), he immediately offered to buy it from resident Critter **Karen Traviss**. You'll be glad he did.]*

An expensive, embossed card, cattleya orchids picked out in the palest pink. "To my special girl, with love from your Dad. Happy Birthday. We are what we're meant to be."

"Oh, Dad, I miss you so much."

Simon scrambled up the attic ladder. "Who're you talking to. Mum?"

"Just remembering my Dad, love," Vicky said. She put the card back in a manila envelope that was sused with age and frequent handling. Her life was in those carefully-kept cards. "I like to remember sometimes."

#

"Congratulations. It's going to be a boy."

Bob looked up at the doctor and wanted to tell him that he bloody well expected it to be for the money he'd paid. Instead, he smiled his best paternal smile and squeezed Gina's hand.

It was clenched tight. He squeezed it anyway.

"It might be premature to tell everyone just yet," the doctor said. "Implantation's been successful, and there's no reason to suppose Gina won't carry to term. But let's be cautious."

"I feel like I did the last time." Gina looked determined rather than elated. "It's going to be okay."

"Of course it will." The doctor ushered them towards the receptionist. "Let's make some appointments for you, shall we?"

Bob had no intention of announcing their pregnancy to the world. It was something he was hoping to avoid for as long as possible. He didn't want to lie. But he didn't want to admit to anyone, especially Gina's mother, that they had paid for IVF treatment and genetic manipulation.

"We'll have to tell her it's a boy sooner or later," Gina said. "Or we'll slip up and call it 'he' sooner or later. Yes, when we do tell her we'll have to say she's going to have another grandson."

#

Ten weeks.

"Yes, mum. . . yes, that's right, I'm pregnant. . . no, I didn't tell you. . . no, I didn't want to get everyone's hopes up. . . it's private. . . I'm sorry, really I am, but it's okay now, you can tell everyone. . ."

Bob heard Gina put the phone down and sigh theatrically.

"Can I say interfering old cow?" he called.

"You can," she called back.

"Interfering old cow."

Gina flopped down onto the sofa and took an apple from the fruit bowl beside her. "She thinks I should have told her we were trying."

"Hello mum, just calling to let you know Bob's spent us up to the hilt getting a private clinic to give me IVF and mess with the embryo to make sure we have a boy like Jack, by way of recompense."

"You know she didn't really blame you for that. Let's not re-open – "

"If I had filled in the pond, like she said, Jack would still be here."

"She never meant that. It was grief talking."

"She meant it."

"I'm not going to encourage you. I'm not even going to start that argument again."

"Thank Christ she's at the other end of the country."

"Yes, but her mouth's on the other end of the phone, and the news'll be halfway round the world by now."

"Did you know you're thirty-six and you don't have to ask your mum's permission any more?"

"Really?" She snorted a laugh and lobbed the neatly chewed core into the waste bin. "Tell her, will you?"

Gina's family were funny about children. They didn't produce many. Maiden aunts and female cousins who had failed in the past to procreate were still spoken of with pity at Hickson family gatherings. When he and Gina had tried for six years to conceive, it seemed they were due to be the next holders of the Hickson Award for Failing in Reproductive Duty.

The obsession had given Jack's arrival an almost religious significance. It also made his death even more tragic, if such a thing were possible.

"I'll make some tea," Bob said. As he passed the dresser in the hall, the repeating video picture caught his eye and he tried not to look at it.

It was Jack on his green tricycle, gleeful at discovering he could turn the handlebars and actually move in another direction. He'd been three. A year later, he'd drowned in the garden pond

Bob was finding it increasingly hard lately to meet Jack's unseeing gaze, reproduced over and over again by the video portrait. *We're not replacing you, I promise, Jack-Jack. There'll never be anyone to replace you. We just wanted another boy like you.* He turned the frame slightly so Jack's gaze wasn't directly aimed at him, but stopped short of turning it completely to the wall. Gina wouldn't like that.

"What're you doing?" she called. "I thought you were supposed to be waiting on me now I'm pregnant."

"Sorry, love. Tea coming up."

Twelve weeks.

A pale blue check teddy playing with a duckling on idealised grass, a blue ribbon threaded through the card. Cursive script saying "It's a boy!" with the words "going to be" inserted in cousin Fiona's handwriting. "Congrats, Bob and Gi! Have you got a name for him yet?"

"John," Bob said to the card, and put it back on the Victorian mantelpiece.

"She thinks I've had an amniocentesis to find out the gender," Gina said, and moved the card a little to the left. "I don't feel like telling her."

"Why?" Bob asked.

"She'll accuse me of trying to have designer babies. She hates this test tube stuff."

"Petri dish."

"You're so pedantic."

"It fascinates me. It's just so crude and kid's chemistry set, isn't it? They can make a baby out of the bits and manipulate the chromosomes and build a boy. And they do it in a glass saucer. I find that – oh, I don't know. Nicely ironic."

"So – we admit we had IVF. But we don't admit we specified a male embryo, or its colouring and appearance."

"Well, it'll avoid the argument with your family about the destruction of spare embryos."

"And we'll just have a row about interfering with nature and distorting the gender balance and trying to replace Jack instead."

"Your call."

The method might have been a controversial one among the more traditional members of their families, but everyone appeared to approve of their having another child as soon as possible. It was good for them, they said. Bob tolerated the inane reassurances of with ill-concealed irritation: how could it be *good* for them to have another baby quickly and get over it? How could you erase a person you loved and believe that a different one - even one you would grow to adore - could fill their place? It was all part of the repertory of foolish sympathies trotted out by the ignorant, just another phrase that slotted somewhere between time being a great healer and that Jack would always be alive in their hearts.

No, Jack was gone forever. John was coming.

#

Sixteen weeks.

They decided to call him John sometime between the news that the embryo appeared healthy and normal, and that implantation had been successful. The rigorous schedule of trips to the clinic and injections and providing samples gave way to antenatal check-ups and relaxation classes. It still felt regimented to Bob.

Gina lay on the couch, craning her neck to see the grainy image on the screen beside her. The gynaecologist – "Call me Doug" - rolled the ultrasound sensor over her swelling belly with one hand, and pointed out interesting detail on screen with the other. Bob watched, bewildered. It could have shown the

wreck of the Bismarck for all he knew.

"Look," said Dr Doug. "That's his spine you can see there - and he's moving around."

"Oh, Bob, look!" Gina said.

Bob looked. There was a little rapid blip-blip-blip at the centre of the image: a tiny heartbeat. That much he could understand, and suddenly the John-to-be was real for him. He had a son.

Or another son. Jack would never stop being his first-born, his eldest. He owed him that. He scolded himself for not prefacing the thought with that qualifier, his second son. *I'm not replacing you, Jack-Jack*, he thought.

"We'll get a picture or two for you," Dr Doug said. "Yes – you've definitely got a boy, but you knew that, didn't you? Silly of me. Look. Those are the testes. See that? You can definitely buy blue romper suits now, Mrs Fraser."

#

A no-particular occasion card, in lieu of a letter. A scrap of an autumn woodland scene. "Gina, Bob sounded dreadful when I phoned last night. Is he all right? I know we've had our differences but he ought to be looking forward to the birth. Perhaps I upset him talking about Jack. Call me, will you? Love, Mum."

#

Thirty-eight weeks.

It was a huge store. Bob didn't like the idea of Gina shopping for things so close to the birth but she was determined. "It's not an illness," she said.

"Okay, I'll believe that when you refuse an epidural," he said. He steered her between the racks of cute little pink dresses and powder-blue dungarees, feeling like a mahout driving a she-elephant. One wrong step, he thought, and her momentum would take an aisle of goods with her. "Admit you're not so fast on your feet, will you?"

"They've got a coffee shop," Gina said. "I could do with a sit-down."

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat while they picked over sandwiches and coffee. "I'll be glad to get rid of this permanent indigestion," she said, and pressed the heel of her hand against her chest. "It's all a bit crowded in here."

"Not long now."

"You don't seem very happy lately. What's wrong?"

"The usual." Bob busied himself rummaging through the bags of stuffed toys and other brightly-coloured things designed to enchant a baby. He had avoided buying a furry monkey. Jack had loved his too much. "You know. Whether we can go through this without trying to make him into Jack."

Gina had set her lips in what he thought of as her line of no surrender. It wasn't a new debate. "I'm not going to go through all that again."

"Well, how are we going to stop ourselves comparing and remembering? It's bound to happen. We're going to see him at all the stages we saw Jack at. We're going to call him Jack sooner or later. He's

going to have brown hair and blue eyes and he's going to look like Jack, too. Is he ever going to move out of that shadow, Gi?"

"It'll be different when he arrives."

His father had said as much. Bob didn't share many close moments with his father: but the old man had listened without embarrassment to Bob's fears about treating Jack as a commodity to be replaced, about unconsciously moulding John into Jack's shape, about just doing things wrong. "Kids grow up the way they want and there's bugger all you can do about it in the end," he told him. It was as near as Fraser senior had ever come to philosophy.

"Uh," Gina said suddenly.

"What's up, love? Not the pains starting?"

"Oh." She stared down at her lap, jaw slack. "Oh no."

Bob stood up and the chair scraped back noisily behind him. He started fumbling for his mobile, ambulance and hospital numbers already on auto-dial. "It's okay. Don't worry –"

He heard before he saw. Drip, drip, trickle on the easy-clean tile floor. "My waters have broken," Gina said, matter-of-fact again. "I didn't get any warning of that. Oh, shit -"

It was a busy Saturday and the traffic was gridlocked as usual. Bob knew the ambulance would be a long time arriving, but that didn't seem to bother the shop staff, who cleared a space in an office and summoned one of their colleagues.

"We get this all the time," one of them told Bob. She was gathering wipes and cloths and other things he couldn't take in right then. "Pregnant customers, rotten traffic – this is our sixth birth, I think. We can hold the fort until the medics show up, don't worry."

Gina was swearing fluently. Bob offered his hand but she batted him away.

John Edward Fraser came into the world while his father listened to the wailing siren of an ambulance making slow progress in the street outside. The child joined in with a thin chorus that rose to braying crescendo.

"Oh! Lovely!" The shop assistant who could turn her hand to obstetrics folded a towel around the newborn and beamed at Bob and the sobbing Gina. "A lovely little girl!"

#

Bob stared at the screen of his mobile. He was scrolling the news headlines, phone numbers and home-shopper pages, but he couldn't see any of it. He could hear Dr Doug. He couldn't hear Gina. He found himself shaking his head involuntarily.

"Androgen insensitivity syndrome is pretty rare," said the doctor. "I think your baby is what we call a CAIS – complete AIS. None of his male hormone receptors will function no matter how much testosterone is in his system."

"That's completely meaningless to me."

"All foetuses have the characteristics of both sexes at first and then one or the other dominates and you end up with a boy or a girl. We all have cells that switch on and do things when the right hormone

touches them – in this case, the cells that are supposed to make male characteristics like genitalia and body hair just don't react to male hormones at all. So the child looks female, even though it has male chromosomes."

Bob found himself staring at Dr Doug's white clogs. A small fleck of blood marked the leather: it seemed a weird choice of footwear with green surgical overalls. "But it's more than that, isn't it?" he said. "I mean, is it just a technical thing or is – she actually ill?"

"The baby's got no uterus but is otherwise perfectly healthy. The good news is that there's a reasonable vaginal structure, so – alright, she might not need a great deal of surgery to have something of a normal life as a female." Dr Doug stared at Bob for a few seconds and then turned to Gina, as if he was expecting a comment. None came. "I realise how hard this must be for you. I think the important thing is to concentrate on the baby. It's not going to be any easier for her when she'd old enough to understand."

"We tell her what she is?" Gina said at last.

"It's probably best," Dr Doug replied. "It'll be apparent to her at puberty. No periods, probably no pubic hair. If she grows up knowing she's a little different, it'll save her a great deal of trauma. I do assume you accept she's best reassigned as a female."

Bob glanced at Gina. She was fumbling with the small card delivered to the ward with a bouquet from her sister.

"You said we had a boy," she said.

"And you did. The karyotype – sorry, the chromosomes were XY, which is male."

"And the scan."

"It's easy to mistake the labia for testes if that's what you're expecting to see. And you can test for the carrier, but you have to know that's what you're looking for – and this is a one in 20,000 chance at best, maybe much lower."

"Carrier?" Gina sounded insulted. "Me?"

"Have you any female relatives who didn't have children or didn't appear to ever have a relationship?"

"Great aunts and a cousin, some way back."

"There's a chance they had it. Remember that this wasn't well understood and many AIS cases went undiagnosed."

Bob knew what Gina was thinking, and it wasn't medical. She had to be worrying about what they would tell the family, how they would explain that they conceived a boy and somehow gave birth to a girl.

It was going to be a nightmare. This would almost certainly be the last child they'd have at this time of their lives. A child who couldn't give them grandchildren: the end of the Fraser line, oddly enough, but not of the Hicksons. Bob, an only child, had most to lose on the dynastic front. He had expected to be angry and afraid and threatening legal action once the shock had worn off, but instead he found himself relieved. He hadn't replaced Jack at all. He'd had a daughter. And that was curiously comforting.

"I don't expect you'd thought of a girl's name," Dr Doug said. They watched the nurse bring the baby back into the ward from the latest batch of tests and lay her in Gina's arms.

"Joanna Victoria," Bob said. It occurred to him much later that he hadn't even consulted Gina on the choice.

#

Nine years seven months.

Hope you're feeling better soon. A bright yellow card with daft cartoons, which plays clips from the century's funniest comedy shows. "With love from Dad."

The best thing about being self-employed as far as Bob was concerned was not having work-mates to talk to. As a management consultant, he came and went. He never needed to explain why he needed a day off to take Vicky to hospital or what was wrong with her.

There was nothing wrong with her. She was just different.

Bob had been the one to call her Vicky. Joanna had been an unthinking response at the time, but it was a poor name, a substitute boy's name dressed up to fit, and he preferred something uncompromisingly feminine. It struck him only later that it was another feminised male label, by which time it had stuck.

The capacity of children to tolerate medical procedures astounded him, and it was a topic he often discussed with other parents from the AIS support group. Two of them lived close enough to contact personally. Bob found he was growing more inclined to talk to them than to Gina, and Gina was more distant about it than ever since she had discovered one of them was a single mother.

"How's it going?" Janice asked.

Bob rearranged the individual teapots and delicate patisserie on the tray, fearful of a slip and the clatter of falling china. It was a genteel coffee shop. "Pretty good, I think."

They found a table overlooking the river and neither much cared if anyone they knew saw them together. It was not a place for assignations, more a shoppers' way station. "Is Vicky still on implants?"

"They don't seem to bother her, and at her age they're better than oestrogen patches," Bob said. "They don't fall off, anyway. Do you want sugar? I didn't get any."

"No sugar. How's your wife taking it?"

"So so."

"It can be tough."

"I thought she'd identify with Vicky. Mother daughter bond. But it's just getting more distant."

"Guilt. And Vicky's a pretty glamorous girl in the making, so don't confuse female rivalry with something special to AIS."

"No, it's guilt. We asked for it. We found a doctor and paid him to create a child for us and it went wrong, and Vicky's paying the price for our covetousness. We wanted a possession."

"I don't think this is a visitation from God, Bob. AIS is rare, nothing to do with in-vitro fertilisation."

"Well, I feel guilty. We have way too many choices over fertility these days." Suddenly he didn't feel like tackling the mille-feuille pastry in front of him. It looked both daunting and fragile. "She wouldn't have happened if I hadn't paid for it. I never felt right about it, you know – but I went from feeling guilty about

trying to replace a lost son to feeling guilty about bringing a damaged daughter into the world."

"Is that how you see her? Damaged?"

"She's had a gonadectomy and now she's on HRT and she's ten years old."

"Marianne's in the same boat."

"Okay. Perhaps I'm overidentifying because of the testes being removed. You have to expect a man to get hung up about that." He managed a smile. "I explained it to her like an appendix. Something you have that you don't need."

"She's a very pretty little girl. And cheerful. Don't underestimate how your view of her shapes her self-esteem. She needs a good father figure if she's going to relate well to men."

I will be that good father, Bob thought. I will spend whatever it takes and sacrifice whatever it takes to give her a normal life.

"Janice again?" Gina called from the kitchen when he came in. He could hear Vicky playing her flute upstairs.

"Yes," he said, offering nothing more.

"Thought so," Gina said, and the conversation died.

#

Seventeen years exactly.

Happy Birthday Granddaughter. An embossed foil card, no feminine froth, with a vid chip that plays a mountain landscape when you pick it up. "Many happy returns, Vicky. From Gran." Nothing more.

The Hickson matriarch had never found it easy to deal with Vicky. "She's much closer to her father," she'd declared. Bob decided it was a command rather than an observation. That suited him just fine. There was no reason why a man couldn't provide the emotional support a daughter needed. He was there to offer a sympathetic ear when Vicky was the only girl in class not able to brag about periods: he could just as easily identify with her first fears about not being able to bear children, he thought.

There was nothing Gina could offer that he couldn't. That might have been the reason behind the divorce.

Vicky lived with him now. She had grown up into the tall, striking glamour typical – so some said – of CAIS girls. Her glossy brown hair reached her waist. Boys pestered her for dates. Bob exercised just a little more fatherly vigilance over her these days than most dads, but only a little.

He wanted her to feel normal. Or at least as normal as a teenager could feel when she had surgeons discussing vaginal hypoplasia and the merits of Vecchiotti procedures over her head.

For a birthday treat he took her to the smartest restaurant in town. It was the first time she'd worn a formal cocktail outfit, and he gave her a corsage of a single magenta cattleya orchid.

It was almost a joke between them, orchids: an exotically feminine bloom from a masculine pseudo-bulb, even its generic name derived from the Greek for testicle. Bob hadn't known a thing about orchids until he'd seen the image in AIS support literature, and now he knew plenty about both.

The cattleya's fragrance filled the space between them as they chose from an eclectic wine list. Bob caught himself searching the menu for something with a good calcium content for her, something to ward off the osteoporosis AIS girls could be prone to. He stopped himself. She was old enough now to manage her condition herself.

"This is ever so posh," Vicky said. "I've never seen so much crystal in my life."

Bob leaned towards her across the real damask tablecloth. "I'll let you into a secret, sweetheart – neither have I." Father and daughter giggled. He looked up and caught the waiter's unfathomable eye. "We're still undecided," he said, wondering if the man was judging them. "But we'll have a half-bottle of the Riquewihr Pinot Gris while we're making up our minds."

It was more a spectacle than a meal. Vicky appeared to be enjoying it. She had always been a controlled person, not much given to displays, but he could tell she was pleased. They talked about her university choices and short-term stuff and marvelled at after-dinner chocolate confections like Faberge eggs. Later they walked through the town centre.

People were spilling out of the theatre and heading towards bars and restaurants, a second shift. An older couple with two small children – grandchildren, Bob assumed, although that was by no means certain these days – crossed their path.

"I won't be able to give you those," Vicky said suddenly.

"What?"

"Grandchildren."

"You mustn't even think that." Bob stopped her in her tracks: she was as tall as he was now. "I mean it. It's nothing. I don't want you to lose a second's sleep over that, do you understand?"

"You know - "

"Hey, I have everything I could possibly want."

They dropped the subject as if by an unspoken signal and carried on past the riverside walk. It was a busy evening. People milled around.

"Oh, Bob," said a voice.

It was a business associate, a man he hadn't seen in years. He couldn't put a name to him, but the face reminded him of a project, and he returned a non-committal greeting.

"So there's life in you yet, eh, Bob?" the man said. He was smiling at Vicky.

It took Bob a couple of seconds to wring the meaning from that. He realised he was frowning. "This is my daughter," he said. "My daughter Vicky."

The man's expression crumpled into embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Bob. She's just - well, I forgot how long it's been. She's a lovely girl."

Bob couldn't recall later how the exchange ended, but it was hurried and flustered. All he remembered – and remembered for years after - was that a relative stranger had been struck by his daughter's beauty.

A lovely girl. Yes, she was.

#

Twenty-five years and ten months.

A sheet designed to look like an old-fashioned telegram. CONGRATULATIONS VICKY. I KNEW YOU WOULD DO IT. YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR! LOVE DAD.

#

Twenty-six years and two months.

Silver bells and horseshoes embossed on ivory. Some cards never change. On your wedding, dear daughter. "Congratulations again, sweetheart. I wish you every happiness with Marc. With love from Dad."

The line from Canada was uncharacteristically poor. Bob reloaded the number a few times but the picture was still snow-stormed and Vicky's voice crackled. He would have to get a better link installed.

"You don't have to go through with this."

"I want to." Her hair was shoulder-length now, more businesslike than princess. "I want to more than anything."

"Not for me, love. Please."

"Marc's over the moon about the idea."

"Vicky, please."

"There's nothing to worry about. Reproduction technology has improved enormously since I was born. We can guarantee so much more."

"You're thinking about gestation by donor, aren't you?"

"You know the problem with surrogacy. It's not the best solution."

"Even so, these women are in comas."

"They've left living wills. What's the difference between leaving your organs for tissue culture and donating time in your uterus? They don't even have to die to help people."

"I don't know. We crossed a line a long time ago. Maybe I shouldn't feel uncomfortable with it."

Vicky shimmered on screen for a second, and he thought he'd lost the link. He tapped the pad to locate a stronger signal.

"We have the embryo. A boy. And we have had everything, I mean everything, checked out." She smiled that anxious and hopeful smile that always told him she was looking for his approval. "Wouldn't you love a grandson, dad?"

Bob paused. He could have remarried and had more children. He could have adopted. He could have done a great many things, but he had chosen to invest all in his barren daughter.

But she wasn't barren now. The next generation of doctors had managed to place her genetic material in a donor ovum stripped of its owner's inheritance, and fertilise it with Marc Peraud's sperm. Now they

were offering to take the embryo out of storage and implant it in a woman who hadn't regained consciousness after an accident.

It seemed monstrous to Bob and he didn't know why, not rationally anyway. Once over that line of medical intervention, what was normal in procreation any more? Yes, he would have loved a grandson. He could see Vicky wanted that too.

"Darling, go ahead. Whatever you need." Bob wished he had used a voice-line: could she see his anxiety at her end? "I said I'd do whatever it took to give you a normal life. Go ahead. You deserve it. And give my love to Marc."

"I'm so proud of you, dad," she said. "Maybe we can let him have the Fraser surname, seeing as you're the last –"

"No need," Bob said. "No need at all."

#

Thirty-seven years and four months.

A plain card. Understated wreath, a non-denominational religious feel to the discreet gilding. With deepest sympathy. "Vicky, I was so sorry to hear about your Dad. He loved you and the kids so much, and he was a wonderful friend to me. Thinking of you – Janice Thomas.

"Vicky, are you coming down?" Marc was one of those men who couldn't bring themselves to shout. He whispered loudly and theatrically. Vicky smiled and tucked the envelope under her arm, intent on resuming her browsing later once the dinner guests had gone.

"I'm coming," she called.

Marc had set the dining room with cattleyas, cymbidiums and odontoglossums in full bloom from the orchid house. Vicky had done well out of propagating them for the cut-flower trade, but they had never become commonplace for her. She loved them. Simon was wandering from bloom to bloom like a demented bee, sniffing hard.

"Mum, they don't all smell strong, do they?" he said.

"Smell strongly, love," she corrected. "No, some orchids aren't fragrant at all. But aren't they lovely?"

"Gran'pa liked them, didn't he?"

Vicky stood beside her son and admired the almost crystalline glitter of the palest of apricot cymbidiums, spotted with carmine at its throat. It was her finest: she'd bred it herself and propagated it from a meristem. It was the current sensation in floristry.

As its breeder she'd been entitled to name it. She had registered it as Robert Fraser.

"Yes," she said. "Gran'pa loved orchids very much."

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