

WE THREE By Dean R. Koontz 1 JONATHAN, JESSICA, AND I ROLLED OUR FATHER THROUGH THE DINING room and across the fancy Olde English kitchen. We had some trouble getting Father through the back door, because he was rather rigid. This is no comment on his bearing or temperament, though he could be a chilly bastard when he wanted. Now he was stiff quite simply because rigor mortis had tightened his muscles and hardened his flesh. We were not, however, to be deterred. We kicked at him until he bent in the middle and popped through the door frame. We dragged him across the porch and down the six steps to the lawn. "He weighs a ton!" Jonathan said, mopping his sweat-streaked brow, huffing and puffing. "Not a ton," Jessica said. "Less than two hundred pounds." Although we are triplets and are surprisingly similar in many ways, we differ from one another in a host of minor details. For example, Jessica is by far the most pragmatic of us, while Jonathan likes to exaggerate, fantasize, and daydream. I am somewhere between their two extremes. A pragmatic daydreamer? "What now?" Jonathan asked, wrinkling his face in disgust and nodding toward the corpse on the grass. "Burn him," Jessica said. Her pretty lips made a thin pencil line on her face. Her long yellow hair caught the morning sun and glimmered. The day was perfect, and she was the most beautiful part of it. "Burn him all up." "Shouldn't we drag Mother out and burn the two of them at the same time?" Jonathan asked. "It would save work." "If we make a big pyre, the flames might dance too high," she said. "And we don't want a stray spark to catch the house on fire." "We have our choice of all the houses in the world!" Jonathan said, spreading his arms to indicate the beach resort around us, Massachusetts beyond the resort, the nation past the state's perimeters - the world. Jessica only glared at him. "Aren't I right, Jerry?" Jonathan asked me. "Don't we have the whole world to live in? Isn't it silly to worry about this one old house?" "You're right," I said. "I like this house," Jessica said. Because Jessica liked this house, we stood fifteen feet back from the sprawled corpse and stared at it and thought of flames and ignited it in an instant. Fire burst out of nowhere and wrapped Father in a red-orange blanket. He burned well, blackened, popped, sizzled, and fell into ashes. "I feel as if I ought to be sad," Jonathan said. Jessica grimaced. "Well, he was our father," Jonathan said. "We're above cheap sentimentality." Jessica stared hard at each of us to be certain we understood this. "We're a new race with new emotions and new attitudes." "I guess so." But Jonathan was not fully convinced. "Now, let's get Mother," Jessica said. Although she is only ten years old - six minutes younger than Jonathan and three minutes younger than I - Jessica is the most forceful of us. She usually has her way. We went back into the house and got Mother. 2 THE GOVERNMENT HAD ASSIGNED A CONTINGENT OF TWELVE MARINES and eight plainclothes operatives to our house. Supposedly, these men were to guard us and keep us from harm. Actually, they were there only to be sure that we remained prisoners. When we were finished with Mother, we dragged these other bodies onto the lawn and cremated them one at a time. Jonathan was exhausted. He sat down between two smoldering skeletons and wiped sweat and ashes from his face. "Maybe we made a big mistake." "Mistake?" Jessica asked. She was immediately defensive. "Maybe we shouldn't have killed all of them," Jonathan said. Jessica stamped one foot. Her golden ringlets of hair bounced prettily. "You're a stupid bastard, Jonathan! You know what they were going to do to us. When they discovered just how far-ranging our powers were and just how fast we were acquiring new powers, they finally understood the danger we posed. They were going to kill us." "We could have killed just a few of them to make our point," Jonathan said. "Did we really have to finish them all?" Jessica sighed. "Look, they were like Neanderthals compared to us. We're a new race with new powers, new emotions, new attitudes. We are the most precocious children of all time - but they did have a certain brute strength, remember. Our only chance was to act without warning. And we did." Jonathan looked around at the black patches of grass. "It's going to be so much work! It's

taken us all morning to dispense with these few. We'll never get the whole world cleaned up." "Before long, we'll learn how to levitate the bodies," Jessica said. "I feel a smidgen of that power already. Maybe we'll even learn how to teleport them from one place to another. Things will be easier then. Besides, we aren't going to clean up the whole world - just the parts of it we'll want to use for the next few years. By that time, the weather and the rats will have done the rest of the job for us." "I guess you're right," Jonathan said. But I knew he remained doubtful, and I shared some of his doubt. Certainly, we three are higher on the ladder of evolution than anyone who came before us. We are fledgling mind readers, fortune tellers, capable of out-of-body experiences whenever we desire them. We have that trick with the fire, converting thought energy into a genuine physical holocaust. Jonathan can control the flow of small streams of water, a talent he finds most amusing whenever I try to urinate; though he is one of the new race, he is still strangely enchanted by childish pranks. Jessica can accurately predict the weather. I have a special empathy with animals; dogs come to me, as do cats and birds and all manner of offal-dropping creatures. And, of course, we can put a stop to the life of any plant or animal just by thinking death at it. Like we thought death at all the rest of humanity. Perhaps, considering Darwin's theories, we were destined to destroy these new Neanderthals once we developed the ability. But I cannot rid myself of the nagging doubt. I feel that, somehow, we will suffer for the destruction of the old race. "That's backward thinking," Jessica said. She had read my mind, of course. Her telepathic talents are stronger and more developed than either Jonathan's or mine. "Their deaths meant nothing. We cannot feel remorse. We are the new ones, with new emotions and new hopes and new dreams and new rules." "Sure," I said. "You're right." 3 WEDNESDAY, WE WENT DOWN TO THE BEACH AND BURNED THE CORPSES of the dead sunbathers. We all like the sea, and we do not want to be without a stretch of unpolluted sand. Putrefying bodies make for a very messy beach. When we finished the job, Jonathan and I were weary. But Jessica wanted to do the nasty. "Children our age shouldn't be capable of that," Jonathan said. "But we are capable," Jessica said. "We were meant to do it. And I want to. Now." So we did the nasty. Jonathan and her. Then me and her. She wanted more, but neither of us cared to oblige. Jessica stretched out on the beach. Her shapeless, slender body was white against the white sand. "We'll wait," she said. "For what?" Jonathan asked. "For the two of you to be ready again." 4 FOUR WEEKS AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD, JONATHAN AND I WERE alone on the beach, soaking up the sun. He was oddly silent for a while, almost as if he was afraid to speak. At last he said, "Do you think it's normal for a girl her age to be always ... wanting like that? Even if she is one of the new race?" "No." "She seems ... driven." "Yes." "There's a purpose we don't grasp." He was right. I sensed it too. "Trouble," he said. "Maybe." "Trouble coming." "Maybe. But what trouble can there be after the end of the world?" 5 TWO MONTHS AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD AND THE BURNING OF OUR parents, when Jonathan and I were getting bored with the house and wanted to strike out for more exotic places, Jessica let us in on the big news. "We can't leave here just yet," she said. Her voice was especially forceful. "We can't leave for several more months. I'm pregnant." 6 WE BECAME AWARE OF THAT FOURTH CONSCIOUSNESS WHEN JESSICA WAS in her fifth month of pregnancy. We all woke in the middle of the night, drenched with sweat, nauseated, sensing this new person. "It's the baby," Jonathan said. "A boy." "Yes," I said, wincing at the psychic impact of the new being. "And although he's inside of you, Jessica, he's aware. He's unborn but completely aware." Jessica was racked with pain. She whimpered helplessly. 7 "THE BABY WILL BE OUR EQUAL, NOT OUR SUPERIOR," JESSICA INSISTED. "And I won't listen to any more of this nonsense of yours, Jonathan." She was only a child herself, yet she was swollen with child. She was getting to be more grotesque with each passing day. "How can you know he isn't our superior?" Jonathan asked. "None of us can read his mind. None of us can-" "New species don't evolve that fast," she said.

"What about us?" "Besides, he's safe - he came from us," she said. Apparently, she thought that this truth made Jonathan's theory even more the lie. "We came from our parents," Jonathan said. "And where are they? Suppose we aren't the new race. Suppose we're a brief, intermediate step - the cocoon stage between caterpillar and butterfly. Maybe the baby is-" "We have nothing to fear from the baby," she insisted, patting her revolting stomach with both hands. "Even if what you say is true, he needs us. For reproduction." "He needs you," Jonathan said. "He doesn't need us." I sat and listened to the argument, not knowing what to think. In truth, I found it all a bit amusing even as it frightened me. I tried to make them see the humor: "Maybe we have this wrong. Maybe the baby is the Second Coming - the one Yeats wrote about in his poem, the beast slouching toward Bethlehem to be born." Neither of them thought that was funny. "I never could stand Yeats," Jonathan said. "Yes," Jessica said, "such a gloomy ass, he was. Anyway, we're above superstitions like that. We're the new race with new emotions and new dreams and new hopes and new rules." "This is a serious threat, Jerry," Jonathan said. "It's not anything to joke about." And they were at it again, screaming at each other - quite like Mother and Father used to do when they couldn't make the household budget work. Some things never change. 8 THE BABY WOKE US REPEATEDLY EVERY NIGHT, AS THOUGH IT ENJOYED disturbing our rest. In Jessica's seventh month of pregnancy, toward dawn, we all were jolted awake by a thunder of thought energy that poured from the womb-wrapped being-to-be. "I think I was wrong," Jonathan said. "About what?" I asked. I could barely see him in the dark bedroom. "It's a girl, not a boy," he said. I probed out with my mind and tried to get a picture of the creature inside Jessica's belly. It resisted me successfully, for the most part, just as it resisted Jonathan's and Jessica's psychic proddings. But I was sure it was male, not female. I said so. Jessica sat up in bed, her back against the headboard, both hands on her moving stomach. "You're wrong, both of you. I think it's a boy and girl. Or maybe neither one." Jonathan turned on the bedside lamp in the house by the sea and looked at her. "What is that supposed to mean?" She winced as the child within her struck out hard against her. "I'm in closer contact with it than either of you. I sense into it. It isn't like us." "Then I was right," Jonathan said. Jessica said nothing. "If it's both sexes, or neither, it doesn't need any of us," he said. He turned off the light again. There was nothing else to do. "Maybe we could kill it," I said. "We couldn't," Jessica said. "It's too powerful." "Jesus!" Jonathan said. "We can't even read its mind! If it can hold off all three of us like that, it can protect itself for sure. Jesus!" In the darkness, as the blasphemy echoed in the room, Jessica said, "Don't use that word, Jonathan. It's beneath us. We're above those old superstitions. We're the new breed. We have new emotions, new beliefs, new rules." "For another month or so," I said.

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