

Anne McCaffrey - Horse From A Different Sea

ARE WE BABES IN THE WOODS? OR I SHOULD say, babes in space. I don't mean beating the Russians to a manned moonbase or setting up a space hospital or making Mars adaptable to our survival there to ease the population explosion here. Our problem is more basic than that: can man survive as Homo sapiens or a reasonable facsimile thereof. In that department, are we wetting our spacesuits!

I know what I'm talking about. Only I can't talk. Not yet, since my evidence hasn't come to light, so to speak. It's due soon and, as an ambulance chaser from way back, I've got to be there. I'd rather know right off what the competition makes out as.

We—that is, mankind, Earthtype—are in for one helluva jolt and this is one therapeutic pill that has no sugar coating—unless it's an LSD cube. I'm not the only one in the medical fraternity to realize that there's something queer in the conversion chamber. Some of us tumbled to it six months ago. The research is not the stuff of which AMA citations are made, but it will be handy when Itoldyouso time comes.

For me it started when my perennial maternity case phoned up and asked for an appointment.

"Buzzyboy says I must be pregnant again," Liz Lattimore said with understandable grimness in her voice. She has six under six—well, one set of twins.

Buzz is a guy on a single track, business and monkey business. As a kind of moral justice, he has sympathetic reactions to each of Liz's pregnancies in the form of violent morning nausea. Oh yes, it hap '166 pens. Liz may develop varicose veins, hemorrhoids, boils, hot flashes, heartburn, and high blood pressure during her gestations. Buzz gets the morning sickness. "How long since you missed a period, Liz?" I asked her.

"That's just it, Ted. This time he must be sympathetic to someone else because I came regular as clockwork last week."

"On a possible sixth pregnancy, you'd better see me."

She did. She wasn't pregnant.

"We had a fight a while ago," she told me after she'd dressed. "Buzz flounced out of the house like an injured Cub Scout. When he came home, he wore that merchandisebetterthanhou expression. Sometimes, Ted, it's a pure relief to me when Buzz cats around so I don't whinge."

She paused, about to add something more but hesitated. Even if she had voiced her suspicion then, I doubt it would've made much difference.

"Anything I can do, Liz?"

"Outside of helping to suppress a paternity suit if the case arises, I don't think so. We made up our differences." She rolled her eyes with droll expressiveness.

"Seriously, Liz, I'm glad you're not freshening again. You're run ragged now. Send Buzz in for a checkup. He may need it."

Buzz came in the next day at noon, which proved that he was now worried about himself.

"How come you said Liz wasn't pregnant?"

"Because she isn't. Praise be!"

"Then how come I got this damned morning nausea? I only get it when she's got buns in the oven."

"Nausea is a symptom not necessarily exclusive to pregnancy. Especially in the male of the species."

As I mentioned, we're such babesinspace.

"Off the record, Buzz, could you be sympathetic to someone else?"

Buzz flushed.

"Ted, I'm nuts about Liz no matter what I do or say. I only go catting when we've had a fight or she's too pregnant to screw. Hell, Ted, if I didn't love her so much, d'you think I'd go home every night to a house full of squalling brats?"

"Well, that was quite an imagination you projected the other afternoon at Casey's."

"At Casey's?" Buzz swallowed. "I didn't know you were there."

"Buzz, your voice'd carry to your funeral. Was it the girl at Lady Linda's?"

A strange look crossed Buzz's face and I could see him about to evade the question with some Lattimorian verbal embroidery. "She was the damnedest woman I ever screwed, Ted. Once was, by God, enough. But that once..." Buzz whistled slowly, shaking his head.

Something in his attitude inhibited further questions, so I changed the subject by getting him to strip. After a thorough physical I found only a little hard lump near the large intestine, but not situated where it could cause pressure that might result in nausea. I sent him to the hospital for a gastrointestinal series but the results were inconclusive. I saw no cause for alarm, so I told him that the nausea was caused by overwork—with a wink—and to give up smoking.

In the next few weeks I examined four more seriously nauseated males with small intestinal lumps. I also heard of seventeen more around town. Then I had a visit from the leading local Boy Scout and our little unprepared Explorer gave me my first definite lead.

"Doc, can I see you for a minute? I mean, you're not too tired or anything?"

When six feet two inches and 185 pounds of Explorer Boy Scout Horace Baker comes sneaking around after my nurse has left, I'd better not be too tired to see him.

"Now, what's wrong with you, Hoke? You look mighty pale for Glen Cove's answer to a maiden's prayer?"

The boy literally cringed away from my buddytype arm.

"Hey, feller, did I strike too close to home?" I led him to the surgery table.

"Aw, Doc, I'm in awful trouble." He groaned and averted his head.

"You mean," and I put on my best Ben Gazzara pose, "you've got some girl in trouble?"

"Naw," and he was momentarily indignant, "I wear my pants too tight. No, Doc, it's me. Ever since I went... to... Mrs. Linda's..." His voice failed him.

A kaleidoscope of impressions overwhelmed me for a moment at this confession. Kids grow up so fast. A few flashes of the red squally baby I'd delivered from Mrs. Baker merged into Explorer Hoke complete with merit badge sash, approaching in best Indian fashion Lady Linda's modestly situated house of seven delights. I wasn't sure whether I was glad or sorry that Hoke had taken his lustiness to Linda's. I was relieved that his experiments hadn't taken root, as it were, in any of his peers. Hoke needn't worry about VD: Linda's girls were clean. I had no remedy for his conscience, however.

"Well, now, Hoke, I don't think you have anything more to worry about than overactive sex glands. Linda's girls are—"

"Oh, it's not that. Doc. It's just that I can't eat. Nothing stays down. It's worse in the mornings, and Mom notices that I don't pack it away—hey!"

Past the first sentence I had dropped the TV medic pose and stretched him out flat. My fingers dug into his big gut and, sure enough, the precocious Explorer had joined the Group.

I gave him some dramamine and told him it was indigestion caused by a guilty conscience and to eat spaghetti for breakfast. He fortunately didn't argue because I had no more quick answers. I hurried him out, locked up, and went on a professional call.

Linda herself opened the door.

"Dr. Martin! You're psychic," she said by way of greeting. "I hate to mix pleasure with business and I'll expect your bill..."

"You won't get one because I am here on business, Linda," I said, trying not to be too brusque. "I'd appreciate seeing you? new girl for a brief professional inquiry."

Linda looked stunned, an expression I never thought to see on her face.

"She's who I was calling you for." And Linda gestured me to follow her up the stairs. "She's been losing weight steadily. She's skin and bones and you know that doesn't bed easy."

"Nausea?"

"Doesn't mention it. Until three days ago she had the appetite of an elephant, but you'd never guess it to look at her." Linda was slightly jealous.

"How long's she been with you?"

"About five weeks. A friend sent her to me from Chicago. She's got a sister in the business there. She's good but funny, no one wants her steady. She's educated, too: speaks very good English."

"She's foreign?"

"Must be, but I can't place her accent and I never ask too many personal questions."

The room Linda gestured me to enter was dark and rank with a heavy, musty, unattractive odor. A dim light shone on the gaunt face of the dying girl. She was dying. It's an indescribable but recognizable look which I've seen too often in my years of practice. The pulse in her spiderthin wrist was barely discernible; her heartbeat muted and erratic. She opened her eyes at my touch, then smiled wanly at Linda standing behind me.

"Too much at once. Now too little, too late. But thanks, Linda. I won't be much trouble, I promise." She spoke in a raspy voice, but her phrases were oddly inflected. "You see, Doctor, I'm dying and there's no cure for my ailment."

"No, you just rest easy," I began, but her knowing eyes mocked me for the specious words. "A cigarette, please?"

I offered my case, tacitly admitting my helplessness. She was sinking so visibly that it would have been heartless to bother her. An autopsy would give me more specifics anyhow.

"Thanks. Now, would you please go? Both of you." This one was different all right. No lastminute confessions of inadequacy, no wailing for repentance and salvation, and no real bravura. She just wanted to be left alone. I guided Linda out.

"Hell, Doc. Someone should stay with the poor kid," Linda said.

"You see too much TV."

"So does she," Linda replied with an irritated snort. "She's never smoked before."

The hall was suddenly flooded with a very bright light and an acrid formic acid stench like burning ants. I threw the door open but it was too late. The bed was a blazing funeral pyre.

I know now why, but at the moment I was aghast with remorse at this mystifying incineration. I couldn't understand how a cigarette, no matter how carelessly held by a novice smoker, could have caused as violent a combustion as this. I didn't have much time to think about it because it was all we could do to keep the blaze from spreading until the fire department got there. Neither Linda nor I mentioned that we'd only been out of the room three seconds when the fire started. No one would have believed us.

So my primary clue went up spectacularly in smoke. A little judicious inquiry uncovered a veritable epidemic of smokinginbed fire deaths in fifteen cities. One incident got a lot of publicity because the victim was a call girl. She was to have appeared before a board of inquiry the next day so her death was considered a grisly form of suicide. Seventeen such incidents on the East Coast scared me sufficiently not to want to know the odds against us in the rest of the world.

Linda gave me the names of all the men who had patronized the girl. If the others of her ilk had got around as much as she had... wow! Five of the men were patients of mine. Buzz was the furthest along—as far as I could tell—but then, it had been his tale in Casey's that had prompted others to visit the girl. The chief of police shouldn't have accepted payola in trade but that's his lookout. I almost wish I could morally allow the old fool to carry to "term." Jerry Striker's a 'poor enough character, but it'd serve his wife right. Martin Tippers? I hadn't guessed 172 him for the type. Must have been drunk. And our precocious Explorer.

What a queer collection of males to be chosen to propagate an unknown race on a new world. That's what I mean about adapting to survive. Those gals, if females they were, used equipment to hand, not fancy lifesupport systems.

Now that I know the game, I can't just ingenuously suggest to any one of my equally puzzled colleagues that their patients got invited into a lady spider's nest. Or maybe they had a hurry call from a passing sea mare? The least bizarre examples of male incubation on this planet are spiders and sea horses, and those comparisons are quite enough to inhibit further speculation. Give the imagination full rein and there are endless possibilities. You pays your money and you takes your choice. Of course, if I let one of the men carry to term, I'd find out more. But, hell, neither my conscience nor my professional integrity will permit me.

The most I can do is spread out the curious unorthodox operations on my five pregnant males so that I'll have some interesting embryos for my babesinspace theory. Even then I might goof. I don't know how long gestation takes, what would serve as a birth canal or, if you know what spiders do... well, you can see my problem. What form will the progeny ultimately assume? That of their hosts? The two foeti I've removed show different stages of freakout evolution. I'm letting Hoke Baker go longest because he's adjusted best to the changes in his physiology. But I've got to arrange for his abortion soon—before he becomes eligible for an Explorer's Maternity Badge.

THE END

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