

YESTERDAY'S KIN



Nancy Kress

“We see in these facts some deep organic bond, prevailing throughout space and time. . . . This bond, on my theory, is simple inheritance.”

—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

I: S MINUS 10.5 MONTHS

Marianne

The publication party was held in the dean’s office, which was supposed to be an honor. Oak-paneled room, sherry in little glasses, small-paned windows facing the quad—the room was trying hard to be a Commons someplace like Oxford or Cambridge, a task for which it was several centuries too late. The party was trying hard to look festive. Marianne’s colleagues, except for Evan and the dean, were trying hard not to look too envious, or at their watches.

“Stop it,” Evan said at her from behind the cover of his raised glass.

“Stop what?”

“Pretending you hate this.”

“I hate this,” Marianne said.

“You don’t.”

He was half right. She didn’t like parties but she was proud of her paper, which had been achieved despite two years of gene sequencers that kept breaking down, inept graduate students who contaminated samples with their own DNA, murmurs of “Lucky find” from Baskell, with whom she’d never gotten along. Baskell, an old-guard physicist, saw her as a bitch who refused to defer to rank or back down gracefully in an argument. Many people, Marianne knew, saw her as some variant of this. The list included two of her three grown children.

Outside the open casements, students lounged on the grass in the mellow October sunshine. Three girls in cut-off jeans played Frisbee, leaping at the blue flying saucer and checking to see if the boys sitting on the stone wall

were watching. Feinberg and Davidson, from Physics, walked by, arguing amiably. Marianne wished she were with them instead of at her own party.

“Oh God,” she said to Evan, “Curtis just walked in.”

The president of the university made his ponderous way across the room. Once he had been a historian, which might be why he reminded Marianne of Henry VIII. Now he was a campus politician, as power-mad as Henry but stuck at a second-rate university where there wasn't much power to be had. Marianne held against him not his personality but his mind; unlike Henry, he was not all that bright. And he spoke in clichés.

“Dr. Jenner,” he said, “congratulations. A feather in your cap, and a credit to us all.”

“Thank you, Dr. Curtis,” Marianne said.

“Oh, ‘Ed,’ please.”

“Ed.” She didn't offer her own first name, curious to see if he remembered it. He didn't. Marianne sipped her sherry.

Evan jumped into the awkward silence. “I'm Dr. Blanford, visiting post-doc,” he said in his plummy British accent. “We're all so proud of Marianne's work.”

“Yes! And I'd love for you to explain to me your innovative process, ah, Marianne.”

He didn't have a clue. His secretary had probably reminded him that he had to put in an appearance at the party: *Dean of Science's office, 4:30 Friday, in honor of that publication by Dr. Jenner in—quick look at email—in Nature, very prestigious, none of our scientists have published there before . . .*

“Oh,” Marianne said as Evan poked her discreetly in the side: *Play nice!* “it wasn't so much an innovation in process as unexpected results from known procedures. My assistants and I discovered a new haplogroup of mitochondrial DNA. Previously it was thought that *Homo sapiens* consisted of thirty haplogroups, and we found a thirty-first.”

“By sequencing a sample of contemporary genes, you know,” Evan said helpfully. “Sequencing and verifying.”

Anything said in upper-crust British automatically sounded intelligent, and Dr. Curtis looked suitably impressed. “Of course, of course. Splendid results. A star in your crown.”

“It's yet another haplogroup descended,” Evan said with malicious helpfulness, “from humanity's common female ancestor one hundred fifty thousand years ago. ‘Mitochondrial Eve.’”

Dr. Curtis brightened. There had been a TV program about Mitochondrial Eve, Marianne remembered, featuring a buxom actress in a leopard-skin sarong. “Oh, yes! Wasn't that—”

“I'm sorry, you can't go in there!” someone shrielled in the corridor outside the room. All conversation ceased. Heads swiveled toward three

men in dark suits pushing their way past the knot of graduate students by the door. The three men wore guns.

Another school shooting, Marianne thought, *where can I—*

“Dr. Marianne Jenner?” the tallest of the three men said, flashing a badge. “I’m Special Agent Douglas Katz of the FBI. We’d like you to come with us.”

Marianne said, “Am I under arrest?”

“No, no, nothing like that. We are acting under direct order of the president of the United States. We’re here to escort you to New York.”

Evan had taken Marianne’s hand—she wasn’t sure just when. There was nothing romantic in the handclasp, nor anything sexual. Evan, twenty-five years her junior and discreetly gay, was a friend, an ally, the only other evolutionary biologist in the department and the only one who shared Marianne’s cynical sense of humor. “*Or so we thought,*” they said to each other whenever any hypothesis proved wrong. *Or so we thought . . .* His fingers felt warm and reassuring around her suddenly icy ones.

“Why am I going to New York?”

“I’m afraid we can’t tell you that. But it is a matter of national security.”

“*Me?* What possible reason—?”

Special Agent Katz almost, but not quite, hid his impatience at her questions. “I wouldn’t know, ma’am. My orders are to escort you to UN Special Mission Headquarters in Manhattan.”

Marianne looked at her gaping colleagues, at the wide-eyed grad students, at Dr. Curtis, who was already figuring how this could be turned to the advantage of the university. She freed her hand from Evan’s, and managed to keep her voice steady.

“Please excuse me, Dr. Curtis, Dean. It seems I’m needed for something connected with . . . with the aliens.”

Noah

One more time, Noah Jenner rattled the doorknob to the apartment. It felt greasy from too many unwashed palms, and it was still locked. But he knew Emily was in there. That was the kind of thing he was always, somehow, right about. He was right about things that didn’t do him any good.

“Emily,” he said softly through the door, “please open up.”

Nothing.

“Emily, I have nowhere else to go.”

Nothing.

“I’ll stop, I promise. I won’t do sugarcane ever again.”

The door opened a crack, chain still in place, and Emily’s despairing face appeared. She wasn’t the kind of girl given to dramatic fury, but her quiet despair was even harder to bear. Not that Noah didn’t deserve it. He knew

he did. Her fair hair hung limply on either side of her long, sad face. She wore the green bathrobe he liked, with the butterfly embroidered on the left shoulder.

“You won’t stop,” Emily said. “You can’t. You’re an addict.”

“It’s not an addictive drug. You know that.”

“Not physically, maybe. But it is for you. You won’t give it up. I’ll never know who you really are.”

“I—”

“I’m sorry, Noah. But—go away.” She closed and re-locked the door.

Noah stood slumped against the dingy wall, waiting to see if anything else would happen. Nothing did. Eventually, as soon as he mustered the energy, he would have to go away.

Was she right? Would he never give up sugarcane? It wasn’t that it delivered a high: it didn’t. No rush of dopamine, no psychedelic illusions, no out-of-body experiences, no lowering of inhibitions. It was just that on sugarcane, Noah felt like he was the person he was supposed to be. The problem was that it was never the same person twice. Sometimes he felt like a warrior, able to face and ruthlessly defeat anything. Sometimes he felt like a philosopher, deeply content to sit and ponder the universe. Sometimes he felt like a little child, dazzled by the newness of a fresh morning. Sometimes he felt like a father (he wasn’t), protective of the entire world. Theories said that sugarcane released memories of past lives, or stimulated the collective unconscious, or made temporarily solid the images of dreams. One hypothesis was that it created a sort of temporary, self-induced Korsakoff’s Syndrome, the neurological disorder in which invented selves seem completely true. No one knew how sugarcane really acted on the brain. For some people, it did nothing at all. For Noah, who had never felt he fit in anywhere, it gave what he had never had: a sense of solid identity, if only for the hours that the drug stayed in his system.

The problem was, it was difficult to hold a job when one day you were nebbishy, sweet-natured Noah Jenner, the next day you were Attila the Hun, and two days later you were far too intellectual to wash dishes or make change at a convenience store. Emily had wanted Noah to hold a job. To contribute to the rent, to scrub the floor, to help take the sheets to the laundromat. To be an adult, and the same adult every day. She was right to want that. Only—

He might be able to give up sugarcane and be the same adult, if only he had the vaguest idea who that adult was. Which brought him back to the same problem—he didn’t fit anywhere. And never had.

Noah picked up the backpack in which Emily had put his few belongings. She couldn’t have left it in the hallway very long ago or the backpack would have already been stolen. He made his way down the three flights from

Emily's walk-up and out onto the streets. The October sun shone warmly on his shoulders, on the blocks of shabby buildings, on the trash skirling across the dingy streets of New York's lower East Side. Walking, Noah reflected bitterly, was one thing he could do without fitting in. He walked blocks to Battery Park, that green oasis on the tip of Manhattan's steel canyons, leaned on a railing, and looked south.

He could just make out the *Embassy*, floating in New York Harbor. Well, no, not the *Embassy* itself, but the shimmer of light off its energy shield. Everybody wanted that energy shield, including his sister Elizabeth. It kept everything out, short of a nuclear missile. Maybe that, too: so far nobody had tried, although in the two months since the embassy had floated there, three different terrorist groups had tried other weapons. Nothing got through the shield, although maybe air and light did. They must, right? Even aliens needed to breathe.

When the sun dropped below the horizon, the glint off the floating embassy disappeared. Dusk was gathering. He would have to make the call if he wanted a place to sleep tonight. Elizabeth or Ryan? His brother wouldn't yell at him as much, but Ryan lived upstate, in the same little Hudson River town as their mother's college, and Noah would have to hitchhike there. Also, Ryan was often away, doing fieldwork for his wildlife agency. Noah didn't think he could cope with Ryan's talkative, sticky-sweet wife right now. So it would have to be Elizabeth.

He called his sister's number on his cheap cell. "Hello?" she snapped. *Born angry*, their mother always said of Elizabeth. Well, Elizabeth was in the right job, then.

"Lizzie, it's Noah."

"Noah."

"Yes. I need help. Can I stay with you tonight?" He held the cell away from his ear, bracing for her onslaught. *Shiftless, lazy, directionless* . . . When it was over, he said, "Just for tonight."

They both knew he was lying, but Elizabeth said, "Come on then" and clicked off without saying good-bye.

If he'd had more than a few dollars in his pocket, Noah would have looked for a sugarcane dealer. Since he didn't, he left the park, the wind pricking at him now with tiny needles, and descended to the subway that would take him to Elizabeth's apartment on the upper West Side.

Marianne

The FBI politely declined to answer any of Marianne's questions. Politely, they confiscated her cell and iPad and took her in a sleek black car down Route 87 to New York, through the city to lower Manhattan, and out to a