

Spitting Image

By E.S. Strout MD

Human cloning would contradict the most fundamental principle of medical ethics.

George W. Bush -17 April, 2002

Friday, 24 May, 2002. Professor Edwin Rogers, Ph.D, announced his resignation as U.C. Irvine Medical Center's Reproductive Research Center Director. His opposition to the President's anti human cloning policies was given as the reason. He has accepted a position as consultant to BioGenetics, a civilian entity involved in the study of female reproductive disorders.

The Orange County Register

1.

Monday, 23 June, 2003

“Good news, Steve.”

Her husband looked up from his evening newspaper, stifled a yawn. “What, honey? We win the lottery?”

“Better than that, my love. I'm gonna make your millennium.” Jennifer Moeller plopped herself into her husband's lap, scattering newspaper pages in several directions.

“Later, Jenn. I'm beat, okay? Caught a real prick of a judge today.”

She smiled. “This will make it all better, sweetie. Two years we've been trying. You get one guess.”

Steve's brow wrinkled in annoyance, then puzzlement. Then his demeanor changed, brightening like a first-magnitude star going supernova. “My God, Jennifer. You're pregnant?”

“Bingo.” She handed him the lab report. Chorionic gonadotropin level: 80,000 units, it read.

2.

One year earlier:

Jennifer slit the flap of the envelope from the UCIMC Fertility Clinic using a kitchen paring knife. She unfolded the single computer-generated sheet with an impending sense of dread.

She read the results and explanatory text, her breath held in disbelief. The test results were unequivocal. Gonadal dysgenesis, a rare congenital abnormality. Failure of ovaries to produce mature eggs.

Jennifer unleashed a string of heartfelt expletives. She grabbed her half full glass of iced tea and flung it fiercely at the sink, where it shattered. She ran tremulous fingers through her jet-black bangs, blinked aquamarine irises and blotted hot tears from her cheeks as she paced. “Why me, God?” The document was savagely ripped into small shreds and consigned to the kitchen trash can.

3.

“What can I do?” she asked her friend Ellen Gale, a fellow secretary at U.C. Irvine’s Special Projects office. “If Steve finds out I’m the problem, it’s sayonara Jennifer.”

Ellen gave her a brown-eyed stare through steel-rimmed John Lennon glasses. “The truth, Jenn? It’s time you dump that arrogant shyster. Lawyers give me the creeps.”

A vigorous headshake. “I need other options, Ellie.”

Gale exhaled an exasperated breath. “No divorce? Too bad. You two had better have a heart-to-heart about adoption, then.”

“I hear you, Ellen. No choice. Gotta be his.”

“You wimp,” she muttered through her scowl. “Try Dear Abby or Dr. Laura.”

“I’m begging. Please, Ellen?”

Ellen pounded a fist on the desktop. “Gimme a sec.” She punched computer keys while Jennifer fidgeted.

“Aha!” She tapped a pencil point on the CRT screen. “Here’s an unauthorized option, Moeller buddy. Take a look.”

Jennifer pulled her chair close, stared at the screen and shrugged. “Who’s Edwin Rogers?”

“He’s a consultant over at BioGenetics. Resigned here because of differences with the administration over cloning research.”

Jennifer curled an unruly dark tress around an index finger. “BioGenetics did some of my lab studies.”

Ellen nodded. “I read in Scientific American a year or so ago where they reported the cloning of a human embryo. Rogers was one of the co-authors.”

“The President vetoed any further research, Ellen.”

“Listen to me, amiga. I was Prof Rogers’s secretary before he split. He’s a rebel. He resigned rather than give up his genetics studies.”

Jennifer scratched her chin. “You mean human cloning?”

“Yep.”

“Ellen. Why even bring it up?”

Ellen gave her a Machiavellian grin. “What do you want to bet Prof Rogers is just itching to continue his research. He just needs a push. What do you think?”

“I could get myself in a megaton of trouble, Ellen,” she said.

“Definite possibility. I can’t lie to you, babe.”

Jennifer stared at the wall. “The odds suck.”

Ellen nodded. “You got that right. So it’s a longshot. Rogers has been real quiet lately.”

“And he’s gonna risk his career for a nobody like me? Fat chance.” Jennifer grabbed tissues from her purse and blotted red-rimmed eyes.

“Oh, knock off the soap opera histrionics,” Ellen said, her voice rising half an octave. Her glare sent curious coworkers scurrying elsewhere. “You’ve got nothing to lose. You’re a resourceful lady, Jenn. Just flutter those baby blues.”

“You’re one passive-aggressive bitch, Ellen.”

“What are friends for, Jenn? Professor Edwin Rogers. BioGenetics.”

Jennifer nodded sullen agreement. “I’ll make an appointment.”

“Dinner and drinks on me if it works out, compadre.”

4.

“Anything good, Professor Rogers?”

He looked up from her chart. “I’m sorry, Ms. Moeller. These lab studies confirm a form of gonadal dysgenesis. There’s no mistake.”

Jennifer wiped away tears with a soggy Kleenex. “Do you have a couple of minutes? May I tell you a story?”

“Please.”

She did.

Rogers slid his glasses from his forehead to the bridge of his nose and gave her an intuitive stare. “You really believe Steve would divorce you? I think you’d be better off without that ambulance chaser.”

“That’s what my friend said.” Jennifer rose to leave.

Dr. Rogers stopped her with a raised hand and. “You’ve been giving this more than a little thought, am I right?”

“I’m out of options,” she said, holding another Kleenex to her nose.

Rogers eyed her with sudden suspicion. “How did you come to choose me? Are you a spy from the State Board of Medical Examiners?”

Vigorous head shake. “You were recommended.”

“I see. May I ask, by whom?”

“A secretary at UCIMC’s Special Projects office.”

His visage brightened. “Ah, Miss Gale. Very efficient lady. My secretary for three years before I resigned. Wait one.”

He booted up his desktop computer, tapped keys. “Yes. Come take a look, Ms. Moeller.”

Jennifer clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle a gasp. “My complete medical history. You knew.”

“You’re part of a database comprised of women such as you, with significant problems related to inability to conceive.”

Jennifer squinted an eyelid. “For what purpose?”

Rogers gave her an enigmatic smile. “Just in case some future Congress would overturn their medieval law. I have facilities here which would enable me to perform miracles.”

5.

She gave her lower lip a nervous tug. “Well, sir, I’m at my wits end. And you are at the forefront of human cloning experimentation. Do you see where I’m going?”

The Professor cocked an eyebrow. “Whoa, now. I did have some preliminary studies underway, then came the congressional ban. I retired rather than face the Regents Disciplinary Council.”

Jennifer exhaled a deep, disheartened sigh. “Yeah. I’d heard something about that.”

“I’d be looking at hard time. This President doesn’t waffle.”

Jennifer wiped her nose on a sleeve, took a deep breath and opened fire. “Ellen said you just needed a push.”

Rogers nodded, smiled. "You two are quite a pair."

"Yes we are."

Rogers tapped fingers on his desk blotter. "What's in it for me?"

"Ellen Gale buys me dinner and drinks if I pull this off. She will owe you the same. Our treat."

"Riviera at the Fireside? Good wine list."

"Deal."

He nodded. "This conversation never took place, Jennifer." He laced his fingers behind his neck and favored her with a lazy smile. "You realize if one word leaks out, we're both up on Federal charges."

"We'd be more famous than Roe vs. Wade, Professor."

"Infamous, you mean."

6.

Rogers enumerated points on his fingertips. "First we'll need an appropriate cell from you to provide DNA. Breast ductal tissue would be ideal. I can do the biopsy. Then we obtain compatible donor ova from the fertility clinic. The next step is to remove the donor ovum's DNA and insert yours. This could take a few tries. "

"A few? I don't understand."

"Very important, Jennifer. We will need to examine the DNA structure of each fertile egg before we implant it. A number of genetic abnormalities have arisen in the first attempts in mammals."

"Like what?"

"Metabolic enzyme defects, which resulted in shortened lifespans in sheep and dairy cattle. We can spot them now with updated DNA mapping technology. Even so, there is some inherent risk. Do you understand?"

"I'm ready, Professor Rogers."

7.

“Six months and half a dozen discards. The previous one only had a minor translocation on one chromosome. What do you think, Jennifer?” Professor Rogers asked with a grin.

“What about the latest one?”

Dr. Rogers laid two cellulose sheets side by side on the view box. “This is it,” he said. “And the one beside it is your original DNA configuration.”

Jennifer viewed the alternating dark and light bands of each chromosomal arm with concern.

“What am I looking for?”

“Superimpose them.”

Her voice was ecstatic as she viewed the overlaid patterns. “Good God. They’re identical.”

“Yep. No deletions, no translocations, no unusual additions. This one can be your mirror image daughter.”

She gave him a radiant grin. “When?”

“Give me a couple of days to get everything in place. I’ll start you on uterine implantation hormones now.”

Jennifer fidgeted, crossing and recrossing her legs. “But ovarian dysgenesis. Won’t they suspect?”

“Not to worry. Some forms of ovarian dysgenesis can be partial. They’ll believe those drugs woke up a live egg.”

She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. “I’ve got all my fingers crossed.”

“In theory your little girl should be perfect. She’d better be. I’ve called in all of my markers.”

8.

Monday, 1 March, 2004

“She’s a little sweetheart. A Pisces. Looks like your baby pictures, Jennifer.” Steve glanced back and forth between the old photos and the infant’s ruddy face. “Damn near identical, I’d say.”

“There’s a likeness, I’ll grant you,” Jennifer said, her cryptic grin hidden behind a hand.

Steve cushioned the baby in one arm, feeding her the formula-filled bottle. “Look, honey. She’s staring.”

“Come on. She’s only a week old. Infants can’t fixate.”

“She smiled at me, Jenn.”

“Your imagination, Steve.”

“You’re grinning. What’s so funny?”

“You, love.”

The baby expelled a lusty burp as Steve patted her back. “Guess you’re right. Got a name picked out yet?”

“Ann Marie. After my grandmom.”

9.

Diary entry, February twenty-third:

Ann Marie’s sixth birthday. Compared my old photos. Likeness is supernatural. All her follow-up physical exams and lab tests have been normal. Professor Rogers is encouraged.

Showed Ann Marie the digital photo printouts. “It’s us, right, Mom?” she asked. Gave me a wink. Grabbed them to show to Steve.

She’s a Daddy’s girl, that’s for sure.

10.

Diary entry, February twenty-third:

Ann Marie's twelve today. Precocious freshman, smart as hell. Skipped a grade. Cognizant, too. Kind of weird how she figures things out. One-ups me sometimes. Example: I was about to explain cloning, but she stopped me with a raised index finger and a grin. "We read about deoxyribonucleic acid in science class, Mom."

I had dreaded the inevitable biology lesson, but Ann Marie showed only clinical interest. "Our secret," I cautioned her. "Your Dad can't ever know. He'd feel, well, you know, inadequate."

"Inadequate. Good word. Like how he's not my biological father, right?" She gave me an odd little smile. "don't worry, Mom. Dad won't hear a word from me."

She's off to Disneyland. Birthday present. Dad and daughter. Complete acceptance by Steve. Things are working out. Dr. Rogers says no additional tests necessary. He will keep in touch.

11.

Diary entry, February twenty-third:

Ann Marie's eighteen today. Steve surprised her with a new Chevy Corvette. Mom Jennifer drives a six year-old Toyota Camry. They went out to dinner and a movie last night. I couldn't go, had a damn seminar. Why do I feel left out? Am I getting a little paranoid? Professor Rogers says not to worry.

12.

Diary entry, February twenty-third:

She's twenty-three. Wears her hair in bangs, like mine. Clothing selection too. We're identical twins except for the age difference.

Going for her Master's degree in computer technology. Absorbed my old class notes in a day. Still living at home. No boyfriends. "My career comes first, Mom." The odd grin again.

Guess that's the trend of the times. Doesn't bother my jerk husband at all. He just falls all over her. Taking her out dancing for her birthday. I turned down the invite, faked a headache. Professor Rogers is retired, living in Hawaii. His E-mail expressed some concern. Wants more frequent updates.

13.

Diary entry, February twenty-third:

My clone rival is twenty-four. I'm convinced the little slut can read my mind. Something with the genetics? One of Professor Rogers's unknowns? He agrees. Says there are recorded cases of precognition between identical twins. Something the chromosomal mapping might not have revealed. He'll fly back next week to do some psych profiling. Be patient, he says.

Patience, my ass. I know what's going on. I'm forty-eight and starting to show it. Steve's fifty. Mid-life crisis. My nemesis is me at age twenty-four. Steve is reliving our romance. And the bitch is encouraging him. I've loaded Steve's Beretta 9mm automatic. Big gun, but I can handle it.

I'm destroying this diary now. Don't want Professor Rogers to get in any trouble.

14.

Homicide Detective Patrick Riley shuffled paperwork, lit a cigarette and exhaled a cloud of tobacco combustion byproducts. He squinted a dubious eye. "You're claiming self defense, Miss Moeller?"

Ann Marie lowered her eyes, a coy grin flickering across her face. "I know my Mom, sir. We would think alike, sometimes, and we were always very close. Closer than close."

Riley scribbled on a note pad. "You knew?"

"She pulled the gun on me, Detective. Good thing I'd bought a Lady Colt a year ago when I first felt the vibes."

The cop scratched his scalp in puzzlement. "The vibes? Well, yeah. You were lucky. She missed you but winged your Dad."

Ann Marie gave him a slow, furtive grin. "Lucky I'd been practicing, right, Detective Riley?"

He riffled the stack of reports on his desk top. "I can't hold you, Miss Moeller. But I might have more questions . . ."

She gave Steve an enigmatic wink and stood up. “Let’s get outta here, love, before Detective Riley changes his mind. We’ve got places to go, things to see and do.”

Steve nodded, gave the bandage over the gunshot wound in his shoulder a self-conscious stroke.

“It’ll be like old times, sweetie,” Ann Marie whispered. “Remember when I was Jennifer?”

The End