

## IN UTERO

A ponytail pulled back Lila's ebony hair from the layer of dried sweat still covering her face. She hadn't waited to rinse off after her jog around the synthetic lake. Instead, she began the celebration of her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday by logging onto the Birth Control Commission website. With her icon hovering over the *send* button on the computer screen, she fought needles of anxiety pressing against her body with the determination she had gathered during her run.

She had been waiting for this day her entire life. As a girl, she put the collars of t-shirts around her forehead. With the soft material draping down her back, she pretended to walk down the aisle next to her Prince Charming. Afterwards, she wheeled her little baby dolls around in miniature strollers pretending to coax them to sleep. At the height of her maternal fantasies, she slept with 15 baby dolls spread around her and her doll husband, Daredevil Dirk.

Lila closed her eyes and told God she knew whatever happened was for the best but could the best, pretty please, include her winning what she really wanted? Amen. Click. Done.

The phone call arrived a month later.

Their living room wall lit up in colors as the telephone system danced its pattern to one of her favorite songs.

“Hello?” The patterns and music ceased, replaced by a stereo-cast voice. “Lila Swansen?” the voice wearily said.

“Yes? Who’s calling?”

“This is Shelly Bates from the Birth Control Commission.”

Even as innocent little Lila had dreamed her dreams of romance, things had started to change. Resources, long taken for granted, dwindled under the weight of unrestricted population growth.

Lila flipped off the call screening button, set to black, to protect them from telemarketers and a holographic image appeared in the staging area. A woman with graying brown hair raised into a severe bun, like an evil little crown, sat before Lila behind a desk strewn with various sized piles of paper.

“Yes Ms. Bates, how are you?” Lila stood straighter, widening her mint-colored eyes, feeling like she’d been called to the principal’s office and absently pulled down the sides of her long, jet-black hair.

Pre-teen Lila’s hopes had dried up with the lakes and rivers as desperate people fought to satiate their thirst. The global economy had plunged into a terrifying recession as mobs of hungry and scared people overran the streets with their anger.

The solution was a global policy regulating new live births by the United Nation’s Birth Control Commission.

“I’m very well, Ms. Swansen, thank you. Ms. Swansen you’ve been selected to compete for the privilege of having your own child.”

In a newly created ceremony called Renewal, before their first menstrual cycle, doctors now surgically altered all girls to be sterile.

All births now required an application process through the BCC that couldn’t begin until after a woman turned 25. Requirements to reverse sterilization were strict. First, a couple had to prove their lives were stable through an application process. Then, the woman needed to be selected to compete. If any of these things didn’t happen, her uterus would remain forever empty.

“Woooooo!” Lila jumped up and down, both fists bobbing over her head. Shelly Bates smiled and waited for Lila to finish her happy dance.

“Great! Now what happens?” Lila asked.

“We’ll be emailing you the details later today. If you have any questions, please respond to the email and we’ll try to answer within 24 hours. Sometimes 48. Anything else?” The woman’s brown eyes appeared vacant above her little smile. Only 3 out of 10 women were given the opportunity to compete to have a baby. Lila briefly wondered if the woman making the call had competed, if she had been a winner.

If the human race was to survive, the politicians wanted to ensure only the best of humanity would be genetically reproduced and there would be less of a drain on the entitlement system. To ensure genetic diversity, the selection process included geographic areas around the world. The people accepted this because they felt like they still had a say in their destiny. Each time the BCC chose 10 women to compete, it was the people who chose the actual winner.

“No, perfect! Thank you so much!”

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Lila met Dante in college. He had been the one who wasn't getting wasted at the fraternity party where her pudgy cousin had dragged her.

“Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!” Various sized “brothers” formed a canopy of peer pressure around girls who desired their attention more than their self-respect. Alcohol was the common denominator connecting this blood line. Lila had stood there, watching her cousin fill her stomach with the thunderous contents of shot glasses and beer bong. That morning Lila had woken up feeling sad and alone. That had probably inspired her decision to accompany her cousin here, knowing it was not her scene.

Lila detached herself from the wall at one point and slowly sidled up to her cousin, “Please Haley,” and tried to gracefully steer her flaccid cousin away from the deluge, only to be condemned as a party pooper.

Lila had noticed Dante watching her from across the room as she attempted to look interested in the various photographs of past “brothers” hanging along the walls. Detaching himself from a group, he came over, brown puppy eyes melting into concern. “Hey, you look lost. Are you okay?” She had smiled politely and given him an answer

short enough to communicate she wasn't interested in forming one of the dog piles of romance littered across various corners of the house.

Not to be thwarted, he offered her a soda and commented on the band, distinguishing her as an independent thinker, proudly displayed on her t-shirt. Impressed he had ventured far enough from the mainstream to have heard of her favorite band, she accepted the soda and later he helped carry her cousin back to their dorms.

That was seven years ago. They married four years later and started to dream the impossible: creating a family of their own.

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"You know...you could still back out. You don't have to do this." Dante rubbed Lila's feet. The glow from the virtual fireplace sent a kaleidoscope of amber across their living-room. Dante had set their living-room Envirotrol to "soothing" tonight so everything from the smell of cookies baking and the soft background music was calculated to relax them. Lila sighed and leaned farther back into the armrest of her cloud. Her contentment held fast despite the firestorm his statement had unleashed.

"I know it won't be easy but I just don't see how we couldn't win. We're perfect for the whole thing. We're young, successful and super foxy!" She laughed at her lingering fear. It's not that she didn't feel it, she just refused to be bullied by it. "Nothing has been easy for us Dante. That hasn't stopped us yet." Her gaze moved toward the pictures over their mantel. Everyone was there. Just not together. Neither of their families had approved of their marriage. Hers claimed she was too young and needed to create something in her own life before becoming part of something else. His said she was not the right girl for him. His family had had their sights set on combining their family with

his father's childhood friend. A sometimes business partner with an available daughter. Now that the global family dynamic had changed, people didn't marry in their twenties, if at all. Most marriages resembled business mergers with monogamy a thing of the past.

"Well, *you're* super foxy lady!" He laughed. His chestnut eyes reflected the fire and, she imagined, a bit of her love.

"And smart," she added.

"And smart," he agreed.

"And creative," she goaded.

"And creative," he wisely agreed. "And don't forget super humble!" She yelped as his soothing rub pressed into an anguish of tickles. She retaliated by lunging at the spot she knew above his hip. He arched back then threw himself around her like a blanket preventing her from making any moves while he continued his assault on her secret spots.

"Okaaaayyy!" She yelled, "Enough!" He stopped and they both lay laughing, breathing over each other on the carpet. Arm twisted in leg woven by head atop heaving chest. "Okaayyy," she sighed. "It won't," she said softly, catching her breath, "be easy. But we have to try."

"Yeah," he searched for something on their ceiling. "I know."

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The camera crews arrived and started setting up their equipment all around their apartment. Gaffers broke coffee mugs and overturned plants while lighting people rearranged furniture and knocked over pictures. She knew there would be a crew but had no idea there'd be so many of them. Meanwhile, the producers told them to "just act

naturally” like it was totally normal to have two fistfuls of strangers camping out in your apartment and following you everywhere, including your gynecological exam.

“Lila Swansen,” her gynecologist tried to keep focused on the chart but kept glancing over at the camera pointed directly at his face.

“Doctor, please don’t stare at the camera. Pretend we’re not here,” said field producer, Mike? Was it?

“Oh, of course. No problem,” he muttered, put the chart down and threw his head between Lila’s legs. She heard the metal clank of the speculum and swallowed air. He inserted his fingers to clear the way.

Lila leaned back into the examination table and closed her eyes trying not to feel like there were worms making their way into her vagina, like there wasn’t about to be a mining project with workers wearing headlamps scrutinizing every cranny between her legs. She tried to transport herself to a “happy” place. The remote beach where she spent her honeymoon with Dante, one of the last places not governed nor protected by the UN. The little outlaw children who ran around the island in their donated western clothing, smiling their glistening whites. Anywhere where there weren’t FIVE MEN about to participate in something she’d never been crazy about in the first place: an objective look through her private parts.

You know what? Screw her “happy” place! “Mike? Mike, is it?” she called to the producer. “Is this really necessary? Really? Do you ALL have to be in here?” She smacked the side of the table, the impact ripping the thin sterile sheet.

Mike stared at Lila then rolled his eyes. They closed.

“Mrs. Swansen.” He opened them.

“Yes, Mike, call me Lila. I think we’ve surpassed the formal part of our relationship,” Lila said crisply.

“Lila, you agreed to have us do this with you. You want to win, dontcha? Well, that involves us getting a well-rounded story of your life. And this kinda stuff kills it. You want the viewers to empathize with you. You want them to cringe with you, to cry with you, to become you so much that all they want is for you to have that baby.” His press-pass encased in a square plastic case jiggled around on its nylon neck strap as he tried to convince her to let them stay. Jeans and a soiled Dodgers t-shirt completed his media uniform. He ran a hand through a tangle of blond curls and waited.

Her desire to have a child took on her need to be true to herself. If she started allowing these people to participate in the most personal areas of her life, it wasn’t too far from prostituting herself, from performing as a pornographic actress because she sure would have to be acting to pretend like this invasion wasn’t stealing a part of her soul. She had seen the other girls doing it on TV but that had seemed so distant and objective. Now it just felt dirty.

But the idea of never seeing her little baby staring into her eyes, of never holding that warm, squishy body, bitty arms stroking her skin, she couldn’t live with that either.

“Listen Mike,” she closed her eyes as she started to speak, “maybe you could just have one guy in here?” Eyes open now, forcing him to feel her discomfort. “Not all of you need to be monitoring every single scene, right?”

Field producer Mike smiled. “Sure Lila. Come on guys, let’s wait outside. Troy, you can get a wide shot with Lila and Dr. Traipser over here in the corner. Give them



their space.” He held open the door for the other three to make their way out. “Sorry Lila. This can’t be easy.”

“Mike, you have no idea. But thanks.”

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“Hurry, hurry! It’s starting!” Bodies jostled into bodies, cushions and the coffee table. Popcorn flew as people tried to squeeze their areas into spaces that weren’t big enough to accommodate them. The Envirotrol was set to “party” and various colored lights rotated around the room with floating glitter replacing stationary walls.

She hadn’t intended to make this such a spectacle but really there was no way to avoid it. One thing she had never anticipated was how this endeavor would finally unite their families. As elbows bumped into heads, it was smiles that were exchanged instead of tight lip lines. “Mom, can you see?” Lila moved a plant from the coffee table that had somehow survived the commotion from the family melee, giving her mother a clear view of the stage. The media center transformed their sitting spaces into seats in the audience with a front row view of the action. Holographic images of previous episodes set them right into the journeys of the hopeful girls.

Each country had many local broadcasts airing at the same time. The producers, in partnership with the BCC, selected 10 women for each competition. Each episode told the stories of two girls every week. Everyone tuned in to root for their hometown favorite. At the end, the local citizens voted one woman off the show. The winner moved on to the next round, until the final broadcast pitted the last two contenders. If she lost, a girl was never given another opportunity to compete for her own baby.

Lila's heart seemed to be having its own party the way it danced around inside her chest. She took in a long breath trying to settle it down. She'd never been a public person. When she revealed to her family she planned on participating in this program, her mom couldn't see it.

"How can you be serious about this?" her mom had asked. "You get red-faced when you speak to more than three people at a time." Her mom paused. "Not that I'm discouraging you." When her mom said she wasn't doing something, it was usually exactly what she was doing. "I just want you to be realistic, Lila. You'll have an entourage of people hounding you during the entire production." And her mom had been right. Paparazzi flew out of every nook to catch what they hoped the video cameras might miss. Images of her life played out on every e-mag frame in every grocery store check out line in her state, adding suspense and intrigue to an already tense situation. Her only private time was the time she spent in the bathroom and sometimes she'd extend that by as long as she could to hide from the constantly prying eyes.

"Mom." It was more of a sigh than a word. By now it shouldn't have been a surprise that her mother didn't understand her. Yet, it always was.

"I can't picture," she spoke slowly, making sure her mom at least heard the words she was saying, "going through my entire life and never having the chance to teach someone all the things I've learned." The thought choked her and clouded her vision as she thought about all the things she had had to figure out on her own.

Lila wiped at her tears before her mom could detect them and also point out that she was too emotional to attempt something that also required a steel resolve.

“Lila...”

And she, like many daughters throughout time, knew that she would never repeat the mistakes of her own mother, actions that had hurt her deeply whether by intention or misjudgment.

“Mom.” Lila’s tone cut a swath of silence stretching deep between them. “Don’t you remember that this is all I’ve ever wanted?”

She heard her mother expel her breath, raising a silent flag of resignation as she considered the implications of Lila’s reality. In the end, her mother really had no choice but to begrudgingly support Lila’s plan. The way things were today, no one really had any choices.

The room went dark as the opening credits started to roll. A male voice guided their experience, “Ten women.” Images flashed of women engaged in various activities, each more beautiful than the last. Lila registered her face swimming by in a moment pulsating between the beats of her heart. “Ten chances to have their fairy tale dreams come true. But only one will walk away a winner to hold her warm heart against the loving embrace of her baby. And you will choose who it is that was Born to Breed!” A jarring piano crescendo left the moment vibrating in suspense.

Tonight’s broadcast introduced two new women, one of whom was Lila. She briefly closed her eyes while images of her childhood cascaded through the stage. The voice described her impeccably built life as she topped her peers in scholastic and athletic achievement. It spoke of the tragic loss of her father when he was ripped from her life by a faulty circuit in his internal GPS unit. It talked about her moving forward and achieving

a purposeful existence founded on helping others overcome their grief. Everyone in her family was cheering and applauding with the audience while Lila tried to squeeze deeper into her husband's body. Dante's arms wrapped tightly around her as they sank further into their double divan. "Hey," he whispered into her ear, "you're ok. This is great."

She watched images of their life together, laughing, discussing, looking silly during the time they tried to windsurf on their synthetic lake. She felt grateful that the producers liked her enough to make her life look so enjoyable and attractive. She'd seen other broadcasts where the girls weren't as fortunate. Then her segment was over and she felt the floor crumble when the next girl was introduced. She was beautiful. And she was a veterinarian. People loved animals and all she could think about was every person in every living room sitting huddled in their media centers around boxes of tissue, writing letters to this woman about their own dog, Fido or parakeet, Kate. There was no way she could compete against this rock star. Her husband rubbed the back of her head, shushing softly to her, using his cool hands to pull handfuls of her hair off her clammy forehead. She heard the music and knew the segments were over, thank god. She didn't know if she could take any more. Her body felt uncomfortably hot as if she had caught a chill after a bad sunburn. She closed her eyes.

*Oh please please please, God. I want this more than anything I've ever wanted,* she prayed in her head. *If you give this to me, I'll never ask for anything ever again.* She wondered if that was a realistic promise and if God would see right through it. *OK,* she started again, *if you give this to me,* she squeezed her eyes tight, *I'll donate my hair to the cancer people.* She'd always admired those who had made that sacrifice but never had

the guts to chop off her own long locks. *Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll give my most prized possession to help make a sick person's world a better place to be.* She opened her eyes.

The celebrity panel of judges started to discuss the virtues and downfalls of each girl then finally, after their witty repertoire had dwindled, allowed the viewers to get in on the action. A website was announced with the procedure of voting and the rules governing fraud. Lila and Dante's families grew silent as they scrambled onto their selfphones. A series of commercials allowed time for anyone who cared to participate in creating a future world, time to cast their vote.

The show came back and no one moved. No one breathed. Lila gripped her husband's hands, willing herself not to cry or close her eyes. She had to know. No matter how difficult this was going to be, she had to be aware and experience this transition into this most important next part of her life.

The panel started in again, making jokes at the expense of the hopeful girls and then glossing over them with self-righteous compassion. Lila just wanted it to be over. Dante squeezed her tighter.

"OK, everyone let's see who moves on to the final round in our competition." The once very popular actress, Peppy Deluscious, trying to hold on to as much fame as she could in her dwindling years, flashed a once provocative smile at the cameras. She looked down. They all looked down as their personal video monitor revealed the voting results.

"Wow!" Peppy laughed incredulously and looked to her cohorts for validation.

"Holy cow!" aging country star, Chomper Hill corroborated her observation.

"Whooweeee," still popular rap star, DJ Bootie rounded off, leaving the audience unsure if he was expressing sincerity or sarcasm.

Peppy decided to ignore him and addressed Chomper to the right of her swiveling leather recliner. “I can’t believe how close it is.” Her eyelids batted velvet coated lashes.

Chomper leaned forward in his recliner and grabbed the drink sitting in its armrest. “I’ll drink to that!”

DJ Bootie just looked at them and said, “Peppy, do you want to tell the audience who will push out our next fan?”

The actress blinked a couple times and looked at the camera. “I sure will Bootie dear! Ladies and gentleman, it was a close one and thank you for taking the time to help one of these lucky ladies advance to the final vote. The votes were 597, 789 to 597,754. I don’t think it could have been much closer! But the lucky lady is.....”

Time froze. Not a dust mite moved.

“LILA SWANSEN!!!” She shouted and the studio audience exploded with applause, hoots and whistles but Lila didn’t notice because her heart swelled and her own head shot off rockets and she was crying and smiling and there were hands everywhere and she was surrounded by faces all laughing and smiling and crying and all the anxiety she had stored in her heart melted into a river of relief and tears.

“WAIT! BE QUIET! EVERYONE! QUIET!” Dante’s father was shouting and pointing to the stage where Lila could see the panel had started to talk again.

“...and now Lila will join the last contender on our stage next week where the final decision will be made LIVE as to who will be the one who was Born to Breed!”

Peppy Deluscious opened her arms, possibly to welcome a mood of mystery and suspense. Luckily, the show had already done most of the work for her. She winked at the

camera and batted her eyelash extensions, leaving behind a still cute dimple as the room faded to black.

Oh no!!! Lila had gotten what she wanted but now she had to appear live! On stage! On television! In front of millions of people! She started to cry, unsure if they were tears of joy, fear or maybe both.

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Every time Lila forgot to look away, the bright lights above her left black patches in her vision. The audience was darkened anyway, which actually made it easier to stand on stage without feeling like a microscopic, newly discovered life form. But it also made it harder for her to gauge their responses to her performance. She was playing “Lila, the wholesome, sincere girl who would give up a kidney to have a baby.” Yes, she certainly was that girl, at least partially. But right now she was feeling more like “Lila, the incredibly nervous girl who was distracting herself from her shaking hands by pretending to be the person she wished she was.” As opposed to her remaining competitor, Lila watched as she smiled confidently at the panel, giggled at their jokes and flipped her cascading honey locks at the male judges. All while she made the actress feel superior by deferring to her wisdom and star quality in the answers she shot back to the panel’s questions.

This was it. The final round. Both girls stood in front of the panel in their loaned designer gowns radiating all the humility and warmth they could muster. Lila smiled, pretending to enjoy the verbal repartee, pretending to enjoy the attention, pretending like this was the exact place where she wanted to be. She knew her husband was somewhere in the darkened audience. She knew he knew that the baby she desired was the only way

she would ever have exposed her insides to millions of salivating viewers, most of whom just wanted to witness the humiliation she and the other contestant were being put through in the comfort of their Envirotrol controlled living rooms. She tried to focus on the ones who were wishing her well though, because she knew they were out there too.

“Lila, what would you do if you found out your baby had some kind of genetic mutation that caused him or her to be developmentally disadvantaged?” aging actress, Penny Deluscious asked, brows twisted by contrived concern.

Lila knew that this question was just for show, designed to see what type of maternal instinct lay within her. She knew after the surgery to implant the fertilized embryo, all types of testing would be done to ensure that the newly formed human being would be free of defects in all ways measurable.

“Well,” Lila formed her face into a thoughtful, sweet expression, batting her large emerald eyes in empathy to the embattled little embryo. She tucked her hair behind her ear before answering. She looked out into the darkened audience and felt her spirit swept away.

“I wouldn’t care,” she said. “Every life form is special and a gift from God. Just because someone isn’t the way you’d hoped they’d be, there is still something amazing and unique within that person. You just have to find it and encourage its development.” She spoke into the darkened audience and when she was done, quite pleased with herself, she looked over, smiling, at the hostess and her heart froze. Peppy’s eyes were shards of ice. She stared at Lila without moving for a second and Lila realized too late what she had done.

Fear clawed into her gut like a vulture ripping raw meat.



God had become a politically incorrect topic, taboo out in the open and for some reason, maybe because she was tired of feeling violated by the process women now had to endure just to have a baby, maybe because she was tired of hiding herself within herself, who knows, Lila stepped out of character and into her own naked skin.

For a second, she stood behind her own thoughts and she felt great. In that second, Lila didn't tailor her viewpoint into something acceptable like "the Universe" or "Forces" or whatever the currently popular way to describe something larger than the individual had become. It wasn't like she was a God-freak or anything but a part of her always felt a connection to the old beliefs. And then, that second passed.

"Ok, Lila. Thanks." Big teeth, no warmth, slit eyes darting sideways toward the panel for confirmation of her assessment of this strange little girl who hadn't yet outgrown the Tooth Fairy or the Easter Bunny or God.

"Ok all," DJ Bootie started beat boxing into his microphone to lighten the mood, "the results are in."

After Lila's answer, the audience had grown still, which is a bit scary to think that 5000 people could stop fidgeting, coughing and conversing all at the drop of the word God. But they had.

The numbers weren't even close this time. Everyone must have decided that the most fit mother of the two would be the one who didn't rely on a heavenly ghost to protect her destiny. Lila left the stage feeling like nothing mattered anymore. For months she lived in a stream of tears and wistful sorrow. In between she was numb.

One day the phone rang. No one expected Lila to get it as she sat in the middle of a rerun in their media center. “Hello?” Dante activated the phone system and a woman behind a desk appeared on the staging area.

“Lila Swansen?” she asked, brown hair pulled back in a well managed bun.

Lila raised her head and tried to talk but her words initially jammed. She tried again. “Yes?” hollow, faint, a little raspy.

“Lila, I’m Agent Maxine Krilly from the Birth Control Commission,” she started and her words acted like a cup of warm water on the icy block of Lila’s world. Lila sat up and moved the pillow she was hugging to the side.

“Yes?” she said, loud enough for Agent Krilly hear.

“Ms. Swansen, I’m calling with some bad news.” Here Agent Krilly paused, eyes darting downward. “Well, maybe good news for you anyway.”

“OK?”

“This has never happened before, at least not that I’m aware of. But...are you still interested in having a baby?”

Everything stopped. Nothing existed except the image of this woman, in her khaki suit jacket with the fake white rose attached to her chest. The Agent’s words exploded in Lila’s brain. Streams of thoughts tumbled together waiting to be identified. Lila wanted to tell her how much she regretted what had happened on that stage, how she had replayed her final answer thousands of times in her head, each time altering her words in a way that made her more attractive, more suitable for the audience, so that they chose her instead of the woman who had won. She wanted to tell her that she would do anything. Anything. To take it all back.

“Yes! Of course!” Lila jumped up, silent tears springing to her eyes.

“Well, the first place winner was unable to perform her function as an embryonic host. As a result, we had to eliminate the initial results and award reversal to the runner up in your regional selection program. I am happy to inform you that you have been granted the right to the full reversal of your reproductive sterility surgery.”

Lila took a breath in but didn't dare breathe out in case she again did something to knock the world out of balance. What did that mean? The woman saw Lila's frozen expression, her brows jammed together in confusion, the tears rolling helplessly down her cheeks.

“That means she was unable to conceive after her reversal surgery and after many attempts, the doctors finally determined none of her eggs were viable.”

Lila felt Dante's arms slide around her from behind. He lifted her off the couch and she held him tight, closing her eyes. If this was a dream, she didn't want to wake up. He kissed her face and they wrapped each other in silence.

Later, they sat by themselves. They discussed the news without a desire to share it yet with others. They both felt they had given enough of themselves for now and too soon, they would again be in the spotlight.

“It didn't matter, did it?” She said.

“What?” He asked, rubbing her newly exposed white neck.

“It didn't matter that I stepped outside the lines. It didn't matter that I stopped playing my part. It all happened the way it was supposed to anyway,” she said biting at her lower lip.

He threw himself around her like a bear holding onto his trophy, nuzzling his words into her neck. “It would appear so. I guess, only God knows.”