

## No. 2 Pencil

“New neighbors,” said my husband Hank, “and he looks like a frog.”

“Hank,” I said. “What kind of thing is that to say?”

“Max,” said the new neighbor the next day when I took the dog out after walk, and Hank was right. Our new neighbor Max looked like a frog-eyed gargoyle on an institutional cornice. It was as if he had been hanging out at the gate to tell me that he had just won the state lottery with a two-dollar ticket. I had difficulty not staring at his teeth which were shiny and the size and shape of computer keys.

“Max and Georgette,” he said nodding at the woman on the porch. Georgette had a face that had a tragic gecko look.

“Gee,” she said, “call me Gee.”

So our new neighbors, Max and Gee. Saturday I took over my seed cake on one of my good green plates and formally welcomed them to the neighborhood. Max, it seems, was an MIT computer geek and Gee was an artist.

They had a cat, Asimov, a wiry calico.

They had a child too. Not really a child. More like a mannequin, life-sized and armless. He sat in the living room on an armature. He was the size of a three-year-old and had electrodes attached to his ear, his scalp, his chest and his tiny little penis, which was a No. 2 pencil sharpened down to its eraser. The electrodes were connected to wires wrapped around his body at odd angles and ended in plugs. In the middle of the little boy’s forehead was a spider of sorts. A tarantella made of black pipe cleaners and a hairball the size of my fist.

The spider seemed fake, but the child seemed oddly real even though it was just plaster. “Meet Isaac,” Gee said formally when she caught me looking over her shoulder. She seemed to expect me to shake hands with the little fellow, but, of course, I couldn’t because he had no arms, just large keyholes in the shoulder where his limbs would fit. I wondered if I should pick him up and hug him. “I made the spider from the hair of my old dog Frank,” said Gee. “I’d been saving it since I was sixteen—couldn’t decide what else to do with it.” She took the cake. They were still unpacking so I left.

For the next three or four weeks, we didn’t see them. Their gray Hondas wheeled in and out at like mechanical rats. By the time I waved, they were inside. “Not very sociable,” I said to Hank.

Then I got a picture postcard with Isaac, the child-mannequin on it. It read: “Dear Betts, for weeks, I’ve tried to think of a proper way to thank you for the seedcake you brought us on the occasion of our leaving MIT and coming here to Easton. It was the oddest thing. When I looked at it the next morning, it seemed to have a face which looked like Isaac. I couldn’t eat it, seemed like cannibalism. So I put it out back. You simply must come see it. It’s grown a beard. Gee.”

I went over, but no one answered the door. I heard weird wails though. It sounded like Asimov the calico cat had gone into heat.

When Hank got home from the Crayola Factory, I showed him the postcard. Hank’s a Crayola chemist.

“Let me look at that picture,” said Hank, reaching for a beer instead. “Weird kid, no arms. She’s probably trying to be neighborly.”

So I decided to go over again. I made Hank come with me. When we got to the door, we could hear Asimov in heat. No, the howls seemed more like a child screaming. I wondered if anyone could hear our knocking, but finally Gee came to the door.

“Oh, isn’t that awful,” she said. “Max is trying to shut him up, but he just keeps crying.”

“Well,” said Hank, staring into the living room at Max down on his knees fiddling with Isaac’s wires, “when we had babies, we just unplugged them.”

“We did not,” I said, jabbing him in the shoulder, but Gee didn’t seem to notice. Hank handed her the six-pack he had grabbed on the way out of the door, and she directed us through the house to the backyard where four plastic chairs looked like Jackson Pollack had attacked them with melted crayons. “My kind of chair,” said Hank.

We sat watching Asimov slinking through the grass growing from a green plate while Gee went to get Max who evidently was not the social type.

“That’s odd,” I said, “it looks like the green plate I brought the seed cake on. Is that the beard she’s talking about?”

“Dunno,” said Hank. “It’s the cat that seems odd to me—meowing like that.”

“Him’s a her,” I said. “Asimov’s a calico. All calicos are female—and she must have some Siamese with a howl like that.”

“Maybe the kid’s in heat too,” said Hank.

The baby was still yowling in the background when Max appeared. “We’re having a hell of a time with Isaac,” he said, gulping the beer Hank handed him. “For a whole week now, I’ve been trying to hook up a motion sensor so that Isaac cries when the cat comes near him. Gee wants Isaac to be allergic to cats, but the problem is that instead of sneezing, he cries. A kid goes by on a skateboard, he cries. A car passes. He cries. Someone comes to the door. He cries. Gee got so upset when she pulled into the garage yesterday; she could hear him before she got out of the car. She says I should have made him so he cries like that, but I can’t shut him up. That’s what I have been trying to do. His circuits are so small, it’s so difficult.”

“Oh, I know. It happened to us when our Jenny was eleven months old. She got a bladder infection, but she was too small for a catheter,” I said.

Isaac was whimpering now, but he hadn’t stopped.

“We used to spank Jenny when she bawled like that,” Hank said. “Not hard. Just a quick slap when she kept whining and we thought we would go crazy.”

Max and Gee looked at Hank as if he had said something awful.

“Oh, we couldn’t hit Isaac,” said Gee. “It’s so traumatic for a child, and with his delicate constitution. . . .”

“You know anything about computers,” Max asked Hank.

“A little—e-mail, e-bay, e-stuff. User not abuser, if you know the distinction. Our son Henry’s the hacker.”

Before Hank could launch into his Hank Junior stories, Max said, “Well, I started using a computer before I could talk. I thought I’d have no problem having a child, but Isaac has become such a problem. I suspect I made a wrong decision when I decided to

go Intel. Anyway, I thought it would be easier if Isaac were autistic. That's what I said to Gee. An autistic kid is a lot more predictable than a kid with allergies. You know what an autistic kid wants. You just have to program him, and he's happy doing the same old thing over and over. You can leave him home on vacations, and he won't notice you're not there."

"But allergies," Max continued, "if Isaac has allergies, you never know what will happen when we take him to a Chinese restaurant. They may say that they are not using peanut oil, and the next thing you know, Isaac is lying on the floor in anaphylactic shock."

"But, Max," said Gee, "an autistic kid isn't a real person He's a PC. So he can sit down and play Rachmaninoff without a mistake after he has heard it once, but there is something so predictable about it. I want a real child."

"Gee, I hear what you're saying. It's just that I am having one hell of a time with the kind of kid we've made. He's enraged by everything. It started out with that allergy to the cat that made him sneeze his arms off, and now he howls at everything that moves. I'm ready to wring his goddam neck."

"Max, Isaac can hear you."

"How many times do I have to tell you that he won't say *goddam*. There's a firewall for objectionable language."

"Oh, Max, I told you not to program that in. I want a real child, one that might say *goddam* once in a while and you have to wash out his mouth. I certainly don't want an autistic child who can't say *goddam*," said Gee. And then to us, "Max is having a little trouble getting Isaac sorted out emotionally."

“We’ll be a lot better off without all this emo-stuff,” said Max. “I would have been perfectly happy with an idiot savant. I could have programmed an idiot savant . . . easy.”

“Max, we’ve been through this a thousand times,” said Gee. “You’re the scientist and I’m the artist. You design the inside and I the out, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have some say about the inside.”

Max stomped back in the house.

Gee turned to me. “I mean Max, I love the man, but he probably is a bit autistic himself. The way he gets so upset when his programming doesn’t quite work out. Max just doesn’t get why I want the kid to have an emotional life. Max doesn’t have normal emotions. He’s a good enough lover, but he doesn’t have normal emotions. Like now. Just walking back in the house without saying anything. No social graces. No ‘excuse me.’ That’s why he doesn’t think Isaac needs emotions. Max doesn’t think like Isaac. But Isaac is only three, and he has to stop howling so that he can talk.”

“I didn’t know Isaac could talk,” I said.

“Well, that’s the thing,” said Gee. “He doesn’t talk around strangers.”

“I’m a bit confused,” said Hank.

Hank likes to play the confused skeptic. “I thought Max was programming Isaac to be allergic to cats, or at least to cry when he sensed a cat was in the vicinity. I thought it was going to be like one of those Hoot Owls you can buy in a Lillian Carter catalogue, one that senses motion—it swivels its head and hoots if a squirrel or a crow comes in the vicinity.”

“Yes, that’s what Max was going to do,” said Gee.

“But now you’re saying that Isaac is really more like an autistic child, not wanting anything to move. Isn’t that what an autistic child is, one of those *don’t-move-my-cheese* kids.”

“Oh, my god,” said Gee. “You’re right. That’s it. Max must have intentionally mis-wired him. I wanted allergy, and he wanted autism. Max, come here.”

Max ambled back out. “Max, you wired Isaac for autism instead of allergy.”

“Exactly,” said Max.

“What?” said Gee.

“Exactly,” said Max. “That’s what seems to have happened.”

“What do you mean *seems to have happened*? You did it on purpose.”

“No,” said Max. “It just happened, and I am having a hell of time shutting it down.”

“I understand,” said Hank, “You started out wiring Isaac so that he would act like a kid with a simple cat allergy, but you ended up with a kid that cries all the time. He’s like one of those plastic dog sensors you put on your porch that barks anytime anything goes by.”

“Max, we don’t want a kid with autism. We want a kid who had a minor defect, like a goose down allergy, and now we have got this thing with major problems. We can’t have him.”

“But Gee,” said Max, “you’re the one that’s always going on about how awful it is, all of those sonograms and all those women in India and China and Korea aborting their girls.”

“Max, this is different. Isaac is not a girl. If Isaac had Downs, we’d abort him. If he had sickle-cell anemia, we’d abort him. If he had schizophrenia, we’d abort him. Autism is serious. It’s really serious. If all he is going to do is scream any time anything comes near, we have to abort him.”

I raised my eyebrow at Hank. Time for us to get out of here. Hank wasn’t looking at me. He wanted to stay.

“Well,” Hank says, in his one-parent-to-another mode, “some kids are screamers and some aren’t. Now our Hank Junior kept us awake for the first year of his little life. Screamed all night. Didn’t sleep through until he was two. I was just kidding about the unplugging bit. It *is* pretty awful, but I think you just have to accept what’s given you. Like Emma’s mother used to tell us, God wouldn’t have given you Henry Junior if he didn’t think you could handle him.”

“We don’t acknowledge a higher being,” said Max.

“Actually, neither do we,” I said. “But at the time that Henry Junior didn’t give us a night of sleep, it was tempting.”

“We don’t even accept a Prime Mover,” said Gee.

“Hey,” said Hank, “it’s fine with us. Believe what you want but no need to proselytize. But it’s about time for me to become the Prime Mower and get the grass mowed.”

“Oh, don’t leave,” said Gee. “We get into this argument every day. It’s not really an argument. Anyway, you have to see the beard before you go.” She walked over to the corner of the garden and lifted up my green plate with the grass growing from it.



“See,” she said, “can you believe? I just looked down at the cake when you left, and there was little Isaac’s face in it. The next day he looked a bit older, and by the third day he was sprouting grass. Just like a beard. Well, as I said, I can’t eat it that. So I put it out back. You can’t see the face anymore, but I water it everyday. Asimov seems to think it is a girl cat. He sings to it.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t tell you,” I said, “but Asimov is definitely a girl. And she’s is in heat. That’s why she is yowling. All calicos are females.”

“Are you sure?” said Gee.

“About as sure as I am that . . . that random chance didn’t make her a male,” I said.

“It’s okay,” said Hank. “I thought Asimov was male too.”

“Oh, my god,” said Gee. “Max, Max, what if Isaac is a female too.”

“Can’t be,” said Max. “He has a penis. You made him a penis with that little pencil.”

“I did, but . . .” said Gee, “I just saw it on the Health channel last night. There’s this disease. CAH. Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia. The clitoris is enlarged until it is the size of a penis. It makes people think they have a boy when they really have a girl.”

“Isaac is definitely a boy,” said Max. “Boys are much more likely to be autistic. With the exception of girls like Temple Grandin, it’s boys that are autistic. Maybe that’s the problem. I didn’t take into consideration that Isaac was a boy. I figured, boy, girl—there shouldn’t be any difference to the processor.”

“But there is,” said Gee. “Even a visual artist like me knows there is a difference in the wiring. No wonder he just keeps crying. You are so stupid.” And she began to cry.

“Hormones,” said Max, winking at Hank.

“Isaac doesn’t have hormones,” said Gee.

I raised my eyebrows again, and Hank finally looked at me and nodded it was time to go: “Well, we really do have to get to the yard work if we want get it done before the rain comes, prime the mover, and miles to mow before I sleep.”

“Good to chat with you,” I said.

“Thanks for coming,” said Gee. She was standing with her back to us. She was standing on the green plate in the middle of the seedcake beard. I didn’t ask her if I could have it back.

We didn’t see much of them for the next several months, just the Hondas skittering in and out. Eventually, we couldn’t hear the crying either—even when we left our windows open at night. “Well,” said Hank, rolling over onto me, “sounds like Max figured out how to cut the circuits.”

“Thank the God they don’t acknowledge,” I said. “I’ve always had trouble making love when a kid is screaming. They probably do too.”

One morning in August, we noticed a moving van outside their house. Out came all sorts of furniture and gadgets we hadn’t noticed were there. A six-pencil sharpener? A one-hamburger meat grinder? Of course, Max and Gee didn’t say goodbye. That afternoon we noticed Isaac upside down in the garbage can on the curb.

“Maybe we should adopt him,” I said to Hank.

“I don’t think I want to go through that again,” said Hank and made an amphibian grimace.

“Go through what?”

Hank did a double grimace. “You know, computer geek.”

“Junior wasn’t a computer.”

“Hmmm,” said Hank.

“Oh well,” I said, “must just be that *now or never, getting close to menopause* feeling. But I am going over to their backyard to see if I can find my green plate. Must be somewhere under that grassy beard,” and I smiled a big smiley-face icon smile, or at least as big as my mouth could make.