

The Oliver Act

The fizz of beer, bubbles tickling ice cubes. The spiciness of ginger, lime prickling under my tongue. The chill of a copper mug, fingertips hydroplaning over condensation. A Moscow Mule.

Cold, on the back of my neck.

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“Because Gingers are going extinct,” I answered. “You’re the geneticist; you should know that.”

Dr. Kim smiled but waited for more.

So it was vulnerability he wanted. Fine.

“I’m 37,” I sighed, making a tick-tick gesture. “No guy and no itch to find one. A sperm donor is blecchh and adoption too chancy. That leaves this.”

“Why yourself?”

I flipped my red hair again. “It’s a unique genetic legacy. They say it dates back precisely thirty-to-eighty thousand years ago. Us mutants gotta look out for each other.”

Dr. Kim nodded and browsed my file. “No major medical conditions; good.” His eyes lingered on my x-rays. “These are spiral fractures on your arms.”

“They’re old.”

“I can see that.” He closed the folder. “Will you require a surrogate?”

I shook my head. I mean, what was the point of being a woman if you didn’t put the bits to work at least once in your lifetime? I wanted the whole experience. Starting with keeping the miracle secret.

I sure as hockey sticks wasn’t telling him that, though.

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“These two psychologists wrote a list of questions guaranteed to make you fall in love,” my date said, biting a martini olive. “Probably a crock, but hey, it’s the era of working smarter, not harder.”

I was on my second Moscow Mule - enough to make me amenable to this ill-advised endeavour.

He found the questions on his phone as I leaned in. They were fine at first, your standard ice-breaker stuff. I answered with my signature style, but soon they started to annoy me.

“I wouldn’t change anything about the way I was raised,” I said. “Grinding poverty builds character. I’ve been a go-getter from the get-go and wouldn’t trade that for anything. Seriously, what’s the use of regrets?”

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Two men left Dr. Kim’s office, trailed by a woman I assumed was their surrogate. Another couple came in after them, the woman weeping into a fabric hanky. I didn’t know they made those anymore. I offered them pieces of pumpkin taffy, a local treat which I’d just discovered.

“First time in Korea?” I asked. Off some vague memory of a movie about India where they crouched down to show respect, I settled at her feet.

“It is,” her husband answered in delicate R.P. “There are fewer places every year that allow this, and even fewer with world-class laboratories.”

“Today’s P-day for me. This girl is going home preppers!”

“This is our consultation,” the woman said. “I do hope he doesn’t fault our reasons.”

“Care to share?”

She pressed the kerchief to her mouth, and her husband comforted her.

“We lost ours,” he said. “Vincent. Four years old.”

“I’m so sorry.” I took her hand. “Wait - was it anything that won’t pass screening? Dr. Kim refused a couple last week, because SIDS has a genetic component. Too risky, he thought.”

“No,” he said. “Swimming pool.”

“Oh. Oh my, I don’t know what to say.” I was still a moment. “It is something, though, isn’t it? I mean, stop and think – no one else in history’s had a chance to heal this way. What were the chances of us being alive in this century, and be able to do stuff like this?”

“Small chances,” the man said.

“It’s our hope this can be healing,” she managed a smile. “We can carry on with him in some way.”

The nurse appeared. “Miss Butter? We’re ready for you.”

“Let’s exchange numbers,” I said to my new friend. “We’re an exclusive club, aren’t we? We’re gonna write the book on this experience, literally. Us pioneers gotta look out for each other.”

“Gul and Ari Agarwal. But I think P-day isn’t a very good name. C-day is better.”

I hugged her tightly. “C-day it is.”

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I straighten my jacket for the umpteenth time. It’s not every day you appear in front of the United Nations General Assembly, so you dress to the nines. My hand finds my hair. When Gul’s jet-black mane went grey, they called it salt-and-pepper, but there’s no spice term for ginger hair that’s lost its lustre.

Victor Agarwal’s bouncing knee rattles my seat. If his parents were here, he might not be so nervous, but I understand why they would refuse. The lights and preternatural hush don’t intimidate me, though. I’m a woman of a certain age, and one of its few compensations is that we speak our minds. They summon me.

“For Ollie,” I say. “I love you.”

“For Ollie. I love you too, Miss Butter.”

Chair scraping forward. I feel the microphone before I hear it, already amplifying my breath.

“Identify yourself,” is the first question.

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Heat, melting the Canadian-winter-induced tension in my neck. Humidity eddying in the wake of my limbs. The ache in my arms dissipating. The sickening thud I always seemed to wake up with, also dissolving.

“I am Erin.”

I was doing prenatal stretches in jungle temperatures. Hot yoga meant pricier gym fees, but totally worth it.

“I am Erin. Ethnicity: freckled. Origin: right side of the tracks, wrong side of the bed. Creed: Syncretist. Sex: female. Gender: female. Sexual Preference: At arms’ length. Destination: Healing. I love myself, acknowledge myself, support myself, heal myself. L.A.S.H.”

I didn’t say this out loud, of course, not in public. At home I repeated myself for the baby bump. I love you, acknowledge you, support you. . . well, you shouldn’t need healing; you haven’t been traumatized yet. I can’t stop it from happening eventually, but you won’t have to wait until *your* 30s, baby, to figure out how to cope. I’ll teach you.

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“Erin Butter,” I echo into the chamber. “I own an all-female finance company. We invest, manage portfolios, consult, and provide financial literacy education to underserved communities. For the past five years, I’ve also served on the board of Citizens for Cloning Regulation, and I’m here to support the Oliver Act.”

Plain facts. Even I know when to rein in the style.

“Tell the panel about your connection with the Oliver Act.”

"The proposed legislation was named after my foster son, who committed suicide at the age of 15."

"This panel gives you its condolences."

Bizarrely, I'm not even sad, not right now. Nor angry exactly. Just blazing.

"Weren't you also a founding member of the Parents of Cloned Children's Interests? POCCI? Awkward acronym, that."

Ah, different days, different me.

"That's correct."

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"Second set of questions now," my date said. "If I could ask a crystal ball anything, it would be . . . oh, too many! Who was Jack the Ripper? Did D.B. Cooper survive? What happened at Dyatlov pass?"

I giggled uncontrollably. "Seriously? You get a crystal ball, and those are your most pressing concerns?"

"You'd prefer something more existential?"

"More like, why deprive the world of wonder? If we answered all those questions, what would be left to figure out?"

"Okay, so what would you ask?"

I clasped my hands behind my neck. So much air conditioning! It made my arms ache.

"Does it get better?" I finally murmured.

A small sound like a wheeze. He reached out and drew me to the crook of his arm.

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"Does it ever get easier?" Olivia Randall sobbed.

I shifted my 5-year-old daughter off my hip. I put my arms around the newest member of my clone-parent inner circle.

“Yes, it does. You’ll adjust. Trust me, I leaned a lot on my friend Gul Agarwal during Lasha’s first years. Here, I’ll show you a hack. A newborn’s arm wants to curl up tight, so work your fingers into the sleeve like this” - I burrowed into the sleeper - “pull that little fist through, and - sproing! Little arm bounces back, but with sleeve on. Gul taught me that.”

Olivia repeated the maneuver on Ollie’s other arm.

“I can’t believe it. Something so simple.”

I watched her swaddle her son. “I’m glad Dr. Kim put you in touch with our group. We used to be very private, but now that attitudes are relaxing . . .”

“Well, he’s the O.G. Our surrogate vowed never to work for an American company again. You wouldn’t believe the stories she told!”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, I might.”

Out on the deck, Ollie finally stopped fussing. His newborn fragrance mingled with the sharpness of the autumn leaves Lasha was rustling in. Her silken red tresses, pulled into a jaunty ponytail, blended with the russet maples and copper oaks.

“So what’s your story, Olivia? You have a hysterectomy or something?”

“Why? Oh – you wonder why I didn’t carry Ollie myself?”

“Not to pry of course.”

“It just seemed unnatural.” Her rum-and-Coke tinkled. “He’s my father’s DNA.”

“Okay, yeah, I can see that.”

She glanced my way. “Do you think that’s weird?”

I snickered. “What’s weird anymore? Lasha isn’t me, isn’t my twin sister, she’s something else again. Dr. Kim stressed that over and over; these babies are a new category of relative altogether.”

“He did stress that. . . but, do you consider yourself a mother?”

Lasha’s first cry, piercing my ears in the delivery room. “Of course.”

Olivia went inside and returned with a photo of a kindly-looking man.

“We were very close. After he passed, I was devastated. Then I heard that the decriminalization movement was gaining traction in North America, and I was like, that’s it! That’s how I can cope. I can keep a bit of Dad alive.”

I patted Ollie’s bottom. “I’m telling you, I can never get over it. The swathes of existence that we have access to, our generation? The first one. We’re privileged.”

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The muffled stillness of snow. Birchwood smoke rich in my nostrils. The whoop of youngsters bursting from my sauna to roll in the snow. Victor and his little sister calling Canadians crazy; Lasha and Ollie calling him a wuss. In other words, a perfect C-day.

For their first year as official teenagers, only our core group - the Agarwals and the Randalls – showed up to the celebration. A diverse crew, but with one thing in common: Everyone *loved* Lasha.

Pre-partum therapy and post-partum study of gentle parenting had paid its dividends. My girl could hold her own in conversation with adults. She actually loved school - for its clubs and extracurriculars. I tried not to tie her sense of worth to grades, but she managed ok.

And we were partners in crime! We re-wrote the lyrics to “I’m my own Grandpa” in Ollie’s honour, putting everyone in stitches. Later, immersed in the aroma of Gul’s curries, I stared out the bay windows to admire the fine young adults our clone babies were becoming.

Until the conversation came to the birds and the bees. I rambled something about the spiritual connection between soulmates, only to be rewarded with howls of laughter.

“Miss Butter!” Victor was holding his stomach. “What *was* that?”

I looked pleadingly at the four adults, who were no help at all.

My little carrot-top picked herself off the floor and glanced me up and down. “How come you never have boyfriends, Mom? Are you ace?”

“I don’t know. I think I would probably be into guys, if only I liked any of them.”

Each small body fell back on the floor laughing again. Crisis averted, at least for now. There’s no law against being honest in style.

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“You secretly gave birth to a cloned baby yourself, Miss Butter,” says the wall of suits.

“And I paid for said pregnancy by getting fired. Maternity leave is impossible in the equity universe, apparently.”

“Isn’t it rather hypocritical of you to be here, then?”

“On the contrary, I have an insider’s perspective.”

“Do you regret your decision?”

My eyes flick to the other side of the room.

“Not for a nanosecond,” I reply without hesitation. “But I’ve seen regrettable things - surrogates exploited, prospective parents lied to, upsold and overcharged. Harassed, even. Worst of all, I’ve witnessed firsthand the unique challenges these children face. It takes a toll on them that no one imagined.”

“Do you believe that reproductive rights are within the purview of the state to limit?”

Oh boy.

“Cloning is simply not in the best interests of the child,” I declare. “Especially when the DNA is from a deceased individual. End of story.”

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“Oh Victor, how did it come to this?”

The 16-year-old's body was a bag of bones under the hospital sheet. The skin of his face was stretched taut over his skull, but I kissed his forehead anyway.

"How did you get in?" he rasped. "I want to be left alone."

"No can do. We're an exclusive club. We gotta look out for each other."

He thrashed as much as his weakened state would allow. "I don't want to be a member of your stinking club! I didn't ask to be born! My brother – his name was Vincent, you know what that means? It means 'conqueror.' And what does Victor mean, hmm?"

"What of it? Ollie was named after his grandfather, and—"

"I only exist because they wanted a replacement. A replacement! I don't exist for *me*."

"Not true! You made Gul and Ari the happiest parents ever. They love *you*."

"I don't know who I am! Am I my dead brother, some sort of lych? A leftover, recycled soul?"

"I'm no expert, but where you come from, isn't everyone a recycled soul?"

"You'll never understand." He turned away.

I dragged a chair next to the bed.

"You share your brother's DNA, but you are not him. Worst case scenario, that makes you a twin. Nobody bothers whether twins have different souls. Or maybe they do, some people find twins creepy. What do I know. The point is, why should you bother?"

Tears trickled down his temples and into his hairline. I struggled to decide which mix of style and honesty was clinically indicated here.

"Not many people know this, but I was into drugs as a teenager too. Maybe I can't ever understand, but I remember how rock bottom felt when my skinny butt landed on it. And it was skinny at the time; you've seen photos." I took his hand. He let me. "Healing *is* possible. And I'm not leaving your side until you're on the way to yours."

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“There’s nothing I can arrest them for,” said the police officer.

“They’re his parents!” I half-screamed. “They can’t kick him out of the house until he’s 18, no matter how different from her father he is.”

“Legally speaking, they’re not his ‘parents.’ There’s just no consensus on the status of children in this situation.”

“Status? Situation? Ollie’s a helpless child, rejected by his own blood, how much consensus does anyone need?”

“The boy wasn’t conceived of Olivia Randall’s body and was born in South Korea to a woman we have no information on. DNA testing won’t help. No official adoption papers, at least none that the government recognizes. People who went through underground channels in the old days aren’t high priority for lawmakers.”

I trembled. “Are you telling me that an irresponsible couple can get buyer’s remorse, abandon a 12-year-old boy, and there’s nothing you can do?”

The officer rubbed his eyes. “I can refer you to his social worker. He’ll need fostering.”

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Victor holds my hand while Lasha testifies.

“Ms. Butter, what are your reasons for opposing the Oliver Act?”

“For starters, if this bill had been international law 25 years ago, I would never have been born.”

There she sits, wearing the salwar kameez she bought years ago during one of our vacations at the Agarwals’ home in Gujarat. I’d be worried about cultural appropriation, but she makes it work. She always could command a room, that girl of mine, with her gleaming smile and sparkling eyes. And her bleached-blond hair.

She discusses hundreds of women and couples - clients of Dr. Kim and others. She regales the wall of suits with tales of happy families whose decision to clone worked out

blissfully well. She expiates on countless individuals who, for myriad reasons, had no other way of begetting actual **descendants**. They now have hope! Her hands wave, her face transports. Those debate club trophies weren't in vain.

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"I'm tired of these questions," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"They're getting juicier," my date said, showing me his screen. "What's something you've always dreamed of doing but haven't done yet?"

Why are men so warm? Women supposedly have the extra layer of fat, but it's dudes who have the inner furnace. My neck melted against his toasty chest.

"Me?" he said. "Honestly, not a thing. The only item on my to-do list was to answer these questions with you. I've seized the day. Like you said, no regrets."

"There is one thing, maybe. I've never told anyone."

"I'm all ears."

His lips were touching the part in my hair.

"I heard about this Korean scientist, he'll clone a baby for you."

A puff of breath rustled my scalp. "Clone a baby? Like who?"

"Like me."

"Huh?"

"I want to clone myself. Like a second chance, you know? I wonder sometimes what kind of a person I might be if . . . things had been different. I'm ok now because I can afford therapy, but what would a 'me' look like that wasn't crippled, does that make sense? Because I would know, right? If she were me, I would know exactly what to say to her, exactly what she needed to hear. I could be the exact kind of mother she needed, and she could turn out better. Oh god, how could she turn out, if she weren't. . . me."

Motionlessness. The susurrations of classy bar patrons on the periphery. Cold on the back of my neck as he broke embrace to reach for his glass.

"I think I need another olive," he said, "and another martini to go with it."

I touched his shoulders. Whoever designed the men's suit jacket knew exactly what they were doing. But those shoulders were hunched.

"Damn, Erin."

"It's just words. You kept asking these whacked-out questions, what was I supposed to say?"

He stood up and began peeling bills off a wad. Paying in cash has absolutely no business looking so sexy. Normal people pay with their phones.

"How many Moscow Mules have you had?"

"Three."

"You've had two."

I waved my empty copper mug at the waiter, who gave a little salute. My date sighed and flung down a few extra notes. Then he tucked the billfold into his jacket's breast pocket, another quintessentially masculine gesture.

"You have issues," he said.

And then he left.

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The Oliver Act fails to garner sufficient votes. The U.N. Commission presents a laundry list of recommendations to world governments to prevent the worst abuses. Still, suggestions are just that. Victor rubs my hand.

"Let's go," he whispers over the droning. "Let's just explore New York, see where the flow takes us."

I'm down for that. My arms are sore.

On our way out the door, I glance over my shoulder to lock eyes with my daughter. There's no triumph in them as she nods acknowledgement. I return the gesture. Yes, Lasha, I can acknowledge you. After all, it's the second letter of your name.

L.A.S.H.A. I love you, acknowledge you, support you. I wish I could heal you.

And I accept you.