

Death's Head Reunion

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A Clark Gable clone stands passive while Marilyn Monroe pulls at his elastic band pants ... they're gray, soft, and slips off easily to reveal an enhanced wang surrounded by a gnarled forest of curly black hair. Her velvet hand reaches out and caresses Clark. He's smiling, his unit erect. "I've got something for you," he says.

A man behind the camera line is holding his head in both hands, hiding his face. He can't watch. These are two legends, heroes to him --- how can these people exploit them like this?

"Dreams are real," the announcer is saying. "You can dream. You can live. You can live your dream."

Cinematia bodies. They're real. They're legal --- they're made from your own DNA. You can have your DNA altered, you can authorize your body to be grown. You can be downloaded into your new body, and keep your old one as a spare --- or, for a huge tax break, you can donate it to the organ banks for the poor.

The poor cover the world like a blanket of dust. The poor cannot live their dreams. The poor have no dreams. We must help the poor. Three percent of the world's population controls ninety-seven percent of the wealth.

It is currently vogue to feel guilty about that.

Many donate money to organizations which feed, clothe, and house the poor. Others donate money and organs to the Organ Bank For The Poor. No one ever donates to the point that it hurts. No one really feels that guilty.

The Clark Gable clone is now on top of the Marilyn Monroe clone. It is graphic, wet, hot sex. Both are enjoying the scene immensely. They enjoy being attractive, and feel no modesty. Their old bodies, their God-given bodies, they had big noses and fat thighs, poor skin, poor vision, and a general pear-shaped ugly quality. Now they have the bodies of Movie Star Gods. The only thing they retain are their fingerprints and retina scan.

The man behind the camera line peeks through his fingers. Marilyn is gorgeous. This is sick! This is *sick*! What am I doing in this business?

Because of the money, George. Because you're in that class that is as rare as a poor child born without cancer: you belong in the middle class. You are neither rich nor poor, and you strive to be rich. Your body resembles a potato, your head is bald and one of your eyes is bad so you sport a monocle. You want a woman like this Marilyn clone, this Bernadette Petrezov. She would never touch a potato-head like you, George, so you need a pot of gold to buy yourself a Clark Gable suit, or James Dean, or Mel Gibson. And this is your chance, George. This is it. And you sit there hiding behind your hands afraid to look at those things you are so close to having, so close you dare not breathe too hard for fear of blowing your chance away.

It's sick, he thinks. It's inhuman. It's unfair. But the words bounce around in his mind like

ping-pong balls, full of air. They lose their meaning, their potency.

Marilyn fakes her fifteenth climax and they call it a rap. Into the editing chamber George goes, practicing that peculiar talent he ended up with, one of God's two gifts to him (God's other gift was a perfect set of naturally healthy teeth).

Bernadette, the Marilyn clone, watches him shuffle off through the darkened backstage with his collection of golden video disks. She lights up a cigarette --- which is harmless to her new body --- and thinks about him, about his wonderful father-like looks, his warm, nervous smile. A real character, she thinks, a genuine real person. She wonders if he'd have anything to do with a mannequin like her.

She pulls on impossibly tight pants and loops on a rotary shirt, no underwear, no bra, gives Gavin (the Clark clone) a friendly kiss on the cheek, and wanders out of the studio. Nobody pays any attention to her whatsoever. She's just a clone, a meat puppet.

Outside the rain pours down in a torrent, ugly brown rain, rain that is muddy even before it touches the ground. After the rain the afternoon sky is still black. Nature is dying; only man-made things like Bernadette's body will survive. Bernadette's body and Martinelli's 9 pound apples and Chiquita's patented tree-less bananas and vat-grown cultured meat by Hormel, and "Sticky Finger Honey" produced by special bacteria, and programmable bionic racing horses, and cats and dogs of metal and plastic, and your best friend, Sexy Susan, an AI sexual surrogate that now outsells cars and house computers, or her alternate Macho Maxx, who can go all night and day 'till you beg him to stop.

Beyond the black air, almost straight up --- 55,000 miles away --- a new condo is being built for Bernadette. It's all bought and paid for, but it's not finished. There's no air to breathe yet. Bernadette is only down here until it's ready. Until then, she takes occasional trips to New California, a mere torus but very pleasant, or sometimes to Heaven Orleans, the "Europe of space cities," and for the time being lives in a 7 bedroom apartment in an archology in Arizona, only 33 minutes via air-taxi from Hollywood.

She doesn't go home tonight, as the thought of another lonely and meaningless evening in her apartment might drive her to suicide. She hails a SmartCab, and when it asks for a destination, she says, "Just go." The AI programming is prepared for that, and drives off in a random pattern, charging her credit account by the millisecond.

At that moment Bernadette is again locked in coitus with the Clark clone, coming to an orgasm then freezing, un-coming for a moment, movements in reverse to a point and then stopping. George walks around the two, studying the positioning, the 360° composition. Cutting from one angle to another is much more of an art in cine-holography than cinematography, since George must also control 360° segue and use the powerful effect of planned vertigo. A phone call interrupts his concentration. He is annoyed.

"Editing room," George snaps, answering.

"Sorry ... I hope I haven't disturbed you." Marilyn Monroe's face is on the phone's 2D screen. "Silly of me, really --- of course I've disturbed you."

"Well," George says. His voice is weak, all harshness disappearing into a little hole in space. His heart rate changes painfully. "I'm not too busy to answer the phone."

"I was hoping ... there might be a chance ... you would have dinner with me." Despite all the make up and state-of-the-art genetic engineering, she suddenly looks more like Norma

Jean than Marilyn.

"I'm probably going to be working until three or four in the morning." George says this regretfully --- it's hard for him to speak the words. "Would you still be interested tomorrow night?"

"Yes, I would." She smiles.

Joy. Glee. Rapture.

Heartburn.

Sickness.

They say good-bye and George labors far into the wee hours of the morning, falling asleep with his head inside the image of Bernadette's heaving torso.

The rain continues on and off the next day. Large areas of coastal Los Angeles have been claimed by the sea, and one seaside highway, on pillars, gives a great view of half-submerged buildings encrusted with sick yellow barnacles and gray-blue mussels. George is on his way to meet Bernadette, and he is wondering why it was happening.

Maybe, George, it's because she likes you, and wants to get to know you better.

You know that's bullshit, George. She couldn't possibly give a rat's ass about you. She's pulling some sort of career move thing, and she's going to try to talk you into working on her portfolio for free, "as a friend." Or maybe she's involved in one of those stupid cults and she's going to try and recruit you. She's one of the "Daughters of Orca" and she needs you as a male sacrifice to that big fish they're keeping in Huntington Bay.

The restaurant, *Sal's by the Water*, is on the banks of the Los Angeles River, which is so full it's in danger of flooding the parking lot. Despite the run-down look this is a chic place, and the entrance is guarded by doormen. As the SmartCab pulls up and stops, two dozen heads turn to watch George get out, watching to see if he is *somebody*. Disappointed, they turn away.

The two large male doormen have Cinematia bodies: Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. While the clones are pumped up enough to be realistic, the psyches inhabiting them are all wrong. Sylvester looks far too intelligent, and Arnold looks gay. Sylvester confirms that George is on the list and they step aside and allow him to pass. The crowd's interest in George is suddenly renewed; obviously George *is* somebody, but they have no idea who. A few wave and call out to him, as if it would help them get inside.

Inside, Marilyn greets him at the door. She's a receptionist. "Your name?" she asks.

George stares at her for a moment, waiting for her to recognize him. Then he realizes it's not Bernadette, and he looks around feeling overwhelmed. The place is full of Cinematia bodies, and one of the most popular is Marilyn. There's at least eight of them. They're all throughout the restaurant, mingling in with James Deans, Clark Gables, Cary Grants, Burt Reynolds, John Waynes, Raquel Welchs, Annette Funicellos, Bridgette Bardots, and young Jane Fondas. Strategically placed throughout the various sections are old-style flat video screens showing non-stop classic cinema, with no sound.

George gives the receptionist his name and asks after Bernadette. Bernadette has not yet arrived, so George takes a seat at the bar between Rock Hudson and Elvis. This perturbs Rock and Elvis, as they were making eyes at each other. George orders a \$50 beer and waits.

Bernadette makes an entrance, and heads turn. George bites his lower lip --- she's wearing

The White Dress. She smiles, looks around, and waves at George with white gloves almost up to her elbows. The other Cinematia Marylins fade into the background like 3rd rate mannequins. Bernadette's mannerisms, her smile, the twinkle in her eye --- they're genuine. They're the real thing. She wears the Marilyn body as well as Norma Jean herself.

"Ooo, you're here! You showed up," she says.

"Of course I did. How could I not?"

"Very easily, I'm afraid."

"Nonsense!" George's hands are shaking so that he nearly spills his beer. "Not a chance." She smiles. "You're nervous too."

"No, uh ... well, yes. I am."

"Feel my hands," she says, reaching out. He takes them. "They're sweating," she tells him.

"I can't tell." He laughs. "Mine are sweating too, so I'd never know."

"First date jitters," she says. "It's been a long time since I've been nervous about a first date."

"Yes, me too." He neglects to tell her that it's been a long time since he's had any kind of date, period.

"This is a date, right?" she asks, suddenly concerned.

"Yes," George says quickly. "I mean, I consider it one."

"Our first date." She smiles. "You make me feel like a teenager again."

"The, uh ... the first of many, I hope." To George his own words sound clumsy and awkward, and he inwardly cringes, sure he's made a stupid remark.

Bernadette moves her Marilyn lips just perfectly, an embarrassed smile. "I hope so, too," she says.

They move from the bar to dinner. Dinner goes well. I can't believe this, George thinks. I'm sitting across the table from Marilyn Monroe, holding her hand, and she likes me. *Me!*

Bernadette is thinking, What a wonderful person. So warm, so genuine. And he likes me for who I am inside, not because of the body I happen to be wearing. This is the kind of man which with I want to spend the rest of my life.

"Would you like to go to a movie or something?" he asks.

"I want to have your babies," she tells him.

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For the first time ever, George finds his life doesn't suck. During the Calamity Awards, George wins as best editor in his medium. His earnings increase 10-fold overnight. Tremendous pressures are at work on those few who fit in the term, "middle-class," forces that are either trying to make them poor or rich. It's an inherently unstable position. Most become poor and commit suicide. Others, like George, join the ranks of the three percent that control ninety-seven percent of the money.

Money makes money. More money makes even more money. The "rich" class, like the "poor" class, is a very stable position. While an earthquake is killing several thousand poor people on the Gold Coast, and a tidal wave is wiping out hundreds of thousands of poor people in Asia, George and Bernadette are moving into her new condo in space. The city is

called "Eutopia." The designers are very proud of the name (they made it up themselves) because it's pronounced "Utopia" but it's spelled like "Europe" --- which is a very chic place, at least inside the heavily guarded walls.

There are no heavily guarded walls in Eutopia. There are no locks on the doors in Eutopia. Many homes have no doors at all. Nobody in this place is going to steal anything from anybody, and even if they did, everyone is so rich that nobody would care. Even the servants are rich. The ones that aren't rich aren't alive --- they're mechanical.

George and Bernadette are ecstatic. The trees are all real. The air is pure. The grass never needs to be mowed. There are no flies or mosquitoes. There are no cockroaches, mice, lice, gnats, rats, bats, ants, silverfish or moths. Everything is perfect. Everything, George thinks, except one thing. He still hates his reflection in the mirror.

I can dream, he thinks. I can live.

I can live my dream.

Secretly, so as to surprise Bernadette, George calls and makes an appointment.

At the offices of the local Cinematia franchise, cell samples are taken for which to fashion the new body. A holistic interactive catalog is presented, and he's encouraged to take as much time as needed to make sure he chooses the body he wants to inhabit. Not all of the DNA templates are of famous people --- there are literally thousands of handsome, anonymous models from which to choose. But George already knows. In his mind, it made perfect sense. Marilyn and John Kennedy had always belonged together. Low and behold, there was a John Kennedy template, not one of the most popular but in demand none-the-less. This one actually featured a pre-programmed Bostonian accent built-in.

"This one," he says, speaking to the interactive catalog software.

"You have 48 hours in which to change your mind. After that, your new body will be ready in two weeks."

George doesn't change his mind. He also succeeds in keeping it a secret from Bernadette, so that it will be a wonderful surprise. He goes in for his second appointment two weeks and two days later, and is introduced to his new body. It stands naked and soul-less in the presentation room, ready for his inspection. He wonders briefly if Kennedy's wang had really been that big. "Perfect," he tells the Cinematia associate. "When can I move in?"

"Right after your brain backup," she says. She's happy and wants George to be happy, as George has lots of money and she's going to get a commission. "Right this way."

George kind of had the idea that they were going to cut his head open, scoop out his brain, and slop it into the head of his new body. It doesn't work that way. A holodata interface helmet with ten-billion triangulation pattern receptors systematically stimulates every synapse in George's brain and takes a reading. This information is stored in specially designed DNA sequence strands. Once the recording is done, an unconscious George is injected with an anti-freeze compound and his body is placed in storage at absolute zero. The DNA sequence strands are then decoded and the patterns are implanted into the bionic brain of George's new body. Then a specially trained and well-paid Catholic priest blesses the new body and asks God to transfer George's soul over. That being done, George is awakened and presented with a full-length mirror.

His eyesight is better than ever, and he sucks in his stomach and flexes his muscles. "Look

at that!" he exclaims. "Look at me!"

He's given a complementary set of clothes and, once dressed, heads back home to surprise his woman. He finds Bernadette watching the news, wiping tears from her eyes. "Is that you?" she calls out as he comes in. "Those Siamese twin babies with the three heads just died. Isn't that sad?" She turns and looks at him, and exclaims, "Oh!"

"Hi," George says.

"I thought you were ... what are you doing in my house? Who are you?"

"It's me, George! Surprise!" His built-in Bostonian accent sounds great.

There's several long, alarming seconds of silence, and then she says, "Oh no. No. No, you didn't..." She turns away from him.

"I ... I did it for you."

"You didn't ... you didn't have to do anything," she says, sobbing. "I love you for you. Now you're not you, you're ... you're just another one of ... you're just like all the others."

"But ..."

It's no use, she's very upset. There's a lot of shattered silence between the two for the next few days, and then Bernadette gives him a surprise. He wakes up to find she's left him.

Up in Eutopia there are windows you can look out of that view the Earth, the moon, and the vast universe of stars. George stands and stares out at the stars, feeling as empty as the vacuum outside the window. Down on Earth, the Chinese government is being accused of dropping neutron bombs on its own villages. The piles of bodies are as high as small hills. "We can't feed them," their government tells the startled world. "What's worse, a long painful death of starvation, or a sudden, sterile release?"

George mopes for a week. His only conversations are with his agent who is negotiating new projects for George to work on. George is so rich now he gets to pick and choose, and in fact doesn't ever have to work at all. He does it for enjoyment, now, but there's nothing enjoyable about it. It all seems empty and meaningless. The color seems to have drained from his life. Food no longer tastes good, paintings he used to like now all seem ugly, and music either grates on his nerves or causes him to burst into tears.

"George," his agent tells him, "go to a doctor. They have ways of treating depression."

Depression? George never thought to give what he was feeling a name. Depression seemed too shallow and two-dimensional a word for what he was going through. *Total-rending-heart-break* seemed a closer description of the experience.

Nope, the doctor tells him. It's depression. It's a very specific type of depression, one for which there is a very specific type of cure. George balks at the price, but what the hell, he can afford it. On Earth, a plague is killing tens-of-thousands of poor people in Western Australia, and there's a cure for that, too, but those who are sick and dying don't have any money to pay for it. However, George has the \$120,000.00 to pay for the single bottle of pills that will cause him to fall out of love with Bernadette. Four pills a day for four days, and it will be all over.

Four days later, just as the doctor had promised, it's over. George feels fine again, and is ready to go back to work. The trouble is, on the fifth day Bernadette comes back. "I'm so sorry," she tells him. "I feel so stupid. I was so grateful to you for loving me for what I am inside, and I was loving you for what you are inside, I failed to realize it's still you inside that

new body, and I still love you for you." She smiles at him.

George studies her like a bug he's found crawling on the carpet. She's a total stranger to him, now. She looks just like any other shallow Cinematia body clone bitch. But his new body's libido kicks in, and he takes her into his arms and kisses her, and they go into the bedroom and have meaningless sex. Afterwards, Bernadette discovers the empty pill bottle in the bathroom. She confronts him with it, sounding angry but actually feeling shock and loss. "You *took* these?"

"What was I supposed to do?" he asks. "You left me."

"You don't love me anymore?"

"No, I don't."

She stares at him in disbelief, her face warping into an expression of deep pain. Crying out, she makes a long, wailing sobbing sound, like a sad emergency siren, until her lungs run out of air and she's left with silent, vacuum-filled, body-shaking tears. Wow, George thinks. Wow, she's really hurting. I must have felt like that.

He seems to remember feeling like that, several days ago --- several days that seem like several months ago. Feeling oddly responsible and bad, in a detached sort of way, he runs out to the doctor and gets another bottle of the pills. When he returns home, he finds Bernadette face down in bed, her face in a pillow, and she's still crying. "Here," he says. "Here, I got these for you."

She looks at the pill bottle like he's offering her a big hairy spider. "I don't want your god damned pills!" she yells at him.

He cringes. The poor girl has snot all over her face. He tries to point this out to her, but she doesn't seem to care, and buries her head back into the pillow. George places the bottle of pills on the night stand next to her and says, "You take these. I'll be back in five days, and we'll talk. We'll see what we can work out." She ignores him, still crying. George turns and leaves.

He spends four days on Earth, talking about new projects in Hollywood, and goes out a few times with a pretty woman who's body was not a famous clone but was probably a clone none the less. They engage in meaningless sex, and while she's sleeping he studies her beautiful curves, her flawless skin, and wonders if nature actually produces anything so perfect anymore. Oddly, it makes him think about Bernadette, about how broken up she was when he'd left. He is touched that she actually cared about him so deeply. He wonders, *Did she take the pills?*

The next day, only hours before a riot destroys the Los Angeles Space Port, George takes a launch back up to Eutopia to meet with Bernadette. They're sharing a condo, but it actually belongs to her. He's got to make some sort of living arrangements, or buy it from her, or something. She's home when he gets there, sitting in front of the holovision and watching the news. "You made it," she says. "I was worried that you got caught in the riot."

"They were getting pretty ugly while we were waiting for take off," George tells her.

"They moved the launch up, thank God."

Bernadette points toward the images. "Look at all the fires," She says, shaking her head.

"Oh, by the way, thank you for the pills."

"You took them?"

"Yes. Thank you. I feel much, much better now."

"You're not angry or anything?"

"Angry?" She shrugs. "I was in a lot of hurt, but the pills made it better. Thank you for the pills."

"You're welcome."

"You had been in a lot of hurt, too, and that's why you took the pills."

"Yes."

"So, then, we're even."

"Yes." He takes a few steps toward her, getting a closer look. She doesn't seem like such a stranger anymore. "I want to thank you for being so in love with me."

"You know, I wanted to tell you the same thing. We really were in love with each other, weren't we?"

"Yeah, we were. What happened?"

"Emotions aren't perfect. Everything about us is perfect, except for our emotions. It's like a flaw in the brain."

"It's nice that we can control them, now," George says.

"Yes, isn't it?"

They stand and stare at each other, then both break into spontaneous smiles. "It's like a new start, like we're starting over again."

"You really want to?"

"Yes, I do." He takes her hands. It's a familiar feeling, but the emotions are mixed with haunting, distant memories of feelings. Like memories from a past life, like actual John Kennedy memories released from the DNA that gave George a hint of how the man really felt about Marilyn Monroe. "I wonder..." he says. "I wonder if there's a pill we can take to fall back in love again."

"There's no real need for such a pill," she tells him. "It happens all by itself, don't you think?"

"Yes," he says. "Yes, maybe it does."

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