

# Wednesday's Child

## William Tenn

**When he first** came to scrutinize Wednesday Gresham with his rimless spectacles and watery blue eyes, Fabian Balik knew nothing of the biological contradictions that were so incredibly a part of her essential body structure. He had not even noticed—as yet—that she was a remarkably pretty girl with eyes like rain-sparkling violets. His original preoccupation with her was solely and specifically as a problem in personnel administration.

All of which was not too surprising, because Fabian Balik was a thoroughly intent, thoroughly sincere young office manager, who had convinced his glands conclusively, in several bitter skirmishes, that their interests didn't have a chance against the interests of Slaughter, Stark & Slingsby: Advertising & Public Relations.

Wednesday was one of the best stenographers in the secretarial pool that was under his immediate supervision. There were, however, small but highly unusual derelictions in her employment history. They consisted of peculiarities which a less dedicated and ambitious personnel man might have put aside as mere trifles, but which Fabian, after a careful study of her six-year record with the firm, felt he could not, in good conscience, ignore. On the other hand, they would obviously require an extended discussion and he had strong views about cutting into an employee's working time.

Thus, much to the astonishment of the office and the confusion of Wednesday herself, he came up to her one day at noon, and informed her quite calmly that they were going to have lunch together.

"**This is a nice place,**" he announced, when they had been shown to a table. "It's not too expensive, but I've discovered it serves the best food in the city for the price. And it's a bit off the beaten track so that it never gets too crowded. Only people who know what they want manage to come here."

Wednesday glanced around, and nodded. "Yes," she said. "I like it too. I eat here a lot with the girls."

After a moment, Fabian picked up a menu. "I suppose you don't mind if I order for both of us?" he inquired. "The chef is used to my tastes. He'll treat us right."

The girl frowned. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Balik, but—"

"Yes?" he said encouragingly, though he was more than surprised. He hadn't expected anything but compliance. After all, she was probably palpitating at being out with him.

"I'd like to order for myself," she said. "I'm on a—a special diet."

He raised his eyebrows and was pleased at the way she blushed. He nodded slowly, with dignity, letting his displeasure come through in the way he pronounced his words. "Very well, as you please."

A few moments later, though, curiosity got too strong and broke through the ice. "What kind of diet is that? Fresh-fruit salad, a glass of tomato juice, raw cabbage, and a *baked potato*? You can't be trying to lose weight if you eat potatoes."

Wednesday smiled timidly. "I'm not trying to reduce, Mr. Balik. Those are all foods rich in Vitamin C. I need a lot of Vitamin C."

Fabian remembered her smile. There had been a few spots of more-than-natural whiteness in it. "Bad teeth?" he inquired.

"Bad teeth and—" Her tongue came out and paused for a thoughtful second between her lips. "Mostly bad teeth," she said. "This is a nice place. There's a restaurant almost like it near where I live. Of course it's a lot cheaper—"

"Do you live with your parents, Miss Gresham?"

"No, I live alone. I'm an orphan."

He waited until the waiter had deposited the first course, then speared a bit of the shrimp and returned to the attack. "Since when?"

She stared at him over her fresh-fruit salad. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Balik?"

"Since when? How long have you been an orphan?"

"Since I was a little baby. Someone left me on the doorstep of a foundling home."

He noticed that while she was replying to his questions in an even tone of voice, she was staring at her food with a good deal of concentration and her blush had become more pronounced. Was she embarrassed at having to admit her probable lack of legitimacy? he wondered. Surely she had grown accustomed to it in—how old was she?—twenty-four years. Nonsense, of course she had.

"But on your original application form, Miss Gresham, you gave Thomas and Mary Gresham as the names of your parents."

Wednesday had stopped eating and was playing with her water glass. "They were an old couple who adopted me," she said in a very low voice. "They died when I was fifteen. I have no living relatives."

"That you know of," he pointed out, raising a cautionary finger.

Much to Fabian's surprise she chuckled. It was a very odd chuckle and made him feel extremely uncomfortable. "That's right, Mr. Balik. I have no living relatives—*that I know of.*" She looked over his shoulder and chuckled again. "That I know of," she repeated softly to herself.

Fabian felt irritably that the interview was somehow getting away from him. He raised his voice slightly. "Then who is Dr. Morris Lorington?"

She was attentive again. In fact, wary was more like it. "Dr. Morris Lorington?"

"Yes, the man you said should be notified in case of emergency. In case anything happened to you while you were working for us."

She looked very wary now. Her eyes were narrowed, she was watching him very closely; her breathing was a bit faster, too. "Dr. Lorington is an old friend. He—he was the doctor at the orphanage. After the Greshams adopted me, I kept going to him whenever—" Her voice trailed off.

"Whenever you needed medical attention?" Fabian suggested.

"Ye-es," she said, brightening, as if he had come up with an entirely novel reason for consulting a physician. "I saw him whenever I needed medical attention."

Fabian grunted. There was something very wrong but tantalizingly elusive about this whole business. But she was answering his questions. He couldn't deny that: she was certainly answering.

"Do you expect to see him next October?" he inquired.

And now Wednesday was no longer wary. She was frightened. "Next October?" she quavered.

Fabian finished the last of his shrimp and wiped his lips. But he didn't take his eyes off her. "Yes, next October, Miss Gresham. You've applied for a month's leave of absence, beginning October fifteenth. Five years ago, after you had been working for Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby for thirteen months, you also applied for a leave of absence in October."

He was amazed at how scared she looked. He felt triumphantly that he had been right in looking into this. The feeling he had about her had not been merely curiosity; it had been an instinct of good personnel management

"But I'm not getting paid for the time off. I'm not asking to be paid for it, Mr. Balik. And I didn't get paid the—the other time."

She was clutching her napkin up near her face, and she gave the impression of being ready to bolt

through the back door of the restaurant. Her blushes had departed with such thoroughness as to leave her skin absolutely white.

"The fact that you're not going to be paid for the time off, Miss Gresham—" Fabian began, only to be interrupted by the waiter with the entree. By the time the man had gone, he was annoyed to observe that Wednesday had used the respite to recover some of her poise. While she was still pale, she had a spot of red in each cheek and she was leaning back in her chair now instead of using the edge of it.

"The fact that you're not going to be paid is of no consequence," he continued nonetheless. "It's merely logical. After all, you have two weeks of vacation with pay every year. Which brings me to the second point. You have every year made *two* un-usual requests. First, you've asked for an additional week's leave of absence without pay, making three weeks in all. And then you've asked—"

"To take it in the early Spring," she finished, her voice entirely under control. "Is there anything wrong with that, Mr. Balik? That way I don't have any conflict with the other girls and the firm is sure of a secretary being in the office all through the summer."

"There's nothing wrong with that *per se*. By that I mean," he explained carefully, "that there is nothing wrong with the arrangement *as such*. But it makes for loose ends, for organizational confusion. And loose ends, Miss Gresham, loose ends and organizational confusion have no place in a well-regulated office."

He was pleased to note that she was looking uncomfortable again.

"Does that mean—are you trying to tell me that—I might be laid off?"

"It could happen," Fabian agreed, neglecting to add that it was, however, very un-likely to happen in the case of a secretary who was as generally efficient on the one hand, and as innocuous on the other, as Wednesday Gresham. He carefully cut a fork-sized portion of roast beef free of its accompanying strip of orange fat before going on. "Look at it this way. How would it be if every girl in the office asked for an additional week's leave of absence every year—even if it was without pay, as it would have to be? And then, every few years, wanted an additional month's leave of absence on top of that? What kind of an office would we have, Miss Gresham? Not a well-regulated one, certainly."

As he chewed the roast beef with the requisite thoroughness he beamed at the thoughtful concern on her face and was mentally grateful that he hadn't had to present that line of argument to anyone as sharp as Arlette Stein, for example. He knew what the well-hipped thirtyish widow would have immediately replied: "But every girl in the office *doesn't* ask for it, Mr. Balik." A heavy sneer at such sophistry would mean little to Stein.

Wednesday, he appreciated, was not the person to go in for such counterattacks. She was rolling her lips distressedly against each other and trying to think of a polite, good-employee way out. There was only one, and she would have to come to it in a moment.

She did.

"Would it help any," she began, and stopped. She took a deep breath. "Would it help any, if I told you the reasons—for the leaves-of-absence?"

"It would," he said heartily. "It would indeed, Miss Gresham. That way I, as office manager, can operate from facts instead of mysteries. I can hear your reasons, weigh them for validity and measure their importance—and your usefulness as a secre-tary—against the disorganization your absences create in the day-to-day operation of Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby."

"M-m-m." She looked troubled, uncertain. "I'd like to think a bit, if you don't mind."

Fabian waved a cauliflower-filled fork magnanimously. "Take all the time in the world! Think it out carefully. Don't tell me anything you aren't perfectly willing to tell me. Of course anything you *do* tell me will be, I am sure I need hardly reassure you, completely confidential. I will treat it as official knowledge, Miss Gresham—not personal. And while you're thinking, you might start eating your raw cabbage. Before it gets cold," he added with a rich, executive-type chuckle.

She nodded him a half-smile that ended in a sigh and began working at her plate in an absent-minded, not-particularly-hungry fashion.

"You see," she began abruptly as if she'd found a good point of departure, "some things happen to me that don't happen to other people."

"That, I would say, is fairly obvious."

"They're not bad things. I mean what, oh, the newspapers would call bad. And they're not dangerous things, exactly. They're—they're more physical-like. They're things that could happen to my body."

Fabian finished his plate, sat back and crossed his arms. "Could you be just a little more specific? Unless—" and he was struck by a horrifying thought—"unless they're what is known as, er, *as female* difficulties. In that case, of course—"

This time she didn't even blush. "Oh, no. Not at all. At least there's very little of that. It's—other things. Like my appendix. Every year I have to have my appendix out."

"Your appendix?" He turned that over in his mind. "Every year? But a human being only has one appendix. And once it's removed, it doesn't grow back."

"Mine does. On the tenth of April, every single year, I get appendicitis and have to have an operation. That's why I take my vacation then. And my teeth. Every five years, I lose all my teeth. I start losing them about this time, and I have some dental plates that were made when I was younger—I use them until my teeth grow back. Then, about the middle of October, the last of them goes and new ones start coming up. I can't use my dental plates while they're growing, so I look kind of funny for a while. That's why I ask for a leave of absence. In the middle of November, the new teeth are almost full-grown, and I come back to work."

She took a deep breath and timidly lifted her eyes to his face. That was all she evidently had to say. Or wished to.

All through dessert, he thought about it. He was positive she was telling the truth. A girl like Wednesday Gresham didn't lie. Not to such a fantastic extent. Not to her boss.

"Well," he said at last. "It's certainly very unusual."

"Yes," she agreed. "Very unusual."

"Do you have anything else the matter with—I mean, are there any other peculiarities—Oh, darn! Is there anything else?"

Wednesday considered. "There are. But, if you don't mind, Mr. Balik, I'd rather not—"

Fabian decided not to take that. "Now see here, Miss Gresham," he said firmly. "Let us not play games. You didn't have to tell me anything, but you decided, for yourself, for your own good reasons, to do so. Now I must insist on the whole story, and nothing but the whole story. What other physical difficulties do you have?"

It worked. She cringed a bit in her chair, straightened up again, but a little weakly, and began: "I'm sorry, Mr. Balik, I wouldn't dream of—of playing games with you. There are lots of other things, but none of them interfere with my work, really. Like I have some tiny hairs growing on my fingernails. See?"

Fabian glanced at the hand held across the table. A few almost microscopic ten-drills on each glittering hard surface of fingernail.

"What else?"

"Well, my tongue. I have a few hairs on the underside of my tongue. They don't bother me, though, they don't bother me in anyway. And there's my—my—"

"Yes?" he prompted. Who could believe that colorless little Wednesday Gresham...

"My navel. I don't have any navel."

"You don't have any—But that's impossible!" he exploded. He felt his glasses sliding down his nose. "Everyone has a navel! Everyone alive—everyone who's ever been born."

Wednesday nodded, her eyes unnaturally bright and large. "Maybe—" she began, and suddenly, unexpectedly, broke into tears. She brought her hands up to her face and sobbed through them, great, pounding, wracking sobs that pulled her shoulders up and down, up and down.

Fabian's consternation made him completely helpless. He'd never, never in his life, been in a crowded restaurant with a crying girl before.

"Now, Miss Gresham—Wednesday," he managed to get out, and he was annoyed to hear a high, skittery note in his own voice. "There's no call for this. Surely, there's no call for this? Uh—Wednesday?"

"Maybe," she gasped again, between sobs, "m-maybe that's the answer."

"What's the answer?" Fabian asked loudly, desperately hoping to distract her into some kind of conversation.

"About—about being born. Maybe—maybe I wasn't born. M-maybe I was m-m-made!"

And then, as if she'd merely been warming up before this, she *really* went into hysterics. Fabian Balik at last realized what he had to do. He paid the check, put his arm around the girl's waist and half-carried her out of the restaurant.

It worked. She got quieter the moment they hit the open air. She leaned against a building, not crying now, and shook her shoulders in a steadily diminishing *cre-scendo*. Finally, she *ulped* once, twice, and turned groggily to him, her face looking as if it had been rubbed determinedly in an artist's turpentine rag.

"I'm s-sorry," she said. "I'm t-terribly s-sorry. I haven't done that for years. But—you see, Mr. Balik—I haven't talked about myself for years."

"There's a nice bar at the corner," he pointed out, tremendously relieved. She'd looked for a while as if she'd intended to keep on crying all day! "Let's pop in, and I'll have a drink. You can use the ladies' room to fix yourself up."

He took her arm and steered her into the place. Then he climbed onto a bar stool and had himself a double brandy.

What an experience! And what a strange, strange girl!

Of course, he shouldn't have pushed her quite so hard on a subject about which she was evidently so sensitive. Was that his fault, though, that she *was* so sensitive?

Fabian considered the matter carefully, judicially, and found in his favor. No, it definitely wasn't his fault.

But what a story! The foundling business, the appendix business, the teeth, the hair on the fingernails and tongue...And that last killer about the navel!

He'd have to think it out. And maybe he'd get some other opinions. But one thing he was sure of, as sure as of his own managerial capacities: Wednesday Gresham hadn't been lying in any particular. Wednesday Gresham was just not the sort of a girl who made up tall stories about herself.

When she rejoined him, he urged her to have a drink. "Help you get a grip on yourself."

She demurred, she didn't drink very much, she said. But he insisted, and she gave in. "Just a liqueur. Anything. You order it, Mr. Balik."

Fabian was secretly very pleased at her docility. No reprimanding, no back-biting, like most other girls—Although what in the world could she reprimand him for?

"You still look a little frayed," he told her. "When we get back, don't bother going to your desk. Go right in to Mr. Osborne and finish taking dictation. No point in giving the other girls something to talk about. I'll sign in for you."

She inclined her head submissively and continued to sip from the tiny glass.

"What was that last comment you made in the restaurant—I'm certain you don't mind discussing it, now—about not being born, but being made? That was an odd thing to say."

Wednesday sighed. "It isn't my own idea. It's Dr. Lorington's. Years ago, when he was examining me, he said that I looked as if I'd been made—by an amateur. By some-one who didn't have all the blueprints, or didn't understand them, or wasn't concentrating hard enough."

"Hm." He stared at her, absolutely intrigued. She looked normal enough. Better than normal, in fact. And yet—

Later that afternoon, he telephoned Jim Rudd and made an appointment for right after work. Jim Rudd had been his roommate in college and was now a doctor: he would be able to tell him a little more about this.

But Jim Rudd wasn't able to help him very much. He listened patiently to Fabian's story about "a girl I've just met" and, at the end of it, leaned back in the new upholstered swivel chair and pursed his lips at his diploma, neatly framed and hung on the opposite wall.

"You sure do go in for weirdies, Fabe. For a superficially well-adjusted, well-organized guy with a real talent for the mundane things of life, you pick the damndest women I ever heard of. But that's your business. Maybe it's your way of adding a necessary pinch of the exotic to the grim daily round. Or maybe you're making up for the drabness of your father's grocery store."

"This girl is not a weirdie," Fabian insisted angrily. "She's a very simple little secretary, prettier than most, but that's about all."

"Have it your own way. To me, she's a weirdie. To me, there's not a hell of a lot of difference—from your description—between her and that crazy White Russian dame you were running around with back in our junior year. You know the one I mean—what was her name?"

"Sandra? Oh, Jim, what's the matter with you? Sandra was a bollixed-up box of dynamite who was always blowing up in my face. This kid turns pale and dies if I so much as raise my voice. Besides, I had a real puppy-love crush on Sandra; this other girl is somebody I just met, like I told you, and I don't feel anything for her, one way or the other."

The young doctor grinned. "So you come up to my office and have a consultation about her! Well, it's your funeral. What do you want to know?"

"What causes all these—these physical peculiarities?"

Dr. Rudd got up and sat on the edge of his desk. "First," he said, "whether you want to recognize it or not, she's a highly disturbed person. The hysterics in the restaurant point to it, and the fantastic nonsense she told you about her body points to it. So right there, you have something. If only one percent of what she told you is true—and even that I would say is pretty high—it makes sense in terms of psychosomatic imbalance. Medicine doesn't yet know quite how it works, but one thing seems certain: anyone badly mixed up mentally is going to be at least a little mixed up physically, too."

Fabian thought about that for a while. "Jim, you don't know what it means to those little secretaries in the pool to tell lies to the office manager! A fib or two about why they were absent the day before, yes, but not stories like this, not to *me*!"

A shrug. "I don't know what you look like to them: I don't work for you, Fabe. But none of what you say would hold true for a psycho. And a psycho is what I have to consider her. Look, some of that stuff she told you is impossible, some of it has occurred in medical literature. There have been well-authenticated cases of people, for example, who have grown several sets of teeth in their lifetime. These are biological sports, one-in-a-million individuals. But the rest of it? And all the rest of it happen-ing to one person? *Please.*"

"I saw some of it. I saw the hairs on her fingernails."

"You saw something on her fingernails. It could be any one of a dozen different possibilities. I'm sure

of one thing; it wasn't hair. Right there she gave herself away as phony. Goddammit, man, hair and nails are the same organs essentially. One doesn't grow on the other!"

"And the navel? The missing navel?"

Jim Rudd dropped to his feet and strode rapidly about the office. "I wish I knew why I'm wasting so much time with you," he complained. "A human being without a navel, or *any* mammal without a navel, is as possible as an insect with a body temperature of ninety-eight degrees. It just can't be. It does not exist."

He seemed to get more and more upset as he considered it. He kept shaking his head negatively as he walked.

Fabian suggested: "Suppose I brought her to your office. And suppose you examined her and found no navel. Now just consider that for a moment. What would you say then?"

"I'd say plastic surgery," the doctor said instantly. "Mind you, I'm positive she'd never submit to such an examination, but if she did, and there was no navel, plastic surgery would be the only answer."

"Why would anyone want to do plastic surgery on a navel?"

"I don't know. I haven't the vaguest idea. Maybe an accident. Maybe a disfiguring birthmark in that place. But there will be scars, let me tell you. *She had to be born with a navel*"

Rudd went back to his desk. He picked up a prescription pad. "Let me give you the name of a good psychiatrist, Fabe. I've thought ever since that Sandra business that you've had some personal problems that might get out of hand one day. This man is one of the finest—"

Fabian left.

**She was obviously in a flutter** when he called to pick her up that night, so much more of a flutter than a date-with-the-boss would account for, that Fabian was puzzled. But he waited and gave her an ostentatious and expensive good time. Afterward, after dinner and after the theater, when they were sitting in the corner of a small night club over their drinks, he asked her about it.

"You don't date much, do you, Wednesday?"

"No, I don't, Mr. Balik—I mean, Fabian," she said, smiling shyly as she remembered the first-name privilege she had been accorded for the evening. "I usually just go out with girl friends, not with men. I usually turn down dates."

"Why? You're not going to find a husband that way. You want to get married, don't you?"

Wednesday shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. I—I'm afraid to. Not of marriage. Of babies. I don't think a person like me ought to have a baby."

"Nonsense! Is there any scientific reason why you shouldn't? What are you afraid of—it'll be a monster?"

"I'm afraid it might be...anything. I think with my body being as—as funny as it is, I shouldn't take chances with a child. Dr. Lorington thinks so too. Besides, there's the poem."

Fabian put down his drink. "Poem? What poem?"

"You know, the one about the days of the week. I learned it when I was a little girl, and it frightened me even then. It goes:

*Monday's child is fair of face,  
Tuesday's child is full of grace,  
Wednesday's child is full of woe,  
Thursday's child has far to go,  
Friday's child is loving and giving—*

And so on. When I was a little girl in the orphanage, I used to say to myself, I'm Wednesday. I'm different from all other little girls in all kinds of strange ways. And my child—"

"Who gave you that name?"

"I was left at the foundling home just after New Year's Eve—Wednesday morning. So they didn't know what else to call me, especially when they found I didn't have a navel. And then, like I told you, after the Greshams adopted me, I took their last name."

He reached for her hand and grasped it firmly with both of his. He noted with tri-umphant pleasure that her fingernails *were* hairy. "You're a very pretty girl, Wednes-day Gresham."

When she saw that he meant it, she blushed and looked down at the tablecloth.

"And you really don't have a navel?"

"No, I don't. Really."

"What else about you is different?" Fabian asked. "I mean, besides the things you told me."

"Well," she considered. "There's that business about my blood pressure."

"Tell me about it," he urged. She told him.

**Two dates later**, she informed Fabian that Dr. Lorington wanted to see him. Alone.

He went all the way uptown to the old-fashioned brownstone, chewing his knuck-les in excitement. He had so many questions to ask!

Dr. Lorington was a tall, aged man with pale skin and absolutely white hair. He moved very slowly as he gestured his visitor to a chair, but his eyes rested intent and anxious on Fabian's face.

"Wednesday tells me you've been seeing a good deal of her, Mr. Balik. May I ask why?"

Fabian shrugged. "I like the girl. I'm interested in her."

"Interested, how? Interested clinically—as in a specimen?"

"What a way to put it, Doctor! She's a pretty girl, she's a nice girl, why should I be interested in her as a specimen?"

The doctor stroked an invisible beard on his chin, still watching Fabian very closely. "She's a pretty girl," he agreed, "but there are many pretty girls. You're a young man obviously on his way up in the world, and you're also obviously far out of Wednesday's class. From what she's told me—and mind you, it's been all on the positive side—I've gotten a definite impression that you look on her as a specimen, but a specimen, let us say, about which you feel a substantial collector's itch. Why you should feel this way, I don't know enough about you to say. But no matter how she rhapsodizes about you, I continue to feel strongly that you have no conventional, expected emotional interest in her. And now that I've seen you, I'm positive that this is so."

"Glad to hear she rhapsodizes about me." Fabian tried to squeeze out a bashful-type grin. "You have nothing to worry about, Doctor."

"I think there's quite a bit to worry about, quite a bit. Frankly, Mr. Balik, your appearance has confirmed my previous impressions: I am quite certain I don't like you. Furthermore, I don't like you for Wednesday."

Fabian thought for a moment, then shrugged. "That's too bad. But I don't think she'll listen to you. She's gone without male companionship too long, and she's too flattered by my going after her."

"I'm terribly afraid you're right. Listen to me, Mr. Balik. I'm very fond of Wednes-day and I know how unguarded she is. I ask you, almost as a father, to leave her alone. I've taken care of her since she arrived at the foundling home. I was responsible for keeping her case out of the medical journals so that



she might have some chance for a normal life. At the moment, I'm retired from practice. Wednesday Gresham is my only regular patient. Couldn't you find it in your heart to be kind and have nothing more to do with her?"

"What's this about her being made, not born?" Fabian countered. "She says it was your idea."

The old man sighed and shook his head over his desk for a long moment. "It's the only explanation that makes sense," he said at last, dispiritedly. "Considering the somatic inaccuracies and ambivalences."

Fabian clasped his hands and rubbed his elbows thoughtfully on the arms of his chair. "Did you ever think there might be another explanation? She might be a mu-tant, a new kind of human evolution, or the offspring of creatures from another world, say, who happened to be stranded on this planet."

"Highly unlikely," Dr. Lorington said. "None of these physical modifications is especially useful in any conceivable environment, with the possible exception of the constantly renewing teeth. Nor are the modifications fatal. They tend to be just—inconvenient. As a physician who has examined many human beings in my life, I would say that Wednesday is thoroughly, indisputably human. She is just a little—well, the word is *amateurish*."

The doctor sat up straight. "There is something else, Mr. Balik. I think it extremely inadvisable for people like Wednesday to have children of their own."

Fabian's eyes lit up in fascination. "Why? What would the children be like?"

"They might be like anything imaginable—or unimaginable. With so much dis-arrangement of the normal physical system, the modification in the reproductive functions must be enormous too. That's why I ask you, Mr. Balik, not to go on seeing Wednesday, not to go on stimulating her to thoughts of marriage. Because this is one girl that I am certain should not have babies!"

"We'll see." Fabian rose and offered his hand. "Thank you very much for your time and trouble, Doctor."

Dr. Lorington cocked his head and stared up at him. Then, without shaking the hand, he said in a quiet, even voice, "You are welcome. Goodbye, Mr. Balik."

**Wednesday was naturally miserable** over the antagonism between the two men. But there was very little doubt where her loyalties would lie in a crisis. All those years of determined emotional starvation had resulted in a frantic voracity. Once she allowed herself to think of Fabian romantically, she was done for. She told him that she did her work at the office—from which their developing affair had so far been success-fully screened—in a daze at the thought that *he* liked *her*.

Fabian found her homage delicious. Most women he had known began to treat him with a gradually sharpening edge of contempt as time went on. Wednesday be-came daily more admiring, more agreeable, more compliant.

True, she was by no means brilliant, but she was, he told himself, extremely pretty, and therefore quite presentable. Just to be on the safe side, he found an opportunity to confer with Mr. Slaughter, the senior partner of the firm, ostensibly on per-sonnel matters. He mentioned in passing that he was slightly interested in one of the girls in the secretarial pool. Would there be any high-echelon objection to that?

"Interested to the extent of perhaps marrying the girl?" Mr. Slaughter asked, study-ing him from under a pair of enormously thick eyebrows.

"Possibly. It might very well come to that, sir. If you have no ob—"

"No objection at all, my boy, no objection at all. I don't like executives flim-flamming around with their file-clerks as a general rule, but if it's handled quietly and ends in matrimony, it could be an excellent thing for the office. I'd like to see you married, and steadied down. It might give the other single people in the place some sensible ideas for a change. But mind you, Balik, no flim-flam. No hanky-panky,

especially on office time!"

Satisfied, Fabian now devoted himself to separating Wednesday from Dr. Lorington. He pointed out to her that the old man couldn't live much longer and she needed a regular doctor who was young enough to be able to help her with the physical complexities she faced for the rest of her life. A young doctor like Jim Rudd, for example.

Wednesday wept, but was completely incapable of fighting him for long. In the end, she made only one condition—that Dr. Rudd preserve the secrecy that Lorington had initiated. She didn't want to become a medical journal freak or a newspaper sob story.

The reasons why Fabian agreed had only a little to do with magnanimity. He wanted to have her oddities for himself alone. Sandra he had worn on his breast, like a flashing jewel hung from a pendant. Wednesday he would keep in a tiny chamois bag, examining her from time to time in a self-satisfied, miserly fashion.

And, after a while, he might have another, smaller jewel...

Jim Rudd accepted his conditions. And was astounded.

"There is no navel at all!" he ejaculated when he had rejoined Fabian in his study, after the first examination. "I've palpated the skin for scar tissue, but there's not the slightest hint of it. And that's not the half of it! She has no discernible systole and diastole. Man, do you know what that means?"

"I'm not interested right now," Fabian told him. "Later, maybe. Do you think you can help her with these physical problems when they come up?"

"Oh, sure. At least as well as that old fellow."

"What about children? Can she have them?"

Rudd spread his hands. "I don't see why not. For all her peculiarities, she's a remarkably healthy young woman. And we have no reason to believe that this condition—whatever you want to call it—is hereditary. Of course, some part of it might be, in some strange way or other, but on the evidence.

They were married, just before the start of Fabian's vacation, at City Hall. They came back to the office after lunch and told everyone about it. Fabian had already hired a new secretary to replace his wife.

Two months later, Fabian had managed to get her pregnant.

He was amazed at how upset she became, considering the meekness he had induced in her from the beginning of their marriage. He tried to be stern and to tell her he would have none of this nonsense, Dr. Rudd had said there was every reason to expect that she would have a normal baby, and that was that. But it didn't work. He tried gentle humor, cajolery. He even took her in his arms and told her he loved her too much not to want to have a little girl like her. But that didn't work either.

"Fabian, darling," she moaned, "don't you understand? I'm not supposed to have a child. I'm not like other women."

He finally used something he had been saving as a last resort for this emergency. He took a book from the shelf and flipped it open. "I understand," he said. "It's half Dr. Lorington and his nineteenth-century superstitious twaddle, and half a silly little folk poem you read when you were a girl and that made a terrifying impression on you. Well, I can't do anything about Dr. Lorington at this point in your life, but I can do something about that poem. Here. Read this."

She read:

**Birthdays, by B.L. Farjeon**  
*Monday's child is fair of face,*  
*Tuesday's child is full of grace,*  
*Wednesday's child is loving and giving,*

*Thursday's child works hard for a living,  
Friday's child is full of woe,  
Saturday's child has far to go,  
But the child that is born on the Sabbath-day  
Is brave and bonny, and good and gay.*

Wednesday looked up and shook the tears from her eyes. "But I don't understand," she muttered in confusion. "That's not like the one I read."

He squatted beside her and explained patiently. "The one you read had two lines transposed, right? Wednesday's and Thursday's child had the lines that Friday's and Saturday's child have in this version and vice versa. Well, it's an old Devonshire poem originally, and no one knows for sure which version is right. I looked it up, especially for you. I just wanted to show you how silly you were, basing your entire attitude toward life on a couple of verses which could be read either way, not to mention the fact that they were written several centuries before anyone thought of naming you Wednesday."

She threw her arms around him and held on tightly.

"Oh, Fabian, darling! Don't be angry with me. It's just that I'm so—*frightened!*"

Jim Rudd was a little concerned, too. "Oh, I'm pretty sure it will be all right, but I wish you'd waited until I had time to familiarize myself a bit more with the patient. The only thing, Fabe, I'll have to call in a first-rate obstetrician. I'd never dream of handling this myself. I can make him keep it quiet, about Wednesday and all that. But the moment she enters the delivery room, all bets are off. Too many odd things about her—they're bound to be noticed by some nurse, at least."

"Do the best you can," Fabian told him. "I don't want my wife involved in garish publicity, if it can be helped. But if it can't be—well, it's about time Wednesday learned to live in the real world."

The gestation period went along pretty well, with not much more than fairly usual complications. The obstetrical specialist Jim Rudd had suggested was as intrigued as anyone else by Wednesday's oddities, but he told them that the pregnancy was following a monotonously normal course and that the fetus seemed to be developing satisfactorily and completely on schedule.

Wednesday became fairly cheerful again. Outside of her minor fears, Fabian reflected, she was an eminently satisfactory and useful wife. She didn't exactly shine at the parties where they mingled with other married couples from Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby, but she never committed a major faux pas either. She was, in fact, rather well liked, and, as she obeyed him faithfully in every particular, he had no cause at all for complaint.

He spent his days at the office handling the dry, minuscule details of paper work and personnel administration more efficiently than ever before, and his night and weekends with a person he had every reason to believe was the most *different* woman on the face of the Earth. He was very well satisfied.

Near the end of her term, Wednesday did beg for permission to visit Dr. Lorington just once. Fabian had to refuse, regretfully but firmly.

"It's not that I mind his not sending us a congratulatory telegram or wedding gift, Wednesday. I really don't mind that at all. I'm not the kind of man to hold a grudge. But you're in good shape now. You're over most of your silly fears. Lorington would just make them come alive again."

And she continued to do what he said. Without argument, without complaint. She was really quite a good wife. Fabian looked forward to the baby eagerly.

One day, he received a telephone call at the office from the hospital. Wednesday had gone into labor while visiting the obstetrician. She'd been rushed to the hospital and given birth shortly after arrival to a baby girl. Both mother and child were doing well.

Fabian broke out the box of cigars he'd been saving for this occasion. He passed them around the office and received the felicitations of everybody up to and including Mr. Slaughter, Mr. Stark and both

Mr. Slingsbys. Then he took off for the hospital.

From the moment he arrived in the Maternity Pavilion, he knew that something was wrong. It was the way people looked at him, then looked quickly away. He heard a nurse saying behind him: "That must be the father." His lips went tight and dry.

They took him in to see his wife. Wednesday lay on her side, her knees drawn up against her abdomen. She was breathing hard, but seemed to be unconscious. Some-thing about her position made him feel acutely uncomfortable, but he couldn't de-cide exactly what it was.

"I thought this was going to be the natural childbirth method," he said. "She told me she didn't think you'd have to use anesthesia."

"We didn't use anesthesia," the obstetrician told him. "Now let's go to your child, Mr. Balik."

He let them fit a mask across his face and lead him to the glass-enclosed room where the new-born infants lay in their tiny beds. He moved slowly, unwillingly, a shrieking song of incomprehensible disaster building up slowly in his head.

A nurse picked a baby out of a bed that was off in a corner away from the others. As Fabian stumbled closer, he observed with a mad surge of relief that the child looked normal. There was no visible blemish or deformity. Wednesday's daughter would not be a freak.

But the infant stretched its arms out to him. "Oh, Fabian, darling," it lisped through toothless gums in a voice that was all too terrifyingly familiar. "Oh, Fabian, darling, the strangest, most unbelievable thing has happened!"

### Afterword

"**Child's Play**" was written in 1946, and for a long time was almost too popular. In the Sam and Bella Spewack play *Boy Meets Girl*, there's a movie producer who keeps asking a songwriter to write him another "Night and Day." The writer comes up with song after song, and of each one the producer says, "It's good, but it's not another 'Night and Day' " Finally, the songwriter plays a song that knocks the producer out. "What do you call that one?" he asks excitedly. "Night and Day," says the songwriter.

That's how I came to feel about "Child's Play": for years after I wrote it, editors would look at any new story by me and say, "It's good, but you know, it's not another 'Child's Play.'" At last, in desperation, I sat down to write another "Child's Play." I called it "Wednesday's Child."

All right. That's not quite true. At least it's not the whole truth.

First, Sturgeon warned me not to write a sequel. Especially not a sequel to "Child's Play." He felt that one of the worst stories he had ever written was "Butyl and the Breather," a sequel to his first science-fiction story, "Ether Breather," and something John Campbell of *Astounding* had urged him to do. "Sequels," Ted said, "are pulling on an emptied teat."

But, I told him, I didn't want to write a sequel; I just wanted to pick up a provocative little character from "Child's Play" and examine what could have happened to her.

Ted shook his head ominously. "It's a sequel," he said. "And there'll be no real milk there."

That's first. Then, second, I had long been fascinated by Bartolomeo Vanzetti's last speech to the court that sentenced him to be executed. He spoke of a future in which our time would be "but a dim remembering [sic] of a cursed past in which man was wolf to the man."

I wanted to examine—in a story—such a wolf, particularly something I had seen much of, a man who was wolf to a woman.

Then there's third. I have always had an almost irrational hatred of people in Person-nel. I will not go into the whys of it here. I'm not sure the reasons are at all valid. But I do hate them.

And there's a fourth and possibly a fifth. But I finally wrote the story. And it was bounced. My God, how it was bounced!

John Campbell, who had been begging me for something for *Astounding*, handed it back with the comment, "I don't think I've ever disliked—plain disliked—a story more than this one."

Horace Gold of *Galaxy*, for whom I'd been doing most of my work recently, said with a grimace, "No, Phil, not at all. You've finally achieved it: Not just downbeat, but down-beat squared."

And the next editor sent it back with a note that simply said, "*Ptooeey*." I had never got-ten a rejection note like that before. I thought to myself: "I'm on to something really big here!"

It was finally purchased by Leo Margulies for *Fantastic Universe* at one-half cent a word, payable on publication. His editor, Frank Belknap Long, told me he felt the purchase was a mistake. "But Leo wanted your name in the book," he said.

And that might be all that could be said of a story of which I am quite fond, but for one more thing.

A boyish-looking fellow came up to me at a party, someone I had never seen before. "Hey, Phil," he said, "I understand you've just sold a piece to *Fantastic Universe*."

"I have," I told him, "but I've not yet been paid for it."

"That's neither here nor there," he said. "The point is, I've just sold my first professional story to the same magazine. So—let's fight it out on the pages of *Fantastic Universe*, and may the best man win."

"Who the hell are you?" I asked.

"I'm Harlan Ellison," he said.

**Written 1952 / Published 1955**