

## HOLY

"Maria, what can I do for you?" spoke Alexa, the disembodied voice of the Amazon Echo sitting on a kitchen countertop.

"A child," mumbled Maria. Sipping a double espresso from her MIT mini-mug, Maria watched a red fox scurry between bushes beginning to form buds. A second fox darted into view in pursuit of what must have been a female.

From the black cylinder Alexa spoke, "Maria, repeat please."

The southern New Hampshire winter ebbed as did Maria's patience, her maternal instinct rising like sap in a late winter maple tree. Match.com, Mensa mixers, blind dates, nothing had produced a husband to her specifications.

"A child," Maria enunciated.

"Adoption," spoke Alexa.

"No," said Maria.

"I will work on it." Alexa paused, online, listening.

Maria knew the marital statistics, as her neighbor, retired Professor Josiah Bell, confirmed one night over dinner. His residence and hers were two of five historic dwellings off a gravel lane that pierced the virgin forest a few miles north of Seabrook, New Hampshire. Josiah's cabin was graced with icons, santos, ancient psalters and Qur'ans, brass statues of Buddha and the Hindu pantheon, a sharp contrast to the black, white and chrome labyrinth of Maria's interactive desktops, workstations, screens and bookcases bulging with printouts.

A Caribbean-born woman with an M.D. and Ph.D., Maria felt calendar pages turning in this her 39th year. Tenured professor of Bioinformatics, Maria yearned for a miracle, but she'd abandoned prayer in the eighth grade and embraced science. So much more sensible, belief worthy. Because science was not fiction. It was truth in revelation.

She'd conceived how a database of 50 million x-rays and MRI scans could train a machine to read inner-body images far more accurately than any human radiologist. Her Radiobot was displacing that occupation with robotic perfection, earning her fame and wealth.

"Maria, IVF," spoke Alexa.

"In vitro fertilization," Maria nodded.

"Confirming. Contact Dr. Phee. I sent the form."

Maria rebooted her breakfast nook pc. The questionnaire from Child by Choice, Dr. Phee's renowned fertility clinic, required 240 genetic choices to be marked from A to E - ranging from A meaning Definitely to D meaning Definitely Not, E for No Preference.

Maria scanned the list starting with eye color, height and skin tone, followed by such traits as personality and leadership versus followership potential. She elected to leave male chromosomal foreplay to Dr. Phee's discretion after scanning her stellar bio. Maria faced Alexa and said, "Mark the whole E."

"Got it," spoke Alexa.

Alexa linked with Dr. Phee's Siri. In the mysterious way digital things communicate, Alexa forwarded Maria's payment details but no completed questionnaire.

"240 answers missing," Siri chided.

"Holy," spoke Alexa.

"Holy?" queried Siri.

"Holy," spoke Alexa.

"Got it," Siri coded.

Siri perplexed the Child by Choice nurse by speaking "Holy - H O L Y. That is all the customer seeks."

The nurse winced but asked no more of the voice from the cloud that never erred. The nurse walked hesitantly to Dr. Phee's office, where he handed her the form marked with a single word. Dr. Phee stared and nodded. Aware of who Maria was, Dr. Phee took this as a sign of trust and challenge, and she set about to concoct DNA in sperm format to fulfill the specification. For sixteen years male faith leaders had secretly sent samples to Dr. Phee's sperm bank, based on pledges their DNA would be pseudonymized and used to offer a choice of devotion over disbelief. The Dalai Lama, a Coptic and a Roman pope, imams, rabbis, a Kogi mama, Evangelical and Zoroastrian priests - many had built the faith bank Dr. Phee kept hyper-secure in a freezer.

Maria began a prescribed regimen to prepare for the extraction, everything science dictated for fertility success. Daily 5 a.m. rump shots from a huge needle, estrogen prescriptions to increase the uterine lining.

Josiah drove Maria in his pick-up truck to and from the April 5th extraction, done robotically at the north Boston clinic. It was brief and relatively painless.

"What's next?" he asked.

"Conception in the lab, then the implantation."

"Happy to take you," he offered.

Dr. Phee called four days later to report the extraction had provided seven eggs and four were A or A-. "Girl or boy?" asked the doctor.

"Surprise me," said Maria.

"Your request - a first," said Dr. Phee. "Let's see what we can create."

The implantation was outpatient. Anesthesia quelled a painful annunciation. In the recovery area Josiah told Maria she looked beatific.

The critical first month passed without miscarriage. She knew she was pregnant, but it did not show or really feel. Clinical measurements transmitted through Alexa gave statistically satisfactory numbers.

A June ultrasound revealed a shadowy shape. Was that an arm? A head in formation?

In July Maria's body craved pistachio ice cream, cheeseburgers and chocolate milk.

When the August semester began, she explained the protrusion to her honors class - "A virgin birth it will be."

As leaves blazed in glory, desiccated and fell, she suffered headaches, double-digit weight gain and swelling feet. Staff at the clinic's affiliated hospital, a 45-minute drive from Seabrook, took protein readings that confirmed preeclampsia, but they assured Maria that medical science had virtually eliminated the risks if she were constantly monitored and birth occurred in the High-Risk Unit. A device linked to Alexa transmitted blood pressure readings to the hospital's chatbot. Induction was scheduled for January 17.

At Thanksgiving dinner in his cabin Josiah presented a bassinette that gently rocked and played new age music. He agreed to be godfather.

She spent December at home grading essays. She had Alexa order baby clothes, an infant car seat, pumping accessories, a post-partum bra.

On December 24 Maria was watching a wingless angel talk with Jimmy Stewart on a snowy bridge in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Outside, a Nor'easter hurled dense snow sideways. Winds howled. The cabin shook. The movie was interrupted - "All roads closed - emergency."

She rose from the sofa to get a second hot chocolate and felt water leak to the floor. She yelled, "Alexa, call Josiah."

In two minutes Josiah was at the door, truck idling. There were chains on the tires, as though he'd known. As Maria moaned, he focused on what little could be seen through a windshield barraged by white flakes. The gravel helped, but when they reached the highway, Josiah saw a Lexus spin into a ditch, headlights now aimed skyward. A Prius ahead inched forward, tail lights flashing. Maria groaned like an animal in agony.

To the right Josiah saw candles glowing through the Church of the Loving Waters. Josiah had visited a couple times at the invitation of his friend Gabriella. Praying she would be there, he slid the truck down the church driveway to a stop at the entrance.

The greeter led them along the left aisle to a space behind the nave. The preacher was reciting Psalm 30, verse 5 - "Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning." Gabriella nodded from the fourth pew, arose, and gently grasped Maria's right arm.

"Boil water in that," Gabriella ordered a startled acolyte as they entered a parlor next to the kitchen and Gabriella pointed to a pan used to make spaghetti for AA chapter meetings. A sofa became a bed where Maria lay on a tablecloth and was covered with sheets recently washed after overnights of domestic violence refugees.

"A doctor!" wailed Maria.

"Gabriella's a midwife, sweetie. You're in good hands," Josiah comforted. "I called the clinic to send an ambulance," not adding he'd left a message with the chatbot, no human on phone duty.

"Ask my mother to join us," barked Gabriella to another acolyte, one who'd played a shepherd during the afternoon pageant featuring live animals. A sheep had deposited an offering by the altar when the narrator said, "Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy."

"Maria, deep breath now," Gabriella began a liturgy as ancient as human language. She lay hands upon Maria's belly where inside the unborn child's blood mingled with her mother's. The midwife felt the head in good position, but without betraying alarm sensed the cord twisted around the unborn's neck. Gabriella hummed softly, "To everything, turn, turn, turn...." She massaged Maria's abdomen, as though gently kneading dough.

The organist played and the choir sang, "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given."

Maria shrieked the pain of every birthing mother.

"Deep breath, then three big pushes," commanded Gabriella.

"And heaven and nature sing" streamed through the church.

"God, God!" cried Maria.

As the soprano began O Holy Night, Maria pushed harder. Dark brown hair surfaced.

"Deep breath, three pushes," commanded Gabriella.

Maria's screams flooded the sanctuary. As the soprano approached the high G, Maria was amid a second push. Her howl drowned out the soprano's crack on the climactic tone, a bestowal of perfectly timed grace.

Delivery completed into Gabriella's waiting hands that knew the newborn would be slippery as an eel. No breath.

Gabriella ordered the acolyte to take water meant for rinsing the communion wafer plate and pour some directly into her mouth. She swirled it, then blew a cold spray into the newborn's face. The shock summoned forth breath, and new life came to this world.

Gabriella cradled the infant's neck with her thumb and forefinger, letting the balance of her hand rest under the child's shoulders and placed the baby with Gabriella's wrinkle-faced mother, who attended with an outstretched apron retrieved from the kitchen drawer. Gabriella tied the cord in two places, cleansed the infant with oil used for christenings, then reached her right hand inside Maria to draw out the placenta and evacuated what felt like a bag of shot. An ounce of blood drained. The flow ceased.

Maria's eyes asked without words.

"A beautiful girl," answered Gabriella.

Maria lay spent. Blood was cleaned, pinkish water drained. Gabriella directed the acolyte to wrap warm towels about Maria's feet while Gabriella washed the new mother with cool water and lay a cold cloth across her forehead. Gabriella felt Maria's pulse, calm, steady.

The child squinted open large brown eyes, having left the waters of her mother for a lifetime of breath and separation. She did not squall but seemed to radiate an understanding of her presence.

Carols suspended, the congregation's silence begged revelation.

Maria nodded.

Josiah accompanied Gabriella's mother into the sanctuary, as she carried the cooing infant through the central aisle.

A young boy shouted, "Look, hair!"

The soprano began, "Silent night, holy night." The organist joined, then the entire assembly, "All is calm, all is bright. Round yon virgin...."

It would be decades before Maria would know her daughter's destiny, would witness her miraculous offering, a sacrifice to divert humankind from the abyss, fusing science and faith as never imagined, restoring humankind's connection with the Creator.

But tonight was not about that, not about Easter, or Passover, or Eid al-Adha. Tonight was not about the brokenness of the world. Tonight was about hope. Tonight was holy.

Joseph J Dehner

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