

21. Our Share of Miracles

Lingarn set out on his morning rounds of the compound, starting at the top of the mansion, with Dr. Albert Theodore Knapp's office and the other executive offices, those of Dr. Nostran Shesseribourne and Dr. Barbara Leonides, and working his way downward through the entire structure, crisscrossing, so that he passed through every open passageway, entered every common area, and was able to look into many rooms at random as he went. Two soldiers accompanied him, keeping silent, walking several paces behind, and he usually forgot they were even there.

There was, as usual, nothing interesting to see. And that, in Lingarn's judgment, was a good thing. The guards were at their stations or making their rounds. People scheduled for morning blood work were beginning to converge on the blood testing laboratories. Other people were in the main cafeteria eating breakfast and talking. When Lingarn performed surprise entries, he found several people still in bed, asleep and others dressing, reading, or conversing with their roommates.

One change that Lingarn expected to find came at the end of his tour, in the deepest sublevel of the compound. He was intending to look in on a room in which a pair bonding trial between a STOP and a GO subject had been instituted that morning. The trial had been Dr. Shesseribourne's idea, and Lingarn had found no reason to object to it.

Lingarn put his face to the small glass window in the door of the holding cell in which, he knew, a man and a woman had been relocated, having been removed from the separate cells in which they had previously been imprisoned, and were now being confined together. There, in the middle of the room, he saw them, seated at a small table, talking. And they were holding hands!

Lingarn drew back from the window, without, he was sure, having been seen by either party, for he had no wish to interfere with their tête-à-tête. The man, he knew, was Peter Stammos. Stammos, as Lingarn was well aware, wasn't dangerous and could have been released, if not before, then certainly when Passage started. The only reason that Lingarn kept Stammos confined was to separate him from the rest of the population of Paradise, that is, from Lucinda. Now, Lingarn felt an unaccustomed rush of something like pleasure when he considered that Stammos, already holding hands with his new companion, might well be taking himself out of the picture, as far as Lucinda was concerned!

As for the girl who sat in the room with Stammos, she was a bit of mystery to Lingarn. Without explanation or other comment, she had been delivered—as it happened, the day after Passage had begun—under orders from Donnelly himself that she should be confined but not harmed. Lingarn did not construe GO as harmful. So, in his perfunctory way, he had simply added the new arrival to the subject population for GO, locked her up, and dismissed her from his mind.

Well, thought Lingarn, making his way back down the corridor, to take the elevator back up to the main levels of Paradise, dimly aware of the two soldiers shadowing him as he walked, let them fall in love! Little Lolita and the old geezer! And leave Lucinda to me!

Back in her room, where she habitually stayed, still hoping, by keeping out of circulation, to avert an encounter with Lingarn, Lucinda puzzled over how she could contact Dr. Shesseribourne. She had tried to take the elevator up to his offices, but the soldiers stopped her, asserting that she didn't have proper clearance. She thought it strange, but the telephone number for his office was no longer accessible, either; when she dialed it, she heard a recording advising

her that, if she wanted to reach that number, she should “apply for authorization,” whatever that might mean.

Then, she had an idea. Lucinda remembered that Dr. Shesseribourne liked the picture shows!

An enormous library of movies was available on disk for individual viewing on computer terminals and television screens; but, as the designers of Paradise recognized, some people would still enjoy the opportunity of sitting in a hall with other people, looking up at a show projected on a big screen. Therefore, the main house incorporated a small movie theater, which could accommodate about a hundred people, with floors that gently sloped upwards towards the back and padded seats that flipped up, like the ones in real theaters. Lucinda remembered that Dr. Shesseribourne came to these shows several nights a week. Of course, it depended on what was on the bill—but, pretty soon, Lucinda felt certain he would show his face.

Lucinda had no idea of Dr. Shesseribourne’s tastes in cinema, so she couldn’t pick and choose the movies she would attend. She simply had to check out all the shows, until Dr. Shesseribourne appeared.

The first night, entering the Paradise Cinema Palace, as the theater was called, the name spelled out in a marquis populated by hundreds of white and colored bulbs, Lucinda sat through nearly half of what, for her, was an intensely boring action thriller, filled with gunfights, car chases, martial arts contests, and other things she regarded as nonsense. The show was well attended, exclusively, it seemed by young men from different constituencies in the population, several of whom were paying as much attention to her as to the movie. Lucinda finally got up and left, realizing that it was extremely unlikely that Dr. Shesseribourne would show up for the show any later than it already was.

The second night, they were playing the Claude Rains, Bette Davis, Paul Heinreid movie, “Deception,” a classic melodrama from the forties that Lucinda actually wanted to see. She arrived early and took her seat in the back row, at the far side of the hall, so she could observe everyone who came in. A mixed crowd was attending this show, Lucinda noted, as groups of men and women, of all ages, including several romantic couples, began straggling in and finding their seats. And, there, entering the hall and coming down the aisle, a lovely young woman on his arm, walked the tall, thin, salt and pepper haired figure of Dr. Shesseribourne! But, no—his face! Dr. Shesseribourne’s face was deeply worn with worry, wrinkled, and drawn, thought Lucinda. His expression was dour and weary. This man’s face was nearly smooth, almost free from lines. But, stranger still, he bore an expression of contentment, even quiet joy. Lucinda doubted if it could be he—but it was, she finally realized for certain, noting his distinctive height and his hawkish profile, it was!

Lucinda watched as Dr. Shesseribourne and his date sat down across the aisle from where Lucinda sat, about two thirds of the way to the rear of the tiny hall. She saw Dr. Shesseribourne and the girl break into an animated conversation, though, of course, she couldn’t hear anything of what they were saying. Lucinda felt like a detective or a spy, lying in wait for Dr. Shesseribourne, unsuspected, in the back of the room, and it made her smile. At that moment, the lights were dimmed and, simultaneously, the movie began on the screen up front. Glancing back at Dr. Shesseribourne, she watched as he put his arm around the woman his was sitting with, and the two of them put their heads together, like lovers.

Should I interrupt? Lucinda asked herself. Before Dr. Shesseribourne had shown up, she had felt tense and desperate. She had assumed that, if and when he appeared, she would change her seat, settle in next to him, and immediately appeal to him for help on Peter’s behalf. Lucinda

hadn't foreseen that Dr. Shesseribourne would be on a date! Somehow, now that he was here, and Lucinda knew that she was going to have the opportunity to speak to him, she relaxed in her chair, and her sense of urgency vanished. Besides, it seemed wrong to disturb the couple and ruin their chance to enjoy the movie. Better to approach Dr. Shesseribourne when he was on his way out, she thought, after the show. Lucinda was not the only one, she knew, who was suffering in this terrible place. It was a small mercy to be afforded a couple of hours, close to someone you care for, forgetting the troubles of the day, or trying to. A small mercy, perhaps, but not one she would willingly deprive him of.

Incredibly, or so it seemed to Lucinda, Lucinda found herself captivated by the movie, losing herself for a couple of hours in the hopeless, romantic troubles of the love triangle on the screen, in which jealousy and passion, deceit and murder unraveled and destroyed the lives of Claude Rains, Bette Davis, and Paul Heinreid, and even partly forgetting the troubles of her day.

When the movie finished, the lights were turned up, and Lucinda blinked, accustoming her eyes to the sudden illumination in the hall. By the time she could see clearly again, Dr. Shesseribourne and his young friend were already walking up the aisle, toward the door, and Lucinda rose from her seat and walked toward them.

"Dr. Shesseribourne?" said Lucinda, approaching him from the side, as he neared the exit.

Dr. Shesseribourne stopped walking and turned to see who had addressed him

"Dr. Milne!" Dr. Shesseribourne exclaimed. "Lucinda! I haven't seen you in—weeks!"

He paused to look at her face, a smile turning up his lips.

"You are looking well, my dear," Dr. Shesseribourne said. "Very well! As a matter of fact, I've never seen you so lovely and so radiant! Oh! Pardon me—allow me to introduce Beth

Corson. Beth, meet Dr. Lucinda Milne. Lucinda is an Oxford scholar. She was spearheading the cryptographic work on Roger Bacon's manuscripts."

"Hi," said Beth, shaking Lucinda's hand. "Did you enjoy the movie? We thought it was great!"

"Yes," answered Lucinda, "as a matter of fact, I did!"

Beth was a woman of average height, but, standing next to the towering Dr. Shesseribourne, she looked petite. She was, Lucinda noted, a slender, shapely woman with reddish blonde hair that fell to her shoulders, creamy white skin, and lucid blue eyes. Lucinda was frankly amazed to find Dr. Shesseribourne in the company of such a beautiful, outgoing woman—and one so young! But then she looked up at Dr. Shesseribourne, his face not only smooth and full of color, but with a smile that seemed both tranquil and content. This was not the man she had known only weeks before!

"Dr. Shesseribourne," Lucinda continued, "you look incredible, yourself! Pardon me, sir, but I can't help but observe an amazing change in you. Is this all Beth's doing? Beth," Lucinda, went on, turning to Dr. Shesseribourne's companion, "Dr. Shesseribourne has always been my friend. And friends are hard to come by, in this place. But we've all been working under such a terrible strain, Dr. Shesseribourne, I think sometimes, more than any of us. I can't tell you how happy it makes me to find him so happy! So vibrant! So—"

"Young?" Beth put in.

"Yes!" answered Lucinda. "He looks so young! It's just amazing!"

Dr. Shesseribourne and Beth looked at each other, curiously, then back at Lucinda.

"Lucinda," said Dr. Shesseribourne, "could it be that you don't know what's going on here yet? That you don't know what's been happening to the people in Paradise?"

“What’s going on here?” echoed Lucinda. “I know we’re being tested for something, of course! I’ve been staying in my room. I haven’t really been out among the population much. I’m not sure what you mean....”

“We’d better go somewhere and sit down and talk,” said Dr. Shesseribourne, turning toward the door. “Let’s stop in at Le Chapeau Rouge and see if they’re still serving coffee these days.”

They walked down the corridor and rounded the corner. Fortunately, the café was still in business, as the presence of two soldiers, stationed on either side of the front doorway, seemed to attest. They walked past the soldiers, who paid no attention to them, and entered the softly lit, pleasantly airy surroundings of the mock bistro. There were a handful of tables occupied by couples or small groups of people. The establishment had been reduced to self-service, and a large coffee dispenser, china creamer, sugar bowl, pitcher of ice-water, and a couple of bins filled with muffins and cookies sat on the counter, together with a rack of mugs, water glasses, small plates, serviettes, and cutlery. Each of the three of them picked up a mug, filled it with coffee, and they brought their drinks to an empty table by the side of the room.

Lucinda looked across the table at the handsome couple sitting with her. Dr. Shesseribourne still had his thick hair shot with gray, combed up and back, adding height to his already towering stature. But, apart from that telltale sign, Lucinda would have taken him for a man in his early forties. Beth appeared to be a radiant woman in her late twenties. What’s going on here? Lucinda asked herself. She suddenly felt a little lightheaded, overcome with a sense of the unreality of this encounter.

“Lucinda,” said Dr. Shesseribourne, “if you really don’t know what’s been going on here, you really have been out of touch! The experiment we’ve all been forced to participate in is

underway. You know that. But you don't seem to have realized what that experiment is! Everyone in Paradise was exposed to either a rejuvenation agent or a senescence agent. That's what happened when you were locked in that assembly hall on the day Passage began. It was delivered in the matrix of an odorless, invisible gas."

"Rejuvenation or senescence!" cried Lucinda. "The Baconian formulae! Of course! I don't know why I didn't realize it myself. That would have to be the test they were running! What else could it be?"

"Exactly," answered Dr. Shesseribourne, leaning forward, looking Lucinda deep in her eyes. "The point is, my dear, the test is working! Do you understand? The people in Paradise are starting to grow older or younger, depending on which agent they received. And you," he added, taking Beth's hand, "and Beth, and I, were all given the rejuvenation formula!"

"You mean—" Lucinda blurted out, suddenly remembering Lingarn's promise that the inhaler he was administering to her "should have a very favorable effect."

"That's right!" said Dr. Shesseribourne. "We're getting younger! Every day!"

Lucinda gripped the arms of her chair, feeling her lightheadedness turning to dizziness. Was she really younger? Her mind shot back over the last couple of weeks. Dr. Shesseribourne's elucidation would explain so much. Her restored enthusiasm for her reading, for example. And her new feeling of hope, for Peter, for herself! And then there were her roommates, Nora Bundling and Alma Corson. Lucinda had thought that Nora had seemed like a new woman and that Alma had appeared worn out, disconsolate, beaten. Lucinda had put these transformations down to changes in attitude. Now she knew they were being caused by something more profound.

And, again, what of herself? She was truly becoming a girl again?

“I almost can’t believe it,” answered Lucinda. “But it must be true. One look at your face would convince anyone of that!”

“And at yours,” said Dr. Shesseribourne. “Of course, you were young and very beautiful even before the treatment. But there’s a new bloom in your cheek, a new fire in your eyes. I have a theory about that....”

“A theory?” asked Lucinda.

“Rejuvenation isn’t exactly as simple as turning back the hands on a clock,” Dr. Shesseribourne explained, “or turning the pages of a wall calendar back. In fact, it’s an incredibly complex process. The viral bolus is working, that’s for sure. But what, precisely, is it doing? I think that the transformations that are being effected are creating people of a different kind than have ever been seen before on this earth!”

Lucinda looked at him, questioningly.

“Aging is not as straightforward a phenomenon as it seems to be on initial consideration,” Dr. Shesseribourne, continued, responding to Lucinda’s unspoken query. “Without going into an extensive discussion of the complexities, let me just say that there was always more than one way to answer the question, ‘How old are you?’ Of course, there’s your chronological age, the number of years you’ve lived. Obviously, nothing can alter that—it’s simply a matter of the passage of time. Then, there’s your biological age, how much age has affected the different systems of your body, including, especially, how many age-related decrements you have. Finally, there’s your virtual age, how well you function at a given time in relation to the parameters that change with age.

“The rejuvenation treatment obviously works to reverse biological aging,” Dr. Shesseribourne continued, stopping for a moment to take a sip of his coffee. “The target

restoration age was about twenty. That means that, when the rejuvenation process is complete, the subjects who received the treatment should have, essentially, the bodies they had when they were about twenty years old. But, you see, Lucinda, all the changes in the brain and the mind that occurred during the course of life are not undone because of the restoration of the strength and completeness of the nervous system! You can see this most obviously from your memories. Even though you are biologically younger, you retain the memories of the older person whom you were before the transformation. Similarly, the other powers of mind that you developed, the powers of reason and imagination, for example, are not obliterated by biological rejuvenation. Your virtual age, therefore, the level at which you function, becomes the result of a complex interplay between biologically youthful systems and mature neural and cerebral systems.”

“You’re saying that we’re being transformed into something we never actually were!” Lucinda said. “Something—better, if I understand you!” She paused, turning his words over in her mind. “Let me see if I follow this,” Lucinda continued. “Let’s say that, at age sixty, a man, with a great talent for music, learned how to play the violin. If he took the rejuvenation treatment, he would be biologically restored to the age of a twenty year old. But he wouldn’t forget his violin lessons—or the transports of feeling that informed his musical expression! Only now, he would be able to control the muscles of his fingers and hands much better, his ears would be sharper, and he could sustain the physical energy and the retentive capacity needed to execute a major concerto. In other words, he would have become something he never was at age twenty or at age sixty. He would be a kind of super version of himself!”

Dr. Shesseribourne and Beth looked at each other, then they both looked at Lucinda.

“Wow,” said Beth. “That really explains it. Better than you did, Nostrand!”

“Yes,” said Dr. Shesseribourne. “I agree. Your example is an excellent one. Only, I would go even further. We don’t actually know what the wedding of a biologically young nervous system with mature neural pathways will produce. It could even result in an effulgence of neural activity. Brainstorms, my dear! Minds on fire with new ideas!”

“That’s amazing!” said Lucinda. “Somehow, I feel you must be right. I have been experiencing certain—changes.” She paused, suddenly remembering the business that had prompted her to search for Dr. Shesseribourne. “But, doctor,” Lucinda continued, “I didn’t run into you by accident tonight. I was looking for you. I wanted to ask for your help.”

“My help?” said Dr. Shesseribourne. “I have so little authority, unfortunately. Even Dr. Knapp is taking orders now. A man has come in from the outside and taken control of the entire installation. But, if there’s anything I can do....”

“It’s about Peter Stamos,” Lucinda told him. “I’d like to know if you know how he’s doing. And, also, I wanted to ask if you could do something about getting him released? I can’t imagine why they’d want to hold him in a cell, especially now that the project is finished. We’re all prisoners here, anyway. So, why not let him just mix with everybody else?”

“I do have news about Peter,” answered Dr. Shesseribourne. “For your sake, Lucinda, I tried to have him released a couple of weeks ago. But this man I told you about—the one who came to Paradise, to take over—refused to consider the matter. I agree with you. I have no idea why he’s being confined. It doesn’t make any sense.” He paused and drank from his cup. “But I did do something for Peter,” Dr. Shesseribourne continued. “It was a rather strange favor, and I hope you won’t mind too much. But it was all I could do; so I did it.”

“What did you do?” asked Lucinda. “How could I possibly mind?”

“Peter had been held in isolation for weeks,” Dr. Shesseribourne said. “Because there was no way to secure his release, I arranged for him to get a roommate, a young woman.” He paused, then continued, “Now, at least, he has some companionship.”

Lucinda closed her eyes. Somehow, she seemed to know that this development meant that the chapter of her life dealing with Peter was definitely closing. And she understood Dr. Shesseribourne’s concern over her feelings. But she realized that she didn’t mind, not at all. The important thing was that Peter should be as comfortable as possible.

Abruptly, Lucinda had a terrible thought. She opened her eyes wide.

“But, Peter,” she said, “he must have taken one of the treatments, too! Which one did he get? Rejuvenation or senescence?”

“I’m sorry,” answered Dr. Shesseribourne, slowly. “That was the other reason I wanted him to have a companion. Someone to care for him as he went into—physical decline.”

Lucinda was heartbroken. She had an image of Peter, his thick blond hair, his shining blue eyes, his infectious smile, and a memory of his strong arms around her, replaced suddenly by a mental picture of a man with a sunken, unhappy face, his body weak and bent with age. “And what worse fate may come,” she thought, remembering Yeats’ poem about the losses of old age and the grave that the poet said lay in store—for she realized with overwhelming clarity that Peter’s death would certainly follow soon.

“Oh, doctor!” cried Lucinda. “Then there’s nothing we can do to save him?”

“Only a miracle can save him now,” Dr. Shesseribourne answered. Then, taking Beth’s hand on the tabletop, he added, “And I think we three have had our share of miracles in Paradise.”