

Little Stars

By T. E. Stazyk

I.

Diane MacGuire closed the door to her office and pulled her cell phone out of her jacket pocket. It had been vibrating all morning and she knew that the news would not be good.

She had just wrapped up one of her regular Monday morning staff meetings. Every Monday, she assembled her staff of seventeen at seven-thirty. Over orange juice, coffee, fruit and yogurt she would grill her direct reports on what they were doing. Or, as it more often seemed to Diane, not doing. She was the youngest executive vice president at Bapco Enterprises, the multinational contracting company, and the only woman in top management. She liked to be fully informed about every detail of what was happening in her corner of the Bapco empire.

A glance at the screen on her cell phone confirmed her fears. All of the missed calls had been from one number. Her son Vienna's school. She wondered what he might have gotten up to this time to warrant calls every thirty minutes for the past three hours. She instinctively glanced at the television in her office that continually played CNBC, subconsciously expecting to see that Vienna had triggered an event which might make headline news. It was probably only a matter of time, she felt, before that happened. There were many childcare givers and teachers who bore permanent scars as a result of having incurred Vienna's displeasure.

She sat down at her desk and rubbed her eyes. She sure did have it all. A fantastic career, good looks, power, stock options, a Mercedes SUV and an incipient mass murderer for a six-year-old son. Managing a global empire was a pleasant and relaxing diversion compared to handling Vienna and she reflected, as she did almost daily, that he was the single biggest stress factor in her life.

Second, of course was John, her husband. In Diane's mind, John's degree of responsibility for the Vienna problem was increasing almost as rapidly as her disposable income. Of course initially the blame was allocated at fifty-fifty. One egg plus one sperm equalled one Vienna. But in Diane's mind, John's share of the blame had gone up when he left them, and increased further when he moved to India to seek enlightenment; which, Diane realized, was the same as being out of the reach of the child support enforcement apparatus. John's share of the blame reached the ninety-nine percent level when Diane reflected that he had no doubt passed on to Vienna his hereditary laziness, emotional instability, irreverence and general distastefulness. After all, what had she done? She had only been the buffer to make sure that Vienna went to the best schools and always got the best toys and clothes and technology.

It hadn't always been so bad. Diane and John had been deliriously happy when they had gotten married seven years earlier. Both of them were slightly past the average age at which couples generally marry, but their maturity and financial security were cited as factors in favor of a successful partnership. People also thought that John's laid-back nonconformity was a good balance to Diane's relentless drive and attention to detail. At that time Diane was enjoying a successful career with a venture capital firm and Dr. John MacGuire had a very profitable cosmetic and reconstructive surgery practice.

As a result of their affluence, they were able to take a month-long honeymoon during which they toured the capitals of Europe. As best they could ascertain, their son was conceived in the capital of Austria and was named accordingly. Diane's father, from whom she thought she had inherited her practicality, did not approve of the name. He had hoped that Vienna would be named Stephen, after him. He showed his disapproval by pointing out that the German word for 'Vienna' was 'Weiner' and how did Diane think *that* would make him feel when he reached puberty? He would also, while holding the infant Vienna, say shocking things to him such as,

“Well, my little man. Aren’t you glad your mommy and daddy didn’t do the wild thing in Dusseldorf?”

Vienna’s advent to the world (through a scarless incision thanks to his father’s oversight of the process) was a joyous occasion for John and Diane and it almost broke her heart when she dropped him off at the day care center, and went back to work three days after the birthing process.

For most of his infancy, Vienna had been remarkable as a child who developed very quickly. He was walking before he was one and was talking soon after his first birthday. He was healthy, active and very precocious and Diane and John attributed his many qualities to their superior genetic contributions and their socio-economic status which ensured that Vienna was able to go to the best day care and private schools available.

Everything was idyllic for the first four years of Vienna’s life. John and Diane would take him along on their adventure vacations to exotic destinations such as the Galapagos Islands.

“Do you think that’s wise?” Diane’s father would ask.

“What is wise?”

“Taking him on such long trips to the third world.”

“Of course. It’s important for him to gain new experiences. We can’t put our lives on hold just because we have a baby. And anyway, we’re flying first class and taking the nanny with us.”

By the time he was four, little Vienna had more stamps in his passport than most adults.

But then things started to go wrong. John lost two malpractice cases and he began to lose interest in his practice. His billings dropped off precipitously and Diane realized that the amount of joy John generated by his presence was proving to be intimately and directly proportional to the amount of money he brought into the household. Also, Vienna began to develop a temper and to demand increasing amounts of attention. And he developed unique ways to get attention if it were not forthcoming. One of his more imaginative techniques involved using the products of various bodily

functions as projectiles. John declared he couldn't take it and moved out, although he continued to see Diane and Vienna. A year later he had discovered religion and moved to California to join a new church. Tired of Diane's importuning and imprecations, he had left for India three months ago.

So that was why Diane always got the phone calls, and with some trepidation, she pressed the call button on her cell phone.

"Olympia School for Gifted Children, please hold," said a merry voice at the other end.

Dianne listened to an orchestral version of half of *Burning Love* and was well into *Bad, Bad, Leroy Brown*, when the voice came back, jarring her out of her reflections. She had been thinking about the people who decided which songs should appear on telephone answering systems. Who were they? And why did a kindergarten require a switchboard? "Olympia School for Gifted Children, how may I direct your call?"

"Uh, Mrs. Trotter, please."

"Thank you."

Diane heard the extension ring and heavy voice announced, "Fiona Trotter."

"Ah, Mrs. Trotter, this is Diane MacGuire."

There was a long silence. "I've been trying to reach you all morning."

"I'm sorry. I was tied up in a meeting."

"I know, Mrs. MacGuire." Mrs. Trotter was one of those people who could convey messages wordlessly, even over the phone.

"Is everything OK? Is Vienna all right?"

"Vienna is fine. One of our student teachers is in the emergency room, however."

"Oh my God. What happened?"

Mrs. Trotter's voice suddenly became warmer and more confidential, "Actually, it's partly our fault. We hadn't warned her. She tried to get

Vienna to take off his hat. You know how that upsets him. She didn't know better and made an issue of it."

"What did he do?"

"She made the mistake of shaking her finger at him. I can't repeat all of what he said, but he bit her finger. Really hard. He said he wanted to bite it off and the nasty part was what he was going to do with it afterward. The poor girl is in shock."

"Did he? You know?"

"No, fortunately. It's just badly lacerated."

"I'm so sorry."

"The girl has spoken to our attorney. You know that's standard procedure."

"But that's really not necessary."

"Will you sign a release to that effect? You know it's the law."

"Yes. I will," Diane sighed.

Under the state's recently promulgated child welfare laws, when a child injured a caregiver, the presumption was that the caregiver had provoked the child unjustly and was therefore responsible for his or her injuries and also responsible for any emotional trauma the child had suffered. The student teacher was talking to the lawyer to prepare her defense should Diane bring charges under the law. But Diane knew that the poor woman had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time and it didn't seem fair to ruin her career over it. After all, an encounter with Vienna probably had put her off a teaching career anyway.

"You know, Mrs. MacGuire," Mrs. Trotter said, returning to her *ex cathedra* voice, "I think that it is time we had a little meeting."

Diane had been dreading this inevitable denouement to a Vienna school experience. Glancing at her calendar and knowing full well the agenda of Mrs. Trotter's intended meeting, she said, "Do we really need to meet?"

Mrs. Trotter immediately lightened, happy at what looked like a reprieve from having to be a heavy. "Well, if you don't feel the need, I

suppose we could dispense with a meeting. It's just that we have come to the conclusion that Vienna's unique needs could probably be better met by another school. Effective immediately."

Diane decided to make it easy on Mrs. Trotter. "OK, fine. But I think his fees are paid through the end of the year."

"No problem. I'll have the accounting department send you a refund for the unused portion. Uh. When will you be picking him up?"

"Could you keep him for the rest of the day while I try to find some other arrangements?"

Mrs. Trotter, having been given one benison, decided not to push her luck and said, "Fine."

Diane switched off the phone and leaned back in her chair. Her only short-term recourse was to put Vienna into the company's day care center. Technically he was too old and had in fact been permanently banned from the center a few years ago. But there were times when being an executive vice president had its advantages and she decided to pull rank. She asked her assistant to get the Vice President of Human Resources on the line.

Diane's assistant, Beth, had been with her since she joined Bapco and was fully, if not willingly, aware of all things Vienna. She could tell when Diane was stressed over business matters as opposed to Vienna issues and today Diane's voice and manner had Vienna written all over them. She walked in to Diane's office after Diane had finished her call to HR. "Vienna?" she asked.

Dianne nodded. "Expelled."

"Again? They gonna take him downstairs?"

"Yeah, but its going to cost me all my markers with HR. I've got to find another place."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks."

II.

Later that afternoon, Beth told Diane she had found some possible schools for Vienna. Diane told her it would have to wait. She had a conference call and a meeting with the marketing people.

“OK, I’ll just leave my notes on your desk.”

Diane returned to her office well after five and found Beth’s list. Next to each school’s name were notations from Beth such as “Sounds really nice,” “Probably too far,” “Not 365 days.” One comment caught her eye, “Weird people. Behavioral problem kids welcomed.” That was good news. Of course, the comment about “weird people” gave her pause, but you couldn’t have everything. And anyway, they had to be weird if they wanted to deal with kids with behavioral problems. She decided to give them a try. The name of the place was the Little Stars House of Children and the contact was a Dr. Kreckstein. Diane liked the name, and the idea that the place was run by a doctor. Maybe that’s why Beth thought they were weird. She tapped the details on Little Star House of Children into her palm pilot and left the office to pick up Vienna.

A relieved Mrs. Trotter conducted Vienna to Diane’s silver Mercedes SUV as she pulled into the school’s driveway. Vienna’s behavior in such situations never ceased to amaze Diane. Any normal child’s actions would reflect the fact that they knew something was wrong. He should be cowering behind Mrs. Trotter. But no. He was striding well ahead of her toward the car. His baseball cap on at its usually jaunty angle. Head high and smiling at her. Under such circumstances, Diane realized the futility of getting tough. He would probably laugh at her if she chastised him.

She could feel Mrs. Trotter’s smirk of superiority as she catalogued yet another of Diane’s failures as a mother. Diane was overcome by the desire to give Vienna the spanking of his life, right there in the driveway. It might get his attention, plus it would show Mrs. Trotter that she wasn’t completely ineffective. At the same time, though, Mrs. Trotter would probably have

immediately called the police. Having Vienna confiscated by Child Welfare was sometimes a pleasant thought, but it would be a seriously bad career move.

So she limited her exercise of authority to a stern “Buckle up, young man.”

Turning to Mrs. Trotter, she managed a smile and said, “Thank you.”

“Good luck, Mrs. Macguire,” responded Mrs. Trotter, who with an about face walked back to the school.

On the way home, Diane, lost in thought, failed to notice that Vienna in the back seat was driving his pen into the leather seats. The only time they spoke was at the Burger King drive through when Diane asked him what he wanted for dinner. Once home, they ate at the kitchen table. Vienna insisted on watching his favorite show which he taped during the day. When it was finished, Diane ventured a query.

“So what happened at school today?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“We got a new teacher. I didn’t like her.”

“You know you’ve been expelled, don’t you? What am I going to do? I’m running out of schools that will take you.”

Vienna shrugged.

“Tomorrow you’re going to Bapco with me. Then I’ve got to take the time to find another school. Do you realize how busy I am? I don’t have time for that.”

“Mom, I hate that lame Bapco school. I’m not going back there.”

“Yes you are. That’s what happens when you can’t behave in a regular school.”

“Well, I’m not going, and that’s it, so figure out something else.”

III.

The next morning at nine, Diane delivered Vienna to the Bapco employees' day care center. For most of the last sixteen hours she had been using every negotiating skill she had ever learned as an investment banker and international executive to try to convince Vienna to come along. She also used appeals to emotion, threats, promises of future reward and begging. She wasn't sure what finally convinced him but she was afraid it was probably the begging. She seemed to be doing more and more of it and Vienna seemed to love it.

Once safely in her office, she called the Little Stars House of Children. She was surprised that rather than sounding like Freud, Dr. Kreckstein was a woman with a friendly Texas drawl.

"Call me Marge," she told Diane. "When can you come in to meet?"

"Uh, Marge, I'm kind of busy. Can we just do this over the phone?"

"I understand. But let me tell you how we operate. Then you may decide whether you want to come in."

"Alright, go ahead," said Diane, turning to her computer and checking her e-mails.

"You see, Mrs. MacGuire, this school was started three years ago by myself and another psychologist. We are convinced that mainstream schools are ruining our children."

"Oh. Absolutely."

"Further, we think that home schooling is dangerous to both the children and our society."

"I agree," said Diane, composing a flam-o-gram to a rival in the International Division who was doing some poaching in her territory.

"Where schools fail is that they do not take the time to understand the fundamental uniqueness of each child. We throw them all into the same pool based solely on age and all too often on other artificial factors such as race,

sex, religion or socio-economic background. It is homogenization, pure and simple. Not good for anyone and we are paying the price.”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Now, Mrs. MacGuire.” Dr. Kreckstein lowered her voice confidentially, “Given that it is the middle of the term and you haven’t just moved into town, I must assume that there was possibly some, ah, problem with your child’s last school.”

“Yes there was.”

“That is no problem as far as we are concerned. Just a symptom of unmet needs, I’m sure. Here is what I propose and if it is agreeable to you we may proceed.”

“Yes.”

“I must ask you to arrange for your child’s records from his school or schools over the past two years to be sent to me. I will review them for pertinent information about your child so that we know what we are dealing with.”

Fearing that full disclosure about Vienna’s scholastic history would end any chance of his getting accepted, Diane said, “Is that really necessary? It can be a problem with releases and privacy. You know.”

“Mrs. MacGuire. Everything we see in the file will be confidential. Nothing we see in the file will impact our decision whether to take your child on. It will only help us understand his or her background and needs. If you cannot or will not produce the files we cannot consider taking your child.”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Second, and more important. It will be necessary for us to keep your child with us for three days and two nights before we make a decision. During that time, we will observe his or her behavior in situ and we will conduct extensive psychological testing and evaluations. He will enjoy it. We have made it more like a game and it is critical in determining how the child will fit into the environment here. Do you think that might be acceptable?”

Diane felt a surge of elation. Three days without Vienna, you bet, Doc!
“Yes, I think that would be possible.”

“Excellent. As soon as you get me the files, my staff and I will review them and I’ll call you to set up a time for us to meet.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“Thank *you*, Mrs. MacGuire.”

As she was hanging up, Diane was calling for Beth through her office door.

“Yes,” said Beth hurrying in.

“Call every school Vienna’s been in for the past two years. Pretend you’re me. Tell them to send me his files ASAP. Send couriers if you have to.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

By the end of the week Diane had accumulated all of the files. One of the schools initially refused to release the file to Diane on the grounds that it violated Vienna’s privacy. They insisted that Vienna sign a release form, which Beth forged. Other than that, the process had been uneventful. Without looking at the files, Diane asked Beth, who had pored over them carefully, to send them to Dr. Kreckstein. On Tuesday of the following week, Dr. Kreckstein called.

“Thank you for the files on Vienna, Mrs. MacGuire. A very interesting child. We would be very happy to see him. When can you bring him in?”

Diane, who had been getting pressure from the Bapco day care center as well as Vienna said, “Any time that’s good for you.”

“Well, if you like, we could take him tomorrow morning and keep him for the rest of the week.”

“Per, uh, fine. I think I can do that.”

“I’ll also need to spend an hour or two with you getting more history.”

“No problem, see you tomorrow.”

Shortly after ten the next morning, Diane walked out of Dr. Kreckstein’s office in a state bordering on euphoria. A combination of leaving

the Bapco day care center and the adventure of being away from home for three days had made Vienna unusually tractable over the past twelve hours. And the thought of three days to herself made Diane ecstatic. She wasn't sure what she would do with her freedom, yet. She only knew that three days wasn't long enough to do it in.

IV.

Shortly before noon on Friday, Beth informed Diane that Dr. Kreckstein was on the line. Diane felt a wave of panic. At best, it meant she had to go pick Vienna up. At worst it meant that Little Stars wasn't going to take him and she would have to scramble to find another school.

"Hello, Marge?"

"Ah, Mrs. MacGuire, how are you?"

"Fine, thank you. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, couldn't be better. We've had an excellent time with Vienna."

Diane stared at the telephone receiver. "Uh. Good."

"There is one small problem, though."

"What's that?" Panic.

"Vienna is truly an unusual child. We definitely want to take him on as a student. But we would like to spend a little more time with him to understand some things a little better. Would it be possible to keep him with us over the weekend? Then he can start with us on Monday and you can pick him up Monday night."

Suppressing a whoop of joy, Diane composed herself and simply said, "If Vienna is all right, and you think it's necessary, I guess it's OK."

"Oh yes, Vienna is having a wonderful time."

"OK. Then I guess I'll see you Monday after school."

"Thank you, Mrs. MacGuire."

Diane hung up. This was too good. She checked her calendar for the afternoon, told Beth to cancel her one appointment and that she would see her

on Monday morning. Usually she dreaded weekends because they entailed intensive exposure to Vienna. This weekend was going to be different.

V.

After a magic weekend of solitary self-indulgence, Diane returned to work. Her staff found her unusually benevolent during the Monday morning meeting and wondered what had happened to mellow her. She had a tinge of concern when she got back to her office and Beth handed her a message to call Dr. Kreckstein. Could Vienna have worn out his welcome?

Deciding to get it over with, Diane immediately returned the call.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. MacGuire. Did you have a nice weekend?"

"Yes, thanks. How's Vienna?"

"Everything is just fine. I'm so glad you've brought him to us. You won't need to find another school again, I assure you. We'd like to meet as soon as possible to finalize arrangements."

Once again, Diane stared at the receiver. "I'm so glad. But I'm curious. Forgive me, but I usually don't get this kind of feedback about Vienna."

"I understand. You can't be blamed any more than his other teachers and schools. After all, none of you know what Vienna really is."

Diane wasn't sure she liked the sound of that, "Oh?"

"I'll explain everything when we meet. Could you spend an hour or two this afternoon when you pick him up?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

"Excellent. I look forward to seeing you. Say four? You know I should congratulate you. Although most parents don't feel proud when they find out they have a child like Vienna. But we here at Little Stars think you should be proud."

Diane shook her head, puzzled. "I, uh, look forward to our meeting."

At three forty-five, Diane arrived at the office of the Little Stars House of Children. She introduced herself and asked for Dr. Kreckstein.

“Oh yes, Mrs. MacGuire,” the secretary said. “We’ve been expecting you. Right this way.” The secretary led her to a fairly large conference room, saying “Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you anything, coffee, soft drink, wine?”

Surprised, Diane asked for a glass of wine. This whole thing was starting to get on her nerves.

Almost immediately, a middle-aged woman and two older men walked into to the room. The woman said, “Mrs. MacGuire? I’m Marge Kreckstein. Thanks for coming in and so nice to meet you. I’d like you to meet Dr. Tanner, our resident psychologist and Mr. Willey, our principal.”

Diane stood and shook hands all around as the secretary brought in Diane’s wine and a plate of cheese and crackers. “Ahh, good idea, Jan. Mrs. MacGuire, because it’s the end of the day and we have reason to celebrate, do you object if we join you in a glass of wine?”

“Not at all,” Diane said, wondering what the hell was going on. She was starting to think that she had handed Vienna over to a bunch of weirdos and decided to be on her guard. “But what it is we are celebrating? Vienna’s acceptance?”

“That and more, Mrs. MacGuire,” said Mr. Willey. “You have an exceptional son and we are thrilled to have him. However we need to spend some time explaining why he is exceptional and give you the information you need to make some important decisions.”

“I see.”

Dr. Tanner folded his hands on the table and leaned forward, “Let’s face it, Mrs. MacGuire . . .”

“Please. Call me Diane.”

“Oh, thanks. Let’s face it, Diane, Vienna is a handful. He has been expelled by every school you’ve put him in and most people who meet him are convinced that he is either going to end up as a mass murderer, serial killer or worse. Am I right?”

She hesitated, thinking that agreement might reflect further on her parenting skills.

“Diane, we have to be scrupulously honest with each other. Part of the problem up until now is that no one wants to see Vienna as anything other than a hyperactive, maladjusted little kid.”

“Yes.”

“Well, we here at Little Stars know why Vienna is the way he is. And we have the program he needs to take full advantage of his gifts.”

“Gifts?”

“Yes. You know that Vienna is intelligent. There’s no question about that. It’s his behavior that’s the problem. What if I told you that his behavioral problems are not because of bad parenting or schooling or diet or too much TV or chemical imbalance or any of that?”

“Then what is it?”

“This may be difficult to accept, so I’ll just say it. Vienna is the way he is because he represents the next evolutionary step in the human race. We haven’t evolved to his level so his behavior seems alien and hostile. But in the right environment he can be a totally normal person.”

Diane felt suddenly glad that Doctors Kreckstein and Tanner weren’t wearing white coats because the scene would have become even more surreal.

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“I’m sorry. It’s to be expected. That’s why we wanted to take some time and make you comfortable. I’m afraid we’ve jumped right into things,” said Mr. Willey. “Dr. Tanner, why don’t you start from the beginning?”

Tanner began, “You are, of course, familiar with Darwin’s so-called Theory of Evolution.”

“Yes.”

“So you know that animals evolve in response to stimuli in the environment. If the ocean gets warmer, fish who are better adapted to warm water will thrive and others will suffer. On a more complex level, you know that all animals mutate over time. Cosmic rays, radiation, who knows, all

cause random alterations in genetics and cell structure. Sometimes, in fact, mostly, mutations are neutral or negative. But every so often, there are some that help the organism and get passed down to offspring because the mutation makes them more successful. That's why the cheetah runs fast and some animals are well camouflaged."

"Yes, I know that."

"Very good. So if you accept that humans are the result of an evolutionary process, there is no reason to think that the mechanisms of evolution has stopped. Humans are still evolving."

"Yes, but it must take millions of years."

"Of course. That's why we don't see it until a clearly differentiated species has emerged, as is the case with Vienna."

"What?"

"Not so fast, Dr. Tanner," interrupted Dr. Kreckstein. "I know this is a lot to assimilate and we shouldn't focus so much on Vienna. Your child is not a monster. At least not in the genetic sense."

Diane smiled. "Yes, but what's this about a species?"

"It's fairly simple, Diane. You have no problem with the idea of physical mutations and evolution"

"No, I understand that."

"And it is therefore reasonable to think that the brain can evolve and mutate as well?"

"Of course. Isn't that the whole issue with the missing link and all that? They can't find an intermediate animal between the apes and man?"

"Yes. And I have a theory about why that is, but not now. Anyway, if the brain evolves, and the brain drives our emotions and thoughts and behavior, does it not seem logical that pervasive and profound changes in emotions and behavior might be the result of evolution?"

Diane thought for a minute. "Of all the rationalizations I've ever heard for Vienna's behavior, that is the best. I'm sorry, but I'm starting to wonder what sort of place you people are running."

“Please, Diane,” said Mr. Willey, leaning forward and refilling her wine glass, “hear Dr. Tanner out. I know it sounds crazy, but I’m convinced it’s true. Vienna isn’t the only one. We’re seeing this in other children, too.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tanner. “Sometimes my enthusiasm gets me telling the story too fast. Let me give you some more information.”

“OK.”

“My research and theories are based on something called MacLean’s Triune Brain Theory. Have you heard of it?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Anyway, that theory holds that there are three parts to the brain.”

“I have heard of that.”

“I’m not referring to the cerebellum, cerebrum and medulla. Or the superego, id and ego. The triune brain refers to different parts of the cerebellum which is the frontal lobe which controls the higher brain functions. According to MacLean, our modern frontal lobes represent the uneasy coexistence of three stages of evolution. The first is the so-called reptilian brain that we have carried over from our dinosaur ancestors. As the name implies, it is very primitive. It governs some of our most basic behaviors and, simplistically, drives our flight or fight instincts. Next to evolve was the paleomammalian. This is the part of our brain that controls some of our social behavior such as family loyalties and that sort of thing.”

“I think I understand.”

“This might help,” said Dr. Kreckstein, moving to a white board at one end of the room. She started sketching a time line and some diagrams of brain development. “After the paleomammalian comes the neomammalian brain which is the part that truly distinguishes us from other animals. This is the part that manages rational thinking. It enables us to invent things and see the ramifications of our behavior.”

“That all makes sense.”

“There is fairly wide acceptance of this triune brain model. Where the controversy comes in is two other areas, and to understand Vienna, you have to understand this part.”

“OK.”

Doctor Trotter moved to the board. “I believe, but not everyone in the psychological community agrees, that our mental and emotional states are also controlled by each of these brains. Think about it. You are confronted by a danger in the form of a person pulling a gun on you. Each of your brains is engaged simultaneously. Your reptilian brain tells you to fight back or run. Your paleomammalian brain tells you to protect not only yourself but also your family. Your neomammalian brain analyses the threat to determine the best way to manage it. Should you acquiesce, call for help, kick the gunman in the crotch, or what. OK? No argument there.”

“No.”

“The controversy arises over whether these same brain structures manifest themselves in our psychological functions. I believe they do. Associated with the various physical reactions to threats or stress are emotional reactions as well. Think about wolves and monkeys. They have highly organized social structures in which certain behaviors are adopted by members of the various social strata of the group. The alpha wolf behaves differently than the young males and there are ritualised forms of showing superiority and inferiority, dominance and submission. These are controlled by the reptilian and paleomammalian brain which humans have too.”

“I understand the concept, but I’m not sure how it applies to us.”

“Let me try to help. You’re a business executive, right?”

“Yes.”

“In business there are winners and losers, right? You have to negotiate all the time. I think that negotiations are a perfect laboratory for studying human rituals of dominance and submission. For example, one of the rules of negotiating is to never lose your cool. Losing your cool is a reptilian reaction.

And when people exhibit a reptilian reaction, they lose out to people who are working with their neomammalian brains.”

“I’ve seen that over and over.”

“You’ve probably also seen the way winners and losers behave. If someone is out-manuevered in negotiations they may react with their reptilian brain and get angry. Alternatively, a person reacting with the neomammalian brain may politely concede, or congratulate the winner. Now, if you consider that emotions are driven by the different brain structures, you get things like shame, guilt, sorrow, all associated with these encounters, and which brain is in control determines the nature of the reaction.”

“I’ve seen that, too. But I’m still not clear on why this is so controversial or what it has to do with Vienna.”

“Fair enough,” said Dr. Kreckstein. “So far we’ve established that there are three parts, for lack of a better word, to the brain.” She pointed to the board. “Each represents an increasingly higher level of evolution, from animal to what we call human.”

“The controversy,” said Dr. Tanner, “is that we are saying that human psychology can be explained in part by understanding how these different brain parts react to external stimuli. People who respond in the most neomammalian way are what we consider to be the most healthy. They accept failure. They are not overly intimidated by other people or situations. We believe for example, that depression is nothing more than the reptilian brain getting the upper hand when a person is under stress. Their fight or flight instincts tell them to become submissive, just as the young wolf submits to the alpha wolf. Except in humans, instead of assuming submissive postures, it manifests itself in the form of negative or defeatist thinking. This notion is not widely accepted in the psychological community.”

“I see. But it seems to make sense to me.”

“But that’s still not the greatest controversy,” said Mr. Willey. And that is where Vienna comes in.

Diane asked, "How?"

Dr. Kreckstein became very formal and serious. "Diane, you will admit that Vienna's behavior is completely beyond your understanding, will you not?"

"Yes, I guess."

"You have tried different schools, reads dozens of books, tried every kind of punishment and reward system known, but none has made any difference in Vienna's behavior. Am I right?"

"Completely. You know that if you read the files and watched him in action."

"Now, based on what we have been saying, I hope it becomes clear. Vienna's behavior cannot be understood or managed by us because he represents the next level of human evolution. In addition to the triune brain, he possesses what we call the 'postmammalian' brain. Understanding, and more importantly, controlling and training him with our neomammalian brains is analogous to the lab monkeys studying and understanding the scientists."

"But how could it happen?"

"Who knows? That is like asking which snowflake started the avalanche. The human race is evolving and Vienna is one of the first to grossly manifest characteristics of the next phase. We can only be thankful, Mrs. MacGuire that you found us. Forgive me for saying this, but I believe that most people with postmammalian brains are very unhappy people. So are the people around them. Because their reptilian and paleomammalian brains have virtually atrophied beyond supporting basal metabolic functions, they do not express emotion in the way we do. Nor can they understand emotions or appeals to emotion. They do not understand or accept any normal forms of social interaction or symbolism. For example, normal acts of submission, such as respecting other people's property or following social conventions such as taking off his hat in the house are not part of his makeup. It is like trying to explain colors to a blind person. A lot of people who are

institutionalized or imprisoned may very well be postmammalians who simply are seen as antisocial. In fact, that word appears in virtually every one of Vienna's school reports."

"So what does this all mean?"

Dr. Trotter leaned forward, "You can't control him, Diane. No one can. No school can teach him. He'll never have a career. Sure, he will learn things, but he will not be able to function in society as we know it. In a hundred years or so he would thrive. Most people will be like him, but right now he is just out of his time."

"Oh my God. I've been hoping this was all a phase that he would grow out of."

"I'm afraid it will only get worse. Each day he will become more and more different and frightening. Eventually you will have run ins with law enforcement."

Diane covered her face. "What am I going to do?"

"We have a possible solution."

"What is that?"

"Earlier we said that you should be congratulated. I believe that. You are responsible for the advancement of the human race in a tangible, measurable way. But, let's face it; you're not equipped to cope with it. If you will agree to enrol him in our school, we will take over that task. Full-time students at Little Stars are just that. They live here all the time and only leave under strict supervision. They are very happy. For the first time, they find themselves around people like them and find that they are not outcasts. Vienna will be happier. You will be happier. And I must tell you that we will be working to study and learn more about what exactly is happening. We must gain an understanding of this mutation so that humanity can adapt to it without a violent upheaval. Think about it. As it stands right now, the human race does not know how to cope with its future."

Diane surprised herself by asking, "Are there any, you know, legal ramifications?"

Dr. Kreckstein smiled, "I know what you're thinking, but it's nothing like that. You are still Vienna's mother. We are not adopting him or anything like that. We will just be taking care of him."

"For how long?"

"Indefinitely."

"What if he has problems or doesn't want to stay?"

"We have never had that problem. In fact, if you are like the other parents we've seen, you will be hurt by how quickly Vienna adapts here and loses interest in you. Although he still has a functioning paleomammalian brain which affects his sense of family, this postmammalian brain does strange things to those emotions in children like Vienna. Plus, this is the first time in his life that he is in a situation where he will feel, quote, normal. He will be around people like him and he will not feel so alien. So don't worry about that. Are you OK with this? I know it's a lot to deal with."

"Yes, but you know it so clarifies so many things. I think it is only for the best. Can I see him?"

"Yes. We would like you to take him home with one of us so that he can pick out the things he wants to bring. Then we will bring him back tonight."

Diane, full of conflicted reptilian and paleomammalian brain reactions simply nodded in agreement.

VI.

Two years had passed since Vienna had been admitted to the Little Stars House of Children. At first Diane had visited periodically and exchanged e-mails with Vienna, but it eventually became obvious that Vienna didn't have much interest in her and she found it easier to ignore him than to be reminded of how different he had become. She did receive periodic updates from Dr. Kreckstein indicating that Vienna was happy and well adjusted and enjoying the company of the seven other students at the school.

Even by Diane's standards, the fees were exorbitant, but she felt it was well worth it. Freed of worry about Vienna, Diane's career had taken off and she now was Vice Chairman of the Board and in line for Chairman.

She still held Monday morning staff meetings and one Monday morning her meeting was rudely interrupted by two FBI agents. Diane was mortified. It was not good for her career to have the police wanting to talk to her. She left the meeting and took the agents to her office.

"I'm Special Agent Russo, ma'am. I'm afraid we have some rather bad news for you."

At first she thought something had happened to her husband in India.

"What is it? Has something happened to John?"

"No, ma'am. There's been an incident at your son's school. But he's fine. He's in custody."

"Oh my God. What is it?"

"We're still not sure. We would like you to come with us to help us talk to your son. Maybe you can help us understand."

Diane told Beth she had to leave and to say nothing to anyone. The agents drove her downtown to FBI headquarters and showed her into a room with a curtain along one wall. Agent Russo pressed a button and the curtain opened, revealing a conference room. Vienna was the sole occupant, sitting at the table with his head resting on his arms. At first Diane thought that he was in shock, but she quickly realized that he was only sleeping. Whatever had happened must have exhausted him.

"Mrs. MacGuire, we've interrogated your son and he has told us a story. Based on what little Dr. Kreckstein has been able to tell us, it may be true. But we don't know for sure. We would like you to talk to him. Get him to tell you what happened. That way we can compare the versions of the story plus get your input on his emotional state and whether you think he is lying."

"Lying?"

"Yes. We hope you will tell us that he is lying."

“OK. Yes. But what is it he is supposed to have done.”

“All we know for sure is that he and his roommate are the only people still alive at the school after this weekend. All the other students plus two teachers and two staff members are dead. Dr. Kreckstein was attacked this morning when she arrived at the school and is in surgery.”

“My God. What? Why? Who did it?”

“According to your son, he did. We hope you can help us find out.”

VII.

“Hi, baby. Are you OK?”

Vienna looked up. He clearly recognized Diane but hid his look of recognition with a frighteningly malicious grin. “And who are you again?”

“Don’t baby.”

“Don’t ‘don’t baby’ me, baby.”

“Vienna. What happened?”

“It’s simple. I lost. I should be part of the body count.”

“What? Lost what?”

Vienna rolled his eyes as if frustrated by Diane’s ignorance. “What else? The contest. The race. The game of resource acquisition.”

“I don’t understand.”

“So what else is new? I’ll explain. In terms you can handle. You know, I really liked that school. I liked the people and I was friends with everyone. We were always doing neat things. Like this game.”

“Game?”

“Yeah. We planned it for weeks. The idea was to dream up booby traps to kill everyone else. Just us kids. The teachers and staff weren’t part of the game. It started Friday night. You had to keep your booby traps working and avoid the ones everyone else set. I’m really bummed because I only scored three kills. Jason got four. But at least I got Jason. He would have approved.”

And you killed them?"

"No. I just set the traps. You showed your superiority by setting traps that were deadly and well hidden. Of course extra points for more blood and guts. You should have seen this Iron Maiden thing Tyler got David in. Awesome."

"But why?"

"It was something to do. Weekends get pretty boring. We first got the idea when we were studying about economics and resource allocation. We took a look around the school and figured out that resources like space and computer time and things like that were being allocated equally. We wondered why it had to be that way. By reducing the denominator, an individual could increase his share of the resources. Get more. It just sort of became necessary. We wanted more space, more computer time, more privacy. More everything. More anything. There were too many of us and we decided it was a fun way to start thinning our ranks."

"Too many? Seven people with everything they could possibly want? Whose idea was it?"

"Everyone's. We all worked out the rules and the plan. Sean took some convincing because he thought we didn't have enough stuff to make good weapons. He wanted to try to build some firearms."

"This is terrible."

"I don't know what everyone's so excited about. I just eliminated a few people who were sucking up air I could be breathing. That's how I look at it. If anyone should be upset it should be me. I was sure I'd win."

"Well, you're still alive."

"Not the point. I got sloppy after we got interrupted. It broke my concentration."

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, we started on Friday night. Trotter and Willey usually don't bother us on the weekends even though their rooms are on the campus. The only staff should have been the cook, who wouldn't wonder if no one

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showed up for dinner. But Mr. Stone, the maintenance guy came in Sunday morning. We were using the garage as a makeshift morgue and he found it. So he calls Willey and the game was up.”

“What?”

“Yeah, Willey and Trotter came down and started sneaking around. Sean offed them just to shut them up.”

“Sean killed Mr. Willey and Dr. Tanner?”

“Collateral damage. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. And don’t forget Kreckstein. When she came in this morning she came looking for us but I got her first.”

“Marge Kreckstein is still alive. She’s in surgery in the hospital.”

“Aw, Ma, why did you have to tell me that. I’m even a bigger loser than I thought. That makes my score only two.”

Diane stood up, a look of horror on her face, signalling for the guard to let her out. Agent Russo of the FBI was anxious to talk to her about what Vienna might have told her. She waved him away but he persisted. “Mrs. MacGuire, what do you know about what went on at that school?”

VIII.

After Diane explained to the FBI what she knew about the Little Star House of Children, and what Vienna had told her, Agent Russo immediately wanted to talk to Dr. Kreckstein. He drove to the hospital and was escorted to her room.

“She was heavily sedated. If she’s awake you can talk to her,” said the doctor as he opened the door.

Agent Russo and the emergency room surgeon, because of their chosen careers were no strangers to gruesome sights, but the scene in Dr. Kreckstein’s room gave both of them a shock. With limited means at her disposal, Dr. Kreckstein had managed to kill herself. Slowly, it seemed, and not before she

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had left a note, which made no sense to Agent Russo until he showed it to Diane who helped him to understand.

We thought we could understand. We thought that might help us and help them. But there is no hope. There are a lot more of them than we feared. If they are the future, there is no future. If this is the future of humanity, I won't be part of it.