

Ice

Richard Conn Henry

Passenger boarding had been delayed a few minutes, but now Wilson was striding down the aisle looking for his seat. He spotted the boy with a sense of unreal shock, and then realized that he would be sitting next to him.

The resemblance was extraordinary—the broad forehead, the frowning appearance, and the squat demeanor. It was all too familiar.

He sat down next to the boy in a daze. The man in the window seat was presumably the boy's father. Wilson knew he had to talk, had to engage the boy's father in conversation.

The plane was accelerating now for take-off. Wilson looked up the aisle, at all the 'normal' people. At first he and Janie had thought that Sarah was a Down's Syndrome baby, and had been prepared to love a gentle child for what she was. But the doctor, and subsequent genetic counseling, had told them that they were wrong; that Sarah was a perfectly normal little girl. Perfectly normal, just very different from any little girl that they had ever seen before. And now here was another.

The stewardesses made their little speeches, and the Captain said his words of welcome, and Wilson searched around for an opening. Seeing that the man was reading a magazine that Wilson had read on the flight east the week before, gave him his opening. The man was reading an article on evolution by D. J. Tice. Wilson remembered it vividly; it pointed out that we may not yet know the true means by which evolution proceeds; that new species appear suddenly without warning, fully developed and adapted to conditions, in a manner quite different from what Darwin envisaged. This was enough for Wilson; he had read something recently that fit right in and gave him his conversational gambit. "Say, I see you're reading that fascinating article on evolution!" he said.

The man looked up, slightly irritated, but basically friendly. "Yes, it is fascinating," he said, turning back to the magazine. Not to be put off, Wilson said "I read very recently that there is virtually no difference between the DNA of a person and of a chimpanzee." The man, interested now, said "how is that possible? There are huge differences between the two species." "Apparently," carried on Wilson, "it is regulatory differences in the expression of the DNA that we see. The underlying code is essentially the same."

"So what determines the expression? Conditions?" "Perhaps; no one really knows", replied Wilson; "for example, conditions have changed vastly since the end of the last ice age, about ten thousand years ago." "Yes," replied the man. "By the way, my name's Joyce, Herbert Joyce."

“Fred Wilson; I’m a biologist.”

“Pleased to meet you. You know, your remarks about the last ice age remind me of articles I’ve read recently, by Sir Fred Hoyle among others, pointing out that we are overdue for another ice age.”

“How so?”

“Well, for the last two million years, the typical ice age has lasted a hundred thousand years, and the warm interglacials have lasted ten thousand years or less. The ice last retreated about ten thousand years ago; that’s well established. So the next ice should start any time now; but no one knows how fast they come on. The current global warming is quite likely just a glitch.”

“Well, I guess we won’t be very well prepared for it, soft ill-adapted creatures that we are. Scares me to think of it. Better have a drink; here comes the beverage service!” Wilson was quite relaxed now, and clearly on good terms with the man Joyce. He decided to risk all. “Would your son like a cup of ice?”

Joyce shook, and his face went pale. He looked squarely at Wilson for the first time. “Who are you? How do you know? What do you want?” He turned from pale to red. “What do you mean? What are you saying?”

“I’m sorry,” said Wilson. “I should have come at it another way. Let me tell you right away, my daughter Sarah, whom I love very much, does not drink water; she will only drink at ice cubes. And she looks exactly like your son.....”

“David.” The man was still shaking.

“Sarah has always been like this. The doctors say there is nothing wrong with her, but they look immensely puzzled.”

“Ours too,” said Joyce wearily, “and now there is another on our block, a baby boy. I even took a sharp look at the milkman!”

“You have a milkman?”

“Just joking, but it is no joke. My wife and I are distressed, and so are the neighbors down the block, and no doubt so are you. What is going on?”

Wilson allowed as how he just didn’t know, and downed his drink. He looked out the window, where he saw with surprise that there was snow. “Snow in August?” he thought, but then reasoned that the plane was high up.

The boy spoke for the first time. His finger was in his cup. “Ice,” he said happily, “ice.”