



Madeline's Children

short story

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“End recording. End Program. Compile. Check for errors.”

“Compile complete. No errors found.”

“Thank God,” Noah said. He turned off the console and rubbed his temples. Version 1.3 was finished and as polished as it was going to get, at least until he got some sleep. He sighed and dragged himself to his feet. Time to get back to his quarters. Time to rest.

Outside his office, he passed rows of empty cubicles, the fluorescent lights flickering on above his head as he walked forward. They snapped off behind him – he moved in a constant roving pool of light.

At the end of the room, he entered his security code into a panel and left the office.

Out in the corridor the lights remained lit all the time, even though this section of Lifeboat was deserted at this time of night. Most sections operated all night: the experiments on machines, artificial intelligence, or nanotech. But m055 didn't. M055 kept regular hours. The little girls needed their sleep. *After all, they were still human.*

Weren't they?

He was too tired, even for questions like that. Plus, he was sick of thinking about it.

At the end of the corridor he pressed a button to call the elevator. He wanted to sleep for days. Now that version 1.3 was done he could probably afford to take a few days off. Maybe one, at least. He could spend some time with Madeline, maybe spend a day in bed making love. Noah closed his eyes. That would be nice. It probably wouldn't happen, though. Not with how they'd been lately.

The ding of the elevator woke him up. Had he been sleeping on his feet? He wasn't sure. Forty-five hours of straight work did that to you. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

Inside the elevator the indirect lighting looked hazy and surreal. He felt the pull of gravity on his limbs, watched the numbers click up to his floor. Doors opened. Down another faceless corridor to his quarters. Punched in the code. Entered.

The bedside light was on in the bedroom – Madeline was awake, sitting up in bed, reading a tablet. Her blonde hair, normally almost white, looked golden in the yellow light. She was wearing her glasses – he didn't understand why she didn't just get eye surgery like everyone else. But she didn't really like science as much as most people onboard.

He stripped off his clothes and slid between the sheets. She didn't say anything.

Neither did he. He slept.

When he woke he just lay there without moving, trying to determine if she was still in bed with him or not. He couldn't tell without looking. He opened his eyes.

She wasn't there.

The warm light from the window glowed dimly with artificial sunlight – Noah didn't have enough prestige to secure quarters on the outer hull. Artificial sunlight was the only sunlight he'd seen in six months. Could have been longer. He wasn't sure. Time felt different on Lifeboat.

He sighed.

Maybe he could invite Madeline to go up to the deck with him, breathe some fresh air, have a picnic. Wine, cheese, olives, fruit salad, the whole spread, all laid out on one of those red and white checkered tablecloths, just like real picnics should be.

"Madeline?" he called, his voice thick with sleep. "Are you here?"

No answer.

He groaned and got up, took a quick shower, dressed. Same slacks and dress shirt, same lab coat. Even on his days off, he felt naked without the coat.

Noah didn't feel like cooking. He didn't know where Madeline was, so he decided to head to mess, get something to eat. It was already 2 o'clock in the afternoon. So late. She was probably at work. He left the apartment.

The corridor was busy. People wearing lab coats passed him going the opposite direction, and a few from behind because he was walking too slowly. Who cared, anyway? It was his day off. He still felt tired.

Inside the mess he took a tray from the stack and moved down the line. Today they were serving ham, potatoes, creamed corn, blueberry muffins. None of it looked all the appetizing. You'd think that on a multi-trillion dollar project the food would be better, but it was still awful. He took a muffin and a cup of coffee.

Just as he was setting down his tray, Dr. Shelley slipped into the chair across from him.

"Noah, what are you doing here? Why aren't you in the lab?" Dr. Shelley had a stern voice and over-pronounced his consonants. His hair was black. So were his eyes.

Noah mumbled through his muffin. "Version 1.3 is done. I thought I'd take a day off."

Dr. Shelley nodded a little more than Noah thought was necessary. "Oh? That's good to hear. You should take the day then, maybe spend a little time with Madeleine."

"Madeline."

“Right, right. Madeline.” Dr. Shelley leaned forward over the table. His voice dropped, became secret and low. “With version 1.3 done we should be ready to start advanced testing soon. The next iteration is due from development this afternoon.”

Dr. Shelley looked at his watch. “In fact, I must be going. I’m due in the lab. Enjoy your day. Say hello to Madeleine for me.” He stood and left, disappearing from the mess.

“It’s Madeline,” Noah said. But Dr. Shelley was already gone.

After his muffin was gone, Noah wasn’t sure where to go next. Madeline was probably working, and he didn’t feel like going back to his quarters. He didn’t like being there by himself – the place was small and confining, even with the artificial sunlight.

Maybe he would drop by Madeline’s office and invite her up to the deck with him. Actually, that sounded like a damn good idea. He stood and bused his tray.

It took Noah twenty minutes to walk there from mess to Child Services, where Madeline worked. On the way, Noah tried to prepare what he wanted to say. He’d start simply – just an invitation, just like it used to be. He didn’t need to justify it. She was his wife.

The woman at the front desk didn’t recognize him, but he explained he was Madeline’s husband, there to visit her.

“Oh,” she said. “She’s in the room three with the preschoolers. It’s story-time. You can head on back. It’s that way.” She pointed down a hallway emblazoned with a colorful cartoon mural.

“Thanks,” Noah said. He started down the hallway.

“Don’t interrupt!” the woman called after him. “The kids love story-time!”

The door to room three was open. Inside, twenty little boys and girls sat crossed-legged, enraptured by Madeline and the computer tablet she held in her hands.

“Oh! How beautiful are our Emperor's new clothes! What a magnificent train there is to the mantle; and how gracefully the scarf hangs!”

The Emperor’s New Clothes. Madeline’s favorite fairy tale. When they were still dating, Noah asked her one night, over dinner, while waiting for their fish, what the favorite part of her job was.

Story-time, she’d said. *The Emperor’s New Clothes.*

“Why?” he’d asked.

“Because it’s about children seeing things more clearly than adults. The whole town is faking, right along with the Emperor, that he’s dressed in finery. But a little child finally points out how ridiculous it is. I like that. I believe in children.”

"I understand," Noah had said. But he really hadn't. Not for awhile, anyway.

"Alright, that's all, run along to Ms. Westley for snack." The children leapt up from the floor and rushed past him. Noah had to lean against the wall or risk being run down.

Madeline returned the tablet into the wall charger and spoke without turning to look at him.

"What are you doing here, Noah?"

"I came to ask you to take the afternoon off. I want us to go up to the deck, get some fresh air and sunshine. Have a picnic."

She spun and crossed her arms. "I can't. I have to work." She moved to walk past him.

He caught her arm. "Madeline. Please."

She paused for a moment to search his face. He wasn't sure what she was looking for, or if she would find it, but he stood still and let her look.

"Fine," she finally said. "But I can't leave for an hour. I have to finish things here."

"Great," Noah said. He summoned the best smile he could. "I'll get everything ready. Just meet me at elevator six in an hour."

She nodded, but said nothing. She just shook off his arm and disappeared down the hallway.

It took him almost the entire hour to get things ready. He returned to mess, bought two packed lunches and a bottle of wine, her favorite kind: a pinot noir. He spent more credits than he should have – wine was one of the few things Lifeboat had to import instead of producing onboard, but it was worth it. He doubted he could make everything up to her with just a bottle of her favorite wine, but a good start was better than a poor one.

He wrapped everything in a blanket and left to meet Madeline at elevator six.

She arrived a few minutes late, eyed the blanket in his arms, and pushed the button to take them up to the deck. The ride was long, over sixty floors. Neither of them spoke over the long hum up to the top – they both kept their eyes on the screen as the numbers clicked higher. Finally, the doors opened to the deck.

They stepped out into the bright light of late afternoon.

It'd been a long while since the last time Noah was up on the deck. Months. Even though he knew what to expect, the sheer *size* of the thing still overwhelmed him. Huge. Massive. Gigantic. None of those words even came close to describing the vastness of Lifeboat. Strap together two hundred and fifty of the biggest aircraft carriers in the world and you'd have a quick and dirty approximation of the floating research station's size.

Maybe even more than that – it was impossible to tell. The black asphalt deck stretched for miles in every direction, shimmering with the summer heat, throwing mirages in the distance. Control buildings, machinery, antennas, and parked aircraft – all dotted the deck, scattered like children’s toys over a floor, dwarfed by the flat landscape underfoot.

Overhead, the sunlight beamed through the shield, a translucent skybox that made the whole sky waver like old glass. Noah knew the visual distortion was caused by the way the shield refracted light, bending it and hiding Lifeboat from view. A ship passing Lifeboat from the outside would see nothing but the empty blue of the Pacific.

He had a decent idea of how the shield worked. It wasn’t solid – that wouldn’t have been feasible – too difficult to build and a nightmare to maintain. No, it was nanotech, an interlinked network of microscopic machines, all suspended in the air, refracting light to hide Lifeboat from outsiders.

It was only visual, though. Every once in awhile a ship hit Lifeboat, even though the mammoth boat floated as far from any commercial shipping lane as it could and monitored the surrounding ocean. But it wasn’t feasible to move the thing if something was coming. Lifeboat was too massive. So when ships hit it, well, as far as the world was concerned, Lifeboat didn’t exist. No one ever made it back to talk about it. People saw to that.

Fifty yards from the elevator, Noah unrolled the blanket on the asphalt deck. He smoothed out the edges, setting the packed lunches and bottle of wine off to the side.

“Lay down with me,” he said. He reclined on his back, slipping his hands under his head. Madeline lay down next to him, keeping as far away from him as she could while still laying on the blanket. Her hair blazed white under the filtered sunlight.

Neither of them spoke for ten minutes. Noah began to sweat from the heat. But the air was fresh, not recycled, and it tasted wonderful.

“Why are we up here?” she spoke at last. Her voice was flat in the breeze.

And then the same conversation started again, the same conversation they’d had fifty times in the last three months.

“I’m doing my best to make it up to you,” he said.

“I’m sorry for what I did,” he said.

“I need you to forgive me,” he said.

“I can’t,” she said.

“Why?” He moved up to lean on an elbow.

“You know why,” she exploded, sitting up, ready to stand. “Because you used me to make those...those...things! And you thought I would be happy about it! You’re a monster.”

“I’m sorry, Madeline. I thought that since you can’t have, I mean, we can’t have...I thought it would be special if we could still make something together. You and me.”

“It isn’t. It’s grotesque. We didn’t make those things together. You stole my DNA and made them yourself. Why on god’s green earth did you think that would be special?”

Noah sighed. It was the same conversation, over and over. He didn’t know what to do about it. He couldn’t stop the project. Not now. It was already too far along. And how would he explain it? He’d told Dr. Shelley and the others that the DNA he’d used to begin the experiments was from a blood bank, just a random sample.

They’d fire him if he told the truth, but they wouldn’t stop the project. Lifeboat didn’t worry about complications like scientific ethics. That was why Lifeboat existed in the first place, out in international waters – to avoid trivialities like that.

“I was wrong, okay. You’re right. But there’s nothing I can do about it now.” He’d said this line fifty times, over and over. He didn’t know why he was saying it again – it never made any difference to her.

But this time it *was* different. She didn’t respond the way she’d responded fifty times before.

“I want to see them,” she said. She stood up. Her shadow fell over his face. “I want to see the copies of me that you made.”

“Madeline. I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He stood, took her hands in his, expecting her to flinch away. She didn’t.

“No. Show them to me. Or we’re done.”

That didn’t leave him any choice. “Fine,” he said.

“Now,” she said.

They left the picnic up on the deck and went back down into the artificial light.

The guard outside Project m055 eyed Madeline, but let them through without comment. Technically everyone on Lifeboat had a top secret security clearance, but most projects were still restricted from general support staff.

Inside the office, Noah led Madeline past the rows of cubicles. Most of the scientists didn’t even bother looking up from their computers. No one asked questions here. They just took their tasks and completed them, eyes forward, mouths shut.

“That’s my office,” Noah said, pointing to a shut door.

Madeline only nodded, even though she’d never seen where he worked before.

At the end of the room, he punched his access code into the panel next to a thick metal door. He opened it for her. They went inside.

Noah and Madeline walked across a metal catwalk suspended fifty feet above a concrete floor. Down on the floor various obstacles – ramps, rope ladders, monkey bars, and other equipment lay strewn about, creating a training course. A thick black and yellow striped line snaked between each obstacle, drawing out a suggested path.

The catwalk ended in a door leading to a small office, surrounded on all sides by one way glass. Noah saw his reflection in the glass before leading Madeline inside. He looked frightened.

Dr. Shelley sat inside the office, staring at a bank of video monitors. He was murmuring into a microphone.

“Ah, Noah, what are you doing here? Are you here to see this round of testing?” Dr. Shelley spun his chair to look at them. “Oh, and you brought your wife with you.”

“We’re here to watch,” Noah said. “Madeline wants to see what I do.”

“Ah, yes. Good,” Dr. Shelley turned back to the monitors. “Are you, ah, sure you want her to see—”

“Yes,” Madeline said, stepping forward, interrupting Dr. Shelley. “Show me.”

“This is highly irregular,” Dr. Shelley said. “I’m not sure if—”

“Show her.” Noah put his hand on Dr. Shelley’s shoulder. “She wants to see.”

Dr. Shelley spoke into the microphone, giving the command to start the test.

Madeline peered out the window, looking down to the obstacle course. On the far right side of the course, a metal door opened and a little girl, only about five or six years old, stepped out. The girl, clad in a brick-red jumpsuit, had blazing white hair. The hue matched Madeline’s exactly.

Noah barely heard Madeline’s gasp. Dr. Shelley, if he noticed, said nothing.

Down in the pit, the little girl began moving through the course in a gentle jog. She easily cleared three short huddles with three mighty leaps, and then started up a ramp. At the top of the ramp she caught a rope and sailed over a pit, letting go on the other side.

“She’s so fast,” Madeline murmured.

“Yes,” Dr. Shelly said. “They’ve been bred that way. We altered the source DNA to improve speed and agility.” He adjusted a knob on the console. Sound spilled out of the speakers. They heard the

little girl panting, her footsteps slapping against the concrete as she ran up a ramp. On the top of the ramp, the little girl climbed a ladder to a platform, high in the air.

Here, Madeline could see the little girl's face. She shivered.

It was her face as a girl.

"This, this will be the interesting part," Dr. Shelley said. "We've done our best to teach them problem solving, but since each iteration has such a short half-life, we've had trouble teaching them all they need in a short time. Your husband's been working on a better way, a computer education program. He's up to version 1.3 now. Of course, we haven't started testing with the program yet. This one is from the previous batch. We used human educators for this group."

Madeline watched the little girl pull a coiled piece of leather from a hook on the top of the platform. The little girl uncoiled it, holding the end like a whip.

"Good," said Dr. Shelley. "She's figured out what she needs to do."

The little girl's flicked her wrist, slinging out the leather up and over a beam hanging from the ceiling in front of her. The leather wrapped around the beam three times. The little girl tugged the leather taut, then stepped back.

"She's not going to swing on that thing, is she?"

"Oh, yes," Dr. Shelley said. "That's what we've taught them to do. But we're still working out the bugs."

Out on the platform, the little girl stepped back again, then raced forward and launched herself off the platform out into empty space. Her white hair streamed out behind her as she flew through the air, her jumpsuit rippled in the wind.

Madeline watched as the little girl flew toward another platform, suspended fifty feet above the concrete floor. She reached edge of the platform and released the leather whip. She leaned forward, pressing her weight forward.

Just as the little girl was about to relax, her left foot slipped backwards off the edge.

Madeline pressed her face up against the glass window. The little girl's arms pin-wheeled through the air as she tried to catch her balance, fighting gravity with all her strength.

"No!" Madeline yelled. "Someone has to help her!"

Gravity won. The little girl fell back, plummeting straight down to the concrete floor, spinning through the air in a tornado of white hair and red cloth.

Over the speakers all three heard the sickening crack as her compact body crumpled against the concrete. The little girl didn't rise from the floor.

"A pity," Dr. Shelly said. "That's the third one we've lost today. This iteration has balance issues." He took a sip from a nearby glass of water. "Still, best to test them all."

Noah looked over at Madeline. She was shaking uncontrollably, staring down at the little girl's motionless body. He moved to her, tried to wrap his arms around her.

She caught his eyes in hers.

"Don't you dare touch me," she whispered. "I hate you."

She fled, running back across the metal catwalk, slamming the door behind her.

"I don't know why you brought her here, Noah," Dr. Shelley said. "She doesn't seem to have the stomach for this."

"No," Noah said. "She doesn't." He said goodbye to Dr. Shelley and left.

Noah stopped in his office to collect his thoughts. He had no idea what to say to Madeline. It was probably beyond conversation at this point. He sat down in his chair. He wanted to do something, to use his hands instead of his head, but he didn't know what that something was. He felt helpless and fidgety.

Idly he flicked the sleep toggle on his computer and brought it up out of digital slumber. His screen flickered to life. The compiler interface for the educational program was still up and running. Sloppy. He should have closed it before he left the other night.

"Computer, run Noah version 1.3"

"Running," the computer responded.

His screen flickered again, prompting him for a login and password. He typed it in: username m055, password Madeline. He flinched. It was hard to even type her name. God, how was he going to explain this to her?

"Login Accepted. Welcome, m055."

Noah knew what to expect, but it was still strange to be greeted by himself. This was the first version of the educational program that used a custom avatar. The previous versions just used the standard Lifeboat avatar, a black and green wireframe of a generic human face. Before he began the design for v1.3, Noah had read the most recent studies on human/computer interactions. Almost all the studies showed that people had an easier time interacting with computers if they had a human avatar.

So Noah used himself. Since the m055 little girls would be comfortable with him anyway, it seemed fitting that the educational program that would train and educate them would be an avatar of

himself. It seemed like a good idea. Madeline was their mother – her DNA, anyway, and he was going to be their father – teaching them how to survive.

But he wasn't doing that, was he? The little girls were dying. That testing. It was so cruel. He didn't know why he'd shown it to Madeline in the first place. When he'd brought her down, he'd hoped for to just let her meet the little girls. But she'd seen the worst of it.

The Noah v1.3 avatar on the screen blinked at him, waiting for him to interact with it. Instead, Noah shut off the display. The program was still running, but he didn't want to see it anymore. Maybe he should go for a walk up on the deck, clear his mind, try to figure out what to say to Madeline.

He sighed. Even if he found the right things to say, he and Madeline were probably over. He doubted she would ever forgive him. He stood, not sure where he was going to go, but he needed to get moving.

Just as he was about to leave his office, Dr. Shelley opened his door.

"Noah," Dr. Shelley said, entering. "I was hoping I would find you still here. I wanted to speak to you about this earlier, but I didn't have the opportunity in front of your wife. And then you departed right after she did."

"What is it?" Noah said. "I was about to leave."

"Mind if I sit?" Dr. Shelley asked. "This is important."

Noah said nothing, just gestured toward the only other chair in the office besides his, a black desk chair in the corner.

"Thank you. Now, Noah, I know that this project has been difficult for you."

"What makes you think that?" Noah was surprised by how bitter his voice sounded, even to himself.

Dr. Shelley didn't seem to notice. "But I need to remind you this is all for the greater good. The work we're doing here is integral to the safety of the world. It goes beyond Lifeboat, or any one of us. It's more important than we are."

"I know."

"Our contact inside the nanotech project messaged only me a few minutes ago. The grey goo project has been ramped up in the past few weeks. They're ready to begin preliminary testing soon. M055 needs to be ready to stymie their efforts before that testing begins. You know the possible consequences if we tarry."

Noah nodded.

"I regret that you're having difficulties with your wife. That's unfortunate. But we need you here, Noah. We need you focused on getting the next iteration trained and ready. It might be our last chance to curtail the nanotech project. Without m055 we'll have no way to infiltrate them. So go comfort your wife, but come back after you've taken care of it and resume your work. The latest iteration was delivered this afternoon. You must begin training this iteration on the educational program."

"Yes, sir," was all Noah said.

"Good. Go then. I expect you in the lab this evening." Dr. Shelley left, leaving Noah alone.

Back in his quarters, Noah searched the few small rooms for Madeline. He found no one – she wasn't in any of the rooms they shared. But the closet was hanging open and half the hangers were missing. Her suitcase was gone.

So was she.

On the small refrigerator in the kitchen, Noah found a note held up with a magnet shaped like a sunflower:

Noah, I've left to stay with a friend. I don't know if I'll ever be back. Don't try to contact me. I don't even want to hear your voice.

So that was that, then.

What to do now? Noah had no living idea. Just then, his communicator rang and answered the question for him.

"Noah," Dr. Shelley's disembodied voice said, over the communicator. "Ah...I'm unsure exactly how to phrase this. Perhaps you better see for yourself. Please come to the lab immediately."

"Why? What is it?"

"It's best if you see for yourself."

"I'm on my way," Noah said.

Down in the lab, Dr. Shelley met Noah outside the door to the training course.

"Please allow me to express my deepest regrets, Noah. She was trying to remove some of the subjects from the lab. Security notified me, but I'm afraid it was already too late."

Noah said nothing, just pushed past Dr. Shelley to the door. On the catwalk above the course, Noah saw two security guards hulked over a collapsed figure on the concrete floor. They'd covered the figure with a sheet. Shock white hair spilled out from under the covering.

As fast as he could, Noah rushed down the metal stairs to the testing lab's floor. He almost tripped on the second stair from the bottom, but recovered his stride to sprint over to the covered figure.

"Her retinal scan confirms her identity, but protocol says we need a relative to make sure," the larger of the two guards said to Noah. The smaller lifted the top of the sheet.

Madeline lay there, sprawled out on the concrete floor. Her white hair crowned her head. Her eyes were still open, staring off into

She was dead.

"I'm sorry, sir," the smaller guard said. "It's very rare, but our stun rifles sometimes overload the target's nervous system. There was nothing we could do."

Two months later, Noah left Lifeboat for good.

It'd taken his entire pension and all his savings, but he was able to take two of the m055 girls with him. Twins, he'd tell the world. My wife had twins before she died.

That was his plan.

Dr. Shelley asked him not to go, preached to him again about the dangers of the nanotech project, and berated him from taking two of the test subjects with him. But Noah persisted. Dr. Shelley relented at last – he finally seemed to step out from his cold scientific viewpoint and see Noah for who he was – a grieving man who felt responsible for the death of his wife.

Noah named the two little girls after his wife – Madel and Leine. Even before they all left Lifeboat together, the pair was already asking questions about their mother.

"What was Mommy like, Daddy?" Leine asked. Together they rode elevator on the way up to the deck to meet the helicopter that would take them back to the mainland.

"She was beautiful," Noah said, as they stepped out into the cold light. It was a dreary and overcast day. "She was sad and beautiful. And she loved you girls very much."

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Thanks for reading.