

LIFEBOAT

A family adrift.

BY DAVID CARR

I've just turned 12, which makes it 12 years that I've been on this boat. I'm not a prisoner as such, it's just necessity. Ha! Father's said it so often that I almost believe it. It's during days like this, when the futility of my existence creeps up on me like a malignancy, that I think about jumping ship again. But am I ready for the world?

Father still thinks it was an accident last time — high jinks he called it — but when those nights come, I prowls the decks searching for something of significance, and my mind always comes back to the most significant thing of all...

Then I think that maybe I'll be picked up by a passing tanker — the look on their faces — and I start to think about living more than just surviving. I can't swim though, so most probably I'd drown.

Here is Father now, come in to give me my birthday present.

"Do you like it, Adam?"

He watches me, waiting for a sign of gratitude when I turn the electronic book in my hands.

"You can get any book you like now," he says.

"No need to pay for shipping."

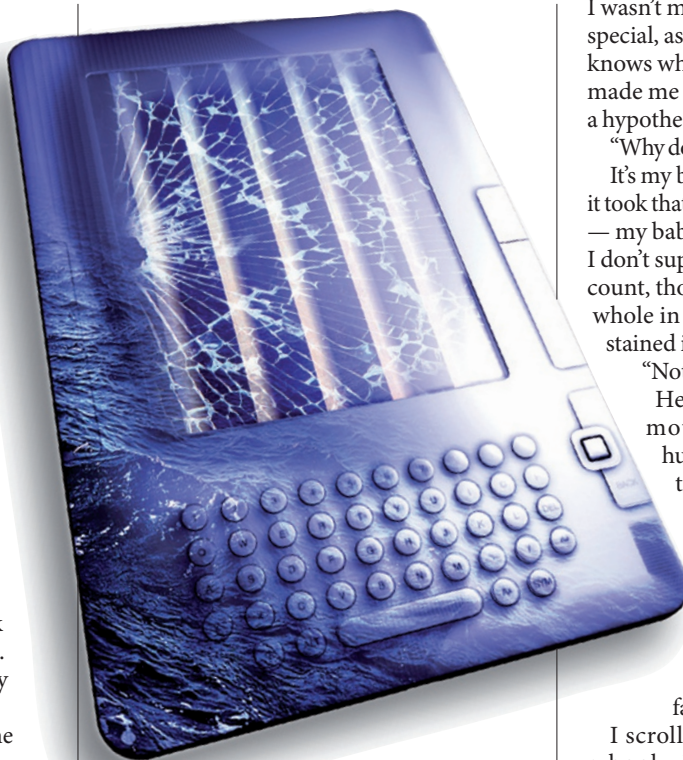
"Exactly!"

He doesn't catch the sarcastic tone in my voice. He has never been very observant.

And I hate my name too. Adam — the Alpha, the First. If only I was the last. But Father, in all his great wisdom, has plans. Beta, Gamma, Delta... Omega?

Here, there are no rules because it's international waters. For me, though — rules or not — the ocean is one giant shackle. Greenpeace came up to the ship once, suspecting something weird. They threw their ladders onto the top deck and turned the scientists into security guards. "Cut the ropes, the ropes." Down as well as up! They could never guess that hunkered down beneath the portholes was a group of monsters. That's how I used to feel about us anyway, and when I was a little younger and more foolish I shunned my mother. I couldn't believe that I came from something so, well, animal.

At that time, I tried so hard to please Father, the captain and principal investigator



of this floating lobotomy — I mean, laboratory. Looking in the mirror, I wished I had skin as smooth as his and his kind. I wanted to be human. But the Cro-Magnon brow, the protruding lips and the large, dark irises testify that I am something else.

"*Mais je pense donc je suis*," I said, what seems like forever ago but couldn't be all that long — maybe it was — maybe even before I was born.

"Where did you read that?" Father asked me.

"I didn't."

The science behind it all is not as sophisticated as some of Father's other work, trivial really when you think of his pioneering genetic breakthroughs. I was made in the metaphorical — or is it literal — test tube. An egg from my mother and a sperm from Father, mixed together with an additional chromosome from the Big Dog — Daddy! — to make 24 harmonious pairs. Incubate until the blastocyst convolutes itself then implant it in mother. Blast! After a seven-and-a-half-month gestation there I

was, ready to suckle, but away, away for tests.

Perhaps I should take it as a compliment that

I wasn't made for fame or fortune, that I'm special, as he says. But I don't think he even knows what kind of special he wanted. He made me only because he could, to satisfy a hypothesis.

"Why don't you come up and play with us?"

It's my brother, younger by three years — it took that long to get the IVF working again — my baby brother, so innocent baby bro. I don't suppose those failed intermediaries count, those malformed fetuses preserved whole in formaldehyde or sectioned and stained in the history — histology lab.

"Not now — maybe later on."

He waits, not understanding my motives, then slinks off in our hunched way — rocking from side to side — off to join the others.

They still sleep on the deck above, nearer to the scent of Father's kind. I prefer it down here with my mother. For all my 'refinements' she still recognizes me as hers, although nothing could bring us together as a proper family — she has no 'proper' name!

I scroll through 'Free Classics' on the e-book: *Moby Dick*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Frankenstein*. And 'Best of Non-Fiction': *The Selfish Gene*, *On the Origin of Species*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

"Is the world ready for us?"

Mother looks at me blankly. She's getting old and sick just when I'm just getting to know her. She's grumpy today and throws some straw bedding through the cage bars at me.

"Stop that, mother."

She lunges towards the bars and reaches a long arm out, grabbing the e-book.

"Hey!"

She bangs the device on the stone floor and bites at one corner, smothering it in thick saliva.

I think on some level she knows her useful life is over and she's becoming more aggressive, possibly suffering from a form of dementia. It's too dangerous for me to go into the cage with her, but when she's in a calmer mood I like to sit up against the bars so she can groom me, stroking my hair with such tenderness. My hair, which is the same colour as hers. ■

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