

A nice thought

Happy families.

Catherine Mintz

The door was old-fashioned, with a knob you had to turn and push. Harry wondered if he was supposed to be puzzled or show he was knowledgeable by just going in. Even as he pondered, he found he'd opened it. He'd always trusted his intuition.

The office inside was in shades of grey, with three bentwood chairs, an antique plastic wastebasket and nothing else. Not even a place to hang his coat. He took it off, folded it wet side in, and sat down. His shoes were soaked through. He hoped they wouldn't hold it against him that he'd been too excited to check the micro-forecast.

"Mr Lin?" said a voice. "You'll be seen in a moment. If you'd go out the door?"

It was then he realized that there was only one. Harry rose, uncertain. Outside, there was a completely different hall with a red door, invitingly open, opposite. They'd shifted him into the secure section and he'd never felt it.

"Please come in," said the voice. At that, he knew he had succeeded. He would be cloned and his clones optimized for the things he might have done. It was impossible to do as much as he might do in one lifetime.

He would have ten.

A medical droid rolled into the reception area. "Follow me," it said in the voice.

The procedures that had followed were unpleasant but no more so than he had expected.

He had expected more contacts with his clones, which were, after all, his sons, his ten sons, all wonderfully alike and amazingly different, but he accepted that the programme knew what was best for him and for them. He had ten sons, Harry Lins One through Ten. He assigned a finger to each of them and reminded himself of their accomplishments every morning. His contacts with the ten Harrys were brief, but it was important he have their individual identities at his fingertips. He smiled every time he went through his drill: the doctors wouldn't dream he had been so literal.

Harry One was training in biology. It seemed Two would be a physicist. At seven, Harry Three had performed on the violin with the Philharmonic and received a recording contract for his original compositions. "Neither classical nor contemporary, this is music for the ages," read one review of his first album. Harry Four

had at least two possible career paths, poet or actor. Harry Five was a mathematical prodigy. Harry Six ...

They were all fine boys and the world would be theirs. He was proud beyond belief. When they attained their majority at 14, he rented a room in the capital's most exclusive restaurant, ordered all their favourite dishes plus a little fine champagne for their first official drink, and memorized a speech about how he loved them all. It was sappy but short. He felt entitled. His investment in them might be emotional, not monetary, but he'd been a good dad.

After dinner, he sat basking in the glow of a life well lived. Harry Ten rose, and said: "Dad, we've been talking things over and I'd like to speak for all of us." Under the table Harry Lin tapped the little finger of his left hand as he remembered that Harry Ten was slow to mature, and had only recently been designated the sociologist. "Experience," the doctors told him, "it's entirely normal for a prodigy in the social sciences to peak later."

"Harry Ten," said Harry Lin and lifted his glass to his son. His sons.

"We've been talking it over, Dad, and we feel that — we mean no offence and hope none will be taken — that you don't add to our image. We're doing well with endorsements and publicity appearances, but we could do better. We will pension you off so that you have a comfortable lifestyle. We thought a simple name change and your signature on this contract not to use ours would be best for all of us. If you'd ..."

Harry Lin stared at his children, his sons. Ten faces, each more implacable than the last. The Harry Lin collective could outvote him.

"I'll have my lawyer ..."

"He checked it all over and is waiting outside if you'd like to speak with him. Of course, if you prefer another option we can agree to, that would be acceptable. We appreciate all you've done for us." Ten's voiced softened. "Dad, we just want what's best for all of us. That means you, too."

In his mind's eye, Harry, who had all the potential of his ten sons, saw himself as they saw him. Older. Old. Unaccomplished. A blot on the collective's public image. He sat up, acutely aware of an ache in his back that had not bothered him before. "I'll sign," Harry said. "I'll want everything gone over, but I'll sign." He knew he had no choice.

The house he moved to was secluded.

However, there was an old-fashioned public cinema nearby where he could watch pre-digital films in their proper context.

He started a book on the subject. He'd always wanted to write. Twice a

week, a driver ferried him into town for a discreet lunch with one or another of his sons and any necessary business for the collective.

He was coming out of the theatre when a woman, who was of a certain age, stopped him. "You know, you look so much like the Harrys."

"I can't see it myself, but it's a nice thought."

"Would chatting over a drink be a nice thought, too?"

"Yes." He smiled. "Yes, it would. What's your name?"

"Margaret. Margaret Rose."

"Margaret, I'm Harold Lakewood. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Catherine Mintz writes science fiction, fantasy, horror and poetry, both genre and mainstream, as well as non-fiction.

