

ROBERT LAKE

KANE AND ABLE

THROUGH EONS OF MISTY INFINITY I drift through balmy clouds, my eye buds encased in lucid egg shells. Beats from my aspiring heart impel me... toward what? where? for what purpose? My pulse gains traction, and I'm tenderly deposited in a snug womb beside an officious fetus. The bruiser shoves my sac beneath his, ordering me to bunk in the lower depths.

"You're squashing me, brother," I protest.

"I'm Benito, and you're not my twin, toad!" He sneers.

"Sure am, idiot!" We share quarters in the same womb. We must be tiny twins or triplets if another fetus' sac lurks beyond my view. Maybe an adorable little sister!

"Dad's noble spermatozoa impregnated *my* egg," boasts Benito. "Our nigger neighbour's sperm skidded into your egg a week later. When your black hide ejects, Mom better have rehearsed a slick explanation. She's such a slut."

"She's unsullied purity," I exclaim and stomp, or would if I had a fully formed foot. Maybe that bugger smothered our little sister. How does he know so much? Is he fibbing? Is he a tiny fabulist? What's a fabulist? Life in the womb's confusing.

"Stop whimpering—it gets more bizarre by the nanosecond," Benito chides, explaining that in a few months Mom's womb will eject us like novice paratroopers, a midwife will slash our umbilical cords, and then we'll suckle at Mom's breast. Suckling sounds scrumptious.

"We'll poop our nappies," Benito crows.

"Ass-wiping, even with talcum powder, stinks, but our womb is climate-controlled, food's on tap 24/7, we needn't wake Mom to feed us, and there are no toilets or nappies. We're masters of our universe, however tiny, as we nest in personalized placentas attached to those cables you call umbilical cords. If you weren't such a greedy gobbler, I'd never be hungry."

"Leftovers suffice for runts."

“Let’s not be born!”

“I *will* be born. I will bestride vast universes beyond this incarcerating womb.”

“How come you’re called Benito? Mom’s still choosing names: Farley, Frederick, Frank, and what’s this: Abednego?”

“Dad’s teasing. Now hear this, squirt. Dad’s not *your* Dad, and I’m not twiddling my developing thumbs waiting until I’m born to train *my* parents. Mom’s fond of monikers that start with F. Fuckface suits you. Oh, throttle your hissy fit; I was joking.”

Benito suspects Dad wants Mom to abort. Dad says they’ll pop kids later when they’re better established. He’s a serf to blood-sucking banks whose head office whims (a.k.a. the latest strategic plan) could rescind his farm’s mortgages. Those vultures would enjoy dining on my parents like roadkill porcupines, their only discord choosing between Canadian rotgut or a fine Burgundy to accompany their meal. When tire-flattened, porcupine’s a devilishly pernickety dish to select an accompanying beverage.

Mom teaches ethics at something called a college, although she’s not tenured. Spiteful colleagues detest her feminist scholarly papers, railing against being labelled yesterday’s bewildered timeservers. She’s reluctant to abort; something called her clock’s ticking. What if, like Molly Joyce, she can’t conceive later? Remember the obstacles that lesbian hurdled to adopt a Peruvian baby girl, whose heart beat erratically, poor darling. Her wife, Orense, divorced Molly because she needed to fake chastity to receive Holy Communion.

I’m confused.

“What’s holy about communion? What’s chastity? What’s abortion?” I ask Benito.

“Abortion means we don’t get born,” he explains.

“Great. We’ll snuggle inside Mom’s cocoon forever!”

“Abortion means we’re sucked out and flushed.”

“Stop them!”

Benito has a plan to finesse abortion. “One, two, three, kick!”

“Adam! Come feel my belly!” says Mom.

“Stop kicking. Hold your breath. Suppress your heartbeat,” orders Benito.

Dad’s fingers slide along Mom’s belly, his ear in close pursuit.

“Don’t inhale his second-hand smoke,” whispers Benito.

“Nothing! Eve, don’t manipulate me,” Dad says.

Benito constantly harps on pleasures outside the womb: bungee jumping, beating up smaller kids, whoopee cushions on teachers’ chairs, slingshots to hunt garden birds, air rifles to hunt field birds, and assault rifles to hunt radical Muslims. What’s a radical Muslim? How come this know-it-all-and-glad-to-tell-me-all-about-it is so erudite? He refuses to divulge his sources.

We’ll set fire to dozing bag ladies and run across the tops of cars in Walmart parking lots. We’ll tell Father Crosby to go screw Sister Ingrid.

That seems mean, not fun, but Benito ignores my pleas that there must be more compassionate activities out there. He’s eager to be Dad’s son and heir. He’ll take over the farm, leverage it, and become filthy rich.

“Why not clean rich?” I ask.

“You’re such a suck,” Benito replies. “I’ll boot Dad and his rocker out on the verandah.”

“Why would Dad acquiesce?”

“Because the dink was cuckolded by a dumb nigger.”

“Nelson’s a minister!”

“He helps homeless welfare bums.”

“Homeless?”

“They sleep on park benches and root through garbage cans for food.”

“Are there many?”

“Loads, but they’re better off than refugees in Gaza.”

“Are there many of them?”

“Yep. Hundreds of thousands.”

“Are refugees common?”

“They proliferate like lice in a tart’s pubic hairs.”

“Let’s not be born,” I plead again.

“When birth happens, wait your turn.”

“Where’s Gaza? How will I know when birth threatens?”

“Mom will groan like the barn’s rafters in a gale. Listen for her howls of labour pains.”

“I’d never hurt Mom. Let’s not be born!”

“Don’t forget I’m ejecting first.”

Mom's womb becomes a repository of noxious stinks.

"Benito, stop farting!"

"I'm not. Dad's trucking squealing pigs to the slaughterhouse."

"What's a slaughterhouse?"

"A bacon factory. Mom's boozing. While the puritan's away, the libertine rocks."

Mom's doctor says Scotch's verboten while she's up the stump and breastfeeding. "That's forever, and forever is a long, long time," she protests. If she disobeys, we could end up with fetal alcohol syndrome, idiots chock-full of sound, fury, and agony, achieving nothing. If we escape that, we'll be stupider and more irritable than if Mom embraces sobriety. Maybe she's already damaged Benito. Because we're tiny we'll be drunker than her if she guzzles a third, hold it, now a fourth shot.

"I can't take another term of team teaching that oxymoron business ethics," she weeps.

Aw, who cares? I'm exuberantly pissed. I'm jitterbugging in my sac. Benito's roaring and bumping on my head to the beat on Mom's iPod. Lord, we'll party until ribald dawn. Mom should imbibe every day!

"Let's rock around the clock," I hoot to Benito. "Bring birth on. I'll get blotto on 12-year-old Royal Lochnagar."

As a hesitant sun creeps over the despondent horizon, Mom's womb is putrid. My headache throbs, and my existence seems dreary, sour, and profitless. I plot how to terminate Benito and his bilious mood with extreme prejudice. "It's called a hangover," he explains.

We bump along in Mom's belly in her Toyota van to her parents' cottage for something called Thanksgiving. Dad's father, whom he calls Jude, is visiting too, although not Dad's mother, whom he calls Tamar. She rocks inconsolably in demented fogs of forgetfulness in a nursing home.

"What's 'demented' mean?" I ask Benito.

"Bad riddance to the confused ninny," he crossly mutters and promises that after we're born we'll screech, yell to stop for rainbow Slurpees (whatever they are), and kick the backs of our parents' seats.

"Why torment our parents?"

"To train them. No sting, no honey," he replies.

What we'll see out windows sounds splendid. We'll pass gaudily-co-

loured forests, swamps, and fields. A deer will bound across the road with her doe, cattle will graze, and horses will canter. We'll see wild flowers (which Benito calls "weeds"), rivers, frog-croaking ponds, and finally kayakers on Grand Lake.

"Perhaps I should risk birth," I think.

"If I'm born and your pit bull attacks me, can I pop back into Mom's womb?" I ask Benito, who snorts in derision.

"Life's a one-way ticket to death with no refunds," he advises.

"We're here," says Dad.

Mom emerges as nobly as the woman Benito calls "the not immaculate Virgin Mary" to worshipful greetings from Jude and Mom's parents, who henceforth demand to be called Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma pats Mom's belly, and Grandpa nearly shakes Dad's hand off.

"We'll shake these nincompoops down after we're born," Benito says cheerfully.

"Eve, you've given us a new leash on life," says Jude.

"You mean lease on life," corrects Grandpa.

Jude admits he's a bowl in a china shop; it turns out that he means "bull," which he is, his nasty wit humourless. He says Mom should forget that ethics-professing scam and be happy, pregnant, barefoot, and in the kitchen. "Just joking," he chuckles. What's she want with socialistic maternity leave? "Hell's bells, when I was a boy a woman would drop her critter and keep topping turnips. Just joking."

He and Grandpa trade barbs as Dad carves the turkey. Jude says aboriginal land claims block oil pipelines, while Grandpa says that Canada should pay reparations to the Indians for war crimes.

"We won and they lost, when all is set and done," says Jude.

"That's idiotic, and you mean 'when all is said and done,' you deaf die-hard," replies Grandpa. Dad and Mom silently eat squash pie, not risking fertilizing their vituperation. Benito warns me that we'll spend Christmases, Easters, and birthdays with these people, who will hug, spoil, and civilize us, which we must resist on pain of becoming polite.

"Piss on stupid family squabbles. I'll block you when birth arrives," I threaten.

"I'll goose step over your sac—or through it, whichever's most convenient," promises Benito.

Benito snores, a fetus absorbed in dictatorial dreams.

Jude's sniffles wake me. "My Tamar wants to die. Lewy's body syndrome grips her in its vice. 'Please Grim Reaper, come harvest me,' she screeches," Jude weeps. He's shaking and Mom's hugging him, her womb swaying worse than during her morning sickness barfs.

"Why does my son, Adam, detest me?" Jude asks. "No, don't bother answering. I wasn't the best of fathers or husbands, and it's past time for amends. I'm straddled with guilt."

Mom rocks him, her silence denying his pitiful plea for assurance that he's a passably fine father. I ask Benito: what's death? He grumpily explains while Mom sings to Jude, "Lullaby and good night, may the angels," and lapses into humming as the soothed geezer slips into snoring sleep. Apparently death tirelessly stalks everybody, scything some in the womb, some soon after birth; others elude him for decades. The blowback is that many of these blithe fugitives play wretched endgames. Death, early or tardy, condemns all and sundry to nothingness, whence we came.

"Even *I'll* die?" I ask. Impossible!

"Bloody soon if you keep me awake with stupid questions. Birth is the royal road to death."

"Cancel the midwife! Say we have a previous engagement."

"She'll yank you out."

"Let the stormtrooper try. She'll pull out, her hand missing fingers."

Benito orders me to hide. "Under there where they can't spot you!"

Dr. Jekyll, who wrote the prescription for Mom's faulty birth-control pills, is running a test to scrutinize Mom's womb.

"A healthy baby boy," he says when Mom and Dad view the results.

"He feels huger than your picture," says Mom.

"That embryo's my son and heir?" asks dubious Dad.

Benito can be born if he likes. Not me. Nobody knows I'm in here. I'm lingering for the duration. That could be centuries.

"Mom won't live that long, asshole," says Benito. "You'll starve in her wintry womb."

We gather for Tamar's funeral. Everybody's sullen, remembering her generous nurturance. Dollops of attention might have prevented her suicide. Unspoken is their remorse that everyone believed she was too befuddled to unlock the window to the balcony of Jude's condominium and leap. A pot-

ted cactus, which never flowered, caught a snatch of her paisley nightgown.

The funeral's followed by guilt-fueled fights, which appal us wee fetuses. Grandma curses climate warming, responsible it seems for this century's outrageous slings and arrows. Grandpa says that's nonsense; weather warms and cools, unpredictably passes and returns, having no alternative. Jude sobs, says he's internally grateful that everyone came, and flicks on his huge TV. Some narcissist called Clinton is bombing a place called Belgrade, wherever that is—San Diego? Children are killed.

"Collateral damage is tragically inevitable," intones his pious, ass-licking press secretary.

"Bullshit, piled higher and deeper," says Dad, who is ordered to curb his tongue by Jude. "Son, you'll be a father soon." No one mentions that Jude never curbs his story-telling tongue, ranting about immigrants and how their spawn form gangs, deal drugs, filch university positions from real Canadians, and speak in tongues.

"The fast majority wants them trundled home, particularly those chinks," he says as dusk shrouds us.

What Benito calls my paranoia (which is really prudent caution) surfaces. How does he know everything? He's only a week older than me. I accuse him of bullshitting after he explains what a crap artist is—a condition afflicting all humans, particularly lawyers, preachers, and Prime Ministers. He invites me to slide past his sac to the peak of Mom's womb and cock an ear. Sound surrounds me in a cacophony of news about rape, pillage, and traffic accidents; Mom and Dad fighting about money; 911 calls; soccer crowds hurling racist chants; Israelis reviling Arabs, who reciprocate; and other noises Benito can't identify. He discovered a slit in Mom's womb that is smaller than I can see—smaller even than medical tests can detect.

"I'm information-battered," he bawls. The overload is deforming his still developing cortex. His shudders wobble the womb. He snivels about gang rapes, school shootings, kidnappings of schoolgirls by divorced fathers and African militants, constant preventive military actions, and politicians pontificating 24/7. Illiterate children die as malaria blows back, and world banks impose cutbacks on desperately impoverished nations, whose elites, flush with Swiss bank accounts, comply by slashing education and health benefits. I cover my ears until he subsides.

Benito begs my help. "If I'm to survive out there, I'll need to be tough,

have a hide like a rhanosphorous, as Jude says. Yell abuse at me.”

“You want to be lean and mean?”

“No, but I must learn to be.”

“Okay, but I’m not being born.”

My considerate insults fail to ruffle Benito. “It’s your Dad who’s the nigger, Mom’s a slut, and you harbour Jude’s bigoted genes and Tamar’s demented ones.” These pebbles glance off his sac like daisy petals. He exhorts me to greater efforts, insisting that Mom’s not a slut and that our black neighbour’s Dad’s best buddy. “I practise lies to prepare for dealing with humans.”

“You’re a flaming faggot,” I charge, wondering what that is. He says he doesn’t think so, but he’s cool with the idea of being gay. I desperately fling childish accusations, “Your mother wears hockey socks, you wet the bed, you pitch like a girl, your slapshots lack slap, you sleep with biting bedbugs, you can’t skip Double Dutch, you bat left-handed, and snot’s dribbling down your face,” none of which disturb the placidity of his sac.

I rethink my strategy. “You’ll never be tough enough. You lack a killer’s instinct.”

He’s briefly flustered before he calmly yet menacingly responds, “Maybe I lack an assassin’s instinct, but I can learn. Come on, you can do better.”

I nail him. “You can’t take over Dad’s farm, you’ll never be a shepherd, and if you’re lucky you might learn to raise second-grade soybeans and stunted kale.”

His rage is titanic. “Watch your back, squirt.”

This must be it. Mom’s groaning and screeching. The midwife, a Jamaican bobsledder, yells “push, push,” and Mom screams, “I am pushing for Christ’s sake!” Benito struggles forward, but he’s too big to eject, so he retreats to replenish his thrust. An unwelcome urge overwhelms me. Against my better judgment I want to be born. I see myself gobbling at Mom’s breasts, pooping in diapers, trying a rocking horse, tracking mud in just after Mom’s washed the floor, and experiencing things I can only dimly imagine. I edge my sac alongside my struggling brother, burst it, and slide out before him.

Snip!

Grandma cuddles me. I gurgle and drool. Mom’s still screaming like she’s landed in pig shit, jarring my adorable tranquillity. Grandma hands

me to Dad, cautioning him to be careful.

“This is my son and heir,” he exults.

“His pecker’s cute as the tam on my barat,” says Jude. It turns out that he means “beret.”

Grandpa suggests calling me Able. Why? “Because he looks so capable. He’s a right bobby dazzler.”

I fire off some fantastic coos, unfortunately mixed with noxious poops. Benito advised training adults early.

“Here comes another one,” says the perspiring midwife, and then Benito arrives, squalling and angry that I beat him out.

“Lord, he’s a big bruiser,” says Jude warily. “Any more of his elk in there?”

“Can’t find anything. Hold it, there’s some refuse. Maybe a sister was smothered months ago,” says the midwife.

Mom wants to hold her baby. She’s offered Benito. “No! Give me the cute one.”

“What shall we call this porker?” asks Dad.

“Whatever,” Mom answers, poking a finger at my noble nose. I wrinkle it adorably.

“Call the big one Kane, after his great great grandfather. Jesse Kane weighed in over three hundred pounds on the hoof,” says Grandma.

“I hereby deem thee Kane,” pronounces Dad.

“Look, Kane’s curling up in the feeble position,” exclaims Jude.

At our christenings Grandma abruptly remembers that Jesse Kane was nabbed pirating guano shipped from Peru for fertilizer. The first lynching rope snapped, as did the second, which infuriated Jesse, who was a choleric man at even the best of times. They finally broke his neck with the thickest rope in PEI, which was used to tie smuggling ships to concealed docks, and his death was none too soon for the women he pleased himself by thrashing with the same stout rope.

Jude suggests changing baby Kane’s name to Abednego.

“Who?” asks Grandma.

“Buddy of Shadrach,” says Dad.

“Come again?” says Grandpa.

“Too late,” says Nelson, the minister next door, as he sprinkles water over us.

Kane wails. I coo.

Life turns out like chalk and cheese to the womb's comfort. I wonder which stage is chalk and which cheese? It seems like the womb was chalk to me, but cheese to Kane. Or vice versa. Whatever.

Out here he's earnest, dull, charmless, and plump—all of which he regards as virtues. Is he faking being a dolt? Why? The contemptuous fetus has become a stoic plodder, his school grades mediocre, unlike mine. He eschews training adults—a blunder I don't share. Teachers adore me but merely tolerate Kane, who wonders what I mean when I remind him that he once ambitiously yearned to be master of universes. He must be pretending to forget memories of the womb, which are so vivid to me. Perhaps the information overload he suffered in the womb actually did deform his cerebral cortex.

Only Nelson, our neighbour, fails to succumb to my charming ploys. He encourages Kane, saying his fastball's quicker than mine. Who cares? Not me. Aclima, a dark orphan our age, dotes on Kane. He's welcome to that turgid twin, who hobbles to school with him, corrects the spelling on his assignments, and cleans our stables under Mom's stern surveillance. Dad fetched Aclima home after a marauding mob of Edomites dragged her mother and father behind hinnies. Unusually they didn't bother raping five-year-old Aclima or her shredded mother, although they buggered her father. Mom confirmed that Aclima was still intact. Her twin was sold.

Is Kane dissembling? "The child is pater to the man," Jude prattles. If so, then it follows that the fetus is father to the child. Can Kane really be a contradictory alien to his fetus? Am I paranoid? A dollop of caution never goes amiss. Kane shares my genes, so he can't be as dim as he appears unless Mom's boozing damaged him in the womb.

Wildflowers suddenly riot on the spring-showered hills. Aclima sheds her winter girlhood and becomes a daffodil. She smiles constantly, bedazzled by her budding womanhood. She flirts with Kane. Mom yanks her from cleaning animals, corrals, and stables and teaches her cooking skills. Mom sends Kane on errands and invites me to sample Aclima's dishes.

For our fifteenth birthdays Dad orders Kane and me to supply provisions. Mom and Aclima will cook. I butcher a fattened lamb, while Kane

provides vegetables from the pathetic plot of land Dad gave him. Kane's ploughed, tilled, hoed, weeded, and dug irrigation ditches to improve its stingy fertility. Of course he accepts that the prime pastures are reserved for me, Dad's firstborn.

Platters of food adorn the festive table.

"Son, this mutton is succulent," says Dad, tossing bones to the dogs.

"What's wrong with my arugula?" asks Kane.

"Salads are rabbit food."

"My onions?"

"Give me gas."

"Well, here's more chickens coming home to roast," says Jude.

Mom convinces me to ask Kane to be my best man. She's suckling Seth, my little brother, the ever smiling prick who has usurped my perch as favourite child. "I know Kane still loves Aclima, but this will reconcile him to your poaching her. You're twins, both farmers, you a shepherd, him raising soybeans and ginseng. Amalgamate! What a team you'll make! Everybody merges these days."

I flick on the TV news to drown her chatter. Obama's ordered drones to murder targets in Pakistan. Children are exterminated. "Collateral damage is tragically inevitable," intones Obama's pious press secretary, another asslicking careerist.

Kane toasts me frequently at my bachelor party, insisting "Bottoms up, brother!" I stagger outside to barf. Aclima fumes when I get this blotto, nagging me to drink moderately like Kane. I gulp air, brush vomit off my mustache, and lurch into the moonlight pasture, the Big Dipper pouring ornaments of stars across the reproachful sky.

"I'm not guilty. What's the indictment? Justice demands a precise charge," I yowl.

The northern lights flabbergast my Basque shepherds, who are tending my lambs by night. Wolves howl on distant ridges. The blue moon's cheese yellow!

"Mind the pond, brother," Kane says menacingly, binds my arms tightly behind me, wrestles me to my knees, and howls that I stole his birthright. He was conceived first and deserved to be born first.

"Finally, I can utter my outrage," Kane screeches, and he boasts that

Aclima's bun in the oven is his. He wildly slashes with the sharpened stick he uses to harvest wild ginseng. Blood clogs my nose. He tosses me into the frog-slimy pond. I cling to a clutch of poison ivy on the slippery slope to prevent drowning. Trickling blood reddens the pond, reflecting the heedless Milky Way, wallowing in its narcissism.

"Where's your brother?" asks Dad. I attempt to yell, but blood chokes me.

"I'm not that souse's keeper," replies Kane.

"Fetch your hide elsewhere. Wander where you will."

He nicks a jagged scratch on Kane's neck. "Here's a scar for a memento."

"Aclima, you're not leaving with Kane," roars Dad.

It feels like I'm being swept back to Mom's womb, but it's only my dying yearning. Actually, I'm hell-bent toward chilly nothingness.

Is being born sane? Go figure. Sometimes it's shortened by butchery, other times confused by dementia. Often it's lovely, fucking, lambing, running like the wind, skating, sleeping by a winter night's fire, canoeing, tackling into a brisk breeze, paying down mortgages, and herding Philistine rustlers over cliffs. Actually, the rustlers were Edomites, but we'd learned to demonize denizens of Gaza, poor sods.

Often I cursed my plagued existence, my ewes attacked by sheep pox, foot rot, blue tongue, wolves, coyotes, pumas, and eagles—predators driven by their imperious genes to nourish ravenous offspring. As Jude said when that rearing hinny's hind legs nearly gelded him, "Life's got its ups and downs and sideways, makes no cents, chuck it up to chance."

Still, I'd raft life's turbulent white water again if I possessed a smidgeon of strength. Of course, I'd change many things—be less envious, booze less, grow a mustache earlier. I wonder what the fetus in Alcima's womb snugly ponders. Is he, or she, wondering who the father is? I pray to Yahweh that there's only one fetus, which provides more time for contemplation.

What hurts most is that nobody will remember me or my parents, Adam and Eve, and my brothers, Kane and Seth, despite Jude's deaf boasts. He's yapping timeless tales to bored acolytes, who giggle, "We're not memorizing this rubbish when rap's all the rage."

"He's in this here ditch," someone faintly shouts. I'm going to live!

“Pump his heart,” I distantly hear. “Able’s going, going,” then “he’s gone.”

Through cold eons of buckled déjà vu I murkily tack, eyeless, deaf, and denied safe passage to a snug womb’s windless harbour.