

UNCORRECTED DRAFT COPY

OBSIDIAN DREAMS

Short Story Collection

by

Barry J. House

UNCORRECTED DRAFT COPY

Contents and layout subject to change in the final version

One sample story from the collection

This file is for advance promo purposes only

Copyright © Barry J. House 2007

No part of this publication may be reproduced
in any form without prior written permission
from the publisher

Published by

Screaming Dreams

www.screamingdreams.com

CONTENTS

(in full collection)

The Return of the Galaxy-X Blaster

The Chance to Say Goodbye

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Meet Your Maker

To Their Former Glory

Encounter With the Dead

Shoddy Workmanship

The Shaft of Ultimate Truth

History Will Repeat Itself Tonight

Biology Lesson

Make Things Good

As Good as it Gets

Alien Abduction

The Doctor Chadwick Party

The Tree and the Switch

The Ghosts of my Life

The Strange Disappearance of Liam Nichols

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

I had locked Dr. Annabelle Tashin's toilet door and was sitting on the loo with my trousers still on. I pulled the note from my pocket and read it:

PLEASE HELP ME

SHE MEANS TO KILL ME

YOU MUST DO SOMETHING

Oh, shit, I thought. There goes my nice little story.

Or maybe not. The old reporter's instincts had kicked back in. *Perhaps this interview will be that elusive scoop, the one that propels my career into overdrive.*

I flushed the loo, in case somebody was listening, splashed my face with cold water, and, resolving to get to the bottom of the story, made my way back to the lounge.

Twenty minutes earlier I'd been standing outside the house in the drizzle, wet and dishevelled, trying to compose myself. Dr. Tashin was notorious for her reluctance to give press interviews, and renowned for her painstaking, genetic research; She was almost as famous, in scientific circles, for her refusal to wear a prosthetic to replace the hand she'd lost in a childhood accident. I wanted her to be entirely at ease for the interview, which was more than I could say for myself; this woman had accomplished much in the field of scientific research, despite her disability, and I was finally going to meet her in the flesh. And she'd specifically asked for *me* to conduct the interview, saying she'd something important to announce. Why then, was I quivering all over like a schoolboy on his first date?

And then she'd opened the door and those beautiful, almond eyes transfixed me. I already knew she was pretty, we've all seen her photo's in the medical journals (sometimes accompanying my own articles), but no amount of crappy, low resolution, images were *ever* going to prepare me for a beauty of such

OBSIDIAN DREAMS

magnitude. It hit me full on, like a physical blow; I swear I've never experienced anything like it in my life. And if you've been lucky enough to meet her you'll know exactly what I mean.

Have you heard of love at first sight?

But have you actually *experienced* it?

I hadn't. Not until then.

We introduced ourselves, and then she guided me through into a spacious lounge.

"Please sit there, Mr. Hardy," she said, taking my coat and indicating a chair.

It was one of those deep cushioned, leather upholstered, armchairs, the type I keep promising to treat myself to one of these days, but never, quite, get around to buying. I lowered myself into it gratefully; it had been a twenty-minute walk from the railway station. Pulling out my notebook and pencil, I watched Dr. Tashin arrange herself on an identical chair.

She faced me across the polished glass top of an exquisitely carved coffee table; it didn't have legs, as such, the body having been fashioned into a double-helix to represent a strand of DNA.

"Sophie's preparing afternoon tea. Would you care for some, Alan? Oh, you don't mind if I use your first name, do you?"

"No, not at all," I said. "And tea would be lovely, Annabelle."

Her relaxed manner had surprised me; I guess I'd expected her to be stuffy and overbearing, like other top scientists I'd encountered. She sat before me, awaiting my every question. I hadn't expected the interview to start so casually.

How could I have known that far greater surprises would soon follow?

"Oh, please call me Annie. Now, where shall we start?" said Dr. Tashin. "Did you know my father migrated here to England from Japan, not long after the Second World War?"

I'd been sinking further into the armchair's embrace and deeper into those gorgeous eyes. *You have your father's eyes, then, Annie*, I thought.

"No, I didn't, uh, Annie. That must've been very brave of him."

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

“Yes, but my father was a very remarkable man, Alan,” she said.

I told her I was aware he was a brilliant biologist in his own right.

“And did you know his *brilliant* life was cut short by the same event that caused *this*?” she said, thrusting out her left forearm to reveal the smooth stump of her wrist. A single, bright, tear rolled down her cheek.

“No, I didn’t.” The conversation had already taken an unexpected turn; I needed to steer it back on track. “Annie, I believe you’ve a scientific breakthrough to announce...”

“Indeed I do, Alan, but all in good time... ah, tea has arrived!”

A slender girl, maybe fifteen years old, had entered the room. She was carrying a silver tray laden with all the paraphernalia of tea making, which she placed on the coffee table. When Dr. Tashin had mentioned Sophie, I’d assumed her to be the maid, but the moment I laid eyes on the child I knew she was Tashin’s daughter.

“Your daughter, Annie?”

“Pour Mr. Hardy’s tea, then, girl!” said Dr. Tashin, ignoring my question. “Milk and sugar, Alan?”

“Yes, thank you, just the one sugar, please.”

Outside, the rain had stopped. Sunlight streamed through the enormous bay window, illuminating Sophie with the intensity of a theatrical spotlight. The girl stood there, holding out my cup of tea with infinite care, as if her life depended on its safe transit into my possession. For one frozen moment I couldn’t distinguish where fine bone-china ended, and smooth, translucent skin began. Had she been substituted by an alabaster statue, placed before me as part of some divine trick?

But then the girl moved, and the illusion was lost.

The cup trembled on its saucer as Sophie pressed it into my palm. She reached out to steady it with her other hand, slipping something beneath the saucer. Her face remained impassive, but there was a sudden desolation in her eyes that grabbed my attention, raising my curiosity level tenfold. Sophie obviously

OBSIDIAN DREAMS

didn't want her mother to see the hidden object. I moved my hand slightly and spied a tiny, folded note. When the opportunity arose, I eased it away from the saucer, slipping it into my pocket.

The child was standing before me, looking uncertain as to what to do next. And then her lip began to quiver.

"Move aside, girl!" commanded her mother. "You're blocking my view. Can't you see we're talking?"

The child sprang to one side and tripped over something. She went flying across the Persian rug and smacked down on the floor, her head barely missing the TV. Dr. Tashin had leaped from her seat in what looked like an effort to arrest her daughter's fall, but I wasn't so sure. I had the distinct impression, that, just before she'd got up, I'd seen Tashin's foot withdrawing from the spot where her daughter had tripped.

Sophie appeared to be unhurt, but as she got to her feet I noticed the gritted teeth, the tears brimming in her eyes. She was hurting, all right.

Dr. Tashin banished Sophie from the room with orders not to return, and it was then I asked her if I could use the toilet. I wanted to read the note. There was something going on between this mother and daughter that I just *had* to figure out.

When I returned to the lounge, I perched on my armchair feeling far less comfortable than before.

"Now, where were we, Alan?" said Dr. Tashin.

"Oh, yes," she said, before I could even begin to formulate a reply. "I was going to tell you about the accident. It's important I give you some kind of background to my work."

She took a sip of tea, and began.

"I was fourteen years, three months, and two days old when it happened. My parents' marriage had been deteriorating for some time, and they were at the point where talk of separation centred on *when*, rather than *if*. It was no secret that my father would be moving out soon, and I would be going with him; he wasn't the only one who didn't get on with my mother."

At that point I think Dr. Tashin noticed my unease, it must've been written all over my face. I reckon she mistook it for

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

impatience.

"I've read your work, Mr. Hardy, and I like it," she said. "I believe you're a fair man; that's why I've chosen to tell you my story. Please bear with me."

Dr. Tashin went on to explain, that, on the night of the tragedy, she and her parents had been invited out for a meal by one of her father's colleagues. Her mother hadn't wanted to go, but even in the closing stages of their relationship, they were still trying to present a unified face to the world, and so she'd acquiesced. The woman had been drinking, but that wasn't unusual for her, so nobody kicked up a fuss when she announced she would drive.

I heard a faint click, and out of the corner of my eye, saw the lounge door crack open; I was sure there was a figure standing behind it. Sophie was listening. Glancing at Dr. Tashin I didn't think she'd noticed. She continued on with her account.

"In those days we lived in Hampshire. The restaurant was in a quiet corner of the New Forest. On the way home, after more drinks, and despite repeated warnings, my mother took yet another corner at high speed. She lost control of the car, and then it careered down a bank, hitting a tree."

Dr. Tashin paused, looking at me imploringly. I could see she needed my sympathy.

She had it one hundred percent.

"My hand was a terrible mess, Alan, but I managed to get out of the car to look for my father. He'd been thrown through the windscreen, you see, completely clear of the wreckage. He was kneeling on the ground, facing away from the car. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't get up. But then I saw what had happened. He'd been impaled on a branch. It had entered his body at the navel, like a grotesque umbilical cord!"

Tears were streaming down Dr. Tashin's cheeks, but I said nothing; I had to let the woman tell her story.

"My mother scrambled back up the bank to fetch help while I clung to my father, offering what little comfort I could. He was still conscious, but, miraculously, didn't seem to be in any pain. I

OBSIDIAN DREAMS

remember I couldn't tear my eyes away from the bulge at the small of his back; I knew without looking, that, if I were to ease his jacket away, I would see the bloodstained tip of that branch."

She let out a little sob, then, before continuing.

"He died right there in my arms, just looked up at me and said, 'I love you, Annie,' and died. The most important person in my life. And *this...*" she raised her damaged arm. "This is my little souvenir of that night, a symbol...a constant reminder of how my father departed this world!"

She stopped to pull a tissue from her handbag. As she dabbed her face dry I took the opportunity to check out the shadow at the lounge door; Sophie was still listening.

Dr. Tashin went on to explain that her mother, who hadn't thought much of her before the tragedy, positively *hated* her afterwards.

"All my parents' fighting had been forgotten, to be replaced in my mother's sick mind by an *ideal*, a remnant of how things had once been. And, to her, all of it was *my* fault. She accused me of secretly trying to break up the marriage. She blamed me for causing the accident itself, even though I'd been dozing in the back when the car left the road. Her condition worsened; she was drinking more and more, and her behaviour towards me declined into downright cruelty!"

Dr. Tashin rummaged through her handbag, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it.

"I'm nearly there, Alan. You'll soon know all about my *great scientific breakthrough*. But it's essential you also know a little of the history that brought it about."

"Please, carry on Annie," I managed.

"One night, not long after my father's death, and following a particularly heavy drinking bout, she threw me down the stairs, putting me in hospital for five weeks. When I came out I went straight into care. I wanted to kill her, Alan. She was an evil woman. As far as I was concerned she'd murdered my father, and would've quite happily murdered me, too!"

I leaned closer, sensing a revelation was imminent.

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

“But she ended up killing herself, instead,” said Dr. Tashin. “She got drunk and went out and smashed her car into a bridge. She killed *herself*, Alan, denying me the revenge I so craved for!”

Dr. Tashin paused once more, gathering her remaining strength, I think.

“But I couldn’t let it end there, I couldn’t!” she said.

The woman studied me closely, as if pondering whether or not to carry on. She must’ve reached her decision because she leaned across the DNA table and whispered into my ear.

“So I cloned her.”

“You WHAT?”

I heard a gasp, almost imperceptible, from behind the door.

“What do you mean, you *cloned* her?”

“I followed in my father’s footsteps, becoming a researcher in human genetics. I eventually obtained the necessary genetic material from my mother’s corpse, and that was no mean achievement in itself, but I’ll spare you the gory details...”

“B...but it’s a generally accepted fact that, due to the biological makeup of humans, cloning will never be possible. When a cell splits during embryonic development the amount of DNA it receives cannot be controlled, and so it dies.”

“A generally accepted fact, yes, but incorrect! I, alone, have found a way to apportion the DNA. While other scientists were arguing over Dolly the *bloody* sheep, Sophie was well into primary school. But I kept quiet about it; I wasn’t interested in fame. I had other, more personal, reasons for wanting to clone a human.”

And then, finally, the penny dropped.

“Are you telling me you’ve cloned *your own mother* simply so you can take revenge on her for your father’s death?”

“YES! And her name was Sophie, Alan.” Dr. Tashin nodded her head towards the kitchen. “That girl’s my mother.”

“B...but that’s absurd,” I said. “If this is true, then surely you know you’ve only *copied* your mother, not re-created her? She’s an individual with her own unique personality, determined by a unique set of life experiences. If anything, she’s your mother’s

OBSIDIAN DREAMS

delayed, identical twin. Oh, how could you hold this girl responsible for your mother's actions?"

"I know all the arguments, Alan. Don't you think I've had plenty of time to ponder them?"

"Then *why*, if you intend to harm the girl, are you telling me all this, Dr. Tashin? Don't you expect me to go to the police?"

"Yes," she sighed. "But I have to share this with *somebody*. I've been reading your articles...I...I just want to stop hurting her, but I don't know how! Didn't I trip her up just ten minutes ago? I can't stop myself! This has been the sole, driving force in my life for so, many, years."

Dr. Tashin broke down, then, and I instinctively pulled her to me. She sobbed against my chest like a baby.

"This has to end. I have no family or friends to turn to. Tell me, Alan, what should I do?"

"You must talk to Sophie," I said, gently. "Find a way to undo this mess. And you must do it now. *She* is your family, Annie."

"But how do I go about explaining this terrible thing I've done to her? Oh, please help me, Alan. She's only ever known my hate for her; she knows nothing of all this!"

Remembering the lounge door, I looked up and saw it was wide-open; the area beyond was empty.

"On the contrary, Dr. Tashin, I'm afraid she knows everything," I said, jumping to my feet and bounding across the room. "Everything!"

Together, we raced into the kitchen, the study, the bedrooms, looking for Sophie. In the bathroom the medicine cabinet was gaping, pill bottles scattered across the floor. And then we found the front door standing ajar; the girl had fled the house.

We charged out onto the road, but Sophie was nowhere to be seen. Fields flank the house on three sides, but opposite, there's a wooded hill that comes right down to the tarmac. We began searching it, but soon realised we needed help. I used my mobile to call the police.

They found Sophie's body in the wood, two hours later.

She'd emptied a bottle of tranquillizers, and then hidden

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

herself away in a thicket, never wanting to be found.

Dr. Annabelle Tashin paused as she got into the police car, speaking to me one last time. "I'm so sorry I dragged you into this, Alan. I pray that you go easy on me when you write your article." And then, after noticing my hesitation, she added, "*Will you write your story, Alan?*"

Well, I had the scoop I'd dreamed of, but it felt like winning the lottery on the day your family got wiped out. I wanted none of it.

I pulled out my notebook; I hadn't written a single word in it.

"No, Annie," I said. "I don't think so."

I wheeled away from the car, and, willing myself not to look back, began the long walk to the railway station.

As I travelled, it began to rain again, quite heavily, but I didn't mind. I turned my head to the heavens, wondering what might've been, savouring every drop that spattered my face. The rain complemented my mood, disguising the tears that had blurred my vision.