

# SYNCUBATION

By B.T. STANWITZ



There is no stepping away from the precipice: Phase One has been implemented successfully and, according to the judicious tracking of the Laboratory, the program has entered Phase Two on schedule. At 15.5% completion, it can no longer be aborted. Confidentially, the Industry would deny termination of the program at T-5%, but he isn't to know that. The only accelerant now is time, and he is acutely aware of that force's arbitrary judgement.

The twelve transparent spheres – Life Units - are held securely in place by thin, metal fingers trimmed with fine fish-teeth. They rotate slowly. At the heart of each is a tiny pin-prick smudge of red in a ball of jelly-glue. The cloudy substance makes the dot in the middle difficult to see from every angle and only as they revolve one at a time into view can he be sure that they are all there and accounted for. A LifeSub© Calculator, intermittently flashing the colour of swelling veins, tells the nurses that growth rate is acceptable.

Life's ability to manifest itself from absolute zero has always been an unfathomable wonder to him. With little else to do as a Height-Grinder scaling 724 floors to fix exploded Higher Z Illuminants, he has time to consider these things. He likes the big subjects – the something subjects - whilst so many of his counterparts appear content by the minutiae of nothing. Here then, before him on this tray, twelve little blots of something.

Something:

Until recently he had considered reproduction in an abstract way: A concept, rather than an actual. Of course he had been fully involved in the process from the start - but it felt in a distant, disconnected way: Not unlike someone else taking your hand and waving it about. Now, as he considers the actuality, something stirs in him - a realisation that these minuscule lifeforms have begun to exist. In turn the thought breathes an energy into him: He understands at last that he is to be a father.

Or, at least, to be clear, as close to being a father as the experience is going to allow him. There is something missing, he knows that.

He sips at thermally-reduced lemon balm tea he has brought with him and thinks

back to his own childhood. Many past experiences are nothing but a foggy residue coating the deepest layers of his memory, but they exist all the same. Like something he once read. Something he once saw. A beach. Or a table and chair. Or even just the twisted ornate pattern of a sliver of wallpaper. Whatever happened to wallpaper? At times of stress - and this current situation would fall into that category - these vague torn pieces of the past feel like something tangible worth holding on to.

He can cope with the past, it is the now that is so impossibly unreal.

The suspended Life Units can be manually rotated if desired. A fault with the original design, most Life Unit Section professionals agree, but it is there as an option for prospective parents. The nurses won't offer it, but if asked they will grudgingly demonstrate how to momentarily destabilise the Unit valve, disconnect and unseal the substance-inlet tube and cup the tiny circular Life Unit in the palm of the hand. The ball can be steadily rotated between thumb and forefinger. It is not an easy trick - especially wearing mandatory plastiskin Infectimitts© - but it is the closest thing to holding the unborn as is possible. Initially he had recoiled at the thought, such physical expression seemed intrusive - a bit yucky, to be honest. After all, his great-great-great grandfather wouldn't have slipped his arm inside his great-great-great grandmother to give their undelivered foetus a grope, would he? The shudder he experiences, he knows, is primitive ripples of masculinity stamping their feet in incandescence. Finally, though, the thought of real connection had made sense to him. The idea began to consume him and the nurses conceded to his wish with a shrug. And that had been the moment. He had held Life Unit 3 in his palm and gazed in awe, an attentive nurse at his shoulder wearing a Pheo-oxy© muzzle and a pitying frown.

Despite this acceptance of fatherhood, the conception hadn't been his idea. Far from it. Quite out of the blue, despite his awareness of such schemes, his boss had brought the idea up during one of his standard annual reviews.

"Consider it Phillips," Bartrum had urged, "time and tide wait for no man, whatever that means. And according to Prophecy Planning your code-DNA threads are predicted to be grossly under-resourced within the Industry."

He had to admit the logic underpinning the Industry's enterprise made commercial sense. Key skills were an investment - paid for, his boss was keen to remind them, by their employers. It is they, he would stab pointedly, who took all the risks. A basic wish to protect their investment was only to be expected.

Cold-faced nurses float across the Lab's watery floor. A snakes-nest of green and yellow wires strangle the borders of the room. There is only synthetic light filtering into the space, natural light considered lawless to manage. The ceiling is a glow-box of pure white – the same technology at the heart of the new generation of Higher Z Illuminants that he fits and maintains for the Industry. He can tell by the tinged reflection on the rotating Life Units that whoever has installed these particular illuminants has been tardy in their work and failed to facilitate a proper final Grading Check. There is a hint of cyan (0.3 possibly) that gives the Lab's surfaces a sickly hue. There will be long-term health implications for anybody working under such conditions. But they are sufficiently long-term to not effect his children, and the nurses have been too dismissive of his presence to earn his willingness to bring it to their attention.

He leans closer to the tray and ponders the perfect synchronised symmetry of each spin. The double-sextuplets enjoy their fairground ride. There's a calm fatality in their rolling. He can't deny Bartrum has been supportive throughout the process, as has his Planning Mentor and his Mortality Counsellor. It hasn't been a universally appreciated initiative, of course. In the early days of inception protests often halted production, however less from an ethical point of view and more from a concern that the Industry might find itself with an over population of Tri-Base Thought Engineers, or too many Sonic Field Developers. But time has proved Prophecy Planning's projections to be surprisingly robust.

There isn't a lot to the little red dots floating in their egg-sack jelly, but it is hypnotising to watch them turn - some clockwise, some otherwise. It might be his eyes, but he is sure a few of them are larger than others. That can't be gender-linked, he knows. It has long-been stipulated that eight will be female and four male. He doesn't know what he thinks about that, but as long as there are enough to love of each. At least a couple of them might learn to love him back, he considers. He pushes his nose as close to them as he dares. A nurse on the far side of the Lab shoots him a reproachful glance. Love, he feels, isn't as unconditional as some like to suggest. It had occurred to him whilst scaling past floor 632 only yesterday that love could be just as synthetic as skin and fibre. If the physical heart could be constructed out of the non-biological elements of metal and carbon, why not the metaphorical heart? Love wasn't exactly very real anyway was it? He had told himself as Sveltebug© Taxis shot within feet of his head. Time was short. Love was fleeting. So, bring it on. What did it matter if his children had nothing but false love for him? He

could deal with fake. So much of the world was fake anyway. He could be very resigned to the proclivities of his existence.

Therein lies the curse of the Height-Grinder: Resilience. Few make the grade. That's not to say many more couldn't, but the resignation by which the monotony of the role is endured draws admiration, if no further financial reward, from the Industry. It can hardly be a surprise that he has been identified as a Prophecy Planning development sample. Bartrum had been quite beside himself with giddiness in their first exploratory meeting. His boss had been accompanied by a note taking Fact-Droid© that he referred to as One, when quite clearly the number on its carbshell was 3B872.

"Just feeling the temperature here, Phillips. Getting a sense of the mood. It's an opportunity the Industry doesn't feel obliged to afford to many employees as I'm sure you realise. One?"

"Three thousand eight hundred and twelve up to the end of period two."

"Thank you One. So a very exclusive club, you'd be in Phillips." Bartrum had leant forward in his seat as he spoke, elbows teetering on his knees. "I, myself, have taken part in a previous prophecy planning initiative. My own sweet little Juniper. A while ago, of course. Early days for the Program. And very different to yours. My own insertion was fully undertaken with the willing consent of the late, great Mrs B. No such feminine intervention in your case, of course, but hey it doesn't make the results any less appealing now does it? Just some general housekeeping – typical production numbers One?"

"At year level 16 production output not to exceed 6, rising to 256 over a 34 year period to year level 50."

"Thank you One. Of course that's not you. We are already at year level 43 and anyway," Bartrum laughed with undisguised jollity, "there's not too much projected requirement, looking here at Prophecy Planning's latest, um, report. A maximum of -"

"12."

"Thanks One, yes 12, a maximum of 12 for a Height-Grinder virgin sample donor, like yourself. So twelve it would be."

It had been a meeting he had felt very little part of. It had been positioned as a debate and played out as a dictate. After thumb-printing a number of screens he had left the room feeling a bewildering sense of loss.

There is nowhere to sit in the Laboratory. He wonders whether this is a deliberate ploy to discourage familiarity, even at this grossly premature stage. In contrast,

there had been a bouyant welcome at the Donation Portal where they had extracted those threads of his DNA they deemed the most useful. Then, they had tripped over themselves with handshakes, vitamin cordials and soothing words.

The spheres continue their cycle. Thin tubes feed mauve liquid into the heart of their jelly at a steady, predetermined rate. A label beside the tray states his occupation, not his surname: Height-Grinder x 12. Twelve perfectly-forming mini Height-Grinders. He sighs. He trusts Prophecy Planning are right or else his offspring will be redundant before they take their first upward step. The Fact-Droid© One had been unable to provide satisfactory stats for the successful retention of previously redundant pre-skill embryos.

Height-Grinders have never been held in high regard by other Sectors of the Industry. It makes him sad for the Life Units spinning unaware in their tray. Their place in the Industry determined even as fledging specks of flesh. He doesn't think this is much of a gift to give to his babies. The babies. They are not all his, of course. That would be folly. How is mankind to evolve without gene-pool playtime?

"It's industry policy never to reveal to the majority donor the percentage of other-source DNA added to the foetal batch. But there's plenty."

"A minimum of 20%, up to no more than 49.9%."

"Thank you, One. So..."

So in reality a large part of these growing flesh-dots are a cocktail of other contributors: Whatever the Industry and attendant technicians decree will make the keenest Height-Grinders. He would like to know, if only for his pride, whether he is an 80% good Height-Grinder or a 51% good Height-Grinder, as defined by the Industry.

"It might be time for you to move on," ushers a nurse at his elbow, "ambient temperature alteration via passive heat exposure – in other words, you - may severely alter growth patterns. You wouldn't want that, would you?" She steps in front of him and does something with the tube attached to Life Unit 7. He loiters against the wall beneath a sign that says: LOOK UP. NOT DOWN. She finishes her fiddling and sweeps from the room.

His DNA reveals he is not an irrational person. Nor is he spontaneous. He likes to know what is expected of him and hates to disappoint those around him. But in that moment - maybe due to the soup of unfamiliar emotions swelling inside him - he feels compelled to do something he will neither be able to rationalise nor justify.

He feels like saving his babies.

He has an overwhelming compulsion to act before it is too late; as those some deeply-buried instinct has gripped him. Without clear thought or judgement he reaches towards the tray. Carefully and steadily, with the diligent hands of a master Height-Grinder, he untwists the tube-valve of one of the Life Units and lifts the embryo up in the cup of his hand. Swiftly and without pause he steps along the line of mini-cots trimming the Laboratory wall. Each labelled in turn: Thought Engineer x 8. Shifter x 64. Svelte Pilot x 96. Ledger Ant x 248.

If he had his soul again, what shape would he want it to be? He's lying if he says it isn't a question he's asked himself a thousand times whilst hanging from the underarm of a Z Illuminant some 800 floors up in the troposphere, nubsects and speed flies teasing and probing the edges of his VisiGard© and burrowing into the clefts of his exo-suit. His answer to himself has been many and varied and singularly fanciful. Whoever heard of a Height-Grinder changing his spots? One is, one does, one hands on to the next generation, one is extinguished. It's a chain of events as faithful as a moon's ebb and flow. Altering the course of consequence can never be an option. Unless.

He picks and detaches a single Life Unit from a tray labelled Vision Leader x2 and replaces it with the ball in his hand. He attaches junior to the feeding connectors and tightens the valve on the sustenance-tube. He is swift, his beautifully nimble fingers piqued to perfection by years and years of reconnecting filaments thousands of feet above the earth with nothing but exo-suit suction gripping the tensile fabric of the building. Then, without pause, he places the errant, deposed Life Unit in the middle of the Height-Grinder tray.

It's a life swap that might spiral him to damnation or change the course of history. But he has lost his mind fully. With deft speed he replaces the fates of all his children with those of Svelte Pilots, Thought Engineers and Care Souls. He leaves the Ledger Ants to their rolling and steps from the Lab, his head high and his eyes moist. Tonight he will raise a toast to all their futures with a glass of something synthetic and numbing. The nurse gives him a withering glance and he grins at her. It is a big smile; a confident smile. It is not the smile of a Height-Grinder.