

Petri Parousia
by Matthew Hughes

Around these parts, Matthew Hughes is best known for his tales of penultimate Earth, particularly the stories of Henghis Hapthorn and of Guth Bandar. This month, however, we find Mr. Hughes using a more contemporary setting as the starting point for this particular strand of speculation....

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A research scientist is someone who cannot rest content within the confines of existing knowledge, but always itches to know what is over the horizon.

Or it's somebody who doesn't know to leave well enough alone.

Either definition would fit Wally Applethorpe. So it was natural for him to stay on at Yale School of Medicine on a research fellowship, while I couldn't wait to get out and start cutting people open to give them new knees and hips and other useful parts in return for a six-figure income.

In our last year together, Wally had got interested in DNA. Nothing wrong with that, of course. There are plenty of useful things to do with DNA, from catching serial killers to editing congenital diseases out of the gene pool. I suppose you can even make a case for the idea of "improving" the species by making people stronger or more germ-resistant, or whatever he was getting up to in his lab over behind the red brick Farnham Building.

I admit, I could never totally fit my mind around what he was doing. If I could have, maybe I wouldn't have become a surgeon. To me, the human body was not a quasi-metaphysical mystery to be unraveled. It was a kind of soft machine whose parts could be repaired when they broke down, or—even better—replaced entirely with materials God would have used if He'd only had access to teflon and stainless steel.

But to Dr. Wally Applethorpe, full-weight genius and Bentham Research Fellow Extraordinaire, the human being was an infinite series of nesting boxes, like those wooden Russian dolls, one inside another. As soon as he got one open, he'd discover another, smaller one inside, and he'd get busy trying to find his way in, world without end.

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inside another. As soon as he got one open, he'd discover another, smaller one inside, and he'd get busy trying to find his way in, world without end.

I moved up to Boston, joined an existing medical group as their bone man, and got busy in my own way: marriage, mortgage, membership in a decent country club. I received regular emails from Wally—"Keeping in touch" was always the subject header—to which I replied as briefly as I knew how. You may not know many real geniuses, but let me tell you: close up, over the long term, they can truly get on your nerves.

Then late one morning he showed up at my office. Sharon, the receptionist,

was still buzzing me to ask if I wanted to receive an unscheduled visitor when he walked right through my door and said, “Jimmy-boy, you’ve got to see this.”

By reflex, I said, “Don’t call me Jimmy-boy. It’s Jim, or James, or what the hell, Dr. Feltham.”

He gave me that look he always used to give me, the *Let’s not make a big deal out of nothing* look (although it seemed to me his whole life was about making big deals out of next to nothing), and said, “I’ve got to show you this!”

Now, someone who didn’t know Wally Applethorpe might think that the logical response to his statement would be, “What?” But I’d spent three years in a grungy New Haven apartment with

him, so my question was, “Why?”

He blinked and put on that expression of astounded innocence that went with the clear blue eyes, perpetually pink cheeks, and shock of corn-yellow hair.

“Because you’re my friend,” he said.

“I’m not your friend, Wally,” I said.

“I’m just a guy who wound up rooming with you because I couldn’t find anything cheaper. Why don’t you try to think of us as strangers who got stuck in an elevator and then happily went their separate ways?”

At which he gave me his *You old kidder, you* look and launched into the matter that had brought him here. “Give me some blood,” he said, pulling a specimen kit out of his pocket.

This time, my response was the same as anybody's would have been.

“Why?”

“So I can show you what I've been doing.”

“Why?”

He sighed indulgently. “Cause you're going to want to get in on the ground floor of this. I'm launching a company, got some backers, going to make some big buckazoids, do a lot more research. Sky's the limit. So naturally I thought of my old buddy, Jimmy-boy.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, “I'm not your old buddy,” but another part of my brain weighed in and said to me, *Just 'cause he's an annoying little twerp doesn't mean he isn't brilliant.*

How many people could stand Bill Gates before he was a multi-billionaire?

I rolled up my sleeve and he efficiently took ten ccs out of me. “Now what?”

I said.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” he said, “to show you.”

“That’s kind of a long commute from New Haven.”

“Didn’t you get my email?” he said. “I’m just six blocks from here now. Hey, you free for lunch?”

I pleaded an urgent, though imaginary, consult with Jag Sharma, our geriatrics specialist. And, thank God, I did genuinely have a couple of hip

replacements scheduled for the afternoon, which allowed me to ease him out the door while he was still bubbling about how it was just like the good old days, the two amigos back in the saddle again. But after he had gone, I wondered how I would keep him at a manageable distance.

I went out front to plot strategy with Sharon. “What a sweet guy,” was her opening comment, which was just what girls always said about Wally. Of course, they hadn’t had him at full strength and close quarters for three years. Or maybe it was just me. Either way, and notwithstanding the puzzled look she gave me, I worked out a system with Sharon: she would buzz me the

moment she saw Wally out in the elevator lobby and heading for the glass doors. That would give me time to get into somebody else's office and close the door before he could inflict himself on me at will. With Wally, I had found that control was the key to maintaining sanity.

But, of course, he was beyond control; so the system failed on its first test. Impatient with the slowness of our elevators, Wally came up the fire stairs and was past Sharon and halfway to my office before she could buzz me with the code words, "Mrs. Arkwright to see you."

So Wally caught me, my desk spread with insurance forms, which meant I

couldn't plead any urgencies to justify shortening his visit. He carried a small plastic case, like an insulated lunch box, from which he removed a set of petri dishes with transparent covers. They were marked with numbers and names. The names were familiar.

“What is this?” I said.

He touched one of the covers. Its label read Stanley Feltham. “That’s your granddad,” he said.

Next to it was a dish labeled Rose (Maguire) Feltham. “And your grandma.”

The two other dishes were labeled with the names of my mother’s parents.

“What is this?” I said again.

“I’ve isolated each of your

grandparents' DNA," he said, giving me that wide-eyed, farm-boy look that meant he had cracked open another doll.

"How?"

So now, finally, he explained. He could unravel a subject's DNA to separate what each of that person's parents had contributed to the mix. It involved microlasers and several kinds of enzymes—cutters, movers, and assemblers, he called them—and the whole process was handled by a super-fast computer that could sort through all the possible combinations and find the one that was true.

"I patented the process and we're going public in a few weeks," he said.

"Write me a check for five grand and

I'll give you stock warrants that will be worth two percent of the company.”

“And what will the company be worth?” I said.

“Why, billions,” he said.

“Why?” I said. “What will people do with their grandparents’ DNA?”

He shrugged. “I suppose some of them will put it into an egg, insert it into a womb and give birth to grandma or grandpa. Most people have fond memories of their grandparents—from childhood, that is—but by the time the kids are old enough to really get to know them, the old folks are getting ready to shuffle off this mortal coil. Or they’re senile.”

“Okay,” I said, and thought about it.

My mother's parents had died before I was born and the world would thank me for not creating another Stan Feltham: there was already an oversupply of sourpusses. "Supposing there is a market for grandparent clones. It can't be worth billions."

He wagged his hands on either side of his head. "Think, man," he said, then he spread them wide as if offering the whole world. "We're not just talking grandparents. We can go way back. Way, way back."

"How way?"

"Wa-a-a-ay, way."

"Give me a for instance," I said.

He moved the petri dishes aside and sat on the corner of my desk. "Got any

famous ancestors?”

There was a legend in the family on my mother's side that we were descended from one of Benjamin Franklin's illegitimate sons. My mother had never been sure whether she should brag about it or hush it up. I told Wally about it.

“Ben Franklin?” he said. “Really? How come you never mentioned this?”

“I guess it never came up.”

I probably had mentioned the Franklin connection at some point, but I wasn't surprised that Wally had missed it. In any discussion, he usually did most of the talking; listening was not among his alpha-level attributes.

“Well,” he said, picking up one of the

dishes that contained my maternal ancestors, “how’d you like to have Ben Franklin as your own son?”

I thought about it and he read my face. “And how much would you pay to be able to do that?” he said.

I wasn’t actually thinking about me raising a young Ben Franklin. Chances were he would have been a handful and a half. I was thinking about all the people who named their kids Jared or Jessica some other J-name just because it was that year’s fashion. They never thought about what it would be like for the poor kid to be one of four or five identically named people in every group they’d ever join, never thought about how the kid would feel knowing that that

most personal of possessions, one's own name, had been chosen merely because it was popular and because their parents were irredeemably shallow.

I was thinking about just how many such people existed and how many of them were willing to spend their bank accounts to remain in vogue. "Should I make the check out to you or the company?" I said.

And so we were in business.

* * * *

And a very good business it was. Wally's company—Ancest, he called it—caught the world's eye and the world's ear. The backers had poured in plenty of start-up money, a good portion of which went into a saturation ad

campaign on network television. Within days, Leno and Letterman were making jokes about their imaginary ancestors, Regis and Kelly were interviewing Wally live, and the stock price hit two hundred a share, then split. It was structured as a straight-out franchise operation and the prospective franchisees were fighting each other to get in the door.

“Come work with me,” Wally said. He offered me a salary that was one figure more than the six I’d been getting as an orthopedic surgeon, plus options, expense account, corner office, company Lexus.

I said, “What on Earth can I do for you?”

“It’s medical research. You’re a doctor.”

“I’m just a bone cutter.”

He gave me his bashful Tom Sawyer look and said, “You’re my touchstone. Everybody else, they’re always slapping me on the back and telling me what a brilliant researcher I am. You don’t do that. You’re the only one keeps my feet on the ground, Jimmy-boy.”

I should have run for the hills. Instead, I took the corner office with the title of Executive Vice President on the mahogany door behind which I did a lot of not very much, while being well paid for my exertions. It turned out, though, that there was one chore Wally wanted me to take over.

“I’d like you to interface with the backers,” he said. “Give me less time in meetings, more time in the lab. I’ve got some interesting projects on the burners.”

“Okay,” I said. I figured it wouldn’t be too onerous a task to schmooze the money people, dazzle them with a little science and set visions of sugar-plum dividends dancing in their heads. Thus armored in my innocence I walked into the Wednesday afternoon board meeting with a fat folder of glowing results from the first few weeks and even shinier projections for the next three quarters.

“We’ve blown right through the granddad and granny market, and we’re into a serious run on major historical

figures,” I said. “Now that the federal court has ruled that DNA from more than four generations back is public domain, it’s not just Robert E. Lee’s descendants who can have him for a son; we estimate we’ll sell him to about five percent of the population below the Mason-Dixon Line. Plus the interest in European monarchs is picking up, particularly the Bourbons.”

I had plenty more, but I was strongly sensing that the five men in black suits on the other side of the table didn’t give a damn. I set aside the bar charts on eighteenth-century poets and nineteenth-century composers and said,

“Gentlemen, am I missing something?”

“Project Parousia,” said the Chairman of the Board. He was a big, stone-faced man with eyes that had had a lot of practice at weighing and winnowing his fellow human beings. I had the feeling I was close to being assigned to the giant bin labeled *Chaff*.

I shuffled through my papers but I knew there was nothing in there about any Project Parousia. I'd never heard of it, although the name rang a faint bell.

“I don't have any information on that project,” I said.

“Then get some,” said the Chairman. “Or get Applethorpe up here.” The other board members nodded, their jaws grimly set, and I realized that they were all cut from the same block of close-

grained hardwood as the Chairman. Now that I inspected them closely, I saw that they didn't have the sleek, well-nourished look common to the upper links of the corporate food chain. Instead, each had the aspect of the zealot; they might have been carried over from some previous era when the most popular pastimes were burning witches and crushing heretics under piles of boulders.

“We'll be back tomorrow,” he said. “Be prepared to tell us what we want to know.”

* * * *

I went down to the lab. It was below ground and behind a number of thick steel doors and an even larger number of

men who wore uniforms and sidearms. At the last door, even my senior executive pass was not enough to get me through, but I managed to convince the head guard to buzz Wally and he told them to admit me.

When I came into the lab he was bent over the monitor of a scanning electronic microscope, humming to himself. Without looking up, he said, "I think we've made it all the way back to Cro-Magnon man. In a week or two, I should be ready to clone a prehuman hominid. After that, Jimmy-boy, I'm going to get some birds and work back toward the dinosaurs."

"What's Project Parousia?" I asked. My teeth chattered a little. The air was

chilly; the large room was designed to keep its banks of super-fast computers happy. Humans could put on a sweater.

“Oh, just a bee in the board’s bonnet,” he said, looking up for a moment.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“No bee would survive a second in any bonnet of theirs,” I said. “Who are those people?”

He had turned back to his monitor. “Backers,” he said. “Money people.”

I put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him down to my lowly plane. “No,” I said. “They’re not. Tell me how you found them.”

I could see him consulting the part of his memory where he stored irrelevant details. “I didn’t,” he said, after a

moment. “They found me. After I published my paper on retrogressive DNA sequencing, they came to see me.”

“It was their idea to set up the company?”

“Uh huh.”

“But they’re not interested in our actual results and revenue projections.”

He looked mildly puzzled. “They’re not?”

“No, the only thing they care about is Project Parousia.”

“Hmm,” he said, and gestured to a lab bench across the room. “It’s over there.”

His microscope was pulling him back to wherever he went when he was working, but I exerted a more immediate level of force and pushed him over to the

Parousia bench. He examined a series of petri dishes connected to sensors and probes that were in turn linked to one of the big computers, then checked a stream of data that was zipping across a monitor.

“Almost done,” he said. “Of course, it’s just fantasy.”

“What is?”

“Their idea.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

Wally said he figured that the board had gotten themselves all wrapped up in that goofy book about a secret society that had protected the descendants of a union between Jesus and Mary Magdalene through two thousand years. I hadn’t read the book but I had heard

about misguided enthusiasts trying to dig up church floors to get at supposed clues.

I saw it now. “They want you to work backward through the DNA until you’ve got a clone of Jesus.” And now I remembered what parousia meant. It was Greek for the Second Coming.

“They want to bring on the end of the world,” I said.

Wally was the only person I’d ever heard use the word “Pshaw.” He used it now, then added, “It’s just a myth.”

“Work with me a moment,” I said. “Suppose it isn’t a myth. Suppose there really is a secret society. ‘Cause I’m thinking if there ever was a secret society of religious fanatics they’d look

an awful lot like our board of directors.”

“Still,” he said, “what are the chances they could be right?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but how much research could you get done if the seas are boiling and we’re all being pitched into a lake of fire?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Okay, suppose all you give them is a mild mannered carpenter—aren’t they likely to think you’ve teamed up with the Antichrist to wreck their plans?”

‘Cause they don’t look like the kind of people who would get their lawyers in and sue. I’m thinking, they’re more the pitchforks and torches kind.”

At that moment the Parousia Project’s computer emitted a discreet *ding*. Wally

leaned over and picked up the last petri dish in the series. He peered into it.

“There it is,” he said then looked around. “But I don’t see any angels or wise men.”

“Fine,” I said. “Tomorrow I’ll give it to them and maybe they’ll go away happy.” Though I didn’t think so. But planes left for obscure corners of the world every hour, and I would have enough time to pick a good one.

Except that I noticed how Wally was looking at the dish with that expression I’d seen so many times before. He had found another doll he could crack open.

“No,” I said, and reached for the dish. “For once, leave well enough alone.”

But he had already slipped it back

into its connective armature and his fingers rippled across the computer's keyboard.

He turned to me with that smile of genius I'd seen so often before, the one that is a virtual twin to the grin of madness. "I can prove it's a myth," he said, "You see, if that's really Jesus, the Son of God, then half its DNA is Mary's and the other half is...."

Ding went the computer.

Behind him, from the lab bench, a light glowed.

I turned to run, but the floor shook and the walls cracked and I was thrown down.

I looked up and saw that the petri dish was enveloped in a flame that burned yet

did not consume, and a voice that came from everywhere at once said,

“Put off the shoes from thy feet for the place where thou standest is holy ground.”

“Oh, God,” I said.