The Oracular Vulva

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Skulls make better pillows that you think. Dr. Peter Luce (the famous sexologist) rests his cheek on the varnished parietal of a Dawat ancestor, he's not sure whose. The skull tips back and forth, jawbone to chin, as Luce himself is gently rocked by the boy on the next skull over, rubbing his feet against Luce's back. The pandanus mat feels scratchy against his bare legs.

It's the middle of the night, the time when, for some reason, all the yammering jungle creatures shut up for a minute. Luce's specialty isn't zoology. He's paid scant attention to the local fauna since coming here. He hasn't told anybody on the team, but he's phobic about snakes and so hasn't wandered too far from the village. When the others go off to hunt boar or chop sago, Luce stays in to brood on his situation. (Specifically: his ruined career, but there are other complaints.) Only one brave, drunken night, going out to pee, did he venture away from the longhouses to stand in the dense vegetation for roughly thirty-five seconds before getting creeped out and hurrying back. He doesn't know what goes on out in the jungle and he doesn't care. All he knows is that every night at sundown the monkeys and birds start screaming and then, around 1 P.M. New York time – to which his luminous wristwatch is still faithfully set – they stop. It gets perfectly quiet. So quiet that Luce wakes up. Or sort of wakes up. His eyes are open now, at least he thinks they are. Not that it makes any difference. This is the jungle during the new moon. This is the dictionary definition of darkness. Luce holds his hand in front of his face, palm to nose, unable to see it. He shifts his cheek on the skull, causing the boy to stop rubbing momentarily and let out a soft, submissive cry.

Wetly, like a vapor – he's definitely awake now – the jungle invades his nostrils. He's never smelled anything like it before. The jungle. It's like mud and feces mixed with armpit and worm. Though that doesn't quite cover it. There's also scent of wild pig, slime of slug, the cheesy whiff of six-foot orchids, and the corpse breath of carnivorous flytraps. All around the village, from the swampy ground up to the tops of the trees, animals are eating each other and digesting with open, burping mouths.

Evolution has no consistent game plan. While famous for remaining true to certain elegant form (Dr. Luce likes to point out, for instance, the structural similarity between mussels and the female genitalia), it can also, on a whim, improvise. That's what evolution is: a scattershot of possibilities, proceeding not by successive improvements but just by changes, some good, some bad, none thought out beforehand. The marketplace – that is, life, the world – decides. So that here, on the Casuarinen coast, the flowers have evolved traits that Luce, a Connecticut boy, doesn't associate with flowers, though botany isn't his specialty, either. He thoughts flowers were supposed to smell nice. To attract bees. Here it's something different. The few lurid blooms he's unwisely stuck his snout into have smelled pretty much like death. There's always a little pool of rainwater inside the cut (actually digestive acid) and a winged beetle being eaten away. Luce'll snap his back, holding his nose, and then, in the bushes somewhere, he'll hear a few Dawat laughing their heads off.

These ruminations are interrupted by the puling of the boy on the skull over. "*Cemen*," the boy cries out. "*Ake cemen*." There's silence, a few Dawat muttering to themselves in

dreams, and then, just like every night, Luce feels the kid's hand come snaking into his shorts. He grabs it gently by the wrist, fishing for his penlight with his other hand. He switches it on and the pale beam illuminates the boy's face. He's resting his cheek on a skull, too (his grandfather's to be precise), which is stained a dark orange from years of hair and skin oil. Beneath his kinky hair the boy's eyes are wide, frightened by the light. He looks a little like a young Jimi Hendrix. His nose is wide and flat, his cheekbones prominent. His full lips have a permanent pout from speaking the explosive Dawat language. "*Ake cemen*," he goes again, which is maybe a word. His trapped hand makes another lunge for Luce's midsection, but Luce redoubles his grip.

So, then, the other complaints: Having to do field work at his age, for one thing. Getting mail yesterday for the first time in eight weeks, ripping open the soggy packet with excitement only to find, right on the cover of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Pappas-Kikuchi's spurious study. And, more immediately, the kid.

"Come on, now," Luce says. "Go back to sleep."

"*Cemen*. *Ake cemen*!"

"Thanks for the hospitality, but no thanks."

The kid turns and looks into the darkness of the hut, and when he turns back the penlight's beam shows tears welling in his eyes. He's scared. He tugs at Luce, bowing his head and pleading. "You ever hear of a thing called professional ethics, kid?" Luce says. The boy stops, looks at him, trying to understand, then starts tugging again.

The kid's been after him for three straight weeks. It's not that he's in love or anything. Among the many rare characteristics of the Dawat – not the precise biological oddity that has brought Luce and his team to Irian Jaya but a related anthropological one – is that the tribe maintains strict segregation between the sexes. The village is laid out in a dumbbell shape, thinning in the middle with a longhouse at either end. The men and boys sleep in one longhouse; the women and girls in the other. Dawat males consider contact with females highly polluting, and so have organized social structures to limit exposure as much as possible. Dawat men, for instance, go into the women's longhouse only for the purpose of procreation. They do what they have to do quickly and then leave. According to Randy, the anthropologist who speaks Dawat, the Dawat word for "vagina" translates literally as "that thing which is truly no good." This, of course, incensed Sally Ward, the endocrinologist who came along to analyze plasma hormone levels, and who has little tolerance for so-called cultural differences and out of sheer disgust and justified anger has been denigrating the field of anthropology to Randy's face whenever she gets the chance. Which is not often, because of tribal law she has to stay down at the other end of the village. What it's like over there Luce has no idea. The Dawat have erected an earthwork between the two areas, a mud wall about five feet high with spears jutting up. Impaled on the spears are oblong green gourds that at first looked refreshingly festive to Luce, sort of like Venetian lanterns, until Randy explained that the gourds are only stand-ins for the human heads of yesteryear. At any rate, you can't see much over the earthwork, and there's only a little pathway where the women leave food for the men and through which the men go, once a month, to mount their wives for three and a half minutes.

As papal as the Dawat appear in reserving sex for procreation, they are a hard sell for the local missionaries. They're not exactly celibate in the Longhouse of Men. Dawat boys live with their mothers until they're seven years old, at which point they come to live with the men. For the next eight years the boys are taught, encouraged and coerced into fellating their elders. With the denigration of the vagina in Dawat belief comes the exaltation of the male sexual parts, and especially of semen, which is held to be an elixir of stunning nutritive power. In order to become men, to become warriors, boys must ingest as much semen as possible, and this, nightly, daily, hourly, they do. Their first night in the longhouse, Luce and his assistant, Mort, were taken aback, to say the least, when they saw the sweet little boys going dutifully from man to man as if bobbing for apples. Randy just sat taking notes. After all the men had been satisfied, one of the chieftains, in what no doubt was a show of hospitality, barked something at two boys, who then came over to the American scientists. "That's O.K.,"

Mort had said to his kid. "I'm fine." Even Luce felt himself breaking out into a sweat. Around the hut, the boys went about their business either cheerfully or with mild resignation, like kids back home doing chores. It impressed upon Luce once again the fact that sexual shame was a social construct, completely relative to culture. Still, his culture was American, specifically, Anglo-Irish lapsed Episcopalian, and he refused the Dawat offer graciously, that night and, now, this.

The irony, however, isn't lost on him that he, Dr. Peter Luce, director of the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic, past general secretary of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex (S.S.S.S.), champion of the open investigation of human sexual behavior, opponent of prudishness, scourge of inhibition, and crusader for physical delights of all kinds, should find himself, halfway around the world in the erotic jungle, feeling so uptight. In his annual address to the society in 1969, Dr. Luce had reminded the assembled sexologists of the historical conflict between scientific research and common morality. Look at Vesalius, he said. Look at Galileo. Always practical, Luce had advised his listeners to travel to foreign countries where so-called "aberrant" sexual practices were tolerated and consequently easier to study (sodomy in Holland, for instance, and prostitution in Phuket). He prided himself on his open mind. To him, human sexuality was like a great big Bruegel painting and he loved watching all the action. Luce tried not to make value judgements about the sundry clinically documented paraphilias, and only when they were patently injurious (as with pedophilia or rape) did he object. This tolerance went even further when dealing with another culture. The blow jobs beings performed in the Longhouse of Men might upset Luce if they were happening at the Y.M.C.A. on West Twenty-third Street, but here he feels he has no right to condemn. It doesn't help his work. He isn't here as a missionary. Given the local mores, these boys aren't likely to be warped by their oral duties. They aren't growing up to be typical heterosexual husbands, anyway. They just move from being givers to being receivers, and everyone's happy.

But then why does Luce get so upset every time the kid starts rubbing his feet against his back and making his little mating calls? It might have something to do with the increasingly anxious sound of the calls themselves, not to mention the kid's worried expression. It may be that if the kid doesn't pleasure the foreign guests he's in for some kind of punishment. Luce can't explain the kid's fervor any other way. Is white semen believed to possess special power? Unlikely, given the way Luce, Randy, and Mort look these days. They look like hell: greasy-haired, dandruffy. The Dawat probably think that all white men are covered with heat rashes. Luce longs for a shower. He longs to put on his cashmere turtleneck, his ankle boots, and his suede blazer and go out for a whiskey sour. After this trip, the most exotic he wants to get is dinner at Lucky Cheng's. And if all goes well, that's how it's going to be. Him and a mai tai with a parasol in it, back in Manhattan.

Up until three years ago – until the night Pappas-Kikuchi blindsided him with her field work – Dr. Peter Luce was considered the world's leading authority on human hermaphroditism. He was the author of a major sexological work, "The Oracular Vulva," which was standard reading in a variety o disciplines ranging from genetics and pediatrics to psychology. He had written a column of the same name for Playboy from the August, 1969, issue to the December, 1973, in which the conceit was that a personified and all-knowing female pudendum answered the queries of male readers with witty and sometimes sibylline responses. Hugh Hefner had come across Peter Luce's name in the newspaper in an article about a demonstration for sexual freedom. Six Columbia students had staged an orgy in a tent on the main green, which the cops broke up, and when he was asked what he thought about such activity on campus Assistant Professor Peter Luce, thirty four, had been quoted as saying, "I'm in favor of orgies wherever they happen." That caught Hef's eye. Not wanting to replicate Xaviera Hollander's "Call Me Madam" column in Penthouse, Hefner saw Luce's column as being devoted to the scientific and historic side of sex. Thus, in her first three issues, the Oracular Vulva delivered disquisitions on the

erotic art of the Japanese painter Hiroshi Yamamoto, the epidemiology of syphilis, and the custom of the berdache among the Navajo, all in the ghostly, rambling style that Luce modeled on his aunt Rose Pepperdine, who used to lecture him on the Bible while soaking her feet in the kitchen. The column proved popular, though intelligent queries were always hard to come by, the readership being more interested in the "Playboy Advisor"'s cunnilingus tips or remedies for premature ejaculation. Finally, Hefner told Luce to screw it and write his own questions, which he did.

Peter Luce had appeared on Phil Donahue in 1987, along with two hermaphrodites and a transsexual, to discuss both the medical and psychological aspects of these conditions. On that program Phil Donahue said, "Ann Parker was born and raised a girl. You won the Miss Miami Beach Contest in 1968 in good old Dade County, Florida? Boy, wait till they hear this. You lived as a woman to the age of twenty-nine and then you switched to living as a man. He has the anatomical characteristics of both a man and a woman. If I'm lyin', I'm dyin'."

He also said, "Here's what's not so funny. These live, irreplaceable sons and daughters of God, human beings all, want you to know, among other things, that that's exactly what they are, human beings."

Luce's interest in hermaphroditism had begun nearly thirty years ago, when he was still a resident at Mount Sinai. A sixteen-year-old girl had come in to be examined. Her name was Felicity Kennington, and his first glimpse of her had inspired some unprofessional thoughts. She was very good-looking, Felicity Kennington, slender and bookish, with glasses, which always killed him.

Luce examined her with a grave face and concluded, "You've got lentigines."

"What?" the girl asked, alarmed.

"Freckles." He smiled. Felicity Kennington smiled back. Luce remembered that his brother had asked him one night, with a lot of suggestive eyebrow moment, if he didn't sometimes get turned on examining women, and that he'd responded with the old line about how you're so caught up in your work you don't even notice. He had no trouble noticing Felicity Kennington, her pretty face, her pink gums and child-sized teeth, her shy white legs which she kept crossing and uncrossing as she sat on the examining table. The thing he didn't notice was her mother, sitting in the corner of the room.

"Lissie," the woman broke in, "tell the doctor about the pain you've been having."

Felicity blushed, looking down at the floor. "It's in my – it's just below my stomach."

"What kind of pain?"

"There's kinds?"

"A sharp pain or dull?"

"Sharp."

At that point in his career, Luce had given a total of eight pelvic exams. The one he gave to Felicity Kennington still ranks as one of the most difficult. First, there was the problem of his terrible attraction. He was only twenty-five himself. He was nervous; his heart throbbed. He dropped the speculum and had to go out for another. The way Felicity Kennington turned her face away and bit her lower lip before parting her knees made him literally dizzy. Second, the mother's watching him the whole time didn't make it any easier. He'd suggested that she wait outside, but Mrs. Kennington had replied, "I'll stay here with Lissie, thank you." Third, and worst of all, was the pain he seemed to cause Felicity Kennington with everything he did. The speculum wasn't even halfway in before she cried out. He knees vised, and he had to give up. Next, he tried merely to palpate her genitals but as soon as he pressed she shrieked again. Finally, he had to get Dr. Budekind, a gynecologist, to complete the examination which he looked on, his stomach in knots. The gynecologist looked at Felicity for no more than fifteen seconds, then took Luce across the hall.

"What's the matter with her?"

"Undescended testes."

"What?"

"Looks like andrenogenital syndrome. Ever seen one before?"

"No."

"That's what you're here to do, right? Learn."

"That girl has, has testes?"

"We'll know in a little while."

The tissue mass up inside Felicity Kennington's inguinal canal turned out to be, when they put a sample under the microscope,

testicular. At that time – this was 1961 – such a fact designated Felicity Kennington as male. Since the nineteenth century, medicine had been using the same primitive diagnostic criteria of sex formulated by Edwin Klebs way back in 1876. Klebs had maintained that a person's gonads determined sex. In case of ambiguous gender, you looked at the gonadal tissue under the microscope. If it was testicular, the person was male; if ovarian, female. But there were problems inherent in this method. And these became clear to Luce when he saw what happened to Felicity Kennington in 1961. Even though she looked like a girl and thought of herself as a girl, because she possessed male gonads Budekind declared her to be a boy. The parents objected. Other doctors were consulted – endocrinologists, urologists, geneticists – but they couldn't agree, either. Meanwhile, as the medical community vacilated, Felicity began to go through puberty. Her voice deepened. She grew sparse tufts of light-brown facial hair. She stopped going to school and soon stopped leaving the house altogether. Luce saw her one last time, when she came in for another consultation. She wore a long dress and a scarf tied under her chin, covering most of her face. In one nail-bitten had she carried a copy of "Jane Eyre." Luce bumped into her at the drinking fountain. "Water tastes like rust," she said, looking at him with no recognition and hurrying away. A week later, with her father's .45 automatic, she killed herself.

"Proves she was a boy," Budekind said in the cafeteria the next day.

"What do you mean?" said Luce.

"Boys kill themselves with guns. Statistically. Girls use less violent methods. Sleeping pills, carbon-monoxide poisoning."

Luce never spoke to Budekind again. His meeting with Felicity Kennington was a watershed moment. From then on, he dedicated himself to making sure that something like that never happened to anyone again. He threw himself into the study of hermaphroditic conditions. He read everything available on the subject, which wasn't much. And the more he studied and the more he read, the more he became convinced that the sacred categories of male and female were, in fact, shams. With certain genetic and hormonal conditions, it was just plain impossible to say what sex some babies were. But humans had historically resisted the obvious conclusion. Confronted with a hermaphroditic baby, the Spartans would leave the infant on a rocky hillside and walk quickly away. Luce's own forebears, the English, didn't even like to mention the subject and might never have done so, had the nuisance of enigmatic genitalia not thrown a wrench into the smooth workings of inheritance law. Lord Coke, the great Brisish jurist of the seventeenth century, tried to clear up the matter of who'd get the landed estates by decaring that a person should "be either male or female, and it shall succeed according to the kind of sex which doth prevail." Of course, he didn't specify a method for determining which sex *did* prevail. It took the German Klebs to come along and begin the task. Then, a hundred years later, Peter Luce finished it.

In 1965, Luce published an article called "Many Roads Lead to Rome: Sexual Concepts of Human Hermaphroditism." In twenty-five pages, Luce argued that gender is determined by a variety of influences: chromosomal sex; gonadal sex; hormones; internal genital structures; external genitals; and, most important, the sex of rearing. Often a patient's gonadal sex didn't determine his or her gender identity. Gender was more like a native tongue. Children learn to speak Male or Female, the way they learn to speak English or French.

The article made a big splash. Luce could still remember how, in the weeks following its publication, people gave him a new quality of attention: women laughed at his jokes more, made it known that they were available, even on a few occasions showed up at his apartment wearing not a hell of a lot; his phone rang more often; the people on the other end were people he didn't know but who knew him; they had offers and beguilements; they wanted him to review papers, serve on panels, appear at the San Luis Obispo Snail Festival to judge an escargot contest, with most snails being, after all, dioecious. Within months, pretty much everyone had given up Kleb's criterion for Luce's criterion.

On the strength of this success, Luce was given the opportunity to open a psychohormonal unit at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. In a

decade of solid, original research, he made his second great discovery: that gender identity is established very early on in life at about the age of two. After that, his reputation reached the stratosphere. The funding flowed in, from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the N.I.H. It was a great time to be a sexologist. The Sexual Revolution had opened a brief window of opportunity for the enterprising sex researcher. It was a matter of national interest, for a few years there, to get to the bottom of the mystery of the female orgasm. Or to plumb the psychological reasons that certain men exhibited themselves on the street. In 1968, Dr. Luce opened the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic, and it soon became the foremost facility in the world for the study and treatment of conditions of ambiguous gender. Luce treated everybody; the web-necked teens with Turner's syndrome; the leggy beauties with androgen insensitivity; the surly Klinefelter's cases who, without exception, either broke the water cooler or tried to punch out a nurse. When a baby was born with ambiguous genitalia, Dr. Luce was called in to discuss the matter with the shocked parents. Luce got the would-be transsexuals, too. They took the subway up from Times Square and arrived in his office wearing feather boas and smelling like air freshener. Everybody came to the clinic; at his disposal Luce had a body of research material – of living, breathing specimens – that no scientist had ever had before.

It was 1968, and the world was going up in flames. Luce held one of the torches. Two thousand years of sexual tyranny were ending in the blaze. Not one coed in his behavioral-cytogenetics lecture course wore a bra to class. Luce wrote Op-Ed pieces for the Times calling for revision of the penal code regarding socially harmless and nonviolent sex offenders. He handed out pro-contraceptive pamphlets at coffeehouses in the Village. Every generation or so, insight, diligence, and the necessities of the moment came together to life a scientist's work out of the academy and into the culture at large, where it gleamed, a beacon of the future.

From deep in the jungle, buzzing in, a mosquito skims past Luce's left ear. It's one of the jumbo models. He never sees them, only hears them, at night, screaming by like airborne lawnmowers. He closes his eyes, wincing, and in another moment, sure enough, feels the insect land in the blood-fragrant skin behind his elbow. It's so big it makes a noise landing, like a raindrop. Luce tilts his head back, squeezing his eyes shut, and says, "Aye-yah." He's dying to swat the bug but he can't; his hands are busy keeping the kid away from his belt. He can't see a thing. On the ground next to his skull the penlight sputters out its weak flame. Luce dropped it in the scuffle that's still in progress. Now it lights up a ten-inch cone of mat. No help at all. Plus, the birds have started up again, signalling the approach of morning. Luce is in an alert fetal position, on his back, holding a twig-like ten-year-old Dawat wrist in each hand. From the position of the wrist he estimates that the kid's head is somewhere in the air over his navel, lolling forward probably. He keeps making these smacking sounds that are very depressing to listen to.

"Aye-yah."

The stinger's in. The mosquito thrusts, wiggles its hips contentedly, then settles down and starts to drink. Luce has had typhus vaccinations that felt more gentle. He can feel the suction. He can feel the bug gaining weight.

A beacon of the future? Who's he kidding? Luce's work casts no more light today, it turns out, than the penlight on the floor. No more light than the new moon not shining above the jungle's canopy.

There's no need for him to read Pappas-Kikuchi's article in the New England Journal of Medicine. He heard it all before, in person. Three years ago, at the annual convention of the S.S.S.S., he had arrived late to the last day's last talk.

"This afternoon," Pappas-Kikuchi was saying when he came in, "I'd like to share the results of a study our team just completed in southwestern Guatemala."

Luce sat in the back row, careful about his pants. He was wearing a tuxedo. A Pierre Cardin tuxedo. Later that night, the S.S.S.S. was presenting him with a lifetime-achievement award. He took a mini-bar bottle of J. & B. out of his satin-lined pocket and sipped it discretely. He was already celebrating.

"The village is called San Juan de la Cruz," Pappas-Kikuchi continued. Luce scanned what he could of her behind the podium. She was attractive, in a schoolteacherly way. She had soft, dark eyes and almost absurdly full, unmade-up lips, but something unseen – a big ass, maybe, or fat calves – caused her to be unsure of herself. In Luce's experience, it was exactly these modest, unsexual-seeming women who proved to be the most passionate in bed, whereas women who dressed provocatively were often unresponsive or passive, as if they had used up all their sexual energy in display.

"Male psuedohermaphrodites with five alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome who were raised as females serve as exceptional test cases for studying the effects of testosterone and the sex of rearing in the establishment of gender identity," Pappas-Kikuchi continued, reading from her paper now. "In these cases, decreased production of dihydrotestosterone in utero causes the external genitalia of the affected male fetuses to be highly ambiguous in appearance. Consequently, at birth many affected newborns are considered to be female and are raised as girls. However, prenatal, neonatal, and pubertal exposure to testosterone remains normal."

Luce took another swig of the old J. & B. and threw his arm over the seat next to him. Nothing Pappas-Kikuchi was saying was news. Five alpha-reductase deficiency had been extensively studied. Jason Whitby had done some fine work with 5 (αR) psuedohermaphorodites in Pakistan.

"The scrotum of these newborns is unfused, so that it resembles the labia," Pappas-Kikuchi soldiered on, repeating what everyone already knew. "The phallus, or micropenis, resembles a clitoris. A urogenital sinus ends in a blind vaginal pouch. The testes most often reside in the abdomen or inguinal canal, though occasionally they are found hypertrophied in the bifid scrotum. Nevertheless, at puberty, definite virilization occurs, as plasma testosterone levels are normal."

How old was she? Thirty-two? Thirty-three? Would she be coming to the awards dinner? With her buttoned collar and frumpy coat, Pappas-Kikuchi reminded Luce of a girlfriend he'd had back in college. A classics major who wore Byronic white shirts and unbecoming woollen kneesocks. In bed, however, his little Hellenist had surprised him. Lying on her back, she'd put her legs over his shoulders, telling him that this was Hector and Andromache's favorite position.

Luce was remembering the moment ("I'm Hector!" he'd shouted out, tucking Andromache's ankles behind her ears) when Dr. Fabienne Pappas-Kikuchi announced, "Therefore, these subjects are normal, testosterone-influenced boys who, due to their feminine external genitalia, are mistakenly reared as girls."

"What did she say?" Luce snapped back to attention. "Did she say 'boys'? They're not boys. Not if they weren't raised as boys, they're not."

"The work of Dr. Peter Luce has long been held as gospel in the study of human hermaphroditism," Pappas-Kikuchi now asserted. "Normative, in sexological circles, is his notion that gender identity is fixed at an early age of development. Our research," she paused briefly, "refutes this."

A small popping sound, of a hundred and fifty mouths simultaneously opening , bubbled up through the auditorium's air. Luce stopped in mid-sip.

"The data our team collected in Guatemala will confirm that the effect of pubertal androgens on five alpha-reductase psuedohermaphrodites is sufficient to case a change in gender identity."

Luce couldn't remember much after that. He was aware of being very hot inside his tuxedo. Of quite a few heads turning around to look at him, then only a few heads, then none. At the podium, Dr. Pappas-Kikuchi ran through her data, endlessly, endlessly. "Subject No. 7 changed to male gender but continues to dress as a woman. Subject No. 12 has the affect and mannerisms of a man and engages in sexual activity with village women. Subject No. 25 married a woman and works as a butcher, a traditionally male occupation. Subject No. 35 was married to a man who left the marriage after a year, at which point the subject assumed a male gender identity. A year later, he married a woman."

The awards ceremony went on as scheduled later that night. Luce, anesthetized on

more Scotch in the hotel bar and wearing an Aetna sales rep's blue blazer that he'd mistaken for his tuxedo jacket, had walked to the podium to an absolute minimum of applause and accepted his lifetime-achievement award – a crystal lingam and yoni, hot-glued onto a silver plated base – which later looked quite beautiful catching the lights of the city as it fell twenty-two floors from his balcony to shatter in the hotel's circular drive. Even then, he was looking west, out over the Pacific, toward Irian Jaya and the Dawat. It took him three years to get research grants from the N.I.H., the National Foundation, March of Dimes, and Gulf & Western, but now he's here, amid another isolated flowering of the 5 (αR) mutation, where he can put Pappas-Kikuchi's theory and his own to the test. He knows who'll win. And when he does, the foundations will begin funding his clinic the way they used to. He can stop subcontracting the back rooms to dentists and that one chiropractor. It's only a matter of time. Randy has persuaded the tribal elders to allow the examinations to go forward. As soon as dawn breaks, they'll be led out to the separate camp where the "turnim-men" live. The mere existence of the local term shows that Luce is right. It's the kind of thing Pappas-Kikuchi would gloss right over.

Luce's hands and the kid's are all tangled up. It's like they're playing a game. First Luce covered his belt buckle. Then the kid put his hand over Luce's hand. Then Luce put his hand over the kid's hand. And now the kid covers the whole stack. All these hands struggle, gently. Luce feels tired. He can't see a thing. The jungle is still quiet. He'd like to get another hour of sleep before the morning cry of the monkeys. He's got a big day ahead.

The B-52 buzzes by his ear again, then circles back and goes up his left nostril. "Jesus!" He pulls his hands free and covers his face, but by then the mosquito has taken off again, brushing by his fingers. Luce is half sitting up on the pandanus mat now. He keeps his face covered, because it gives him some kind of comfort, and he just sits there in the dark, feeling suddenly exhausted and sick of the jungle and smelly and hot. Darwin had it easier on H.M.S. Beagle. All he had to do was listen to sermons and play whist. Luce isn't crying, but he feels like it. His nerves are shot. As if from far away, he feels the pressure of the boy's hands again. Undoing his belt. Struggling with the technological puzzle of the zipper. A few more days and he can go home. His swanky bachelor pad on West Thirteenth Street awaits him. Finally, the boy figures it out. And it's very dark. And Dr. Peter Luce is open-minded. And there's nothing you can do, after all, about the local customs.