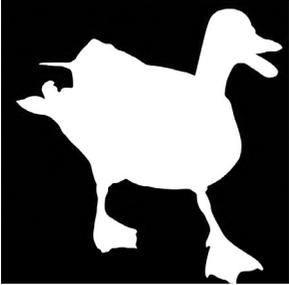


THE NORMA GENE

by M. E. Roufa



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For my parents

Who always knew I had it in me
and possibly put it there.

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.

—*Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction"*

How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg? Four. Calling the tail a leg doesn't make it a leg.
—*Abraham Lincoln*



Prologue

ABRAMHAM LINCOLN FINKELSTEIN CAME into the world much in the same way as all other clones: a wet and screaming combination of science and love and especially money, millions of research dollars made flesh. His parents, Marvin and Miriam Finkelstein, spared no expense to ensure for him what all loving parents hoped for their children: health and intelligence and the right number of fingers and toes, plus the genetic capacity to someday completely right the balance of the world. No one bothered to consult Abraham Lincoln, who may have had his own opinion on the subject of his twenty-first century regeneration. He was, after all, long dead.

Little Abe's birth was attended with very little fanfare. No reporters, no lurking paparazzi lining the halls of the maternity ward, no historical ethicists picketing outside. This was remarkable. In vitro cloning of human beings, living and post-living, had been common for over thirty years, but the Finkelstein baby still managed to be a first. There were no Abraham Lincolns before him (not counting, of course, the 19th-century Alpha), and were not likely to be any after. After the furor over Baby Hitler, the cloning of dictators, presidents and other "crucial" historical figures was prohibited, punishable by incarceration of both host parents after the fact—and if caught in time, enforced

abortion.¹ Which made Abe an illegal, a genetic fugitive. Fortunately, his parents had the necessary money and pull to falsify a “natural” birth certificate. But they couldn’t resist giving him his own name. It would be hard to blame them; they were patriotic, they loved him, they did pay for him. And by the time he reached maturity, he wouldn’t be able to hide in a Presidents’ Day used-car sale anyway.

So mommy, daddy, and baby went home just like any other family, and baby was tucked into his (tastefully subtle) red, white, and blue bassinet. And as he settled down to sleep, little Abe’s mother softly whispered to him—just like every other new mother does—“You are going to change the world.”

¹ In the United Kingdom, these crimes were taken even less lightly than that. While no one actually believed in the divine right of kings anymore, the Labour party refused to take any chances. The possibility of a Tudor or Plantagenet clone someday challenging the throne led to the passage of the Windsor Act, charging anyone caught “birthing, fertilizing, or collecting genetic material” from any member of any royal family with high treason... a capital offense. This despite the fact that the Hitler clone not only failed to live up to his “potential,” his sense of inferiority and petty vindictiveness kept him from rising past assistant manager at McDonald’s.



1

THERE ARE SOME FACTS everyone seems to know about Abraham Lincoln; “everyone” meaning all those people who live in America who have ever learned anything about American history—a number that manages to shrink every year, despite the success of the “Full Contact American History” video game franchise. Everyone knows that he grew up in a log cabin. That he was our 16th President. That he was assassinated at Ford’s Theater by John Wlikes Booth.

There are other facts about Abraham Lincoln that are less well known, but still readily available to the interested scholar. That he was six feet four inches tall. That he was the first President to have a beard while in office. That he had a wart on his right cheek.

Then there are some facts about Abraham Lincoln that were known to only one man, and the handful of people that man entrusted them to. His favorite food was mashed potatoes. He couldn’t carry a tune to save his life. He was allergic to kiwi fruit, or would have been if he had ever had the opportunity to try one. And there wasn’t much he loved more than the smell of laundry fresh out of the dryer. The man in question wasn’t sure whether it was the heat of the dryer, or the chemicals in the fabric softener sheet, or even just the memories of growing up and smelling his mother’s old Kenmore spinning as he came home from school. But

after a long day, when nothing seemed to go right, opening the dryer after a fresh load was done and getting that first smell of freshly washed cotton was like coming home.

Of course, whether the real, bona fide, 1800s Abraham Lincoln had the same Proustian connection when he removed his own softly-scented unmentionables from the dryer will never be known, electric clothes dryers not having been invented for another century. It's not even known whether he ever buried his face into a freshly starched shirt hanging on a clothesline. But shirt-face-burying was exactly what the only other Abe Lincoln in American history was doing without regard to any recorded precedents, and it was making him very happy.

Abe transferred all of the clothes into the basket and made his way into his bedroom for a folding session. He wasn't the neatest person on earth, but he liked doing things in order, and since he first learned to fold laundry on his bed, his bed was where he planned to fold laundry forever, until the day the nice folks at the nursing home did it for him. Or till the mean folks at the nursing home made him wear the same dirty smock every day, and folding locations became irrelevant. Whatever he could afford. He was only 36; there was plenty of time to worry about that sort of thing later. Years later. Even though the original Abraham Lincoln had only made it to 56 years old, Abe had no reason to believe he wouldn't make it to a ripe old age. There was no evidence at all connecting clones to any sort of automatic repetitions of the lives of their historical predecessors. For one thing, there was no evidence at all connecting clones to any sort of automatic repetitions of the lives of their historical predecessors. For another thing, he hated the theater.

First the shirts went into one pile, the underwear into another, the socks into a third, all other items into a fourth,

to be dealt with last. He lowered himself carefully onto the edge of the bed, pulled the pyramid of socks toward him, and started pairing them off and balling them together. It was steady, rhythmic work, practically robotic. He didn't even look at the pile, only at the cotton toes to make sure they lined up. Abe bought his clothes in multiples. It wasn't an act of obsessive-compulsion so much as ease, but there was something satisfying in knowing, as he balled his socks together, that he never had to line them up next to each other to make sure they would match. A sock that matched another sock that matched every other sock only presented a problem when one came up missing. Which happened rarely enough, but each time it did was vaguely unsettling. Had it been the left or the right? The first one he took off, or the second? If it turned up in the next load, would he even know it? Or would an even number of socks in the next load only mean that yet another unmatched sock had somehow disappeared? In other words, the greatest strength of having an infinity of perfectly identical socks was also its largest drawback—without variations, there was no way to keep track of any individual one. Not that there was any need, of course. A sock was a sock was a sock. And a white sock even more so. But when you were a clone, the question of differentiating and individuality became a bit more far-reaching.

Abe reached for another sock. He noticed it had a slightly thinner texture than the one he picked up previously. Was it older? More worn? He momentarily debated unballing all of his socks and starting over, pairing them up by thickness. Then he realized that this was crazy. But it was a thought.

He moved on and started folding his pile of identical white undershorts. They didn't give him the same problems the socks did. Good thing, too. Obsessing about socks

was reasonably normal. Obsessing about your underwear was crazy.

You didn't have to be Abraham Lincoln to know that much.

Placing the last balled sock snugly into place within the top dresser drawer, Abe hummed contentedly. His life might not be historically important or even politically relevant, but it was his life, and it was satisfying.

It was also about to change.



2

THE BELL RANG AND Abe got up from his casual perch on top of the battered regulation-issue desk, trying to look friendly and understanding. The students slumped out, making as much noise and exhibiting as much nonchalant disdain as their five-and-a-half- to six-foot frames could sustain without appearing forced. “See you tomorrow!” he called out, as he gathered up the pile of essays the kids had left for him—all 13-point type and wide margins, the modern equivalent of extra-wide penmanship to stretch three-quarters of a page of ideas into two pages. Doomed to repeat history again, he mumbled to himself. Bring on the farce. It wasn’t a good joke, or even an original one, but it was sarcastic and also true, and helped him face yet another room full of the Ungrateful. At least this was his Advanced Placement class. They may not have been significantly smarter or more interested than their lower-level counterparts, but at least they were academically obligated to give the appearance of making an effort. In return, it was his job to reward their quest for information with the promise of entertainment. So there you had it. Today’s reward was 1865: a nice lengthy screening, in installments, of *Gone With The Wind*.

Abe had fallen into teaching American History by default. His parents had had loftier goals for him; law school,

obviously, then politics. Or at least a career in letters. Miriam Finkelstein had put all the silent pressure on him that she was capable of mustering, but they both knew she had already played her role. She would no more have forced him to become a future president than she would have revealed his heredity to the press. It was their private secret. Every mother wanted to do the best for their children. She had given him the best start she was capable of achieving. The rest was—had to be—up to him. She believed his genetic destiny would be enough to make him great. Abe, on the other hand, could only see it as a stumbling block. It was like growing up in the wake of an overachieving older sibling, but on such an overwhelmingly larger scale it was almost paralyzing. He may have had Abraham Lincoln's body and even his mind, but his crushing sense of inferiority was all his own. So: school valedictorian, that much he gave her, and at Yale his unmistakable intelligence and natural debating talents insisted on setting him apart, but that was as far as he was willing to concede to his mother's happiness. To be honest, he had always secretly hoped to be a basketball star. But apparently for all his height, old Abe Lincoln couldn't hit a bank shot if his life depended on it. Which, funnily enough, it never did.

American History was at least respectable in his mother's eyes; it didn't preclude Abe's eventually going to law school or into politics, and it did have a certain resonance to his legacy. She would have preferred a professorship, or at least his going back to grad school and getting a Master's, but when he graduated from Yale with an American History degree, without even honors, teaching seemed like a natural fit. It was a private preparatory school, the salary was reasonably good, and it allowed him to help people, even to shape the future, albeit on a much smaller scale. Deep

down, he knew, he liked underachieving. It kept him from having to fail.

Actually it hadn't been such a bad class today, Abe reflected as he headed back to his car at the end of the long day (staff meeting, Debate team meeting, "voluntary" attendance at Parent-Teacher exploratory meeting). The discussion had gone from slave narratives to slave memoirs to the politics of memory. How tenuous the hold of personal recollections could be, in the face of a communal search for identity. Whether it was appropriate to pad the truth, to invent memories, if doing so could help elucidate the greater truth of historical experience. And can memory ever document truth at all? If your quest were to find the unadulterated truth about any given historical experience, would you go back if it were possible? Sometimes his kids amazed him with the connections they were able to make, the conclusions they reached. Other days they just amazed him with how many places they could abandon their gum. He infinitely preferred the former.

His good mood made it almost to the door of his car. As he clicked off his security alarm, he couldn't help but notice the caricature staring back at him from the hood of his car—a stick figure Abe Lincoln carefully delineated in shaving cream (he hoped), showing off a profoundly enhanced penis. Underneath was scrawled "FOUR SCORE AND 7 INCHES." You had to give them points for historical contiguity, Abe allowed. He knew the student artist (or artists) responsible for defiling his Ford had no idea of the true connection between himself and Lincoln. His family had never told anyone for fear of possible prosecution, and he had spent too much of his life both scared and embarrassed by the affiliation to ever lay claim to it now. Still, from the time he hit his growth spurt after puberty, he had

never been able to escape the comparison. Now in his early thirties, the resemblance was unmistakable. That his name was Abraham only compounded the problem. At least this prank was actually funny.

Abe wiped the shaving cream off as best he could with the sleeve of his jacket. It had been due at the dry cleaners for a few wearings now anyway. He tried wiping the excess off his sleeve with his hand, then without thinking wiped the hand off onto his perfectly clean pants. Great. The very indignity of it all made him smile. That, along with the other fact that he alone knew intimately—as it turned out, Abraham Lincoln had been a particularly well-endowed man.



3

NORMA OOMPHEDED HER BODY out of bed and wiggled the sleep from her eyes on her usual route to the mirror. Lids half-closed, lips puffy, she caught herself catching herself, wondering for the zillionth time whether today would be the day she snapped, the day she Marilynated. How did it happen? She wondered. What was the trigger? Was there a warning sign, an audible click in your head that snapped you into a budding Stepford mistress? Or did it tiptoe in slowly on crows' feet, quietly kicking you into submission? Whispering, *you can be perfect, you can have men at your feet...* You can be fat and ridiculous and a dime a dozen, she told herself firmly, and headed for the shower.

There were the meetings, of course. It was Wednesday; there would be one tomorrow night. She could pop in just to see what it was like, join the half-dozen or so other women in town searching for meaning in their lives, striving to avoid preordained destinies—and in the process, usually goading each other right into the familiar patterns. *Once a Norma Jeane, always a Marilyn* went the joke, but the nature vs. nurture jury on that one was still out. Was it worth the risk? Norma sighed, sliding the soap over her thigh. She was about to turn thirty, could feel it even though it still didn't show on the outside (two years till decrepitude, she thought grimly, then suppressed it), and she wasn't particularly happy as she was. What did she have to lose?

She would go to work; she would think it over. She had to run some errands on the way back home anyhow. Maybe she would take a quick look in, if the place was on her way. Maybe.

One thing clonologists guessed from the start was the inherent mental need for clones to compare themselves to their genetic predecessors: mentally, physically, even spiritually. And no one felt the brunt of that psychic confusion more than the Marilyns. Bearing the name without the glory, frizzy-haired, tending toward chubbiness and easily addicted to almost anything, there was no way for a Marilyn to avoid the glaring differences between themselves and their alpha. The lure of post-op glamor was fierce. The Normalyn movement, archetype for all clone support groups, was inevitable.

Originally Marilyns Anonymous, until it became evident that anonymity for a Marilyn (even without the plastic surgery) was pretty much impossible, Normalyn served as a gathering house for Marilyns—and the Norma Jeanes who were desperate not to become them. You are okay just the way you are, the club literature stressed. But if you want to change yourself completely, that's okay too. Here are some beauty tips.

In the first years of the cloning boom, before regulation became legally and eugenically necessary, a glut of new old babies was gleefully dumped upon the American genetic scene without any attention to possible social consequences. InstaClone™, Celebra-Clone, and other recklessly enterprising fertility startups took the public's money and gave them exactly what they wanted—the public wanting, in remarkable but not surprising percentages, Kim Kardashians, Michael Jordans, and Marilyn Monroes. There were approximately 1300 Marilyns floating around in the world,

nearly all in the United States, 80% of them between the ages of 25-35. So even the plasticked platinumed perfect copies weren't exceptional in any real sense. Try living up to that.

Pulling into the parking lot of the Lord and Taylor's quadrant of the mall, Norma was surprised to find it nearly empty. She checked her dashboard clock and then her watch, ready to kick herself for possibly undersleeping. But no, it was just before 9, she was right on time. She steered her berry-red convertible (Obvious? Probably. It was her one concession to Marilynhood) into one of the nearest of the farthest-away spaces. Employees were Not Encouraged to occupy the prime mall parking slots; those were for the Express Privilege of Customers, store bulletins repeatedly asserted, and even on an empty lot day Norma wasn't going to risk being caught and lectured.

As she maneuvered the convertible roof up, Norma heard rather than saw the Land Cruiser approaching. Her car, standing out like a flamingo in the arctic in the near-empty parking lot, probably made her a target to begin with. But as the giant roaring luxury truck bore down on her, Norma couldn't pretend it wasn't personal.

The coal-colored SUV coasted into the slot directly behind hers in the sea of empty spaces, the sound of its door opening only just preceding the hush of its engine shutting down. There was no mistaking—or escaping—the classic opening move in the mating dance of twenty-first century suburbia. Norma gathered her jacket and purse and slowly got out of her car, the door locking behind her automatically with an irritatingly perky chirp. She walked quickly, but the light clicks of her sabrina heels were no match for the decidedly unladylike clomping of the boots behind her. Eyes focused straight ahead of her at the gleaming chrome

and glass doors of her destination, Norma steeled herself against the inevitable *Hey lady*.

“Hey, lady!” The voice was deep, amiable, a bit butch. Shosha closed in on her, nudging her hip gently, then slid a bitch-black manicured hand (Chanel, of course) around Norma’s shoulder. Norma smiled diplomatically. Shosha ran the cosmetics floor at Lord’s, and as a lowly perfume artist, Norma was required to look up to her. Which, at 5 foot 5 to Shosha’s 5 foot 1 in boots, was rather difficult.

Norma’s relationship with her boss was reasonable, if occasionally more uncomfortable than she wanted to admit. But after almost two years in the department, Norma had yet to find they had anything in common. Dressed in an ever-changing succession of expensive bondage wear in black leather and platinum, even despite her lack of height Shosha would have been an incredibly menacing figure if she were even the least bit unself-conscious. Standing still behind a counter or posed against a wall, not speaking, Shosha was regal, poised, hard. She had the look down. But statuesque silence wasn’t Shosha’s strong suit, and the second she opened her mouth, or moved her body more than an inch or two, the whole femme fatale façade fell apart. There was something like a puppy about Shosha. Too eager to please, too unsure of her body, too prone to overexcitement. There was no escaping it: underneath the almost perfect hardass bitch-goddess exterior, Shosha was a nerd. Clothing that looked fresh off a Milan runway on a store mannequin would magically transform on her body into something from the latest Klingon convention. She also seemed to have an acute crush on Norma.

“Hey, lady,” Shosha repeated, now so on top of Norma that some sort acknowledgement could no longer be avoided. “Hey, Shosh,” Norma responded, their eyes presumably

meeting through each other's UV-protected lenses (Norma's, vintage cats-eyes with rhinestones; Shosha's, severe black rectangles with the exact width of side supports required by fashion that particular season). "Place is a wasteland today."

"Yeah," Shosha nodded, practically bouncing with joy at the interchange. "Yeah, I think it's because of the cold snap. Only supposed to be 65 today. I bet Maxine will be selling a lot of cashmere, don't you think?"

Norma shrugged politely. The funny thing was, Shosha was probably right. No matter how long she lived in Florida, Norma would never get used to her neighbors' tendency to label two days in a row cooler than 75 degrees a "cold snap."

Seeing that talking about the weather hadn't turned into the conversational springboard she'd hoped, Shosha pushed on. "Say, Norma, I really like your dress. You look seriously fine, girlfriend. Where'd you get it?" Norma cringed at Shosha's foray into slang, then at the question, finding herself suddenly in a real dilemma. The dress had been her mother's. Admitting this meant a guaranteed lengthy conversation, but lying could just as easily lead to the same result—and might require serious brainwork on top of the ordinary discomfort. Thinking fast, Norma gave the best answer she could come up with, one that she knew had only the tiniest chance of success: "Oh my God—What's that over there?"

"What?" Shosha swirled around, following Norma's gaze. There was nothing actually over there. But amazingly enough, the ruse worked. While Shosha paused to scan the empty horizon for signs of whatever it was she was supposed to be shocked and/or awed by, Norma quickly made her escape through the shining store doors. That Bugs Bunny was a genius.



4

STEPPING INTO THE EMPTY store first thing in the morning was always the best part of the day for Norma. The small amount of warm sunlight that was allowed through the glass doors and past security made the chrome and glass counters sparkle like freshly cut diamonds. It was no wonder the store layout required customers to pass through Jewelry before any other department. But first thing in the morning, before anyone arrived, every countertop and display case had that irresistible polished gleam.

It was those initial moments that were always the most dangerous for Norma. Everything shining, everything desirable, and no one around to see. Just to slip something, anything into her purse. A compact, a scarf, a pair of earrings—even just one earring—and she would be steady to face the day. As always, she suppressed the urge. Everything was electronically tagged, traceable not just through the security gates but all the way to your home should you get that far, and no earring in the world was worth that disgrace and humiliation. Though once there was that pair of snake-skin Louboutin slingbacks...

Norma wasn't a smoker, had never been into drugs, and didn't even drink all that much except at parties where, let's face it, social lubrication was practically the law. But the itch to take things was constantly present. Working as a sales

clerk in a department store had to be the absolutely worst occupation for a kleptomaniac, second only to (possibly) pearl diving. But despite all the temptations, so far she had mostly been good. If only because she knew that once she allowed herself to take even the smallest thing, she wouldn't be able to quit. Ever. And the image of a future of being beaten up in a prison cell for surreptitiously pocketing another prisoner's shiny lucky shiv was just too horrifying to fathom.

Fortunately, Norma's job didn't require her to spend any time being tempted behind the vitrines. All she had to do was stand in front of the perfume counters, smile invitingly, and spray the living daylights out of anyone who dared to pause nearby. On busy days, it was a lot of fun. When things were slower, and people lingered longer over things they had no intention of buying, it became much harder not to misbehave. And when things were really really slow, she secretly used the mannequins for target practice.

"Would you like to try *Illusions*?" Norma cooed, for what had to be the millionth time. Brandishing the perfume bottle as if it were a work of art, as if it were a diamond tiara, as if it were a staplegun. All depending on her mood, and on the facial expressions of the passing customers. But always with the same seductive smile. To spritz or not to spritz. So much for her Liberal Arts degree. Still, it was steady work, not too demanding, and it paid well enough to satisfy her food and footwear needs. My God, she shuddered in response to the thought. Steady work? Not demanding? Paid reasonably well? The self-justifying clichés had slid through her mind so easily. Ah, the rallying cry of the horizontally mobile. File clerks and desk clerks and shop clerks, unite! We have nothing to lose but our ambition! Could it possibly be that bad? Yes. Yes, it was that bad. It wasn't that she

lacked ambition. She owned the same dog-eared copy of *What Color is Your Parachute?* as the next twentysomething occupational drifter. But while she was very good at choosing colors, picking which way to leap proved too daunting. She was good with people and she liked to shop. What had begun as a stopgap job while she tried to find herself had become a reasonably lucrative location where she could be found. At least it wasn't show business.

"Would you like to try *Illusions*?" When she had first started, she thought the fragrance was lovely. Now it was the noxious aroma of hell. Toilet Water had become more than a product category; it was a reasonable description. Every day she would subconsciously hope that the scent would change into something more bearable. Gasoline. Sauerkraut. Fresh dog vomit. Anything but this cloying sweetness. And its mitigating factors were minor. At least the bottle was beautiful and fit sensuously into her hand. And the name could be said many ways, in various inflections, depending on her mood. She pitied the poor souls promoting *Penetration*.

At least Shosha had (so far) defended her from the parent company's latest promotional proposal. What better way to sell *Illusions* than to have the sales representatives look like the famous icons of the past? All the one-name glamour girls had been listed, with costume and make-up suggestions, to fool the customer into believing they had stepped into a world of illusions themselves: Garbo, Dietrich, Hepburn (both Kate and Audrey varieties), and of course, the magnificent Ms. Monroe. Norma knew it was only a matter of time before the marketing goons laid down the law. Maybe if worst came to worst they'd let her pose as Cher. But she doubted it. There was only one name likely to show up on their very short list when they looked at her employee

photo. And no matter how many stars she wished on, that name wouldn't be Beyonce's.

Would you like to try *Delusion*?



5

ABE SLID BEHIND THE wheel and started the engine. His car was practically ancient at this point, without fingerprint ignition or computerized autopilot, let alone a reasonably uniform paint job, making it an easy target for parking lot pranksters. He had found it toilet-papered, wallpapered, and vanished altogether—having been pushed by the more industrious students to the farthest-away student lot, to a nearby street’s fire hydrant (125 dollar ticket, thank you very much), and on one particularly memorable occasion to the 30-yard line of the football field. At least the shaving cream caricature rubbed off without a trace. From the car, anyhow.

It was a beautiful, sunny, cliché-worthy Florida day. The sun beat down charmingly on the giant gym shoe poised precariously over the Largest Foot Locker In The World, casting its strikingly athletic shadow over the neighboring fast food restaurants and tourist-friendly mini-malls. A pair of impossibly long laces hovered unenthusiastically in the heat, as if knowing they were fighting a losing battle. Though Abe had driven past it for most of his life, it still gave him an unsettled feeling. Why a giant sneaker? Or at least, why a giant sneaker so high up in the air that people couldn’t be photographed next to it? It was the only tourist attraction in town that he could think of that wasn’t there to be posed

in front of, next to, or inside. As if no one had ever told the owner that if an object—however extraordinary—couldn't be captured by visitors to prove its existence back wherever they came from, it might as well not have existed at all. Unlike almost any other city in America, Orlando only truly existed in photographs and shared videos. A place that could only be experienced from someplace else.

That was the problem with teaching history in this town. As far as his students saw it, there was no history. And technically, they were sort of right. Orlando simply had no past. No historical one, at any rate. Built whole out of unlivable swampland, everything from the faux-plantations and colonial-style developments down to the very grass and trees was transplanted or man-made. Even the bodies of water that dotted the scenery had been carefully fabricated, painstakingly recreated to mimic what developers considered to be the ideal Southern scenery. Or the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Or the veldt. There was even an Eiffel tower. Other than the handfuls of people who actually lived there, only the crocodiles and flying insects (the mosquito had long been considered the state bird) truly belonged. There were some actual birds that were indigenous to the area, herons and cranes and wild turkeys, but they were so fantastical in shape and behavior as to seem animatronic themselves.

So how do you teach about the founding fathers when there is a Hall of Presidents right around the corner with every last one of them sitting in historically correct robotic poses? Where westward expansion and the Gold Rush are not only locally evident phenomena but outright encouraged activities on an ongoing everyday basis? How can you treat history as a living document when everything around you is fake? Sometimes it felt like the only lesson his

students wanted to learn about history was how profitably they could be doomed to repeat it.

And frankly, thanks to the marvels of the exact same worship of physical replication, when it came right down to it he himself was as fake as they came. His factual history negated his biological history negated his personal history negated any possible sense of self. There was nothing he could do that can't be done. Nothing he could say that can't be sung. All the rest is commentary.

Still, today hadn't been that bad. He'd ended the discussion by mentioning the upcoming traveling Smithsonian exhibit, which would bring the original draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to town, among other important historical documents and artifacts. It took a long time to convince the students that there was anything to be gained by—as they put it—looking at a dirty piece of paper in a glass box. Even though Abe was sure that box would somehow manage to be surrounded by dancing robots in powdered wigs and bass-heavy electronic music. But by the end of the discussion he felt like one or two might find their way over to the Mouse Museum after all. If there was nothing on Netflix. Okay, so it was a long shot. But a real piece of history didn't make its way to Orlando every day, and he believed it was his task as a History teacher to try to persuade them. He would go to the opening ceremony tonight, he would come back with some heartrending or stimulating stories about his own impressions, and maybe someone would get excited enough to show up. That is, if he could come up with a heartrending or stimulating impression from a dirty piece of paper in a glass box (which would in all likelihood actually be acrylic). Or at least from one of the peruked robots.

Following the curve of the road into the sunlight, Abe spotted a billboard for the upcoming exhibition. He made a mental note of the sign's location to tell his students tomorrow. Once an event could claim a billboard, it graduated from being a mere happening to an Attraction, and became noteworthy, promising fun and excitement. While the enlarged copy of the Proclamation itself seemed every bit as un-attractiony as he could possibly dare to hope, it had been jazzed up with a burst of fireworks behind it, and what looked like a waterslide-shaped American flag. Abe prayed it wasn't there because of any actual American flag-shaped waterslide. Every time you thought this town had reached its maximum capacity for silliness, Abe thought, you found your concept of "maximum" was impossibly shortsighted. As he drove past another billboard, this one for the Cured Meat Dancing Troupe (with Upside-Down Coasters! Brought to you by Hormel!), a stream of sunlight passed through two of the painted Meat Dancers and hit Abe squarely in the face with such unexpected brightness it caused his eyes to water. Without thinking, Abe wiped his eyes with his sleeve and immediately felt a blinding pain as residual globs of shaving cream oozed into his eyes. The slimy sting was excruciating, thousands of white-hot slugs crawling over his corneas. Instinctively, he reached up to wipe the pain away with his other sleeve, only to be hit with the same pain again, made worse by the humiliating sense of his own stupidity. He flailed his arms wildly, completely losing control of the wheel and any remaining common sense. At the last possible moment he remembered the brakes. As his foot hit the floor, he heard the two sounds you never want to hear in conjunction: a blaring car horn followed by squealing tires and the crunch of metal.

The first thing he saw when he was able to force his still-tearing eyelids open was a red strapless evening gown pressed against his windshield. This was odd. Odder still, though comforting, was the fact that the dress was empty. Abe panicked. He had hit the Invisible Woman.

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