

Pilgrims
by Lesley L. Smith

"Bad news, Cathy. No life," my research assistant, Tawanda, said in my office doorway.

"Don't tell me. Still no peptides?" I asked.

She nodded. "Sorry. Yeah. We've definitely got RNA molecules that can bond amino acids together, but we still can't seem to make peptides out of them."

"I was worried about that." I forced a smile. "Oh well, creating something that's alive out of something that's not alive is tough. We've just got to keep at it. You're doing a great job, by the way."

She flashed me a little smile, her teeth bright in her dark face, and took a step closer to my desk.

"Come on in," I said. "Sit down."

She did so, rearranging her lab coat. "What if this isn't how life first started on earth?"

"How else could it start?" I asked gently, knowing what she was going to say.

"Some of us grad students have been talking..." She looked at the floor in front of my desk.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"What about that theory that life on earth came from outer space?" She glanced up at me.

"It's an interesting theory, but how would we test it?" I smiled genuinely. "At the moment, we're stuck on this planet. If you can come with a way to test the exogenesis theory, I'd love to hear it."

We sat in silence for a few moments. The last thing I wanted to do though, was discourage a grad student.

"Don't get me wrong," I finally said. "It'd be great if it was true. It'd mean we wouldn't have any trouble finding food when we finally get to Alpha Centauri or wherever."

"What do you mean?" Tawanda asked. "Oh, wait. If we had a common ancestor with the life on Alpha Centauri their plants and animals would be compatible with our stomachs, right?"

I leaned toward her, grinning. "Exactly." Tawanda was one of the best R.A.s I'd ever had.

Speaking of food, it was getting to be lunch time. My stomach rumbled. "Say, since tomorrow's a holiday, why don't you go on home?" I said. "I don't think anyone besides us is around here anyway."

"You're right about that. Thanks." She smiled and stood up. "What time for dinner tomorrow?"

"We'll expect you at noon. And don't forget the rolls."

Chase stuck his tongue out of his mouth as he carefully put the finishing touches on his masterpiece. "I'm done, mom!" He held up the report and kicked the rung of the kitchen stool.

I was putting the finishing touches on my own masterpiece: home-made stuffing from scratch. I don't think I was sticking my tongue out, however. Chase must have learned that from his dad. As a biologist, I found the whole nature versus nurture thing fascinating.

I stepped over to look at his report. "Looks good, honey. Why don't you read it to me?" I stepped back to the counter and finished spooning the stuffing into the baking dish. Besides the obvious bread, it contained sausage, apple, mushrooms, carrots, and several secret ingredients which my mom made me swear not to tell. My mouth started watering as the smell wafted up to my nose. Where was Jeremy with that pizza?

"The First Thanksgiving," Chase said. "At the First Thanksgiving the Native Americans welcomed the Pilgrims with open arms. They shared their natural bounty of turkey and yams and corn with the newcomers."

"Newcomers-nice word," I said.

"Please don't interrupt," Chase said. "The Pilgrims left the old country to escape religious persec, persec-something."

"Persecution?" I asked.

"Yeah. That's it. They wanted to be free to live life the way they wanted to. But they were not prepared for the trials they faced in their new country. They had trouble getting enough food but the Native Americans helped them."

As I put foil over the baking dish of stuffing, I wondered what really happened at the first Thanksgiving-or if there even was such a thing. And would we be as generous today?

Chase continued on, but I must admit I wasn't totally paying attention. I opened the refrigerator, put the stuffing in, and surveyed our natural bounty: the stuffing was ready to go into the oven; the turkey was thawed and marinating; the candied yams were ready; the mashed potatoes were ready-I cheated a little there with instant-but I liked the instant better, less lumpy. Were likes and dislikes nature or nurture?

I smiled and closed the door.

"Mom!" Chase said.

"Yes, honey. Sorry. Your report sounds very good. You did a good job. You should be proud."

Chase beamed at me. He was adorable, with his curly brown hair and smug smile-the spitting image of his dad. Three cheers for genetics.

Speaking of his dad, Jeremy burst in the back door carrying a large pizza. A few leaves sailed in with him before he got the door closed. "Here you go, honey," Jeremy kissed me on the cheek.

"One large pepperoni." He put it in the center of the kitchen table. "It's getting windy out there," he said, shrugging off his coat.

"Pizza, pizza! I love pizza." Chase jumped down from the stool.

Jeremy opened the refrigerator door to get the milk. "Wow. Someone must have gotten home from the lab early. Looks like dinner tomorrow is well in hand."

I got out the paper towels from under the sink. "Guilty as charged. Tawanda and I did sneak out early; the place was absolutely deserted."

Chase was already sitting at the kitchen table, kicking his chair.

"That was fast." Jeremy chuckled as he poured the milk. "Hungry, buddy?"

"Yeah," Chase said.

I put the paper plates and paper towels on the table and sat down.

Chase grabbed a slice of pizza and stuffed the end of it in his mouth. "Mmm."

I sat down. "Don't talk with your mouth full, honey."

We all liked pizza. Soon the three of us were chomping happily on gooey cheese and still-piping-hot pepperoni. Conversation came to a standstill.

After about ten minutes the silence was broken, as Jeremy said, "So what's on the agenda tonight?"

"We're going to make desserts, pecan pie and pumpkin pie," I said. "Doesn't that sound fun?"

"No," Chase said. "I never get my way around here. I wanted to go for a walk tonight."

"A walk sounds like a nice idea, buddy," Jeremy said. "As soon as we finish cleaning up, we'll all go for a walk. And then we can all make the pies together afterwards."

I shot a quick smile at the love of my life.

He wiggled his eyebrows at me—something he did when he was proud of himself. I wonder where he learned it. His dad?

A few minutes later found the three of us, in our jackets, tromping down the driveway. The sun had just set. The air was wonderfully cool and crisp. Crunchy brown leaves flew this way and that. The wind in the trees made a marvelous whooshing sound.

"It's neat out here with the leaves blowing and everything," Chase said. "A storm must be coming."

"Great idea to take a walk, son," Jeremy said.

I knew if I looked at him he'd wiggle his eyebrows, so I looked up in the sky to see if any stars were out yet. Instead of stars though, I saw a meteorite. "Hey! Look at that!" I pointed up at the bright light streaking over our heads."

"Cool!" Chase said. "What is it?"

"It's a meteorite-some stuff from outer-space is falling down to earth," I said. "It's okay. It happens all the time." Meteorites were one of the mechanisms proposed for seeding earth with life.

Chase started jogging down the driveway. "Wow! I think it's coming down in the field."

"Hey, slow down, Chase," Jeremy said, walking quickly after him.

They were already across the street and into the field. I knew the chances of a meteorite hitting nearby were slim to none. It just looked like it was coming down there.

I followed them at a more reasonable pace.

In the middle of the field, Jeremy and Chase had stopped and were staring at something big and metallic, their mouths hanging open.

As I came up behind them, I said, "What is that?"

Chase squealed and yelled, "It's a space-ship!"

The thing did look suspiciously like a stereotypical space ship. It was a completely smooth house-sized silver disk partially buried the dirt. And whatever it was, re-entry hadn't been kind. We were a hundred feet away and the heat rolling off it was making my face flush.

Chase took a step closer.

I grabbed his jacket. "Stay here, Chase."

Before Chase had time to argue, a door I hadn't even seen popped open.

We all jerked back.

A small figure emerged from the opening as if being propelled up via some kind of elevator.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a little-gray-man, a small biped with two arms, two legs, two big eyes-the whole package. I knew bipeds were a logical result of evolution, but I still couldn't believe it.

"Hello?" Chase yelled.

The creature yelled, "Hello?" back.

I couldn't tell if he was imitating Chase or actually communicating.

I couldn't talk. This whole situation was surreal.

"Are you here for Thanksgiving?" Chase yelled.

"Thanksgiving?" the creature repeated.

"Oh, my gosh!" Chase said, "Are you hungry? Do you need help? Wait. Are you pilgrims?" He turned to me and whispered, "You're not going to dissect him are you, mom?"

The creature wiggled. Maybe it was it's version of a nod. "Pilgrims. Yes. We are pilgrims."

"No, Chase, no dissections," I whispered back. But I was definitely going to invite them to Thanksgiving dinner. I stepped forward and said, "Welcome."

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