

ELLY

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Editor's Note—Mary O'Brien's piece, "Elly" marks a departure from the scholarly articles that we publish in *Issues in Reproductive and Genetic Engineering*. Best-known for her theoretical work on *The Politics of Reproduction*, O'Brien has ventured here into the area of fiction in the tradition of some of the best feminist theorists. Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, O'Brien shows fiction's capacity to express social criticism. What makes "Elly" especially significant is its theoretical backdrop and the facility with which O'Brien moves back and forth from fictional to philosophical feminist analysis. The women's movement has long recognized the power of fiction as feminist criticism, a power which derives in part from fiction's imaginative possibilities. The roots of "Elly" are in Mary O'Brien's theoretical imagination. It is a strength of that imagination that she is able to transform the political philosopher into the creative writer.

Janice G. Raymond

Elly let her eyes open, confident that she was awake and that it must be 0700. She was programmed to wake at 0700, but not programmed to go to sleep at a special hour. She had stayed awake for a long time thinking about tomorrow's babies. Elly wasn't supposed to think about the babies—wasn't in fact supposed to think much at all. She glanced at the thought screen to see what she was supposed to be thinking, but all it said was Get UP. She got up. She looked through her periscope porthole, but the postnuclear grey cloud, inevitably, was still there. She directed a bit of a smile at the screen, which now said that there was Significant Dispersion of the cloud. Said that every Wake-up: Elly was on Wake-up 2. She tried thinking that the grey was dispersing, and might have managed it if she hadn't kept thinking about the babies; she had to stop doing that all the time. She made a great effort—it's brighter, it's brighter—and numbed her concern about the babies for long enough to do the three-second thought scan. No buzzers. She'd made it.

The dining room was brightly lit, and she ate her mash, took her vitamins, slipped half her juice to Bessie, who would hiccup for an hour before she became dazed. Bessie was the other nursery attendant. She was a bit O-A, but over-animation in their generation didn't necessarily work out as energy for work. Bessie danced, which suited Elly very well, for she got to see more of the babies while Bessie adjusted her calories in an elaborate dance sequence she had developed, clucking

rhythmically with her tongue, and, she said, undoing the knots that compulsory exercise sessions tied in her joints. Elly loved her for this, using the time to cuddle the babies. Dancing was only allowed in the rec room down in the basement, and cuddling wasn't encouraged at all, but Bessie was a clever mathematician and had worked out the master-eye cycle so that they knew when they were observed. So Elly could cuddle and Bessie could dance unobserved. For this also Elly loved Bessie. For doing many of her chores, Bessie loved Elly. They lived in great anxiety that Bessie might be transferred or disciplined for heterosexuality or that Elly might be caught cuddling. Friendship wasn't considered cool in the building where they lived.

They had no concern, however, that Elly might be transferred. Elly was special in a funny way. Her proper name was L.E., which stood for Last Error. Elly's skin was a brownish color. Bessie was B.S., which stood for Basic Stock, which was polite obfuscation of her engineered low I.Q. Still, Bessie was pretty proud of her classification, for they no longer reproduced low I.Q.s. Too many of them had turned out to be High C's—too much cunning. Cunning was the antithesis of disciplined intelligence. There was no need for cunning in a totally rational society. Bessie was an anomaly in that she had this fine mathematical skill which could not be acknowledged as intelligence—she was a B.S., after all. The categories were absolute. Still, Bessie lived and worked with the Errors on

the top floor, where the grey outside was thickest. They were a small community, officially extinct. Elly and Bessie scrutinized the babies longingly, hoping for a few more exceptional children, but none appeared. Bessie said that they never got out of the petri dish, but Elly lived in hope that one day she might caress a brown skin.

The baby boxes were of an eroded chrome material, rough to the hands and the source of great anxiety to the women. They were afraid the chrome might still be radioactive. They were not supposed to take the babies out of the boxes, but of course they did. Bessie would dance with them, Elly would cuddle them. They had been doing this for years, but they could never find out if it made a difference to the babies, who only stayed in the building for 9 months. They dared not ask the ages three-to-nine nursery staff what they did: they probably worked to rule. Almost everybody did. Elly thought fleetingly of the new young pediatrician who seemed less chalky white than the others. Bessie thought it was only a new cosmetic: professionals were allowed cosmetics. The master-doctor painted blue lines on his face and had dyed his hair purple. It was whispered that he was openly heterosexual, so he must be indispensably clever, and anyway he was pretty old; once he told Elly that he had been reproduced even before her, and Elly was programmed to die in just a few weeks. They were never told the exact day and in any case the chronometers were often on the fritz. It really fouled up the babies' feeding schedules, but Elly and Bessie had created a little cache of baby food so that the babies wouldn't cry when time stood still, as it quite often did.

Elly usually arrived alone on first shift. Bessie liked her forbidden sex early in the upspan and as often as possible in the down-span. She would be dancing after her joust with one of the cooks; it took her this way. Elly, of course, had no reproductive nor sexual organs. They had removed them when they saw her skin colour. They had kept her alive because at that time some of the men had gone on strike because so few females were being reproduced, but heterosexuality had been declared obsolete years ago. Elly and a few older Errors had formed a little celibate club. They called it the Gay Ladies, so they were left in peace. Bessie, who ran risks for her bisexuality, poked fun at them, but occasionally came to the meetings. "Prayer meetings," the men called them, though no

one was sure what that meant. The AC maintenance man had tried to explain to Elly that this was a joke, but Elly loved the meetings where they sang and an older lady on the brink of retiring sometimes chanted quaint and wordless songs which made Elly's feet tap. She liked this, but kept her feet under a moulded chair in case it was improper to tap-tap. There was no crime in Elly's universe, but lots of improprieties. Like cuddling babies.

On this morning, Elly was torn. It was change day, and it came every 60 days, though it was hard to measure time. Elly hated to see her babies go, but loved the new ones immediately. She stood just inside the door, the only spot not monitored, and put her hands over her eyes. I love you already, she told the new babies, though no sound came and the glistening in her eyes was felt with dread pleasure and a surreptitious wipe. When she stepped into range she was wiping her hands on the towel, which she was supposed to do anyway, finding clean pleasurable-bility in the notion of her invisible tears. In any case, her big smile was forming spontaneously as she stepped towards the old chrome containers.

First, she counted. Eleven. Better than the last lot, which had been ten. Elly knew that three more nurseries had been closed, so it seemed clear that the building was getting fewer babies less often. On her last out trip she had been taken to a building which had no nursery at all! It was full of fancy, noisy, overbright machines, and on one of the screens she had seen a picture of her own nursery, with Bessie bending solicitously over a container! The people in that building were all men, or at least the folk she saw seemed to be men—they all wore genital slings, and seemed to spend their time watching a queer T.V. with nothing but numbers on the screen. It had hardly been worth the effort of suiting up for an out trip and the tedious two-day detoxification when she got back. And the air bus lurched everytime the grey darkened and they never went up to the Bright at all. Elly had only been up to the Bright once, but it was empty and hurt her eyes. In fact, it was after that when she asked for nursery duty, knowing she would never leave the building again and glad because people from the other buildings had stared stupidly at her dark skin. Never seen it before, she supposed. She'd never seen it herself, ever, never could understand why she was allowed to live as

an Error. One of the marshals always called her Bogey, and told her one day that little kids needed to have bogeys. She didn't believe this, but still, neither Bessie nor anyone else had ever seen skin like hers. She looked first in the chrome and loved her dark reflection for the moment before she would turn her love on the eleven new babies. It seemed longer and longer between consignments and she was sure the chronometers were slowing down, but Bessie said she was too fond and had an eccentric time consciousness. Bessie was too good a friend to report this, but it gave Elly little waves of panic now and then that she or Bessie might be transferred. The only lower category was window cleaning, and who wanted to spend their life cleaning windows no one could see through?

Elly smiled. These little meditations were exercises she had developed to stave off the moment of looking, but not for too long; the box might be watching. It was a man on the box this morning and he looked zonked; probably saved his pot ration for the tedium of this shift. He hadn't shaved either, so he must be over 30 . . .

. . . but she wasn't really thinking these trivial thoughts, for her hand on the chrome had opened the shutter. Her other hand reached for a towel; the baby was stinking of urine. They never had got the catheters right. She touched first the baby's face and it grimaced. Quickly she peeled off the wrapper, which broke up in a way they never used to. At one time they were washed! It was a long time ago though and now nothing was washed. Elly had to be careful not to try to put the gowns on the babies too quickly for they split and went all fluffy and the fluff got in the little noses and the infant sneezes were recorded and Elly got a demerit. Enough demerits and she could be cleaning windows!

It was a boy. She changed him quickly, her hands caressing him, her mind on guard against picking him up, her heart beating with the desire to do so. Silly Elly, silly Elly, silly Elly. She sang this little lullaby under her breath, her lips barely moving. Ten more. She went as slowly as she could. They were all boys, all wet, all drowsy and one a little yellow. She wondered why they had passed him and gently stroked his little belly to show him he was born lucky. He drooled. Her heart or something in her breast leapt and she hoped she wasn't being monitored. They didn't

bother so much when a person was due to be terminated soon.

All boys. Elly took the little jaundiced one out, for he had to be isolated. She wished Bessie would hurry for she could screen her a bit, though she was allowed to take them into isolation to collect a specimen if they were yellow. But Bessie was better with catheters, which often came apart, and there was only an above-table monitor in isolation, so there were four places out of monitor where Elly could hold the children against her breast. She had no breasts, of course, but she knew about breasts from womantalk and could imagine them vividly. The little yellow one stirred in her arms like the faint breeze of the smaller air vents and Elly crooned to him with her noiseless breath. She was conscious of the beat of her own heart, as she laid the stethoscope on his chest and matched his heartbeat with a soundless song from her motionless lips. He squinted, gurgled, puckered his face and dribbled. He looked surprised, Elly laughed, Bessie danced in. What a funny looking one! Bessie said. How many we got? Eleven, said Elly. Toss for the extra one? I'll take him. O.K. Bessie didn't like the yellow ones: out of reach of the monitors she had told Elly that wrong colours were unlucky. Then she had remembered why Elly was the last error, and looked so contrite that Elly laughed and stroked Bessie's alabaster cheek and pulled gently on her fair, fair, hair.

Both women were worried about the little yellow one. Theoretically jaundice was a technical error, and Elly knew well why she *was* the last error: errors were now erased. The little yellow one was drowsy and to Elly's anxious eye getting yellower by the minute. Bessie looked at his temperature reading again and told Elly don't worry, we'll speed his fluids. Bessie knew how to do this but it was tricky. And they never knew when the supervisory team would drop in. The little yellow one yawned with more energy than he had shown yet. See! said Bessie with a glow of delight for Elly. They had to get out of there for rest hour.

Rest hour was really sex hour, but Elly and Bessie were old lovers and rarely performed except for the record: the house favored sexual activity for recreation and for controlling energy. The two women laid on the couch side by side and talked about the little yellow one in a desultory way.

Maybe they meant him to be like that said Bessie, drowsily. We've had them before, though. Yeah. You sure weren't the last error . . . Elly, You're not an error, you're good. Good with the kids. Good to me. Love's you. Love's you, too.

Bessie dosed. Elly thought. She knew the little yellow one would be all right in a couple of days. He wouldn't die of jaundice, but he might die if the doctor's valued a postmortem. Elly scolded herself: they don't want them to die, they're expensive. Only one had ever died that Elly remembered, and she had been in the early days of total-tech repro. She. She. Elly shook Bessie's shoulder gently.

Not asleep, Bessie said. When'dwe last have a girl, Bess? Huh? A girl—When'dwe last have a little girl? Not for ages. Elly moved her body, which suddenly felt stiff and heavy. Bessie offered to get her drink. No. No thanks Bessie dear . . . Bessie? Uh-huh? Do you think they're not making girls any more?

Bessie didn't hoot, didn't laugh, didn't do anything but stare at the glossy ceiling. Bessie? Uh-huh? You do think that don't you? Don't know . . . Ko thinks so. Ko was Bessie's cook friend. He sometimes catered the techofficers parties and heard lots of things, most of which he kept to himself. But he liked Bessie a lot, enough to defy the sex rules. Lots of people did for she had a sort of generous . . . what was that word that had been indexed a few years ago? Ah, yes. Spirit. Bessie had a generous spirit.

Bessie, you've got a generous spirit. Go on!! You have. You don't even like this job and you're always cheerful. Not cheerful, Elly. Don't care. You care about the babies. Uh-Uh. Bessie looked serious, though. Elly, it's true. We haven't had a girl in the last . . . oh! I don't know how many consignments. Fourteen, Elly said quickly. Yea. Fourteen. Elly, I checked with them at the North House . . . they haven't had girls either. They said it was a glitch that was being looked after . . . they said there was a general reduction . . . that the grey was dispersing and they were reducing population to speed up the dispersal. They said . . .oh, what does it matter. I didn't believe a word of it ... Bessie was breathing hard, far harder than Elly had ever seen her breathe before, deeper than her sex

breathing or her dance breathing, hard as a motor on the blink, rasping, hurting breathing.

I only care about you Elly. I care about you because you care about them and I don't care about anything much except you. It's because . . . Bessie stopped, struggling now for breath, red and crying. Crying. Water in her eyes, down her cheeks, funny noises in her nose, an incredulous expression on her face. Crying isn't allowed, Bessie sobbed. I'll be disciplined. But Elly had her body between Bessie and the screen. Because of what, Bessie? Because . . . there's nothing we can do. Come on, now. We can save the little yellow one. Bessie shook her head. They won't let us. All that stuff about perfection. They'll take him. Where to? Wherever it is. We'll all go there, but he won't reach his date. He's not supposed to be imperfect . . . perfect males, that's what they. . . . She paused. You must know, Elly, that you aren't really the last error. Simply the last one to be allowed to survive.

Elly knew it was true. A curiosity, a freak, a barren brown woman who couldn't finally be anyone. None of her babies would ever recognize her, care for her. She had no children yet she had this great lump of pity in her breast for them. She didn't know what happened to them; she hadn't even visited the other house where, she supposed they grew up, grew to be men, to work in labs and flying machines and wait for the grey to disperse. It would never disperse, she suddenly saw, it was in their heads, it was reproduced all the time because they liked it. A world of bleak survival where only power mattered.

Elly shuddered, and Bessie started to cry again. Elly hugged her gently. We count, Elly said quietly, we count because we care . . . and we work. And we're friends.

They went back to the nursery. Elly checked the babies. The little yellow one was paler. Nothing like my skin really, Elly thought: mine is for keeps. Bessie slowly started to dance. Time isn't real any more, Bessie said. Yes it is, Elly said quite fiercely. The babies keep coming. An' goin' Bessie said. Just like us. Not much point in it, is there? Not much, but some, Elly said. They get born, somehow, and we watch over them and they grow.

Elly's tears dried, and she picked up the little yellow one and joined the dance.