

IDENTITY CRISIS

By

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"There are times when I don't know whether to search for a carrot or *leave* - no pun intended," Arbre said, glancing at his own branches as though they were alien appendages. "Are we trees? Rabbits? Exactly *what* are we?"

Sedo, the good-natured, less excitable of the two poplar trees, replied, "Guess we'd be called half-breeds - part vegetable, part animal." He looked at his friend and fellow test-subject, unable to discern any change in his appearance since those vocabulary-laden scientists had injected them with rabbit genes. "Don't be so vain, Arbre. Your looks haven't changed one iota. That might disappoint the needle-wielders," he added, referring to the needle-bearing scientists and their expectations. "They're expecting us to be ... well ... *different*."

Arbre was not mollified. "'In view of their size and powerful root systems,'" he began, quoting one of the researchers, "'these transgenic poplars may display the ability to clean sites contaminated with several pollutants at a more rapid pace and at a cheaper cost than our current techniques.'" That's all well and good - whatever it means - but how about *our* feelings? *We* have rights!"

"Don't be so sensitive. If everything works out the way they expect, some people will think of us as heroes, real trailblazers."

"I don't want to be a hero or a trailblazer; I want to be a tree! Besides, rabbits and trees shouldn't occupy the same body. I wish they'd leave me alone!"

Sedo had to admit that his tree-buddy had a point: the image of a half-animal, half-tree creature was rather unsettling, even to a freethinker like himself.

Darin Soty, chief researcher from the University of Washington, Seattle, checked the results of the latest soil analysis. "Bingo!" he declared, addressing the representative of the National Academy of Sciences. "Hypothesis confirmed: the enzyme cytochrome p450 broke down the trichloroethylene - what once was a contaminant, is now nontoxic salt, water, and carbon dioxide." He smiled. "Next in line: vinyl chloride, chloroform, and carbon tetrachloride."

"Betcha not even Bugs Bunny knew he had it in him," commented the NAS official. "I can see him now, chomping on a carrot, staring deadpan at a poplar, reciting, dramatically, 'To tree or not to tree ... that is the question!'"

Chuckling, they left the room. Had Arbre witnessed their triumphant display of mirth, he would have wished upon them a contamination that not even rabbit genes would be able to neutralize.

"I had the strangest feeling last night," Sedo stated. For the first time since the gene graft, there was a hint of anxiety in his voice. "Like I wanted to *hop*. It was really weird ...!"

"I told you so!" Arbre gloated. "It's the rabbit genes - they're making us crazy! We're becoming *mutants*!"

Sedo dismissed the idea with the wave of a branch. "You're overreacting, Arbre," he said, trying to assuage his friend's fears. He resisted the desire to hop over to Arbre; instead, he leaned toward him. "It's no big deal, but ..."

"But what?"

Sedo whispered, "Could you tell me where I can find some *lettuce*?"

The next four days passed uneventfully. The researchers made only one brief visit, taking soil samples, and pouring some type of liquid upon the ground. Arbre didn't feel anything unusual - no uncomfortable urges, no bizarre promptings, nothing. The only thing out of the ordinary was Sedo's silence; he hadn't spoken since asking about lettuce.

On the fifth day, the ineffable happened. Arbre was awakened by a series of quick, sudden jolts. "What in the world?!" he exclaimed, still half-asleep. "Hey!"

Within a few seconds, he realized the ground was shaking. Arbre thought it was an earthquake - until he saw the true source of the disruption: *Sedo was trying to pull himself up by his roots!*

Arbre watched in shock and disbelief. After Sedo had successfully completed his task, he began *hopping* toward a series of small bushes, his roots trailing along behind him like the tentacles of an octopus. Arbre nearly jumped out of his bark when - noticing a pair of rabbits bounding toward denser brush at the base of a nearby hill - Sedo began shadowing them, his mannerisms and movements mimicking their every move! His bole horizontal, he was using four of his limbs like the legs of a rabbit!

Withdrawing his "forepaws", his upper portion sunk to the ground. Sedo, now situated alongside the rabbits, *began nibbling at a clump of vegetation with his knothole!*

That very moment, from deep within the wooden core of Arbre's tree-brain, a word flashed in conjunction with an all-consuming hunger: *HOP!*

The next thing Arbore knew he was next to Sedo, munching on a tasty patch of greenery!

"I can't help but wonder what would happen if we injected a rabbit with the cells of a tree," Darin Soty said, only half in jest.

Karla Minkoff, NAS liaison, replied, "If we injected the bunny with redwood cells, he would grow tall and straight - and probably move to Yosemite!"

They both grinned. The two experienced researchers, passing the time as they drove toward the testing ground, were unaware of the mind-blowing phenomenon they were about to witness.

They had reached their destination. They were talking about soil samples and crossbreeding, when Darin Soty made an abrupt, tire-screaming stop. Before Miss Minkoff could protest his driving, he cried, "Tell me I'm seeing things!"

His pony-tailed colleague, who had been looking in the opposite direction, turned her attention to where Soty was gazing, transfixed and utterly nonplussed. Objective researcher though she was, she couldn't repress a shriek of alarm.

They sat silently in the car, gaping at what might be regarded as either grand or grotesque. Once thing for certain, it wasn't like anything they had ever seen before!

Minkoff broke the silence. "Impossible! It just can't be!"

Not fifty feet from the car was a tableau of reality rendered ridiculous: two poplar trees were *crawling over a thicket of vegetation, and, with sinuous limbs, ripping bundles out of the ground - and depositing them in their mid-section knotholes!*

"It's like - they're - eating!" exclaimed Karla Minkoff. This was a reality resistant to intellectual processing. "And they are *moving*, roots and all!"

"Yes!" blurted Soty. His expression was a mixture of disbelief and fascination. "Reminds me of a cartoon I once watched - where trees imitated rabbits. Life imitating fantasy, indeed!" He smiled, weakly.

"I think we've created a new life form!" proclaimed Minkoff. "We're two Dr. Frankensteins!"

"How are we going to explain this to the National Academy of Sciences?" asked Soty. He turned off the ignition and set the brake.

"They expected results - they got 'em!" Minkoff chuckled, but her heart wasn't in it.

"Now *I'm* wondering what would happen if we injected rabbits with tree cells," said Miss Minkoff, her eyes fixed upon the poplar trees as the two researchers exited the vehicle, and moved, slowly and very carefully, toward the arboreal absurdities.

"Bunnies with leaves for ears, roots for tails, and a seasonal change of form," Soty speculated, incredulous at what he was seeing. "But a question begs to be answered: What if the rabbits were injected with the cells of a *fruit* tree?"

"Oh, my. Oh, my, my, my!"

"Exactly what I was thinking, Miss Minkoff. It's hard to mentally accommodate the image of a fruit-bearing cottontail!"

Suddenly, they both stopped in their tracks. Raw, unadulterated fear told them to run in the opposite direction; refined, scientific curiosity urged them to get a much closer look.

Discretion is often the better part of valor. When the trees/rabbits angled their bodies toward them, and, seconds later, commenced *crawling* in the direction of the two terrified researchers, they relinquished all professional and personal formalities, and beat a frantic, ragged beeline back to their car; the two educated, self-assured scientific observers had

become a pair of potential prey. Scientific inquiry had been forsaken in favor of self-preservation.

They made it safely back to their vehicle, and hastily (an understatement) departed the scene, never once looking back. When they returned to their headquarters, their preposterous story was greeted by most of their coworkers with scornful skepticism. Eventually, a few of the more open-minded of their colleagues agreed to return to the site of their supposed encounter. They found nothing out of the ordinary; the two trees that were the focus of their experiment were as they had been, just two old-fashioned pine trees, aged, and a little weathered - but neither mobile, rabbit-like, nor extraordinary in any way.

What became of Soty and Minkoff? They received extensive psychological counseling, which was followed by a relentless obsession that overrode nearly every other activity, save those that preserved life and limb. They kept returning to the location of their fantastic experience - always with each other, never alone or with another person - intent on documenting the veracity of their account, resolute in their desire to regain their credibility. But all they ever found were run-of-the-mill trees.

Fifteen years have passed since the "encounter". Both Karla Minkoff and Darin Soty have found a new line of work, never

having proven that anything extraordinary had *really* happened that day. Every so often, they can still be seen at the location of the alleged incident, amidst the wildlife, foliage, and trees, looking for what only they can describe.

And, in one of those strange, unanticipated twists on the road of life, Karla and Darin eventually married. It was a wonderful ceremony, attended by their close friends and family. None of their former coworkers were invited.

They spent their honeymoon camping ... a stone's throw from the spot where their unremitting obsession began.

What of Arbre and Sedo? Were they imaginary? Perhaps they were the product of the imaginations of Karla Minkoff and Darin Soty, aka Karla and Darin Soty? Or, were they living, breathing hybrids, unlike anything known to humanity?

Their psychologist tended toward a variation of the former explanation; Karla and Darin insisted on the latter. Their friends and family were split; some believed them, others opted for a more prosaic analysis.

As of their tenth wedding anniversary, the prosaic analysis was still standing tall and strong - much like the two trees that had become the passionate preoccupation of Karla and Darin Soty. The former researchers learned - the hard way - that some things can be comprehended by using of the scientific method;

others can neither be measured nor understood, not by utilizing the principles of science, nor by applying the rules and ruminations of logic. Arbore and Sedo, be they real or imaginary, fall into that category.

The End