

Nanochaos

by David Allen Hampton

Brilliant beyond measure, thought Clark Webb, yet dumb as a box of rocks. Double clichès seemed to please him as he grinned into his coffee cup. The focus of this observation was Melinda Kinsey, fellow scientist at Keil Laboratories. The plump woman with an Einstein-like coiffure was sitting directly across the conference table and chewing on a honey bun like a starved rabbit, oblivious to the chunk of sugar clinging to her upper lip. *Those mustache hairs must be like velcro,* he mused.

“We’re done here folks,” announced Chris Peters, VP of R&D, from the front of the conference room.

Clark leaned back in his chair as the room cleared, preferring to wait until the traffic eased so he wouldn’t inadvertently rub against someone on the way to the door. He hated when that happened. Other people touching him *without permission* set his teeth on edge. He calmly watched with amusement as Kinsey tried to organize scarf, ring-binder, cellphone and purse while stuffing the last bite of bun into her maw. During this dance Clark noticed a small notepad slip out of the binder and drop to the seat of the chair she just vacated. As Melinda turned to waddle away Clark grunted, “Hey Kinsey.”

Melinda stopped and looked over her shoulder which seemed to eliminate one of her chins. “Yeah Clark?”

Clark just stared at her for a few seconds. *Might be interesting reading.*

“Clark?”

“Nothing,” he dismissed, shaking his head. “Catch up with you later.”

“Oh good, that would be fun,” she gushed.

Clark dreaded his next move which would put his hands and immaculately clad knees in direct contact with the carpeted floor. He took a deep breath and paused to look around before ducking under the table and reaching over to snare the notebook. As he was backing out with the prize a low voice rumbled nearby, “Lose something?”

In another second Clark’s head would have cleared the edge of the table. Instead it jerked up and connected with a loud bonk. He turned, rubbing his naked pate, and looked up at Chris Peters. “Uh, yeah. Got it now.”

“Great, talk to you later,” Chris replied as he headed toward the door.

“About what?” Clark asked.

“It’s just a turn of a phrase,” Chris sighed without pausing. “Lock up when you leave.”

Arrogant prick. Clark waited until Chris cleared the door then sat on a chair and surreptitiously opened the notebook on his lap.

He read in silence for several minutes, facial tics accompanying digested words of particular significance. The notebook apparently was a diary chronicling a research project Melinda had been conducting alone in her home. "Secret lab? This is just too much," Clark mumbled under his breath. The project notes outlined a complex age reversal technique involving nanobots and DNA manipulation. *No doubt why the old bag was working on this. Course she was probably just as ugly when she was young.* Footsteps in the hallway interrupted Clark's thoughts and prompted him to stow the diary under his laptop on the table.

Melinda entered the conference room and smiled at Clark. "Still here, huh?"

A little unnerved by her sudden appearance Clark managed, "Uh, yeah...here I am."

"Haven't by chance seen a notebook lying around have you?"

Clark did a head swivel scanning the four walls. "Nope, sure haven't."

Melinda shuffled around the room looking behind chairs, then dropped to her hands and knees and started rooting under the table. "Damnation," she grunted in frustration as she backed out from under the table with the edge of her skirt riding high on a substantial thigh. "Can't seem to find that sucker anywhere," she whined.

The exposure of so much bare-skinned real estate almost made Clark choke. He shook it off and managed what was nearly a smile. "The custodian was in here a few minutes ago while I was working. Maybe he picked it up. I was really too busy to notice."

"Oh thanks Clark," she beamed. "What a great clue!" She turned and headed to the door, the movement thankfully allowed her skirt to fall back in place. "I'll go check that out."

Clark waited a few minutes then quickly stuffed the notebook and laptop in his briefcase and left the room, locking the door on his way out.

Later, safely ensconced in his study at home, Clark continued to read the contents of the diary. Finally, he set the notebook aside and exhaled loudly. "The bitch has done it. She has damn well done it," he marveled. He grabbed the diary again and thumbed to the last page. *I can't believe it...successful test on a rat and the old gal is planning on injecting herself with the formula. What a dolt. You can't rely on one rat test. You gotta do multiple tests on larger animals before you go into a human trial.* Clark leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs on the desk in front of him. *This is worth billions, maybe even trillions. The scientist will go down in history.* Clark smiled and whispered aloud, "And I'm going to be that guy."

The next evening, attired in a long trench coat, Clark rang the old fashioned doorbell on a large, brick, colonial-style home in the suburbs. A muffled, "Coming." greeted him from inside and after a few moments the peephole in the door was blocked by shadow. Clark quickly scanned the outside of the home and grinned. *Great, the old biddie has no cameras.*

The door opened and Melinda, fresh-faced with surprise and encased in a flowered Muumuu, gasped, "Clark! Whatever are you doing here?" She glanced at the driveway and said, "I didn't know you had a van." She shooed him across the threshold and bubbled, "Come in, come in."

Clark stepped into the foyer and held up the diary. "Look what I have."

Melinda's hands covered her gaping mouth as she shuddered with delight like a plate of jello. "Oh Clark! You are my hero! I could just hug you!"

Quickly handing her the diary, he stepped back with his arms raised to ward off the onslaught. "Th-That's okay Kinsey, I gotta bad cold."

Suddenly Melinda grew serious. "You didn't read it did you?"

Clark smiled a greasy smile and shook his head. "There's no way I would do that Kinsey. The custodian brought it back to the conference room after you left last night and I thought it was too late to bother you. Wanted to give it to you in person, so here I am."

Melinda clasped the diary to her ample bosom. "Well you are the jewel. Let's go sit in the living room and chat."

As soon as Melinda turned toward the interior of the house, Clark reached inside his coat, produced a taser and zapped the woman in the back. With a high squeal Melinda dropped the diary, sprawled to the floor face down and twitched like a break dancer on meth. After a few moments the twitching subsided and she passed out. With considerable effort Clark turned her over and taped a chloroform-laced towel to her face. Then he went back outside and returned shortly carrying a large suitcase and pulling a wheeled shipping trunk. It didn't take him long to find the lab in the basement and he spent the next couple of hours clearing out anything he could find related to the research project. After packing the cases into the van, Clark returned to the basement and opened the valves on three Bunsen burners without lighting them. Next, he placed two decorative candles at the foot of the basement stairs, and these he did light. He ran up the stairs to the foyer where he reached down to retrieve the notebook and threw Melinda a kiss. "Goodnight for good sweet princess," he cackled. Then he was gone.

"Yeah, I saw it on the news this morning. Terrible tragedy, just terrible. I'm taking a couple of vacation days." Clark paused on the cell phone then replied, "Don't worry, I'll be there for the meeting Thursday morning. Yeah...okay...bye." He pocketed the cell and got out of the van. He opened the rear door and coaxed out an old Golden Retriever on a leash and led him into his house. "Not only do you get out of the pound ole buddy," he chuckled, "you're gonna feel like a pup again after I'm through with you."

The next morning Clark rolled out of bed and went to check on the dog in the utility room. When he opened the door the first thing he noticed was the cataracts—that were apparent when he spied the dog at the Humane Society the day before—were gone and the animal was panting with happiness. Clark put a bowl of food on the floor and watched him gobble it down. "Well buddy, you just put my name in the history books," he declared. Then he went to his study and spent the rest of the day working on a marketing plan.

Early the following morning Clark was roused from slumber by a distant howling noise. He sat up in bed trying to determine its source. The only other living thing in the house was the dog so he went to check on him. The howling grew more pronounced as he approached the utility room. *Stupid beast probably got his leash hung up on something*, he thought as he opened the door. The next vision that slammed into his consciousness made him involuntarily step back. The dog was wedged into a corner crying out in obvious pain. The dog's facial structure seemed odd. His ribs were pronounced as if he were emaciated and blood seemed to be seeping through its fur in several large patches. Barefoot and still in pajamas, Clark carefully approached the pitiable animal and reached down to examine his head. The dog responded with a loud growl and viciously bit his hand. Clark was so surprised he fell backward to the floor, then rapidly proceeded to scoot to the door on his ass. The dog tried to rise, but collapsed in a heap and began howling again.

Clark hurriedly left the room and went to the master bath to locate a first-aid kit. Leaning over the sink he carefully examined his hand, which was covered in blood and drool. "How utterly disgusting," he mumbled. After cleaning and bandaging the appendage he dressed and went to his study and grabbed the research project diary from the desk. *This is an obvious trainwreck*, he thought. *There's got to be something I missed in here.*

Clark scanned several pages and focused on the last entry from Melinda that detailed the success of the project.

"...Meco was so old he could barely get to his food tray but now 24 hours after the injection of enhanced nanobots his eyes are bright and he's literally running around his cage. The age reversal formula is a success!!! Yes, yes, yes! Going to buy a brand new wardrobe that's really hip for when I do the jab."

Reading to the end of the entry Clark noticed a dark smudge on the outer edge of the page. Under closer examination he noticed another page was stuck to it by what appeared to be a blob of dried jelly.

Clark gingerly separated the pages and gazed dispiritedly at what were actually the final entries.

"...so so so disappointed!! Meco is gone. I had to put the little guy out of his misery. He was in extreme pain and very aggressive...he almost BIT me for pity sake! I'm pretty bummed but thank goodness I hadn't shot up yet.

"Today did a complete re-analysis of the DNA/Nano formula. Looks like I goofed somewhere. It appears the soft tissue is reacting favorably to the injection and shrinking to youthful proportions, but the bone structure remains unchanged. This process, among other horrible things, was causing the eyes to sink into the skull and the skin to stretch over the skeleton until it started splitting from extreme pressure...ouch, ouch, ouch!!! Back to the old drawing board I guess:("

Clark tossed the diary on his desk with disgust and slammed it with a fist. "Should have known better," he fumed. "Now the real scientist has to fix this damned thing."

Melinda's computer screen created an eerie glow in the early morning hours as Clark reviewed all the data she had compiled on the project. After a bit, he went into the kitchen to get a coffee refill and returned to his desk. *Boy, I don't know if it's this coffee or what, but I sure feel great today. Must be the exhilaration of becoming a world renown scientist and trillionaire*, he grinned.

The man rang the doorbell three times before he started knocking on the door. "Clark! Come on man. You missed the meeting. Chris is majorly pissed! Where in the hell are you?" He banged the door with the base of his fist a couple more times then turned to go back to his car. "Shit. The bastard's gonna get me in trouble too." He halted after a couple of steps and cocked his head. *Jeez, that sounded like a scream.* He paused and looked back at the door as a blue jay flew up to the peak of the roof and commenced to squawk. The man shrugged his shoulders and mumbled, "Just a damn bird."