

Mortal Choice

short story by Lynda Williams
(3,380 words)

Dora took baby Novus from her husband, Richard, trying not to be self-conscious of the stares they drew from others on the crowded transit platform.

"Are you sure you want to do this alone?" Richard asked her, his warm hazel eyes full of concern. Dora answered with a smile and nod.

"Take care, then," Richard said and kissed her forehead, one hand lightly caressing their baby's head, before he turned away to dissolve in the milling crowd. Dora watched until she couldn't see him anymore, wishing she could have asked for one last hug, for courage, but she knew he didn't like to draw attention to himself, in public. In some ways he was the archetypal, reclusive scientist.

Just like mom, she thought, and drew a deep breath. *This is going to be hard.*

Surprised laughter startled Dora. She pivoted to see a woman in casual business wear who had stopped, dead, in her tracks. Novus had been leaning sideways to play peek-a-boo around Dora's upper arm, and had apparently scored another fan. The woman had black hair, Asian features, and a trim figure. She looked flummoxed by her response to the baby in Dora's arms.

Dora was used to that sort of reaction.

"His name is Novus," she said, with a smile. "He's six months old."

The woman's expression slipped from merely awkward to mildly distressed. "Are you one of --" she began, before something like pity choked the words out.

"Yes," Dora said proudly. "I am."

A less easily distracted traveller bumped the baby's admirer as he brushed past, reminding her that she had things to do. She babbled an apology and hurried on.

Dora hefted Novus squarely onto her hip and folded her arms around him, braced to do more than just put up with all such involuntary homage to her infant, on the way to Haven District to see her mother. She wanted people to see Novus, and feel what they were missing in their own lives. She wanted to wake up all of mankind.

Inside the crowded transit train, Dora had to remind herself not to feel guilty over the space taken up by her diaper bag. It may not have been in good taste to be packing so much around with her, but a mother simply had to have what a mother had to have. At least Novus was eating porridge for breakfast, now, and didn't need to nurse as often as before, because despite her mission to convert more couple to the cause, she found the open fascination people showed for breast feeding a bit unnerving even at the best of times.

Novus squirmed to get down as soon as she was seated in a transit compartment with eleven other travellers.

"No," she said, hauling him into her lap. "Stay with Mom." He arched his back and made a complaining noise.

The woman across from Dora leaned forward. "Are you hurting it?" She glanced to her right and left, for support from the other ten travellers.

"Nothing to worry about," said a man with an air of pedantic tolerance. "I believe it was called fussing." He smiled at Dora in a distant manner. "How old is the baby?"

Dora smiled back. "Six months."

It never took long once the ice broke. Half an hour into the trip, all her fellow travellers knew that Dora's baby was called Novus, and each had offered something from fingers to com-kits for him to grab onto and attempt to put into his mouth. All, that is, except for a particularly attractive blonde-haired woman who remained unbendingly aloof. The immaculate blonde endured the fuss surrounding Novus by looking away at first, but by the time the baby began to inspire people to coo nonsense at him, she snapped to her feet, vibrating with hostile emotion.

Fearing the worst, Dora snatch her baby up, but the blonde woman made no move to do Novus any harm.

She only shouted, bitterly, at Dora, "I hope he pleases you as much when you are old!"

Dora held her breath until the blonde woman had gathered up her few belongings and stormed out of their transit car.

"That was very rude of her," said the professional man with the gracious manners, but the spell was broken.

"How old are you, yourself, dear?" asked a woman who had giggled with pleasure moments earlier when Novus gummed her knuckle, gripping her smooth adult hand in both of his dimpled baby ones.

Dora said, stoically, "Thirty one."

"Thirty one?" The woman sat back in her seat, wearing a slightly pained expression, and glanced about her to check on other people's reactions.

Everyone seemed equally subdued.

"Have you already stopped -- " another woman began, and faltered.

"Regenerative treatments?" Dora supplied, projecting her comfort with that decision. "Yes. Of course." She smiled. "My husband and I both knew, and accepted, the conditions for becoming parents."

She remained receptive to further interactions, but they petered out quickly now that people had focused on her.

Novus squirmed around getting comfortable, and eventually dosed off on her shoulder. The adults seated on either side were tolerant of the occasional trespass into their space, or poke from a baby limb, but in addition to the stares Novus attracted, she caught them casting looks of awe, or fear, or pity, in her direction from time to time. The looks made her think about her mother. She hadn't seen Dr. Eve Benson in person for ten years, nor seen any pictures, since her mother refused to include visuals in her live transmissions, whether it was to teach advanced space science or make a private call. Her mother had renounce regenerative treatments when Dora, herself, was born. Eve would look the way a seventy year old woman used to look, before it became possible to slow the aging process down to a crawl: the way Dora would look, when the baby in her arms was a grown man.

Dora dosed fitfully. She woke with a sense of something being wrong, and felt stunned for a moment when she realized the weight of Novus on her lap was gone, only to be relieved, immediately, when the woman beside her handed Novus over with a teary smile, saying, "I wish I had your courage. He is beautiful."

Novus woke up as they struggled out of the packed train and onto another platform, demanding Dora's full attention for the next hour as she sought out a security guard to request access to an office or a private bathroom where she could feed and

change her child, since the cubicles in public facilities were too crowded and busy to accommodate such rare demands. She ate and freshened up herself before she made her next connection. It was only then, leaving the unremitting sprawl of the post-quake west coast of North America, that she took note of the details that defined the world she had brought Novus into. A world she had discovered, in the pursuit of her own research in sociology, to be increasingly stagnant and without either great dreams or fears.

It was not homogeneity that made it bland. Humanity was a maelstrom of cultural color and style, churned into a single, dizzying mass. The core technologies and policies that dominated all of Earth's habitable territories were much the same, not because any universal political union had been achieved, but simply because the demand for the means to sustain densely packed human populations was so great, and the competition to address it so motivating. Anything that worked, spread, and as the majority of mankind grew more and more dependant on complex eco-sustainable infrastructures and collaborations, in space and on the planet itself, world peace had ultimately become as necessary as worldwide solutions to the control of contagious diseases. And so, while cultures waxed, waned and merged around the world, the underlying sameness was spread. There were people everywhere, with spaces for the planet to breath cunningly interleaved, and strict rules about what was permitted, where. There was public transit, solar energy collectors, communication spires, tall living complexes, communal resource and service centres, private businesses sporting their eco-clearance shields of approval, eco-smart industries with pocket gardens on every roof supporting some endangered species or public recreational facility, and pedestrian paths that passed up, down and over, through all of it, like a symbol of the densely tangled way of life pursued by modern people. Everyone lived elbow to elbow, demanding as little of the Earth as was humanly possible, and educated in the science of clean living.

And everyone looked forward to an open ended life span guaranteed to every well behaved citizen.

There were still accidents, of course, but people took fewer risks. There were still diseases that remained incurable, but after nearly a century, most who could not be saved by regenerative treatments had already succumbed. And there were always some who aged and died, by choice, for their own reasons. People like Dr. Eve Benson and her husband Roland, who decided they would rather be moral and have a child. People like Dora and Richard, who had chosen Novus over open ended life spans.

Such sacrifices were discouraged by the stipulation that both parents must be willing to forgo potential immortality, and encouraged by making what life remained to aging citizens as comfortable as possible, since their decision did reduce the population, in the long run.

Sitting in the smaller commuter train, speeding out to Haven District, past mountain resorts that looked like sleek boxes stapled to the side of the coastal Rockies, Dora flexed her hand and looked for signs of wrinkles. She told herself dry skin was just a by product of washing more often, with the baby to look after, and all she had to do was use more cream to keep her hands soft.

Most people who opted for aging, in Dora's sector of North America, moved to Haven District when they started looking old. Some, like Dora's mother, continued to work from their new homes, but it was easier to live among others who shared their predicament than be a spectacle in cities no longer designed to accommodate either the

very young or the very old. Services tailored to them could be concentrated in Haven District, as well, including the rare doctor who chose to go into the geriatric field, which had become as esoteric as pediatrics.

Haven District was nestled in a mountain valley. The air was cool and clear, the view impressive, and the population on the platform thin compared with everywhere else Dora had been that day. Two social workers from the hospital were there to meet her.

"Is this the baby?" the woman said, with a big smile. Her name badge said Lee.

"He's six months old," Dora said, mechanically. "His name's Novus."

"That means new, doesn't it?" remarked the man labelled Aram, who had a west coast accent and the liquid black eyes of a far Eastern heritage.

Lee looked like a big, hale park ranger, with pale eyes and hair. "May I?" she said, holding her arms out for Novus. "I'm thinking about it myself." She followed up with an undecided shrug, "Maybe."

"That's good," said Dora, automatically. It was hard to muster the encouragement she wanted to project, when all she could think about was how she was about to see her mother for the first time in ten years. She compensated by handing Novus over willingly.

"Isn't he just something!" Lee said, with a sparkling delight that was undeterred by the baby's apprehensive looks back towards his mother. "I follow your work," Lee told Dora. "And I've taken part in discussion circles about generational stagnation. I think you're really on to something."

Dora hardly heard. She said, "I want to see my mother."

"Of course," Aram told her, courteously.

It was a quick ride in a staff car to the hospital, too quick, after all the tedium of travelling. Dora's very mixed feelings about rushing to her mother's death bed churned in a cocktail of love and resentment, ingrained devotion and the instinct to resist manipulation. But there was no doubt it was death that her mother faced, now, even if this was just the first warning tremor. Eve Benson was recovering from a stroke and subsequent heart replacement, and although she was expected to survive, her doctors doubted they could keep her alive for more than five or six years more, even if she moderated her obsessive work habits. These days, five or six years did not seem like much time at all.

Lee, Aram and Dora arrived at the hospital door, on an upper floor of Eve Benson's living complex, with Novus in Dora's arms. Dora meant to march straight in, holding him before her like a badge of honor, but at the last minute she lost courage and handed him over to Lee, instead.

"Would you?" asked Dora.

The big blonde woman smiled at her. "Sure." She took Novus and the diaper bag eagerly, although Dora doubted she knew how to cope with either one of them. But if nothing else, someone like Lee was bound to have some theoretical knowledge about caring for people of all ages. *She'll manage*, Dora reassured herself, and turned to face up to the ordeal ahead of her, alarmed by the weight of the emotion pressing down on her resolve, now that she was really here.

Dora took a deep breath and walked into her mother's room, willing herself not to tremble.

Eve Benson was propped up in bed, working. She had a graduate student on an audio connection and output from a deep space testing field on the 3d projection that

hovered over her thin middle, above the bed. Dora recognized the sort of data she was analysing. Eve had seen to it that her daughter had been well and thoroughly groomed to succeed her, in her quest for a faster than light method of travel, before Dora escaped into sociology.

When her invalid mother's sharp blue eyes met hers, the force of that quarrel still registered. Dora swallowed, quailing inside. It was hard to disappoint someone who had accepted the death sentence of natural aging for the privilege of bringing you into the world.

"Take a break at your end, Yuri," Eve Benson told her graduate student, over their audio connection. "My daughter's here." She clicked off the display of data.

Now they were really alone together.

"You brought the baby?" Eve asked, tersely.

"Y-yes," Dora said, taken off guard by such a question. Her mother may not have laid eyes on her since she switched to Sociology, ten years ago, but it was deciding to have Novus with Richard that had shut down communications entirely, until the call from the hospital a week ago. In between, although they never met, they did communicate sporadically. Eve even worked with Richard, from time to time, in a collegial manner, Richard being the one good thing Dora salvaged from her physics period.

The thaw reversed when Dora told her she and Richard planned to have a baby. The last thing Dora had expected was for Eve to be interested in her grandchild.

"He's outside," Dora continued, "with one of the social workers."

Eve gave a grunt that struck Dora as a new sound, made only by old people. She had seemed vigorous despite her age the day she berated Dora for giving up the dream of discovering a way to colonize the stars. Now Dora felt touched, in a piteous way, by the thin line her mother's mouth made when she frowned.

"I had you, so that you could make the breakthrough that eluded me," said Eve, summarizing old arguments, bluntly. "I made you to break mankind out of this deadlock with the planet's carrying capacity. To teach us how to reach the stars. I knew it would take new ideas and fresh blood. I sacrificed my treatments for that."

"I know, mother," Dora said, dragging the words up, over grinding boulders of guilt and resentment. "But I have told you before, I couldn't do it. I wasn't you, given a fresh start. I was someone different."

Eve waved a shaky hand with all her old impatience and new frailty. The boulders rose to block Dora's throat. It was times like this that she most missed her father's mitigating influence, but he had died first, while Dora was still sticking to Eve's plans for her. He had not been there to soften the blow when Dora rebelled, entirely.

"Yes, yes," Eve said, "I've heard all that. You said Lee has the child?" She did not wait for an answer, only nodded as if this fitted in well with her working hypothesis. "It was Lee talking on and on about your media appearances and chat groups that made me realize what had happened." Eve's mouth did not turn up as much on one side as the other when she smiled now. The stroke had left its mark on her expression. "I got just what I asked for," Dora's mother told her, with a short, harsh, laugh. "But not what I wanted. I see that now. Figured it was time I told you."

"What?" Dora asked, horrified by the suspicion this was not her mother, but some brain-damaged surrogate possessing some warped pieces of Eve's character. The feeling made her skin prickle.

"Don't look so dazed," her mother ordered, which felt much more normal. "It was simple enough, once I managed to take a step back. I told you all your life that you were born to solve a problem. Well, you have. At least you think you have. But not through space travel. You think the answer is giving up regenerative treatments to refresh the population, and you're setting the example, just like any good leader. Not what I wanted, but what I deserved, burdening a young life with my own dreams, the way I did while I was raising you. Your father always told me that. 'Ease up on the girl, Eve,' he'd say. 'And love her more.'" She paused. "I wasn't good at that, Dora." She shrugged a shoulder, mouth turned down again in her old woman's scowl. "With this stroke, and all, I realized it was time to tell you that I know I wasn't half the mother you'll be."

Dora's emotional boulders became jelly and quivered inside her. "Mother," she began, "I--"

"You are wrong, of course," said Eve, blunt as ever.

Dora swallowed her liquid feelings back and blinked, hard.

Eve grinned the way she did when she had someone she disagreed with on the ropes. "But the child has a father who is on the right track," she said, "and who knows-- little Novus might just decide to reject your solution and come down on my side of the equation." She chuckled, executing one of those transitions from shark-like intensity to easy good humor, that Dora remembered, far too well, as wholly disconcerting. "It will serve you right, too, daughter, if your son decides to use your sacrifice to move us forward, into space, not backwards into graves we've half escaped from."

Dora opened her mouth to protest, and closed it again. Novus was so small, and so dependant on her, she had taken it for granted he would grow up to respect her views on generational stagnation, and carry on her mission as the answer to the psychological dead ends and stagnant fields of creative endeavour that littered modern immortality. Now, for the first time, she pictured herself in a hospital bed, like her mother, talking to a son who was about to embark on his first deep space mission, still childless, and she found that she could not draw breath into her lungs to deny such a future was possible.

"Hadh't thought about that, seriously, had you?" Eve said, with affection and an air of triumph. "Children have minds of their own. I should know! Just learn to accept it faster than I did. Now go fetch that baby of yours in. Who knows how many chances I have left to make an impression on him."