

## **The Love Strain**

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

My name is Jordan Crossbill and I'm a research subject classified by 'The Brain' as having Neuro-genetic Disorder #5. What is 'The Brain', you ask? Let's just say it's a medical profiling bureau that oversees disorders like mine and essentially keeps us compliant to towing the government-imposed chemical regulation line. Through the daily chemical treatments imposed by 'The Brain', patients like myself are also conditioned and even 'brainwashed' into believing that our genes are inferior and that we are unfit to have or to care for children. In fact, three years ago, a team of researchers contracted by 'The Brain' claimed that they were in the final stages of developing a simple DNA test to detect Neuro-genetic Disorders numbers 1 through 7.

Losing a bit of my ambition after the neuro-bureaucracy first caught me in their chemical web, it all changed one afternoon when I met Charmaine, who I later learned also had 'ND5' and who lived in Complex YRZ of the Market District where I would frequently stop in for groceries.

"Have I seen you before?" I ask the young woman across from the large wooden crate of apples at one of the market's busiest green grocer stalls.

"Are you trying to pick me up?" She inquires with a coy half smile.

"Honestly, I feel I've seen you before..." I say with a hint of casual nervousness.

"Well, I do shop here from time to time." She says picking up her last Green Galaxy apple to place it into her small basket.

"Never mind... You just look super familiar..." I nervously say, wiping a small bead of sweat from my brow.

"No problem. I'm Charmaine, by the way."

"Char-maine... I'm Jord. Nice to meet you."

After the brief encounter that Thursday at the market, we would again cross paths, this time at Complex Disorders Neuroscience Division (CDND).

"Charmaine! Wow, this is so random. Maybe it was on this site the whole time that I recalled seeing you." I say to the same woman whose long flowing hair was now mostly covered by a purple veil, as she was about to exit Building 4.

"Hi Jord! Let's chat outdoors. This place is too clinical."

"Sure thing." I say as we link arms and head into a small patch of greenery just outside the sliding doors.

“So, you’re here to get your imbalance regulated, right?” She asks as we sit down on a small bench.

“I guess you can say that. I really hate this place. At least now I have good company.” I respond looking into her dark brown eyes.

“There’s something so stark about this sanitized architecture. They say they built the whole complex over a park and took out at least 350 trees in the process. The only parts of CDND I find charming are the few outdoor portions that are still left.” She tells me looking back toward the entrance to Building 4. So... You’re stuck as a headcase too in this gaol?”

“Yup. I’ve even got a document and all in court to prove it. Certified ‘ND5’, they call it!”

“So am I. We should go out or something.”

Once she uttered these words, we just kind of stuck together ever since. However, because ‘The Brain’ covertly forbids relationships that could result in neuro-defiance, we did our best to hide our ties and at first would only meet secretly after dark. One night after meeting up in an old review cinema, where we planned our rendezvous date in the centre seats of the fifth row, we chatted candidly about the troubling recent advances in neuro-genetics screenings as the film was about to start.

“Thank God we can finally talk. I knew we had to meet here tonight. I’ve been thinking about last week’s big announcement in CDND that they’re going to be collecting blood and saliva samples from all ‘ND5’ research subjects for the upcoming genetic screening registry... I don’t feel good about this...” She says holding my hand firmly.

“I know what you mean. They say they’re close to finally zeroing in on a unique genetic code for a brain receptor binding site that could serve in ‘early detection’. This isn’t good for us, Charmie.”

“What really creeps me out is that this screening will impact us everywhere, from our workplaces, our educational institutions, clubs and even at the bank. It may in fact deny us things like dental benefits through a workplace health insurance company. I think we should run away together...”

“You mean flee the neuro-registry?”

“Absolutely. We’ll pick a place together that’s safe and screening free and take off there on a jet plane, like that song they used to play all the time on Lithium Radio.”

“I’ve always liked that song. When?”

“I say we jet out of dodge in three weeks.”

When she said this, she meant business. And, so did I. We soon hatched a plan to flee to the southern border of \_\_\_\_\_ and booked one-way tickets in the same aircraft, with seats in different parts of the plane. Soon, the Thursday of our getaway came up and we both found ourselves wearing wigs and disguises in the same airport departure gate, pretending to not know one another.

“Now boarding... Sections 2 and 3... Zone B, for flight \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_.” A loud slightly high-pitched female voice says over the airport intercom. Looking over my shoulder slightly, I quickly spotted Charmaine rising from her seat some twenty yards away to walk toward the short queue and scan her boarding pass at the gate. Still playing a stranger to her, I also got out of my seat to get to the gate first, adjusting a false mustache, hoping my new look will match up enough with my near-expiring passport.

“Take off your hat please, Sir.” A tall stewardess says at the entrance gate.

“Enjoy your flight!” She says, peering down at the small blue-covered booklet before handing it back to me with a smile.

“Thanks.” I say to her, hoping that Charmie will have similar luck.

As I veer into the jet bridge tunnel, I catch Charmaine removing her sunglasses and being welcomed onward after a brief period of assessment. Feeling my heart race, I step into the aircraft showing my boarding pass to the male flight attendant in charge of showing passengers toward their seat section. After finally finding my window seat at the rear of Economy Class, I spot Charmaine finding her aisle seat some ten rows in front, after stowing her knapsack in the overhead bin. After buckling my seatbelt, I feel my pulse quicken when I spot two agents briskly boarding the front of the aircraft showing a stewardess stationed in the front row of the plane a digital photo on a small rectangular tablet. Worried that ‘The Brain’ may have sent agents into the airport to find two CDND escapees, I hold my breath as they patrol the plane row by row, possibly looking for a neuro-chemical fugitive couple. As the agents reach Charmaine in her aisle seat, I feel our quickened hearts beat as one as one of the agents fails to identify her in the shot with her sunglasses and blond wig. Once they near the back of the plane, I hear one of them say softly: “Too bad we only have this blurry photo taken of the two-some holding hands after dark. Let’s get out of here, Gus. They’d be seated side by side anyways. Guess we had the wrong intelligence work. We needed more identity info to work with here.”

Soon, the two agents head back to the front of the aircraft, coming up empty in their search for potential registry escapees. As I watched them disappear into the same jet bridge tunnel toward the terminal gate, I quickly glanced toward Charmaine as she turned her head and winked at me. Soon, the plane took off and our plan to get out of CDND genetic screening research would become more of a reality. As I dozed off in my

seat at thirty thousand feet, I felt someone nudge me as I awoke to find a small piece of paper stuffed in the pouch on the seat just in front of me. Looking over and seeing Charmie heading to the near bathroom, I open the slip of paper and read: "See you when we land. We'll finally admit we're a couple after we get out of the luggage retrieval area and leave the terminal. Kisses."

Soon, we would hold hands again as we walked outdoors toward the gentle rays of the setting sun, knowing deep down that we were both neuro-defective and very much right for each other. Whatever was wrong with our DNA fabric to groups like 'The Brain'—soon detectable through a far-off government apparatus hellbent on genetic perfection—made us all the more compatible as a couple for whatever reason. Soon, we would settle into a new home at the southern end of \_\_\_\_\_ and would raise a small family, glad to all be chemically non-compliant and medication free at last.

The End->