

In the Quest of Truth

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IMMERSED in uncertainty and dread intermingled, Luna stepped into the lecture hall with unfamiliar faces welcoming her. Though the background looked blurry, she was resolute in her purpose of avenging the death of her twin brother, for she knew there was more truth to the story than it just being a mere case of cystic fibrosis. From all the biology she understood and was going to commence to comprehend in the duration of the course of pursuing a degree in biomedical sciences, she wanted to unravel the lingering mystery of her life, a mystery whose repercussions had cost her most prized possession, her parents. Even before she could stop mourning the loss of her brother, life decided to orphan her, for her parents succumbed to the remorse and poignance that was persistent right after Joy was taken away from them.

Joy and his magnetic presence imparted her the strength to embark on this daunting journey. Just the mere thought of Joy brought water to her eyes, but she was soon brought back to the present instant by a voice addressing the gathering. She saw her for the first time, Dr Jennifer Stone, the acting head of the Department of Biomedical Sciences at Stanford

University and a pioneer in perfecting the technology of gene therapy for several diseases, but instead of being impregnated with reverence and elation as one would expect, Luna burned in the fire of agony and not without a good reason. As the former was extending a pep talk to the group, Luna saw through her superficial sweetness. She was already devising a strategy to materialise her plan, which would draw curtains on a story that had commenced long ago.

The following days were spent analysing the movements and actions of Stone. It did not take long for Luna to come to face with the green doored room harbouring information on all the projects that Stone was involved in till date set in the abandoned corridor equipped with high security where only she and her lab mates were allowed to enter. The entry was only through scanning special ID cards, which was obviously not in the possession of first-year graduate students like Luna.

Of course, approaching Stone was a bad idea, for there was no chance she would let in Luna without an appropriate reason, which, though she had, couldn't risk bringing to light so soon. So, she resorted to the next best option, Ria it was. A new PhD student under the supervision of Stone, old enough

to own the golden entry ticket but new and naive to give Luna what she wanted and someone who lacked the ability to uncover the real intentions of Luna. The overtly friendly persona of Ria worked in her favour, and it did not take her more than three lunch dates to persuade her into giving her a tour of the famous green doored room, which had drops of secrecy dripping all over the place, to which she complied after bits of apparent resistance.

Eventually, that Friday evening came to pass and with shaking feet, she entered the room. She knew she was on the clock, so without making it obvious, she casually located the section containing files pertaining to the year 2002. There, she had found it, but before she could make heads and tails of what was written, she heard footsteps advancing towards her in panic, and with what can be best described as trembling hands, she managed to click a blurry picture of the page with the name Joy. As Ria joined her company, she reverted to her usual self as fast as possible. That day, she sat analysing the photo, and after hours and hours of decoding and studying, she found the name of a gene, CFTR, a gene that was associated with her brother's condition, but that was it; it couldn't help her achieve the end she had conceived. She almost thought she had arrived at a dead end, but it was before the sign of the lab attendant caught her attention, Amway Grace.

After hours of internet research, she found his present address. She was surprised to learn that he had resigned from his position right after working in the IVF laboratory in 2002, the year of completion of Stone's 3rd line of IVF projects. Though petrified, Luna was convinced that her quest for answers would only end on meeting Grace and even before she had thought it through, the next thing she knew was her knocking on the door of the address she had discovered a night ago. She introduced herself as a graduate student who wanted to learn from Grace's experience in his working years. With a serene and tranquil composure, she was invited in by Grace. After fleeting moments of small talk, she couldn't fight the urge to ask the question that she had travelled an hour and a half a lifetime to find an answer. "Why did you abruptly quit your job in 2002?" were the words that left her mouth, and it was like Grace had encountered a ghost from the past; his face became pale, and his scratching fingers were only testimony to the fact that Luna's suspicion wasn't based on futile grounds.

Grace excused himself by saying that he wasn't feeling like himself and wanted some rest, but Luna, determined to accomplish the unsurmountable task she had taken up, knew just the right way to get through to him. She knew that without letting on a fragment of her own story, without baring a piece of her heart and before giving Grace a flavour of her pain and suffering, she couldn't price out words from his mouth, so she began. "I know something dark emanated in that lab during that project, and I should know because I lost the most amidst that darkness. I am Luna Martin, daughter of Frank and Lisa Martin, who struggled to conceive and finally resorted to going for IVF in the year, 2002. It was in Nova fertility lab under the supervision of then active scientist

Dr Jennifer Stone. Reports have shown that more than 70% of the children died within 15 years after birth owing to some genetic disorder, including my twin brother and though the matter was quickly hushed up and dismissed as a mere coincidence, I fail to believe it is true. I just need an answer, and you are my light at the end of the tunnel, but if you decide to remain quiet today, 1000 parents would lose their children like this in future. I beg you, please, please just let me know I am not crazy."

And this was followed by the most difficult 20 minutes of Luna's life, for she was enlightened but denied to believe that someone could translate acts wrapped in such barbarity. Though she had the proofs and testimonial, a question lingered, "Why?" A question whose answer resided with just one person, and it was about time that she finally confronted her. Standing at Stone's office door, she wiped her tears and knocked only once before storming in. "I mean, just how could you? Those parents had put their faith in you that you would fructify their long-standing desire to have a child that even God had kept them from. Little did they know, you would only fleetingly fulfil their yearning with the assurance of rendering them devastated and inconsolable in the end. You ensured that they would be parted from their children, for you had manipulated genes of all the zygotes in the batch of June 2002, for them to express a recessive condition giving way to a genetic disorder, and all I want to know is why? How could you be so brutal? Lying will get you nowhere because I have all the proofs and a witness ready."

The resignation of Stone was not sudden, but she gave in, "I wanted to see if any of them could survive the diseased gene and only if one of those 80 children were still alive, I could have used their DNA to develop corrective gene therapy for people with the faulty genes. At the cost of a few zygotes, I could have eradicated this grave problem from this world. It's nothing personal, all for the greater good." Astounded by the brutality and insensitivity with which Stone spoke, Luna's eyes were impregnated with tears, but after bringing her sobs to rest, she finally gathered the courage to say, "Guess what, it is personal, and one of them did survive, the one who is standing before you, a shattered soul who lost her twin brother owing to your little experimental, and the one who would make your name eternal in the field of biomedical sciences, and not because she will be your guinea pig for the establishment of a novel gene therapy, but because she will leave no stone unturned to turn you in and set an example of how a scientist should never be."

With these words, Luna turned her back on her before she could utter anything. She went outside with steps metamorphosed into confidence, with a weight being lifted from her chest. As she walked towards her room, she felt her parents smiling at her from above, and it was then that it was definite that she had done something right!

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