

ECTOPIC MAN

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There was an article on my electronic news service today that caught my attention. It described the suicide of one of the students at the school where I now teach. I hadn't had the kid in any of my classes, but I knew him by sight and reputation. He was a troublemaker: one of those lone-wolf kind of kids that nobody liked, and who was perpetually making attempts at attention getting by acting up in class, dressing weird, and constantly getting into fights which he lost with regularity (or so I understand.) I'm not going to name names, mind you; not really fair to do that sort of thing, but you'll figure it out by association, I'm sure. I read the article with some surprise, because it turns out he was quite a sensation in the past. His father had been even more infamous. I had the dubious honor of living in the same neighborhood as the father, Ectopic Man.

You know who I mean, I'm sure; some of the papers derisively called him Zeus. He was the first guy to carry a baby to term. It's still an odd thing now, but then...he was considered a first-class wacko. The medicos at the time were furious about the experiment's ethical ramifications and hammered at the credentials of the doctor who was overseeing the whole thing. But the idea of opening a new market in fertility options, plus the multi-million dollar prize offered up by some of the tabloids was obviously too much for the doctor to bear.

Ectopic Man—I forget what his name was—he was one of the gays that inhabited the downtown area of Philadelphia near the apartment I was renting near Society Hill and his big

thing was he wanted a baby. Not an adopted kid, not even a child of his own genes that someone else carried. He wanted to create a life, start-to-finish, himself. I was working at the hospital where Dr. Charles Vernicki worked—the doc that actually performed the implantation and the medical care afterward—and nobody thought this was a good idea. It was dangerous to himself and the child, unnatural, arrogant and narcissistic...even blasphemous.

Anyway, Ectopic Man got his street name by one of the other guys that used to frequent the neighborhood video store, which prided itself on the largest selection of homosexual porn in the nation, the whole thing being secreted away in the second floor. I would pop in after work sometimes to rent the odd movie or two, but never went up there, more out of embarrassment and not wanting people to think I was *that way*, than a lack of interest. You would see Ecotopic in there, or in the local deli, or walking to and from wherever he worked or went in the daytime, and as the news got out—and it got out fast—he would take abuse from just about everyone. Throughout that year, Ecotopic Man would be seen, steadily getting larger. Early on, the guys that ran the deli kicked him out after the counter rags outed him and his doctor for the experiment. The Korean septuagenarian that ran the 7-Eleven would take time out from wandering around the store surveilling the black shoppers to gawk at him and conduct a running, and no doubt abusive, commentary with his wife whenever he frequented the store. Most dangerous were the meth dealers and prostitutes that ran their business up the darker side streets like 13th...they would physically assault the guy when they saw him, and I remember seeing him with his arm in a cast for some time. Though the gays were pretty supportive publicly, even they were weirded out by the whole thing. I'd hear them talking about him in the video store from time to time.

I love to say he took the whole thing in stride, but you could see it was tearing him up. This guy went through hell. Not just socially, and can you imagine the anguish of being a pariah while going through the crap that involves pregnancy? He had some *serious* problems all through the affair. You can access the medical records online, of course. They explain it better than I, but the thing grew inside his abdominal cavity, making it, in essence, similar to an ectopic pregnancy. Vernicki did the implantation of an artificially inseminated egg that had been fertilized with Ectopic's semen. The patient had already been put on a pretty impressive cocktail of female hormones to prepare the body for the upcoming pregnancy, and to assist the egg in incubation in the guy's gut. That messed with both his head and body; he lost facial hair, grew breasts, and went through mood swings that occasioned observation periodically. The pregnancy, due to where the embryo was gestating, was inherently dangerous. His organs took a battering as the child got older, and several times he had to be hospitalized for hemorrhages. It was stupid, but in some ways I guess you've got to be impressed with him. It took guts—so to speak—to go through what he did.

As we went through summer, it was really obvious what was going on with him. Philly's a hot place in the summer and the humidity's a killer. Couple that with the enormous amount of concrete and asphalt soaking up the rays, and you wind up with hell on Earth. Like everyone else, Ectopic Man took to wearing shorts and tee-shirts, but that just showed the distended belly his kid was producing and his broken arm, is a highly-colorfully signed cast was a beacon for the local toughs. They actually had to put a police cruiser down on the block to keep him safe after the local Rainbow Coalition people bitched. Some people didn't like one guy, and a freak at that, getting city resources pulled just for him, but the rest of us loved it. The neighborhood actually

quieted down for a while. The dealers weren't arrested, of course. They just moved down a few blocks toward South Street without making a fuss. The business was better down that way, anyway.

He was an odd-looking, pathetic thing by summer. His hair had grown long, he had little breasts and a swollen belly, but not in the same way a pregnant woman does. His was more like a firelog had been inserted from groin to sternum. I guess the kid had more room to stretch out than one in a uterus, but whatever the reason it was uncanny. He would waddle into view, followed by the photographers that were always lurking around his apartment now, waiting for the latest pics to adorn the cover of the *Weekly World News* and the *Star*.

At that time I was dating a waitress, Erhinn, from one of the local taverns. She was a dark-haired, pug-nosed little Irish girl from Cherry Hill who has moved into the city to study art. Her interest in visual arts was rivaled only by her fondness for drinking and trying all sorts of interesting sex games. She was an education all in herself; until then my relationships had been the standard cycle of meet someone in class, date for a few weeks, have sex for a few weeks, then one or the other of us got dumped and the cycle began anew. Erhinn was a real deviant and I was having a lot of fun just trying to figure out what was going on in her head, not to mention enjoying the carnal delights that she allowed me to sample.

After a date one night, I actually took her for a walk along Spruce to see if we'd run into Ectopic Man. I figured this was just the sort of scene she could appreciate. Our luck held out, and we spied him coming out of the local Chinese hole-in-wall that made the best egg drop soup I've ever had. Her eyes took on dinner-plate proportions and she let out a disgusted oath. My luck, of course, the guy hears this and looks like we just ran over his dog, then backed up to

make sure we'd finished the job. I really hadn't given a shit, one way or the other, about the guy—he was just one of the sights in an otherwise odd place I was living in—but at that moment I had actually felt sorry for the guy, because I had injured him, even if he didn't know it. He was the neighborhood's sideshow freak I'd put on display to amuse a girl I was dating just because she put out.

He disappeared for a while after that. I learned through one of the doctors that he was hospitalized, not for physical reasons this time, but because the strain of the hormones and the hectoring had broken him. Maybe Erhinn's comments had been the last straw, but I also heard that his boyfriend had dropped him because of the whole pregnancy thing. By that time, he was a good four or five months into it, and was ostracized by just about everyone in the city but the paparazzi photographers and headhunters from *Jerry Springer* and *A Current Affair*. At least he had enough pride not to go on national television and make a willing spectacle of himself.

As he got closer to term, the media frenzy over Ectopic Man—that was what everyone was calling him by then—had a resurgence. He had come through muggings, health problems, mental problems, social stigma, and was still gamely pressing on, no doubt with his soon-to-be stinking rich doctor behind him all the way. He was in the news nearly daily, both in print and on the screen. Internet sites about him, the medical processes surrounding his pregnancy, and the possible effects on society at large were presented and debated. To some, he was no longer a weirdo out to wreck the traditional society but an underdog that people were guiltily rooting for.

Not everybody, of course had a change of heart. Not even most people. The man from Missouri that showed up on his doorstep one day and started firing his .45 Colt through the window of his living room was not one of the converted. Neither was the woman that tried to

run him down as he was crossing Broad Street one morning. Both of them were arrested, tried with great fanfare, and the shooter was sent to jail, while the lady was released—the jury evidently believing her story about simply losing control of her car. Despite all that happened, he mentally and physically limped to the finish line early in the fall.

He didn't go into labor, of course. The doctors decided the baby had grown enough to be viable outside of his body and he was admitted for a cesarian section. The baby—a boy—was as healthy as would be expected, considering it's unusual gestation and seven-month old birth. Dr. Vernicki was immediately vilified by just about everyone, including right-to-lifers, while hailed by the more radical elements of the scientific community for his brave attempts to further knowledge. While Ecotopic Man recovered from the operation and the sudden decrease in female hormones and watched the money he had won for his achievement siphon off into medical expenses, Vernicki soaked up the accolades on television and on the lecture circuit, while hiring an Israeli-trained bodyguard to handle the more active complaints.

The kid was a star for exactly twenty-six days before a blowup in Central Asia distracted the press. He was the subject of debate for every talking head on the news and talk show, pulling ratings in every demographic from teen to the over sixty; white, black, Hispanic, and Asian; and just about every interest group. The gay and lesbian community cheered his achievement and hailed his commitment to the birth process as a sign of their 'family values', the scientific community argued over the ethical and moral implications, the religious channels went through every sort of permutation—from outright criticism of the father to more muted rumblings about the 'way things should be', from decrying the child as an abomination to a soulless demon. Psychiatrists wondered for viewers about the state of mental health the child would enjoy, and

politicians squared of to defend their positions on the introduction of a new bill to stop male pregnancy experiments from continuing. Feminist groups railed at the patriarchal theft of their one, unassailable right...to have children. Some fringe groups claimed him a sort of male Madonna, the progenitor of a new race of mankind and began rallying for more homonatal operations. But despite the amount of talking the pundits did, little actual thought was given to Ectopic Man or his baby. The media, ever faster paced, glossy and sensational, and interested only in ratings, sales quotas, and commercial pricing, ground up the two people in their video, print, and internet mills, then turned their attention to the fighting in the Hindu Kush with the same greeting-card thin, smiling yet histrionic tone they covered sex scandals and sideshows like Ectopic Man.

In an ideal world, that would have been it. Show over. But his troubles were only just starting. Afraid of continued harassment, Ectopic Man moved out of the neighborhood almost as soon as he was out of the hospital and out to one of the suburbs. Within days, he was back in the local press, having been assaulted by a couple of teenagers with little to do and plenty to hate. They had beat him savagely as he was returning from a local convenience store and put him in the local medical center with all sorts of trauma. With no one to care for him, the child was whisked off into the child protective services system and placed with a foster family up in Lancaster somewhere.

Already approaching broke from the various bills of his pregnancy and related beatings, Ectopic Man rallied once more with the support of the gay community to regain custody of his boy. He was protected night and day by a phalanx of sympathetic people against more abuse from his neighbors. He got threatening calls, his house was staked out, he was hassled at the

Social Security office—having lost his job in early on in his pregnancy—and the occasional missile or bullet would smash his windows or blast through the wall from a passing car. Honestly, I don't think I would have gone through it myself, and I've got a couple of kids.

On the other side, an alliance of the foster parents, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious figures, as well as various representatives of the Lancaster and Delaware counties, Philadelphia, and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania aligned themselves to thwart him. The press, smelling a long-running human interest story with plenty of perverse vectors, homed in on Ectopic Man once more, as well as the foster family of his son. They cast him in the role of the wronged man, solitarily seeking justice, while all the time undermining the image by painting him in the rich colors of a homosexual, a pervert who had undergone an experiment of questionable moral character, a layabout who was sponging off of the welfare system while engaging in a costly court battle in which a victory for him might mean injustice to his boy. The tone became more strident as the case finally worked its way to trial.

Actually having him talking on television was probably a mistake. I remember watching his testimony one night and cringing. He came across as a whiny little man. The anti-gay factions tore into him with relish. Here was a subject they could flaunt and few people were overtly sympathetic. While he was losing the case in the press, the House of Representatives managed to pass the anti-paternal pregnancy bill, but it stalled in the Senate until the outcome of the trial then passed by a large margin and the president, sensing the way the winds were blowing, signed it into law. Which anyone could have foreseen; I even made a couple of bucks in a pool at the office. He cried on the steps of the courthouse after losing and his supporters vowed an immediate appeal.

By this time, Ectopic Man had been through more than most men ever would. The appeal was more than likely the idea of his lawyers, who scented a big, juicy civil rights suit, if they could get the decision overturned. It didn't matter if the guy couldn't pay now, or if he had the mental stamina to get through the next round of persecution, the firm would make back a hundred-fold at the other end of the litigation process and the advertisement of being Ectopic Man's law firm was sheer gold.

Living in the spotlight for so long, especially hounded as he was by disapproval, had crushed his self-esteem. The loss of his son, for whom he had gone through all of this, was an added burden that had prematurely aged the guy. When I first noticed him in the neighborhood, he had been an average-looking sort. He appeared in his early twenties, with blond hair and a pretty pathetic attempt at a goatee. By the end of the first trial, he had lost most of his hair, and his face was permanently warped by the beatings, stress, and hormonal overload he had experienced over the two years. The hormonal changes had effected him in ways the doctors hadn't really expected and he was suffering from a form of osteoporosis, not to mention the emotional roller coaster they had engendered.

As the appeals process was staggering into motion, he hit the end of his unemployment and the state refused to renew his claim. He tried to get work and nobody would hire him. He found out the state was considering a suit for social security fraud. His lawyers were pressing forward with the appeals, and if he lost, he'd have no money to pay. Evicted from his apartment, he went through a series of housing arrangements the state and his detractors gleefully pointed out indicated he would not be able to provide a stable home for the child. The case was lost before it had even won, the talking heads smiled and shook their head in mock sympathy.

His then boyfriend found him just before the trial was set to begin. Ectopic Man had dropped back a bottle of his roommate's prescription downers and had gone to sleep while having a bath. The coroner report was netcast, of course, to serve the prurient interests of a spectacle hungry world. He had drowned, they said. Had he taken the pills and gone to bed, they might have been able to revive him. But the media wasn't quite through with him. His burial in his Appalachian Pennsylvania hometown was widely attended by media, mostly because of the public relations opportunity it afforded his supporters and detractors, who turned the funeral into a frenzied brawl at the gates of the small cemetery—the only one which his parents could find that would accept his internment.

Frustrated in their appeals case, the lawyers of Ectopic Man attempted to sue the state for damages and wrongful death, to be put in trust for his son, while at the same time readying a claim against the foster parents for the same thing, should the case against the state fail. The counties settled out of court, but the state went nose-to nose with the law firm and won. The Supreme Court case, I think, is still pending.

With the spectacle of Ectopic Man now inconveniently six feet deep, the media swung its shark-like appetite for pain and suffering elsewhere. The kid dropped out of sight and grew up an outcast in the community. Everyone knew the boy was a 'freak' and 'faggot'. He got picked on, he got beat up. Hell, if he'd been a kid back in the days of Ectopic Man, he'd probably had shot up the school instead of killing himself. But with all the guns now safely in the hands of the police and army--and the criminals—he had to resort, ironically, to his father's method of escape.

So anyway...that's the sordid little story of Ectopic Man, as I remember it. The guy did a stupid thing and went through hell for it. A lot of people think he got what he deserved. Me, I'm

kind of torn on the whole thing. He did show a lot of dignity and bravery under some god-awful conditions, and with that insight that comes from getting older and viewing an issue from the safety of time, I suppose he should be admired in a way for that. But mostly I feel ashamed for that night, when I took Erhinn out to laugh at our neighborhood freak.