

Garden Spot

By: Anita Simpson

An irritating, impossible-to-satisfy itch on my scalp was the first sign of what was to come.

“Have you dyed your hair?” asked my co-worker, Anne. We didn’t get along, it’s true, but I didn’t think she found me disgusting – until now.

“No, why?” I asked, reaching up to touch my hair.

“It looks a little.... ah.... greenish,” she replied, her voice dying to a whisper at the end.

"What?" The prickling itch moved down my neck to cover my chest and back. My heart thudded an irregular cadence as my thoughts ran the gamut of possibilities. Did someone dye my hair in my sleep? Was someone playing a practical joke with DMSO and plant pigments? Or could it be an effect from the Transcon experiments? The last time I worked for Transcon Gene Therapeutics was over two years ago.

I slid out of my chair and ran to the restroom. A glance at the mirror caused my gut to roil like a cement mixer. My hair really was green, and it wasn’t dye, it was the green of chlorophyll, and the hairs were widening to form leaves.

I swallowed hard, then rushed to a toilet to vomit repeatedly. I didn’t bother to rinse my mouth before leaving. My lungs burned as I dashed down the staircase seven floors until I reached the parking lot.

As I drove, my attention was caught by my own reflection. By the time I reached home to look in the bathroom mirror, my hair was like a giant fern, my nose was large and purple, and my eyes were faintly red where they should have been white. My vision seemed clouded by a dark red haze. I wanted to cry, but had no tears.

A wave of dizziness hit me and I began to fall. I caught myself on the door frame, shaking as

my skin changed from a hot flush to goose bumps and back again. I knew I needed help, but I couldn't call 911 looking like that! Instead, I called Marty -- we had been friends since high school, and had worked together at TGT; he designed proteins while I did base-pair to enzyme matching. Plus he still had a key to my flat.

“Marty!” I screamed into the phone. “I’m turning into a plant!”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “Not an insect?” He obviously remembered how much I’d enjoyed Kafka in sophomore English.

“No, you idiot!” I was in full panic mode now. “Get over here right now!”

I had never called Marty names, not even mild ones such as “idiot” or “moron,” so my words apparently convinced him that I was serious. “I’ll be right there. Try to relax.”

I knew he meant well, but really, try to relax? My vision was almost enveloped in reddish glaze, my nose had become a purple eggplant, and my fingers felt knobby inside, as if they were green beans.

I staggered to the living room and lay down on the sofa. Something was pushing my blouse up below my left breast. I tried to unbutton the blouse but my fingers didn’t have the dexterity, so I ripped it open with a loud cry of frustration. I tossed the useless blouse aside, tossing away all hope at the same time.

The process had become painful; my arms and legs stung. I knew they must be changing, but to what? I had no idea. My heart pounded and my breath came in quick gasps; between the two noises I barely heard the door opening.

“Rachel?” Marty called.

“Marty, in here!” I shouted – at least in my brain I did. But nothing came out. I tried again, this time screaming “Help me!” I heard nothing.

Marty found me and whispered, “Oh, Rachel.”

I shifted restlessly, frustrated at my inability to speak. My body had changed so much I could no longer produce sound! How could I possibly communicate?

For a moment I felt utterly defeated, then I realized I could still hear my breathing. I tried altering my breath sounds using my teeth, tongue, and lips, and found that even though my vocal cords were useless, I could still articulate and produce something close to speech.

“Hhh – lll – ppp.” Marty immediately realized what I was doing.

“You can still hear,” he said with a smile in his voice.

“Ttt – lll – kkk.”

“And talk. I'm glad.” He paused; perhaps he was looking me over. “You're in bad shape. I need to take you to my lab for tests.”

My gut twisted. “Wh – ttt?”

“What tests? Everything I can think of. X-rays, MRI, CT scan. Blood tests. DNA sequencing. Obviously there's a mutation – several mutations – and...” He stopped and sighed. “Let's just get going.”

He lifted me abruptly, then carefully carried me to his car. For a moment he was gone, and I assumed he was locking the front door. The car started. I wanted to ask how he was going to get me past all the people in the lab who would stare at me, but with the noise of the engine, my attempts to talk would be inaudible.

It took about 15 minutes to reach his lab. After he parked, I heard the car door open, then to my surprise something fell on me. “Sorry, I thought I should keep you out of sight,” he said, with that same smiling voice. “It's my laundry. Are you okay?” He asked, lifting the cloth over my face.

I nodded.

“I'm going to make arrangements to get you into the building without causing a stir. I'll be back soon.”

I knew I could trust Marty.

I spent the next several hours being poked, pricked, and who knows what else inside Marty's lab and the hospital next door. Whenever I had to be moved, Marty or one of his assistants cleared the

public areas by mentioning “highly contagious specimens.” No one was anxious to ask questions, and they were quick to leave when requested. Besides, I was always covered with a sheet.

I couldn't have asked for a more thoughtful, concerned investigator, and after awhile I started to relax. I even fell asleep inside the MRI!

I woke up still unable to see, but the sounds and smells told me I was in the main lab. I moved and heard rustling.

“Ah, you're awake.” Marty's voice was close. “You must have really enjoyed that MRI.”

“Ssss,” I said, not meaning anything in particular, just taking my conversational turn.

“Hurting?”

I felt around inside and did not detect any pain, burning, or other discomfort. “Sss – ttt – ppp?”

“You mean, has the metamorphosis stopped?”

I nodded.

“We haven't noted any changes in about... uh... two and a half hours. We gave you an injection of prednisone when you first arrived, and another three hours ago. That reduced the inflammation caused by your normal tissue fighting against the mutated tissue.”

“Hhh,” I replied. “W-w-w...?”

“Why? We don't know yet. We're comparing the DNA of the plant material with the adjacent unmutated cells to identify the nature of the mutations. I've contacted TGT --”

“Sss.”

“Yes, even though you haven't worked there for over two years, we think you were exposed to an enzyme or other protein that wasn't triggered until recently. We've requested information on all the work you did there.” He chuckled. “They weren't too keen on sharing proprietary information, but when I reminded them of a possible lawsuit, they came around.”

My mind was racing, trying to think of all the projects I'd done while at TGT. None of them had anything to do with plants, but of course, I often visited the labs of other people and who knew what

they were working on!

But Marty was still talking. “As far as the trigger, we're looking for something that affects skin cells – specifically, cells in the dermis and epidermis. The hypodermis has not mutated, so the plant DNA only presents in the 2 upper layers.”

That was good news, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It didn't explain the malfunction of my vocal cords, but I set that thought aside. Marty and his research team were doing the best they could.

I tried to smile, and it felt as though I managed at least a small one, since I still had some control over my lips. Then I gasped, feeling a warm, soft touch. He kissed me! I was a monstrosity, and he kissed me!

“Was that okay?” he whispered nervously. “Was it okay to kiss you?”

I could only nod, but there was so much more I wanted to say!

“That's good,” he said. I heard a voice call his name. “Just a moment,” he replied. “Rachel, I have to get back to work. Would you like a sedative? This can't be comfortable for you.”

It would be nice to sleep through it all; on the other hand, I wanted to hear and know as soon as they made progress. I shook my head.

“Okay. Well, I'll check back in a little while.”

I could hear them talking, but understood only scraps of conversation as the lab workers moved around the room, their voices rising and falling. I distracted myself by trying to determine the number of people in the room and their names.

“ – use the QuickExtract solution – ” That was a soprano voice with a Georgia accent.

“ – to dice – for better absorption?” responded a deep male voice.

“Actually, Ben, it's – specialized – last year,” Marty said. So the deep voice was Ben.

“Marty,” called another voice, probably female, in the alto range.

“Coming, Nell,” he replied, his voice traveling across the room.

I couldn't hear Marty and Nell; they spoke in whispers that were just beyond my ability to

comprehend. But I could hear Ben and the woman with the Georgia accent talking; even though they tried to keep their voices quiet, I could pick up the gist.

“ – you think we – save her?” asked Ben.

“I don't see – it in time to help – we'll try – ”

“ – course, Karen – job.”

“Right, we – our best. I just – is enough.”

Ben and Karen seemed pessimistic about my chances, so I stopped listening. Thinking negatively would not help me at all. I had to keep up my hopes.

I sang to myself (mentally) to rid myself of the frightening thoughts, but they crept in occasionally, no matter what I did. What if they didn't find out what caused this horrid transformation? Or even worse, if they knew what caused it but could not reverse it? What if the changes penetrated below the skin and my entire body became plant material? I envisioned my heart trying tenaciously to beat normally as more and more of its cells turned into a pineapple or a pear. At some threshold it would falter, then fail completely and remain stubbornly still.

In spite of these horrid thoughts, I fell asleep again. I woke with stabbing pains in my mouth, ears, and other mucous membranes. The mutations had infiltrated a little further and I could no longer hear nor articulate sounds. I felt my heart pound an unsteady rhythm and I pictured the pineapple again. This time I didn't even have Marty's voice to soothe and reassure me. At least I could still breathe, but at any moment that ability might be taken from me as well.

I imagined I felt a touch on my cheek – could there be any square inch of my skin that was still me? I decided to believe that it was really Marty touching me. Even if it was a false belief, it might be the only thing that would keep me sane. I thought of the kiss from earlier, and managed to distract myself from the pain for a few seconds.

I felt something in my throat and assumed – correctly – that it was a breathing tube. Shortly I felt a blessed chill that washed away the pain, then consciousness as well.

* * *

When Rachel's transformation went deeper, Marty knew they didn't have much time left. Karen gave her more prednisone, but it only slowed the changes.

"Ben, what have you found? Is there any correlation with the info TGT sent?"

"Not yet. I'm still checking her blood with the Raman in the near infra-red but I --"

Nell interrupted, "How old is she?"

"Thirty-two. Why?"

"I thought it might be hormone related. All of the -- er -- plant products growing on her skin are fruit, which contains seeds. Several of the TGT protocols involved enzymes related to growth."

Marty grabbed that thought immediately. "If you're right, how would we counteract it? We don't have any time to lose."

"I'm not sure," she said, frowning.

"Growth hormones," Ben mused, pulling at his beard. "Their effects could be increased if she's been exposed to large amounts of phthalates or BPA, or -- is she on the pill? Maybe there's a relationship between the sex hormones and --"

"She was on the pill when we were together," Marty said, "but I suppose she could have stopped. I don't really see how that... hmm..."

"Perhaps stopping the pill somehow activated the plant DNA. I'll go get what we need." Karen jumped down from her lab stool and was out of the room before the rest of them could speak.

Marty stood looking at Rachel, barely noticing when Karen returned. In the corner of his eye he saw her hang a bag on the IV pole, tie it in to the main IV then inject something else. "I hope this works," she muttered. "For all we know, it could make it worse."

He snapped out of his reverie. "No, I think it will work. I can't tell you why, but I think it will."

"Maybe subconsciously you remember the relevant research," said Ben, carrying a folder and a printout from the Raman spectrograph. "I don't know how she got exposed, or why no one else has

been transformed, but this is clearly what caused it. Look." He opened the folder, then held it and the spectrogram where Marty could compare them. "The structures are almost identical."

Marty forced himself to read the report. The Transcon Delta 43 team was engaged in production of medications in food crops -- in other words, edible drugs. According to the file, the project was aborted a few weeks before Rachel left the company. "Undesirable results from in vitro testing" had prompted the company to shut down all of its plant-related projects until certain "issues" (the report didn't specify what issues) could be resolved.

Had someone else ended up like Rachel? The report was more eloquent in what it did not say than what it did say, and he had a feeling that the answer to that question was 'yes.'

Rachel... He turned to look at her but could see no improvement. Ben sighed.

"Give it some time," said Karen quietly. "It's not going away instantly."

Marty had never been a patient man, so to occupy himself he called TGT to check on his suspicions.

* * *

I woke up to hear myself choking, then rapid footsteps.

"Rachel! Can you hear me?"

I nodded and pulled at the tube. "Wait," he said. I didn't have to wait long. There was more choking as the tube came out, but then there was blessed relief.

"Thank you," I said automatically. A moment later I realized I had spoken! My voice was hoarse and crackling, but it worked and I could hear it.

Were my eyes working too? I opened them slowly and blinked several times; at first everything was just blobs of light and dark, but gradually the blurry shapes resolved into Marty and his lab staff. He was beaming at me and holding my hand tightly.

"You're back," he said softly. To my delight he leaned over and kissed me again. I reached up to embrace him in my newly responsive arms.

After he stood up again, I saw that his staff had returned to their work, probably to give us a little privacy. "Tell me what happened," I said eagerly. When he mentioned the TGT project, a picture came into my mind: one day I had visited my friend Susan's lab and she spilled a solution all over herself and me. We washed off in the emergency shower and that was the end of it. At the time, we had no reason to think anything would happen.

"What about Susan?" I interrupted.

"You mean Susan Maitland?"

"Yes."

"She had this problem too – how did you know?"

I explained, and he nodded. "She didn't make it, though. They didn't figure it out in time."

"Oh." I was silent for a moment. "I didn't get a Christmas card from her that year, but I didn't bother to find out why. I wish I had -- not just because it would have helped me, but because she was my friend."

He squeezed my hand, giving me some time to think before he continued the story. "You're getting estrogen and progesterone by IV right now, to counteract the plant auxins, but we'll have to remove the chemicals from by plasmaphoresis. You'll be in the hospital awhile."

"I don't mind, as long as you visit me."

"You couldn't keep me away," he said softly.

Bio: Anita Simpson has been writing science fiction since childhood. She lives in Texas with her partner, and spends most of her time on the computer writing freelance nonfiction (primarily web content), as well as fiction. Her hobbies include scrapbooking, music, and daydreaming.