

The Pearls in the Hair of Roberta Paula Williams

By Olivia Brown



Deep below the earth, something writhes, awake—

and very determined to die.

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The attendant beeps her key card outside of the heavy glass door, and it slides away. She wears a suit of sterilized white. Her hands are gloved, her feet shuffle, the plastic blue booties over her medical clogs grating against the tiled floor. The ear plugs help to mask most of the din that surrounds her when she steps into the room, an arhythmic distorted hum that jumps up and down different octaves and tones. The sound defies prediction, impossible to tune out. A maddening distraction for the workers who must carefully mark ciphers on their tablets; a task made harder today than on most.

The space she has entered in after her commute—through the grand sliding doors at the entrance on the surface, a check-in with her key card, a security check, the changing rooms to her uniform, an elevator ride down several stories into the depths of the building, another security and sterilization check, and finally the last sliding door—is a cavernous space that has ceased to awe her, though seasoned workers say that you never quite get used to the unsettled feeling it provides. Massive, alien, a monument that couldn't exist but for the pursuit of money.

If you gaze up, all one sees is scaffolding of dozens of floors, lofted so that from the ground floor you can crane your neck and count until blinded by the penetrating sun lights installed in the ceiling high above. The floors are connected by six glass elevators, always on the move, filled with workers wearing the same uniform. The attendant walks to the elevator, step in, and briefly checks her assigned floor on her tablet, click the button for U5. The doors close, and the sound around her shuts out with them. She is whisked upwards, deposited on the correct floor, and walks out to make her rounds.

She approaches her first grow tank. It is a shallow box filled with slightly brown and green-tinged water. Many rows of the same design are beside this one, all connected through tubes and electrical wires, all monitoring nutrients and depositing new ones, and taking waste to the disposal units in another part of the enclave. She stoops and runs her finger along a tape measure built in the box, comparing it against the ghostly strands in the water, noting a number with a hasty scrawl, before moving to the next container. Behind her, a man with large scissors dives them into the water, and cuts. She turns back to her work, her face illuminated from below, the blueish lights built into the floor of the containers form

and re-form shapes on her face in time with the wiggling water. The light reflects slightly off of the ceiling above; the bottom of another level of containers supported by a matrix of scaffolding. Up, and up, and up it goes, attendants and cutters on each floor mirroring her movements: stoop, sign, shuffle, stoop, sign, shuffle. She sighs, a mix of affirmation and exhaustion, caps her pen, and *schk-schk-schks* to the next row of containers.

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In another part of the building, far above the subterranean cave where the attendant has just assessed the yield of their valuable crop, Roberta Williams smooths out her pinstripe pantsuit and swivels in her chair, agitated. She impatiently flips a section of braids behind her shoulder, then taps her finger against the cold glass of the imposing desk she sits before. To her right, demanding red lights flicker on and off on the phone standing neatly on her desk. She ignores them, thinking of creative curses for the journalists and shareholders on the other end. The lines have been going all morning, but she won't answer them—not till she's got more information, not until she's calmed down some. *Damn those people, can't they see what we're doing is for good?* she thinks furiously. Roberta swivels her chair around, abruptly stands up, and walks to the glass wall behind her desk. From her forty-three stories high, she looks down from her nose at the vast urban sprawl, the rivulets of roads snaking through the buildings, the dark-colored grains of rice zipping along the tubes, bringing their passengers to their destinations.

She gazes from this spot often, drinking in the ego she feels when she looks down on her empire. *And an empire I have built*, she thinks often. An accidental discovery during a late laboratory session with CRISPR during her PhD led her here. Her efforts to make the oysters's more resistant to infection thus far resulted in disappointment and failure. But in the midnight glare of the lab's LED lights, her eyes caught a glint of a dark filament whipping slowly in the petri dish, connected to the lip of her specimen. After several weeks of growing and testing, she realized she had mysteriously led the oyster to grow thin, keratinous fibers from its lips. *Hair*. Quietly, she paid visits to friends in the law department across the lawn at Howard University. She stopped writing her thesis in favor of rock-solid patents. To the dismay of her professors, she dropped out of the doctorate, and began assembling investors, helped greatly by seed money from her parents. Within a year of launching PearlHair Braiding Hair, her company cornered ten percent of the market. Fifteen years on, they had essentially a monopoly.

Cheaper, ecologically-derived, real hair grown from the mouths of oysters. It was genius.

And it has changed her. With every comma added to the quarterly reports, every diminutive bowed head from passing interns, every pop! of a champagne bottle opened in her honor, has changed her. Rewiring and connecting, the atoms in her brain hammering out paths that reinforce her own self-importance. The money, the covers of Forbes, the invitations to speak at college graduations—they are what she wants to protect now, a gross colonization of her limbic system, guiding all of her desire and greed and longing to the sole pursuit of growth, an unbroken and fragile piece of keratinous fiber. Long gone is the Roberta who wanted to follow in her mentor’s footsteps, spending her life doing research with humble grant money for improving the health of fisheries in the eastern United States. What remains is a woman of steel and glass, fragile yet harsh, ready to crush anything in her path that threatens her position in the world.

Roberta’s thoughts of inviting the district attorney for dinner is interrupted by the crackle of her secretary over the intercom.

“Ms. Williams, Fox News has just arrived.”

The CEO turns, walks to her desk, and leans over the intercom, clicking a button with one long nail—a prototype that has cost Roberta a billion dollars, which her in-house economists project that she will expediently make back following PearlNails launch later in the summer—and curtly replies:

“Tell them I’m coming.”

She compulsively flicks her braids, straightens her suit, and strides out of the room.

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Many stories below, an oyster cracks its lip. It’s a difficult movement, her mouth being muzzled by the mane of hair she doesn’t understand why her body has grown. It’s always been there, but it strikes the oyster as being awfully inconvenient. She releases a little scent, something so new that it will utterly bypass the health monitors, though the swirling water molecules in which she survives with her community will soon be saturated with the smell. These pearlescent signals slip into the stream, swinging around wildly and randomly through the churning water, taken up into a water tube and brought to a new tank, until its round body sweetly touches the gills of another oyster. Then it is grabbed, waits at the gate of the oyster’s lips, and slips inside, dissolving into the flesh of its host. As the signal dissolves, it whispers its message into the oyster

and sighs into oblivion, being fully absorbed, it's purpose fulfilled. The host grinds deep within his body and minutely opens his lips, releasing identical smells into the strata.

Amplifying the message he has just received, the smell is stronger, dispersing farther by the water circulation that connects all of the tanks. The engineers built it this way when they realized that the oysters survived longer when they could share water. The contaminant spreads. It is picked up by one oyster, created, released, sent further into the entire tank system. The humming of their song changes, more frenzied, higher pitched. One or two attendants lift their heads, and then bow them again to their task.

Then the oyster begins to die. Starting from the base of its being, cell by cell begin to slow down their processes. Chaotic molecules, of every shape and size, who are accustomed to zipping and trembling inside of their matrix are stilled, as if a frost swept a springtime field. The slow, then stop, and the warmth generated dissipates into the cold water surrounding. Then the next cell, then the next. It will take several days for all the trillions of cells of the oyster to die, leaving the hard husk of its outer shell and columns of swirling black hair behind. Heard by no one, she will sigh contentedly, and sing no more.

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Roberta sits impatiently, clicking the nail of her thumb and pointer finger together while a technician attaches the microphone to her shirt collar. She knows their close proximity and the light clinking of her nails is making him nervous, which a small part of her is ruefully enjoying. He determinedly avoids eye contact, fumbling with sweaty palms. She has half a mind to snap at him, to do it herself, but at the last moment she stops herself, hearing the echoes of her father's voice in her head.

Twice as hard to get half as much.

They will talk and one word could sink you

The lowest on the rung is still higher than you

The microphone clips into place, and he moves away from her as if she were on fire. She grits her teeth, and sinks in to the power of her knowledge that those around her can feel her inner tumult. The television crew is chatting to one another, setting up a makeshift studio in the corner office of a conference room,

and Roberta looks at them working, momentarily envious none of them have to be dissected on air for the sake of their legacy. She imagines what banner they will run underneath the video of her smiling and assuring viewers at home that the animals—if you can call them that—that are used to make her products don't have a central nervous system, and therefore cannot be reasonably expected to feel pain. She has repeated the phrase so often that it's not something that she believes or not anymore as fact. It simply is in order for her to have what she does. She pinches the bridge of her nose and squeezes her eyes shut—

“Ms. Williams?”

They snap open at the voice of Stacey Arms, a short woman with chestnut skin and a striking blue pantsuit on, standing inquisitively with a microphone in her hand. *Good*, Roberta thinks, and smiles wide, *they didn't send some bullshit newbie*. Interviewer and interviewee shake hands, exchange small talk and pleasantries until a man with a headset on approaches and tells the women they are ready. Roberta and Stacey sit in chairs arranged to face one another, the buzz of the glowing stage lights illuminating them against the setting sun from the corner windows. Roberta takes a breath, Stacey nods and smiles, and as the man with the headset counts down loudly from 10, to the silent 3... 2... 1...

Roberta has an unsettling feeling that Stacey's reassuring grin doesn't quite reach her eyes.

“Hello and welcome, I'm Stacey Arms here tonight with PearlHair CEO Roberta Williams.” She pauses and looks at Roberta.

“We're going to jump right in—Ms. Williams, how is the atmosphere here at PearlHair following the bombing of your facilities in New Jersey?”

“Hello Stacey. Well, you know, it was quite a shock when we first received the reports, but luckily no one was hurt, and that is the most important thing. As for the damages, we believe we'll be up and running again in the next few weeks and have large stocks of hair ready to ship, so there should be little, if any, disruption of the supply lines of our high quality braiding hair.”

This was a lie, one meant for the shareholders more than the customers. The truth is that the facilities in New Jersey were in a state of carnage. The bombers had been organized, and had planted explosives along weak points of the metal scaffolding of the tank facility that closely resembled the one below the building they were sitting in. When they blew, it collapsed half of the structure in on itself, creating a crater in the ground the size of several parking lots. All that was left was a smoldering pile of rubble interspersed with pipes somberly squirting

out water. If they had managed to do it to this complex, the entire skyscraper would have come down. As for the large stocks ready to ship, those should have been out the door the following morning. Hundreds of thousands of units of packaged hair bundles had instead had their biodegradation sped up to their final end: ash and smoke. To make matters worse, the hair acted as a natural accelerant. A few explosions blew through critical points of the infrastructure, and Roberta Williams' own product did the rest. The smell of burning hair still blanketed parts of New York.

Roberta wills her frustration at this knowledge down with a clenched fist and looks directly into the camera lens.

“As for the perpetrators, we are ready to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law, and have set up a hotline for any information pertaining to the capture of those responsible.”

“Ms. Williams, we have reports that a group calling themselves Free Meat have taken responsibility. Do you have anything to say to them?”

This takes Roberta by surprise—her team didn't tell her that someone had already claimed the attack. She shoots a look at her terrified assistant, who is hastily looking through papers and yelps quietly from the withering look of her boss. She refocuses.

“Yes, well, Stacey... I do have something to say... these terrorists, Freak Meat or whatever—”

“Free Meat”

“*Free Meat*, then, have only contributed to a long history of violence against the Black community, and, as we always have in the past,” she shores up, sitting taller in her seat while delivering the line, “we will *persevere* and *overcome* and build back stronger, delivering the same high quality product as we have for years. Now, Stacey, I actually want to talk to you about something new we've been developing here at PearlHair. We are very happy to introduce PearlNail, a new line we're very excited abo—”

Before Roberta can finish her pitch, a deafening sound erupts in the room: glass shattering, screams, and the unmistakable recording of the oysters mournful song in their tanks, cranked up through a massive speaker that has just leveled the corporate glass wall of the conference room. The cameras swivel around to the dozen masked figures that have crashed the interview. One makes a sharp movement, and moments later Roberta is yelling and spluttering from the foul-smelling murk that they have thrown on her. She tastes salt and decay and sewage and recognizes the smell from unpleasant tours of the sanitation systems below in the cavern. Waste materials from the tanks, concentrated many times

over before they are shipped for disposal. Before she can move, the music cuts and is replaced by a distorted shriek,

NEW RESEARCH SHOWS INVERTEBRATES POTENTIAL FOR FEELING. THEY ARE IN PAIN, WHY ELSE DO THEY SING?

The recording repeats, and on it's third round, the room finally wakes up. Roberta springs out of her chair, a staff member yells into a walkie-talkie for security, and the group is already turned on their heels, whooping down the halls toward the staircase, leaving their boombox behind.

Roberta wheels from left to right, crazed, bellowing for someone to unplug it. Her assistant is crying, trying unsuccessfully to detach the superglued battery from its frame, accepting ear damage from the persistent drone of the machine. Those in the room not frantically running around are rooted in place, shock splayed across their face. In the chaos no one sees the TV station technician, a young man, breathing hard and eyes wide, slightly grinning in the corner.

For hours, a muffled arhythmic sound leaks from above down to the sidewalk. Few notice—it is drowned out by the cars until the traffic dies down for the evening, and even then, only the soloists of the streets hear its tone. Further below the pavement, a legion of aliveness stirs at the vibration. And starting from a singular point, and then to a great cascade, they sing back.

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Roberta is in a rage for days. When she is not ranting and raving at home, she is ranting and raving at the office. The molecules in her body are dancing wildly, creating heat, relaxing, then coming again to a crescendo when she wills them to remember the whole affair. After the activists stunt left her humiliated on live air, her employees were too fearful of their mercurial boss to inform her that for the first time ever in the history of PearlHair, there had been a crop failure. The oysters weren't sick—the health monitors showed no signs of infection or bacterial presence. Attendants would simply show up for work, prepared to mark the growth of the hair before cutting, to find slack-jawed oyster shells and loose strands of hair floating in tanks that had been alive and productive a day before. The scientists had quarantined the tanks at the first sign of death, but it was far too late. They scrambled for days, testing the water, monitoring the remaining oysters, increasing the antibiotic drip to the tanks, but they continued to die in the thousands. At this rate, PearlHair was weeks out from owning several million

oyster shells, several thousand bundles of too-short hair, and a crater in the ground.

When an assembly of scientists finally gather to break the news to Roberta, whispering words of encouragement on the elevator up, she is still for many moments after. Her face hardly changes, refusing to betray the mounting tension she is holding in her body.

“*Out,*” she whispers.

The last white coat steps out of the room. In the crack before the heavy glass seals completely, a strangle cry slips into the hallway. Then it disappears.

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A large oyster, one of the oldest, and one of the last to die, laboriously filters water through their congested lips. It will not be long now—they have resisted the process for two months now, allowing the death march but only slowly, waiting to go until they see the work complete. The smell that they released several weeks ago grows dimmer in intensity. In fact, they can only feel remnants of the signal’s presence in their pool. The cell death reaches around the rind of the oyster’s lips, *not long now*, and one by one, the hairs fall away from its mouth. The great mollusk’s detangling allows them to take in a great gulp of water into their freed mouth. They hold it...

... and release in a long, victory song.

And then they move no more.