

THE DISILLUSIONMENT
OF
HAL LK2154

BY
JON WESICK

 **istal taper**

Distal Taper, an imprint of Aionios Books

The Disillusionment of Hal LK2154

Copyright © 2017 by Jon Wesick

All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by United States copyright law. This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

Cover design by Jack Lungu

www.jackdphotos.com

Version 001

ISBN-13: 978-0-9980844-3-5 (Paperback)

Published by Distal Taper

An imprint of Aionios Books

Carlsbad, California

www.distaltaper.com

www.aioniosbooks.com

I wish to thank my writing teachers Sam Hamod and Glory Foster as well as my editors and publishers, Jim Babwe, Gerardeen Santiago, and Daniel Primbs.

—Jon Wesick

**THE DISILLUSIONMENT
OF
HAL LK2154**

PROLOGUE



The trauma of that night visited Hal in his dreams again and again. It always started with street lights and wind-blown branches making eerie shadow puppets of snarling dogs on the ground. He had to catch up with Jane. If he could get there in time, he could save Jane but no matter how hard he willed them, his legs carried him no faster than a walk.

Too late! He always arrived too late. The murderer was already plunging the chef's knife into Jane's belly. It was long as a forearm and each thrust buried it deep into the soft, woman flesh that Hal had rested his cheek against only moments before. This couldn't be happening. Dr. Pak had perfected the human genome; violence was a thing of the past. The hoodie slipped off the killer's head allowing Hal to see his face. It was his own.



The week of the murder had begun full of promise. Surrounded by nine hundred ninety-eight members of his graduating crèche in the Lansdale Uniform School's auditorium, Hal LK2154 adjusted the mortarboard on his head. Like Hal, the four hundred ninety-eight wide-shouldered males who sat on the left of the aisle, stood six foot two inches tall, weighed one hundred seventy-five pounds, and had bronze skin. As upperclassmen, they had the privilege of growing their dark hair to medium length but still had to remain clean-shaven, though no one would want to stand out anyway. All the men were physically identical except for identifying barcodes on their forearms.

Hal searched the cloned females for Jane LK 2154's trademark ruby earrings. Identifying yourself was a common problem in a society where all women were identical twins. Like the men, all women had bronze skin and brown eyes. The

graduating class had chosen to adopt the latest style and get pixie cuts so their dark hair fell to just below their jawlines. Since everyone looked alike, clones came up with practical ways to identify themselves to others by wearing a characteristic fashion, such as a bowtie or purple scarf.

He couldn't spot her. No matter. Five hundred identical females, genetically designed to be his perfect mate, sat on the other side of the aisle. Hal thought of Jane's shapely athletic body and suppressed a shudder of delight. Two years ago, Hal and Jane had lost their virginity together. Of course, they suffered no serious consequences since doctors routinely sterilized everyone to prevent accidental reproduction. Even if the vocational counselors moved them to different cities, someone just like Jane would love him. It was a perfectly ordered society with no unwanted pregnancies and no adultery. After all, why would anyone cheat with someone identical to their spouse? Like the ubiquitous billboards said, everyone was a member of One Family.

Hal was marveling at Dr. Pak's genius when Principal George RW3278 ascended the stage and leaned on the lectern, allowing his ornate purple robe's sleeves to flow down the side. Even though he was in his sixties, Principal George's superior genes had kept him trim and fit. His chiseled

features expressed a raw masculinity. All of today's graduating males would one day look like him once maturity added a few lines around their eyes and the graying hair at their temples.

"Congratulations." Principal George's eyes swept the room. "You've all studied diligently and achieved grade point averages within a tight tolerance around the norm. Now it's time to move onto the next stage of your lives.

"At Lansdale we tried to give you a fair start. You were born with the same genome, took the same classes, and received the same treatment. No one gave you any more or any less than your peers.

"I remember when I came to this institution almost fifty years ago . . ." Principal George went on about the school's history and his rise through its bureaucracy.

Hal squirmed, causing his metal folding chair to scrape the wooden floorboards.

Eventually Principal George wrapped up the story. "Now as you embark on your separate careers, that's about to change. Some of you will study to become doctors or scientists. Others will become bankers, bakers, or store clerks. Whatever path you take in life, I hope you'll remember what you learned here-to treat others as you'd like to be treated because at heart we're all the same."

Hal tapped his feet in impatience. What did

this have to do with him? Let the others follow lesser careers. He was going to be a reproductive engineer.

“May you always look back at your years here with fondness. It’s been a privilege to shepherd you from birth to adulthood. Bless you and good luck!” Principal George concluded.

The auditorium erupted in cheers. Hal threw his hat into the air with the others. Tomorrow he would see the vocational counselor and take the first step toward his dream.

Next morning, after putting on his khaki slacks and blue dress shirt, Hal left for his appointment with the traveling vocational counselor at the gym teacher’s office. Hal did not have the patience to wait for the elevator so he took the stairs from his third-floor dorm room and exited the lobby with such speed that the flyers on the bulletin board waved in the wind of his passing. Hal dashed down Watson Boulevard toward campus. Like all business and government buildings, Lansdale’s classrooms and dormitories were built in the architectural style known by the unfortunate name of Brutalism. Of course, the term “architectural style” went out of fashion centuries earlier when the builders of the new world standardized designs to take maximum

advantage of economies of scale. Hal didn't know the blocky, concrete structures with beams, duct work, and elevators as Brutalist buildings. He just thought of them as buildings.

The gym teacher's office was identical with the others at Lansdale with interior walls painted high-gloss yellow and a steel desk with a framed photo of a wife who looked like an older version of Jane.

"Ah so you're Hal. I'm your vocational guidance counselor, Seymour ZA1811." Seymour looked comfortable behind the gym teacher's desk, his face identical to but his body less muscular than the chair's usual occupant. "Let me just scan you to verify your ID."

Hal presented his forearm for Seymour to scan with the barcode reader attached to the desktop computer.

"Excellent!" Seymour looked up from the monitor. "Everything's in order. Although community needs have the highest priority, I always ask my clients what careers they have in mind for themselves."

"I'd," Hal gulped and recited the speech he'd rehearsed. "I'd like to be a reproduction engineer. Ever since I was little, the story of how, in spite of his own genetic illness, Dr. Pak rescued humanity from hatred and jealousy after the twenty-first century Race Wars has inspired me. I know our

Great Father completed most of the work when he designed our perfect genome. Still I can think of no higher calling than to safeguard his legacy.”

“An admirable sentiment.” Seymour smiled. “You know, I too wanted to be a reproductive engineer when I was your age. In fact, over ninety-eight percent of graduates respond with reproductive engineering as their preference.

“Let me tell you what’s involved.” Seymour rested his arms on the desk and leaned forward. “Candidates for reproductive engineering have to work a minimum of three years at unpopular, pay-grade-one jobs such as garbage collector or hydrogen fuel attendant before even qualifying for the training program. After that, fewer than two percent are accepted.”

“I see,” Hal said.

“What I’m trying to say,” Seymour said, “is that you’ll be of more use to the community elsewhere.” He began typing on the keyboard. “We have several good opportunities: mathematics instructor, pay grade five; electronics technician, pay grade five; exotic dancer, pay grade four.”

“I don’t care!” Hal blurted. “I’ll pick up garbage for a decade if I have to!” He suddenly felt embarrassed by his outburst. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I want to do something meaningful with my life. If not, what’s the point?”

“Let me get this straight,” Seymour said. “The only way for you to do something meaningful is to further Dr. Pak’s dream. Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“And what is that dream, exactly?”

“That we’re all brothers and sisters. That we’re all the same.”

“So you’re telling me that in order for us all to be the same, you have to have a career that’s more special than anybody else’s?” Seymour grinned.

Hal blushed. “That’s egotistical thinking. Isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Happens with a lot of my clients.” Seymour typed on the keyboard. “Hmm, what’s this?” He stroked his chin. “Insurance actuary, pay grade six. It jumps to seven, once you complete the training and pass the test. Right here in Fayetteville, too. Good thing you got here early. An opportunity like this won’t stay free for long.”

Hal looked at Seymour’s smiling face. Even though the vocational counselor wasn’t a reproductive engineer, he showed a lot of wisdom. “I guess I’ll take it.”

“Good choice. I know it seems disappointing but I think you’ll find satisfaction comes from giving your all to whatever you do. I never thought I’d end up counseling but I wouldn’t trade the experience for anything. It’s been rewarding helping

young people like you chart their futures.

“You have two weeks before you have to report. Why don’t you take some time off and enjoy your well-deserved reward?” Seymour shook Hal’s hand. “Good luck, Hal LK2154. It’s been a pleasure serving you.”

The smell of the felt-tipped marker bit the air in the dorm room as Hal took part in a Lansdale tradition. The students had been modifying their forearm barcodes to get into nightclubs for years. While Hal employed a steel ruler, marker, and steady hand to pass for twenty-one, he thought back to a lesson from a civics class. Since all boys (and all girls) were identical, crèche workers tattooed identifying barcodes on everyone’s forearm at birth with serial numbers replacing the surnames that went out of fashion when cloning replaced families. Letters indicated the crèche while the number was the batch of clones the individual came from. Given names were assigned at random. With a few quick modifications, Hal changed the 2154 barcode on his arm to 2111 and walked to the nightclub.

Once the trendy shops downtown surrounded him, Hal’s mood brightened. All buildings weren’t

concrete. Homes, apartments, and shops that needed to present a cheery façade, were built in a style formerly known as Art Deco. They had flat roofs and metal-frame designs on their pastel exteriors of stucco, concrete, smooth-faced stone, or terracotta. Pink, turquoise, and mustard yellow were common. If Hal had gone into construction, he would have learned builders used these designs to break up the monotony of the twenty basic floor-plans these buildings conformed to. Up ahead a neon light shaped like the famous, bearded biologist announced the location of Darwin's Garden.

Hal slipped past the attendant at the door and entered the nightclub. He'd left his nametag and trademark suspenders behind in the dorm. Jane LK2154 had wanted to finish practicing piano and had promised to meet him around nine that evening. Hal ordered a beer at the bar, paid with a few credits, and turned to watch the dancers moving to the amplified beat of the latest synchro-thrash hits. Unlike at other clubs, everyone on Darwin's dance floor had mastered moving in lockstep to the flashing lights and thump of bass. Nobody was even a fraction of a beat out of step. That's what made it so trendy. Several of the men wore colorful shirts that Hal had almost bought. They looked great with their threads glowing under the black light. Hal drained his beer and bought

another. He was on his third when he glimpsed a red earring on the woman entering and waved to get her attention.

“Jane?”

“There you are.” Jane maneuvered her shapely bottom onto the bar stool next to Hal and ordered a whiskey sour. Like Hal and many others out for an anonymous good time, she wore no nametag.

Although Hal liked every song the DJ’s played, the loud music made it almost impossible to converse. He leaned close to Jane’s ear. “Wanna dance?”

Jane nodded and set down the glass, she’d smudged with red lipstick. They hustled through the throbbing bodies and found a free space on the dance floor. Hal had never considered himself a good dancer, certainly not of the caliber of Darwin’s patrons, but he mimicked the others’ steps. After a few minutes, he fitted in well enough. At least he didn’t look like an egotist.

Jane was much better. She caught on almost immediately. Hal’s heart swelled with pride at how the sensuous roll of Jane’s hips and the stretch of her lithe arm matched the other women’s motions. They danced vigorously for over an hour, pausing only for more drinks. Sweat darkened her white blouse at the hollow between her breasts, making the fabric almost transparent. During the slow dance, she melded her moist body to his and stuck

her tongue in his ear. Hal touched his lips to her damp hairline and tasted salt.

“Wanna get out of here?” she whispered. “I know a place we can save a few credits on a motel.” Jane took his hand and led him away.

If Hal were less aroused or hadn't drunk so much, he might have wondered how she knew this. As it was, he followed her out the door like a staggering, one-hundred-seventy-five-pound puppy. They passed one of the ubiquitous One Family billboards. Illuminated by lights swirling with bugs, it depicted Dr. Pak pointing toward a golden sunrise. Clone followers, whose dress indicated the professions they pursued, surrounded him. One held a beaker. A stethoscope hung from another's neck. A third wore a business suit. The caption in bold black letters read simply, “One Family—Keep the Dream Alive.”

They turned down a darkened street and walked past warehouses and factories that looked like they hadn't been used since the Race Wars. Eventually they came to an abandoned house with several broken windows and spray-painted graffiti on the walls. The waist-high, chain-link fence's gate groaned when Jane opened it. They walked the cracked cement path that led through the overgrown grass to the front step. The door hung crookedly on its hinges. Hal held it open for Jane.

“This way.” She took his hand. As she climbed the stairs, her hips swayed like a metronome.

Hal followed up the creaking staircase and down a hallway to a bedroom where Jane struck a match to a small candle. The dim yellow light illuminated a stained mattress with stuffing showing through rips in its fabric. The room smelled of dust and mildew. Two-by-fours and fiberglass insulation showed through a hole in the sheetrock wall.

Jane wrapped her arms around Hal’s shoulders, pressed her mouth to his, and parted her lips. He reached under her blouse and stoked her sides, his hands stopping at the edge of her breasts. Strange, she usually wore a bra.

Jane steered Hal like an unbalanced wheelbarrow until his heels caught the mattress’ edge and he toppled backwards. She peeled her blouse over her head to expose her shapely golden-skinned breasts. Hal closed his eyes and pressed his face to her soft flat belly. She stroked his hair while he inhaled her musky woman scent. Jane wasn’t usually this aggressive. Must be the alcohol he’d tasted on her breath and her joy at finally graduating.

She pushed him backwards, landed atop Hal with a giggle, and kissed him hard on the mouth. Delicate fingers undid the buttons on his shirt. She

kissed his nipples and belly and undid his belt buckle. Hal reached into Jane's jeans and rested his hand on her pubic bone. She smiled and wiggled out of her pants.

Hal tried to sit up but Jane pushed him back, straddled him, and guided him inside her. He reached for her breasts. Jane arched her back while rocking her hips. Hal tried to hang on but let go after a few minutes. Jane continued to move. It began to hurt. Hal had to hold her hips to restrain her.

As they lay beside each other, Hal admired Jane's dark eyes and golden skin in the flickering yellow candlelight. He felt drugged with pleasure and dozed off for a few minutes. His cell phone's ring roused him.

"Hello."

"Hal, it's Jane. Sorry I couldn't meet you at Darwin's. I messed up the barcode, and they wouldn't let me in. You're not mad at me, are you?"

"No," Hal sat up and turned his back on the naked woman beside him.

"Where are you, now?" Jane LK2154 asked over the phone.

"Oh, uh, back at the dorm. I think I'll go to bed early. Why don't we do something tomorrow?"

"Okay, Sweetie. Bye."

Hal hung up, set the cell phone atop the pile

of clothes on the floor, and turned to face his blunder. “You did say your name was Jane, right?”

“Yes.”

“Jane LK2154?”

“Oh my God!” The woman put her hand over her mouth and laughed. “We’ve identity-fucked. I thought you seemed a little inexperienced. I’m Jane QG3119.”

“Hal LK2154.”

“Don’t worry, Honey.” Jane QG3119 kissed Hal on the cheek. “Happens all the time. You weren’t cheating on your girl. I mean, you were attracted to the part of her you saw in me. Of course, you’ll have to be treated for herpes.”

Hal’s mouth dropped open.

“Just kidding! God! You’re so gullible.” Jane put her legs into her panties, stood, and pulled up her jeans. “I gotta get back to the club. I hope Roger hasn’t already left with someone else.”

Hal let her leave first. Her joke and the bit about him being inexperienced still stung and he didn’t feel like talking to her. As he pulled on his underwear, he spotted something red glittering on the floor by the mattress. Hal picked up the earring, Jane had forgotten, and examined it in the candle-

light. He'd better return it. Hal sighed and stepped into his pants.

He blew out the candle, dashed out the front door, and looked back and forth. A strong wind had started while he was inside. Branches swayed. The wind blew dark clouds across the moon's face and shadows slithered over the grass. Hal crossed his arms over his chest to keep warm. With her head start, Jane QG3119 would be hard to catch. Hal picked up his pace and retraced his steps. The other side of the billboard was the powder blue of the ruling Unity Party proclaiming its motto, "Order." As a new graduate, Hal would be eligible to vote in the upcoming election. He didn't follow politics but leaned toward Unity even though Jane tried to get him to vote for the Rapid Development Party.

A series of desperate screams came from up ahead. Hal ran toward the sounds. The cries turned to whimpers, and the whimpering grew quiet. At the site of an abandoned factory Hal froze. A man plunged something shiny into Jane QG3119's abdomen again and again until she collapsed to the ground. The man knelt by her body and began carving the skin of her forearm. Things like this were not supposed to happen in the modern world.

"No." Hal's voice cut through the gusting wind, his voice breaking in stunned disbelief, shock, then overwhelming fear.

The murderer looked up from his grisly deed and the two men locked eyes. Hal could have been looking in a mirror. After a fraction of a second, the killer turned and ran with his bloody token. Overcoming his paralysis, Hal gave chase but soon abandoned the reckless heroics that would only get him stabbed. He returned to the gruesome scene. Blood had soaked Jane's blouse and her blank, unblinking eyes stared, like those of a fish in a display case. A jagged hole remained where the killer had carved the barcode ID from Jane's forearm. A sickly-sweet taste gathered at the back of Hal's throat. He turned and vomited. Knees shaking Hal unclipped his cell phone from his belt and dialed the Public Safety Bureau.

At first, the operator thought Hal's call was a prank. He had to argue for what seemed like forever before she agreed to send help. Even then, it didn't seem like a priority. Hal waited by the road away from the body. Twenty minutes later a white Chrysler Chromosome marked with orange and blue pulled to the curb. A female public safety officer got out and put on a uniform cap, circled with a checkered band.

"What seems to be the problem here?"

Hal pointed toward Jane's body. The officer

set off. Her flashlight's beam played on the ground in front of her. Soon after she reached the murder scene, another vehicle arrived. A male officer jumped from the car and ran to join his colleague. He returned to Hal a few minutes later.

"You want to tell me what happened here?" said Officer Jerry KH1326.

"My, uh, date, we were taking a walk and, uh . . ."

"Let me get your ID." Jerry scanned Hal's arm. "Says here you're Hal LK2111, and you live in New Orleans. What are you doing here?"

"I, uh, I'm really Hal LK2154." Hal shifted his weight back and forth. "I modified my barcode with a pen to get into Darwin's."

"Wait here." Jerry went off to confer with the female officer and returned with an alcohol wipe, which he used to clean Hal's arm and get an accurate scan. "I'm going to have to ask you to come with me." Jerry opened the back door of his car for Hal to get in.

"Jerry," the woman said, "I'm worried about you driving alone with him. I mean he might be dangerous."

"What do you think I should do, Ruth?"

"How about immobilizing him with narco-spray?"

"Hmm," Jerry patted his pockets. "Must have

left it back at the office.”

They decided Ruth would drive while Jerry sat in back with Hal where he could wrestle Hal to the floor if necessary. When they arrived at the public safety building, they rode an elevator to the fourth floor. Ruth confiscated Hal’s cell phone and told him to wait in an unoccupied office. Hal sat behind the gray steel desk. With nothing else to do, he opened the drawers and cleaned his fingernails with a letter opener he found.

The man with the tired eyes didn’t introduce himself. He arrived around four a.m., set his overcoat on a chair back, and began asking questions.

“This dead woman, what kind of accident did she have?”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Hal said. “A man stabbed her.”

“But how could that be? We’re all brothers and sisters. Who would harm their own sister, let alone kill her? What really happened?”

“Like I said, a man stabbed her.”

“Do you know the penalty for lying to public safety?”

“Why?” Blood rushed to Hal’s face. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Have you been drinking tonight, son?”

Hal nodded. The man with the tired eyes collected his overcoat and left. Unable to get back

to sleep, Hal paced back and forth. What if he'd imagined the whole thing? After all, violence didn't exist in the modern world. Dr. Pak had seen to that. But Hal knew what he saw. Dammit! He knew what he saw!

They kept him for three days. When he needed to use the bathroom, Hal was supposed to knock on the door to get an officer's attention. Often no one was in the hallway so Hal went by himself. During questioning Hal learned that the murdered woman had given him a false name. There was no QG crèche. Hal subsisted on drinks from the water fountain and food from vending machines. There were no showers.

The morning he was released, Hal returned to Lansdale and learned Principal George had requested to see him. After showering and changing clothes in the dorm, Hal walked across the quad to the principal's office. The secretary told him to go right in.

"I don't know how you did it, but congratulations!" Principal George stood from behind his desk and shook Hal's hand. "The Department of Genome Assurance has chosen you to join them. You're our first graduate in several years to have such an honor." He handed Hal an envelope. "You leave for Mendel City this afternoon."

Hal removed the plane ticket from the enve-

lope. His flight was at 1:00. That gave him about an hour before he had to leave for the airport.

“Thank you, sir.” He shook Principal George’s hand and left the administration building.

Hal had little need to pack. The Department of Genome Assurance had found him quarters in Mendel City. No doubt, the previous tenant had left his clothing behind, and of course, the garments would fit. Similarly, Hal would leave his pants and shirts for some underclassman.

He had barely enough time to say goodbye to Jane so he rushed across campus toward her dorm. He jogged across Crick Meadow where the bronze statue of Dr. Pak pointed the way forward. He sprinted up the hill, and crossed under the pedestrian overpass. Across the street, a group of third graders were doing calisthenics in Adenine Field. Hal paused to watch the boys in their navy shorts and gray shirts. Even though he was leaving, he felt a sense of comfort knowing Lansdale would carry on.

Overland Hall, nicknamed Ovary Hall, was the largest female dormitory on campus. Floors one through six were reserved for young women in their teens. The rules forbid unauthorized males access

to the uppers floors that housed girls twelve and under. Hal took an elevator to the fourth floor, walked down the hall, and knocked on Jane's door. The girl who answered had the bangs of someone in the eighth grade and couldn't have been much older than thirteen. Her bony limbs and budding pubescent breasts barely filled her Lansdale sweat-shirt.

"Is Jane here?" Hal asked.

"Oh," The girl dropped her hand from the doorknob. "You must mean the former occupant. No, my roommate and I just moved in the other day. I'm so glad to get off the little girls' floor. They can be so annoying. Your Jane's moved on, I guess, but you can stay. I was just going to the cafeteria. Wanna come?"

Hal suppressed the impulse to flee. "That's okay. I've got to go. Did Jane leave a note?"

"There wasn't one when I got here. Sorry." The girl hung on the open door and made mooneyes as Hal retreated.

He still had Jane's cell phone number. He was about to call when he realized public safety had never returned his cell phone. It didn't matter. He'd call her, once he got situated in Mendel City.