

The Shapeless Man

By Damien Riegel

The scientists said I was a creature.
To my parents I was just a monster.
The newspaper called me a mutant, and the philosophers said I wasn't even human.

But I knew what I really was.

The scientists said there was an unborn child, and I went where I didn't belong, and took what its mother meant to give it.

But that's not what really happened.

I was the unborn child. I was there with the creature. It took my genes, and fed on what my mother meant to give me. It swallowed up my brain, and all that made me who I was. I should have been dead; I should have ceased to be, but I did not.

The scientists said they shouldn't have given my mother the drugs. They say they should have known what it would do. They should have known what could have happened.

They say it was genes mostly, and hormones too. We morphed, and *I became* the creature. It was an amoeba. So small and shapeless; so different from me. Yet still, we merged.

After its DNA was mixed with mine, it started taking more things of mine. My brain moved out, and went deep inside the shapeless blob of empty life. The nerves and other things followed it soon.

If ever impossibility came to life, it then did. I should have been dead; I should have ceased to be, but I did not.

When the doctor delivered me, he was horrified. He said I was dead, and the shapeless parasite had killed me.

But he was wrong! Oh, so wrong! *I* was that shapeless parasite! Only my *body* was dead! I was still alive!

The scientists say it was the hormones that went to me instead of the child, which made me grow so massively large. They say also that it was a DNA splice that let the amoeba take my brain and not kill it. Somehow it and I began to work together. Those drugs must have been very powerful.

When they examined me, they said I had some human organs. They said I had a pair of ears deep within the shapeless blob. But they never saw my brain. They marveled at what they called a "groundbreaking scientific phenomenon."

But I did not marvel. My parents did not love me, and I had no reason to marvel.

I was seeing the world, but the world could not see me. I heard them speak, and I heard them cry, but I could not answer.

I should have learned to speak and learned to walk, as any other child, but no. I could not speak no matter how smart I was. And I could walk ever since I emerged, but not like they walked. The scientists called it pseudopodia.

I did not like the scientists. None of them loved me. None of them wanted to. There were so many machines and so many devices, and some of them hurt when the scientists used them on me.

I can vaguely remember the day my parents came to see me. The scientists showed me to them. But even they did not love me. They looked like they were angry with me, and they never even spoke to me.

When I was born, I think I was half the size of a soccer ball. But when my parents came to see me, I was several times as big.

One day I had a chance to get away. There were a couple scientists around, but none of them were watching me. I pushed off from the table and bounded away as quickly as I could. Even though I was slow, so unlike humans, and even though I had lived there so long, I escaped. Once, while I was fleeing down the hall, one of them grabbed me, but I squeezed myself and slid through his grip.

I bounded out the door and fled as far as I could go, tiring but never stopping. I didn't see very many people, but I was glad that I didn't. They would have been scared of me, or hated me, as everyone else.

But I was not something to be scared of, or to hate! I was not a monster! I was created equal, just like you and your brothers and sisters. I may have been ruined and mangled and part of an inferior creature, but I was still alive! I was still made in the image of God, even though I didn't have arms and legs like you! Even though that image had been blurred and misshapen by a terrible, man-made injustice!

But the scientists didn't believe that. And neither did my parents, or the newspaper. They all said the same thing. And after a while I almost believed it.

Something in me drove me to follow certain lively sounds and smells. Though I'd never been out of that building, I for some reason wanted to follow these thick smells and cheery sounds. Most of the sounds only came at night, and the smell was very faint. I think a normal human wouldn't have been able to smell it at all.

But finally I found it, and it was beautiful. A murky green it was, and perhaps you would not have loved it, but I did. I dove into the water, ever so beautifully decorated with green floating substance, and ever so populated with tiny fluttering creatures, and larger hopping creatures.

The water was moist and refreshing, and I, for the first time in my life, just relaxed and let myself go limp, with no shape whatsoever. I floated a little and sank a little, but mostly floated.

But now that I was so relaxed, I realized how hungry I was. The scientists always fed me, and I hadn't eaten since I left.

But my hunger isn't the same as your hunger. From things I've read and heard, when you're hungry your stomach hurts and you feel a need to eat, and are drawn to food, and feel like your stomach is smaller than it should be.

But that's not what it is like for me to be hungry. I begin to feel weak. My vision (which is already very bad compared to yours, and I never have understood "colors") gets weaker. It's not as easy for me to move into different shapes, and therefore I can't walk as easily. But it doesn't hurt to be hungry, and I never crave food. If I get excited about something and forget to eat, I sometimes get so weak I don't think I can make it to food.

So, as I relaxed in the cool, pleasing swamp water, I started to feel weaker, and I knew I was very hungry. I looked around me and saw many different kinds of creatures. Some were offensive-looking, long creatures that slithered through the water. Some were fish, some were frogs, and a few were larger, furry creatures. I guessed I could probably

eat the green stuff floating on top of the water, too, but it didn't look like it'd be very satisfying.

I ate one creature, and as I digested it, I felt the strength returning to me. I was happy and contented. The only thing I wanted now was to be a human, so that my parents would love me...so that they could watch me learn to talk, and then to walk. But I was already older than those human children who were learning to walk and talk were. I was older than they were, yet I had never experienced what they had experienced. I felt cheated.

But I couldn't help being happy as I contentedly soaked in the delicious water and watched the strange creatures swim around nearby. I had everything I wanted here: enough food for the rest of my life, and this wonderful cool basin that I couldn't imagine being happy without.

I lived in that swamp for years. I mostly caught fish and eels for food. I didn't like to eat the larger furry creatures, because they moved about while I digested them, and I felt sorry for them. But feeling creatures moving inside me as I digested them didn't nauseate me. It was actually a rather pleasant experience, though that may sound horrible to you. The only thing I didn't like about it was that I knew they must be in terrible suffering if they don't die right away.

Whenever I could, I tried to find a way to kill things before eating them. Sometimes I could get a tree to fall at the right time, and I even set a number of good traps.

But more than anything, as my days passed in that beautiful swamp, I practiced taking different shapes. After time, I found that I could make myself long and thin like an eel, and stay that way for a long time, swimming about like they did.

After a matter of months, I was able to imitate all sorts of other simple creatures, such as fish. What I really wanted to do was make myself into a mammal form like a human, but I doubted I'd ever be able to do that. Most of my shapes I could only hold if I was in the water. Usually whenever I tried to do it on land, I'd fall off balance and either instinctively stretch out a pseudopodium (as the scientists called my instant arms) to catch myself, or just fall over and land on the ground.

I didn't really think I could ever make myself look like a man. It would be too complicated, and even if I could do it, I would never be able to hold it in place and walk around like one of them. And even if I *could*, I would still be that same bland color all over.

But I didn't let that ruin my happy life in the swamp. Of *course* I was lonely. Of *course* I wished I were a person. But I had *never* been a person, my parents had *never* spoken to me, and I'd never even communicated with *anyone*, except occasional gestures of pain when the cruel scientists poked or prodded in a careless way.

So, though I was not content, I had no reason not to be happy here. The beautiful green swamp was warm and comfortable, the water moist and relaxing, the creatures reassuring and edible, and everything around me so beautiful and wonderful.

I was happy! My life was perfect! The water creatures were more of friends than I had ever known, and the swamp a more precious home than I had ever known, for I could not remember what was before my birth (all of that I knew only from others' accounts).

But as years passed, I found that I *was* able to imitate land animals. I could make myself into a beaver, right down to the tail, and eventually I even learned to slap my tail on the water like they could.

It was intricate work, but I found that the more I tried to take on different shapes, the more flexible I became. I suppose you could compare it to a balloon: if a balloon could grow, but not have more air added to it, you could twist it in more exotic shapes without it bursting. That is how it was with me: the more I exercised, though I did not grow all that much bigger, I was very much more flexible, and the more I tried to do intricate forms like paws and hands, the more able I was *to* do it.

Keep in mind, though, that at this point in my life I was about the size of the man. So when I made myself into a beaver, it was a very large beaver, and the same with whatever else I tried to do. I *could* squeeze myself into a smaller shape sometimes, but never very much, and it took so much effort that it wasn't worth it.

I'll never forget the day, many years after I made my home in the swamp, when I decided to try to imitate a person. I slid out of the cool swamp water, and began to shuffle off toward the city, staying in my shapeless form so I'd be ready for my great attempt.

After taking a good look at the people without them seeing me, I went back to the swamp and tried to imitate it, using the reflection in the water to guide me.

Eventually, to my glad amazement, I found that I *could*... I *could* imitate a man!

But that joy was not nearly so wonderful as the joy that I found when I looked in through the window of a science building and heard what they were developing. I knew that, with it, I could learn to speak like a man!

When everyone had left the building and locked the door, I looked for a way in. The first thing I tried was to slide under the door, but the gap was not nearly big enough. Eventually I found that I could slide down through what looked like a chimney.

After finding a computer, I typed a message to the scientists. (I had, of course, learned to read since I began my numerous trips to the city.) Then I waited in the building, in hiding, until they had read the message. These scientists seemed to me at the time to be very different from the scientists I had grown up with. Now that I am more mature, however, I believe that they were *all* good scientists, but that the others simply did not know that I had the brain and the soul of the child they thought dead.

They were very kind and caring (not to mention fascinated with my existence). They did perform many tests that I wish they hadn't, and did experiments on me, but they were very kind about it, and treated me like a person.

But, as I had guessed, they *were* able to give me the ability to speak. The implant had a speaker, and it was partly a link with my brain and partly received input from my movements. But once I learned how to use it, I found speaking ever so easy! And now I could take on the general form of a man and truly *be* one of them! I could not yet walk among them, though, for the secret of my existence was being well kept by the scientists. This I had requested of them, so that I would not become a spectacle for the public to come see in museums and science shows. I had been very relieved when the scientists had agreed, their personal reasons being that they didn't want their work to be distracted by the press. I guess I was very lucky to run into them instead of a less dedicated group.

It took a genetic experiment to give me the ever-so-potent ability to change my skin pigmentation at will. At first I was skeptical, and thought perhaps the scientists were

joking, when they told me it could be done. But once they had finished their initial experiments and assured me it *was* a plausible plan, I was convinced, and very happy.

It took me years, but eventually I was able to fully imitate a human. I eventually could walk among them, as one of them, and whenever a great evil came upon us, I was always ready to throw aside my fallacy of being a man, and save the day with my flexible membrane and generic abilities.

I made many friends among the humans, and, despite my embittered upbringing, found that I *could* love these humans, as I had longed for so long ago. The kind scientists helped me to learn to get along socially with humans, and to battle the tendency within me to think that all men are cold and heartless like those that I knew in my early life.

Though it had taken me much effort, my frozen heart had been melted by the love of the kind scientists, and now I could have friends just as any other man. Granted, though, often I would lose my focus and my shape would distort, which frightened many people, and I never could understand their sense of touch, and often found great difficulty in causing my face to show what people expected to see.

After a while, I wanted to do more than just be an ordinary man. I was content, and I was very happy, but I saw that my mutation could be used for great good, even though it had brought so much evil. At first I looked into law enforcement, and became known as a superhero by the newspapers, though they never could catch me to interview me. (I did not believe it would be wise to reveal myself to the public, lest criminals learn about me and beware of me.)

But I found that catching criminals did not satisfy my desire to create justice. Eventually I found that what I really wanted to do was to help people in situations like the one I had been in when I was a child.

Though very few people are born into an amoeba, there are orphans with no family, and there are abandoned children in third-world countries. I spent many years of my life trying to give to them a better chance.

But then I began to see how many more people there are in this world who *have* perfect lives, *far* more, than the people in this world with shattered lives.

And now, I adjure you, I beg of you, to look at your arms and your legs and be glad that you have them. You are not a shapeless creature who must struggle to form something that looks like a hand!

When you eat something, you can taste it, and it satisfies you. You are human. You are what you are meant to be. If you are a child, you can play with your friends. And more than anything else, be glad for the *relationships* in your life. For there is very little that is more precious than the love of your parents, and the love of your friends and siblings.

And finally, even though I was in a shapeless, empty form, I was still made in the image of God. Many people do not realize what an amazing thing it is to have a soul with true life. And as I grew in my relationship with humans, and found that humans actually *can* love me, even though I'm so different, I found out something else even so much more true. I found that *God* loves me, and that, even though my body is the result of a horrible mistake of man, He still loves me. Though I am a corruption and a ruined, contorted mutation of man, I've found that *all* men are even more twisted contortions of what they were meant to be.

God's intentions for making man were to make a life form that could be *truly* alive, and understand Him, and choose to worship Him, and choose to love Him. But man fell, and sinned, and so many men throughout the world choose to continue to live apart from God. And I believe that it is a *much* more horrible corruption for man to sin and to forget about God, than it was for my body to be merged with a shapeless animal. You could argue that some good came from my being what I was, but *no* good has *ever* come from man being a race of sinners.

Note: this story is obviously totally fiction. None of these events ever happened. But I do believe what I said about man being a corrupt, debilitated form of what God made him. Furthermore, I believe; I know, that God does still love this man, as twisted as he is, and wants man to come to Him and accept His forgiveness and become what he was intended to be.