Next, Please

Josh stood under the shining ‘Personality Purveyor’ sign in the market, serving customers. This was how he spent most days, surrounded by vials promising to change your life. Within these glass vials were chemical patches that, when applied to your neck, changed your hormone balance. In his view, vials weren’t appropriate containers for patches, but apparently the tradition was important — or maybe the advertising was too expensive to change. When you’re an essential service, rebranding isn’t worth the investment. Customers will come.

‘Instinct’ had become a bad word. Any inkling of natural feeling must be fought in order to maintain society. Therefore, customers’ needs were predictable. Politicians purchased Persuasive Pride for speeches. Businesspeople sought Forever Fortune for pitch meetings. Young adults bought Sensual Seduction and Lusty Love for date after date. Parents looked for Enduring Energy to keep up with little ones and teenagers alike. Artists took advantage of everything they could, hoping that inspiration could be manufactured in a world where experiences were fabrications. Everyone wanted the shop’s products to fill some hole in their life.

And then there were, as Josh called them, the Exceptions.

The Exceptions stood out to Josh, though he couldn’t name why. Was it the glimmer of life behind their eyes? Their changing facial expressions, juxtaposed with the casts of everyone else’s? The fact that some could barely afford their purchases? Or maybe it was simply the high collars hiding their recreational activities.

Things he couldn’t see and the people he couldn’t understand fascinated Josh. Conscious shame and embarrassment didn’t exist anymore, but Josh still felt a slight physical discomfort knowing what each customer purchased. He felt that he knew them better than their families did. Finding the right vial and ringing up each person felt quite robotic yet intimate, as did understanding their needs. Still, he never cared as much about those customers as he did about the ones he couldn’t read. He found some sort of pleasure in the enigmas.

‘Next, please.’

‘Hi,’ the customer said in a hushed tone. ‘I need number seven from the *other* selection.’ He was an Exception. His high collar and slight eye twitch gave him away.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean,’ Josh replied. ‘What colour is Shire Lane?’

‘Forest green.’

Josh nodded. Locked inside the till were vials of a different variety. Their labels didn’t have catchy names, only numbers. They were forbidden outside of the rigorous prescription system, but shops and customers agreed to keep quiet if the customer had the right password. High risk, high reward on both ends. When the government had hired scientists to engineer all emotions deemed negative out of humanity, some people objected, saying that the bad things are necessary in order to live fully. A deal was struck that vials of negativity would be produced, but only in short supply and for special cases. Their advertisement was forbidden. Josh’s knowledge came with the job. He had the most common ones committed to memory, but certainly not all of them. Seven was heartbreak.

‘Here you go,’ Josh said with a crooked smile. He struggled to act natural.

‘Thanks.’ The man paid exact change and walked away. He didn’t even flinch.

On his way home from work that night, Josh noticed an unusual, flickering light down an alleyway. He slowed, listening for activity. He heard young voices, some of them quiet, some nearly shouting. He couldn’t tell how many people there were, so he crept closer, staying in the shadows. He wasn’t sure this was smart, but it gave him something new to do. Around the back of a building, a group surrounded a small fire. There were only eight of them, but it sounded as though ten conversations were going on at once. Next to the fire was a box containing many vials. Josh could recognise the products from a distance, both standard and password-protected.

‘Welcome.’ The voice came from behind Josh and made his jaw tighten ever so slightly. Josh turned to see the customer from earlier that day.

‘Hi.’ A subtle discomfort crept down Josh’s spine.

‘I’m Warren.’ His tone was neutral, but he was physically imposing in the dark alleyway.

‘Josh. We— we met earlier.’

‘I know.’ Warren stepped toward the group, still caught up in their own business. ‘Care to join?’

‘What’s going on?’ Josh followed without thinking.

‘Josh, meet everyone. Everyone? Josh.’ Warren gestured, though no one needed him to point out the new guy.

‘Hey, I recognise you,’ a girl in the back said.

‘Me too!’ chimed in a few others.

Warren looked at Josh expectantly.

‘I work at Personality Purveyor. I recognise some of you too.’ He shifted awkwardly, unsure why he’d chosen to engage. ‘Though I didn’t know you were all Exceptions.’

‘What?’ Warren asked.

‘Oh,’ Josh hesitated. Their stares put him on edge. ‘I call certain customers Exceptions when they don’t fit the categories our shop is used to.’

‘Exceptions.’ Warren paused, thinking. ‘I like that.’

‘Me too,’ the girl from before said. ‘I’m Veronica.’ She stepped forward, and Josh couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she looked in the fire’s glow. He felt drawn to her. He made a mental note to talk to her later.

‘I’m assuming by now you know what’s going on.’ Warren said, staring Josh down. ‘Can we trust you?’

‘Yeah, it’s fine. I follow the rules, but I don’t worship them. I just need my job, and passing the emotion test would be too hard if I used patches.’

‘Well then, Josh,’ Veronica said with a smile. ‘Welcome.’

‘What exactly is this?’ Josh asked a few nights later.

‘We don’t think the regulated emotions are enough, so we take liberties,’ Veronica explained. ‘We started by going through the system — using the standard patches, getting prescriptions for the stronger ones, the usual stuff. But it wasn’t enough. We didn’t feel like we were living.’ She pointed to another girl near the fire. ‘Alex overheard her ex talking about the passwords for alternative vials. Once we had a way in, it was easy to get what we wanted.’

‘How did you all meet?’

‘We just did.’ Josh’s silence prompted her to keep talking. ‘You know how you spotted something in us at the shop? That’s how. We saw it in each other at school, at work, on the street, wherever.’

‘You just feel like using certain patches, and then you do?’

‘Basically, yeah.’

‘And you pass the emotion tests?’

‘It’s easy to learn tricks for the weekly ones at work. We just have to convince them that we’re neutral. It’s the random testing that’s harder, but we have our ways. I can share them, if you want to experiment.’

‘No, thanks. I’m fine.’ He shifted awkwardly. Maintaining eye contact for this long was foreign to him. ‘What about the dangers?’

‘These things don’t have warning labels, since mixing and experimenting is illegal. If we get caught, we’re going to prison for a long time, and we’ll be permanently barred from patches.’ As she said this, she grabbed a patch and stuck it on her neck. ‘Oh, plus there’s always the risk of death.’ She smiled and walked away. ‘I guess that’s life!’ She shouted back to him.

Josh knew the risks, but he wanted to hear her talk about them anyway. He knew that he shouldn’t understand the desire to mess with this stuff, but he did. He didn’t feel it, but he understood. All the emotions he had repressed for the last twenty years were trapped under a thin layer of paint that was starting to peel.

Over the next several weeks, Josh got to know the rest of the group. He didn’t come every night, but neither did anyone else. The meeting place changed, which made it a bit difficult to find the group. Warren and Veronica seemed to be the leaders.

‘You should probably shop at Personality Purveyor less. It connects us, and people might get suspicious.’ Josh paused, but no one replied. ‘I can’t afford to lose my job.’

Warren nodded. ‘We can send others to get more from other stores.’

‘Thanks.’

Josh wandered around the group for hours, but he couldn’t keep his eyes off Veronica, even more so than usual. He watched her spiral through shaking sobs, uncontrollable laughter, complete relaxation, and intense flirtation that he would have given anything to receive. She was stunning. When he finally approached her, she appeared emotionally blank – the poster child for ‘enlightened’ humanity.

‘Hi,’ Josh said, hesitantly sitting on the ground across from her. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine.’ Veronica stared next to his head, just above his shoulder. She was sitting against a building, and Josh thought the building might be the only thing keeping her upright. ‘I thought feeling everything would help. I thought it would give my life meaning. I guess it did. I would have no stories, no memories without this. No friends, even. It’s hard to know if it was all worth it. How could we ever have gotten rid of emotions?’ She looked at him with the eyes of someone who had lived a thousand times. Her tears glistened.

Josh’s voice caught in his throat. ‘I don’t know.’ He had never listened this intently to anyone. He still hadn’t used any illegal patches, but, seeing her like this, he felt something in his stomach. Something new. Something natural. And he didn’t want to push it down.

‘I needed this. I don’t regret anything. I’m so glad I met you, Josh. It was all worth it.’ She reached for his hand.

‘What are you talking about?’ He wasn’t sure she was truly with him.

‘Do something for yourself, Josh.’ Her voice grew faint, and her speech slurred. ‘Live a little. Rules only matter if you let them. You have too much potential to keep following them.’

Her eyes closed, and she slumped against the building.

‘Veronica? Veronica?’ Josh felt his body react, and for the first time in his life, he didn’t fight it.

‘Josh, step away.’ Warren sped over. Everyone stared.

‘What happened?’ Josh’s stomach was turning, and his hands shook.

‘She probably…’ Warren moved her collar. ‘Damn it, Veronica.’ He ripped one patch off his neck and replaced it with a different one. He took a moment to breathe.

‘Did she…?’ Josh couldn’t find the words. Nothing felt right to say.

‘Yes. She knows too much for it to have been an accident.’

Silence.

‘Let’s get some more hands and move the body.’ Warren motioned, and two people came over to them.

‘What are you doing?’ Josh shouted, confused.

‘We have to hide the body. There’s a dumpster a block over that’ll do.’

Josh couldn’t believe any of it. He watched them carry away Veronica, or whatever was left of her. How could they do this to her? Wasn’t she worth more than that? He felt sick.

Warren put his hand on Josh’s shoulder. ‘You’re almost a full member of the group.’ He held out a patch in his palm.

Josh hesitated. ‘I get it now. I have nothing, but she had something.’

Josh took the patch.