

Quarantine

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These days, Sy has to be careful. Everything is sealed and sterilised, boiled and disinfected; but caution is a way of life now. Or at least a way of avoiding death.

Sy's building, a twenty-storey edifice of wet grey concrete the colour of angry cloud, is hermetically isolated from its neighbours on the Marylebone Road, which have different contagion indices. The mirrored black structure to the left is occupied by Stage Three Symptomatics and bears the double blue warning lines. The right-hand block is a smaller Victorian building housing asymptomatic Carriers. In a way, these are more dangerous than the S-3s, as they could be mistaken for being Clean; but superstitiously, Sy regards the venerable brick town-house with more affection than the tower of dark glass.

Love, even companionship, is elusive in the current environment. Sy smiles at her reflection. She doesn't aim so high as the poets people are reading again, entranced by tales of knights sworn to serve maidens in high, impregnable towers. Her teeth are even and small, the colour of polished bone. It would be crazy to expect real love, physical love, here and now. Sy rejects the lipstick: red might remind her date of the second, hypersanguine stage of Kiehl's syndrome. Not very romantic. Online relationships have increased, but flesh-and-blood partners are a rarity. Concealer over the blue skin beneath her eyes and thin black lines around them. Love is harder than ever. Long hair twisted into a chignon, stabbed tight with a syringe-shaped pin: surgical chic.

Sy's panel burrs. She smacks the button beside the bathroom mirror.

"Yes?"

"CleanCabs confirming your 19.30 booking Miss Terrill S. Please reconfirm."

Sy pouts and rolls her eyes.

"Reconfirm. No condition change, MedInsure unexpired. Happy?"

"Thank-you Miss Terrill S. Good health."

It amuses and annoys Sy that although the CleanCabs woman is not a machine, she still chooses to talk like one. Perhaps she feels it might confer some magical immunity from the terrors of organic existence. There's a lot of it about. Cyborgs and the Amended are more visible on the panelshows: entertainment, not news, naturally. News reports are full of suicides and untouchables walking suitless in the plaguey air, too far gone to know or care where they are. Driving through open streets, even in the sterilised taxi tanks, is discouraged unless strictly necessary. The roads are eerily empty; the wide West End pavements and lofty arcades of the City full of cardboard tenements. Fires leap from oil drums in winter; corrupted, semi-naked bodies lie prostrate in the heat of summer. Thrill-seekers go down among the dispossessed sometimes; tooled-up lone stalkers, slumming it for a nihilistic buzz. Suited functionaries, garbagemen and post office workers, still perform the basic municipal tasks, except that nowadays they are armed. Not that the sick and dying can do much to an integrated suit, but without armour or weaponry, the paranoia can get you before the untouchables do.

The panel tinkles the news sponsors' signature tune, and Jace Gohan's warm, plastic tones ooze out. He is Amended: you can hardly tell unless you look closely, but under the studio lights his skin has a nacreous sheen and his third eyelids flicker momentarily when he looks down. Sy gets a little twinge in her belly whenever she sees this: the Amended are more than human, removed from all the dirt and

vulnerability humanity implies. Cleanliness is sexy: words like *machine* and *vacuum* have become erotically charged since the disease's spread. The obsession with hygiene started as a necessity and has become a fetish. All the breaking pornstars are Amended; a few are cyborgs too. Smooth sharp contours; total efficiency. The Amended aspire to be angels, and in another generation or so, science and the panelshows whisper, they will be half-way there. Not for the first time, Sy wishes her parents had amended her. She could have been almost invulnerable, almost indestructible; almost perfect. She studies the black sweep of her eyeliner, the gold on her lids: today she is wearing 1969. Almost perfect.

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Sy can't remember the last time she left her building, let alone saw the streets. Perhaps it had been for her mother's funeral; but even then, the windows of the hired limousine had been mirrored on the inside. The car had told her it was so the bereaved didn't get upset. Sy had turned away from her distorted reflection, wondering what could be more distressing than the deformed iteration of her face that stared back at her, oozing down the curved glass like a tear.

They stop once beside a statue of Eros, who leans half-cocked from his platform, bent and battered in the Celibacy Riots of ten years ago. Sy's heart throbs unevenly as on the edge of her vision, something pale limps along the gutter. Sy panics before realising it's just the wind fooling with a discarded sterile glove. Its plastic is torn but it still waves white at her from the side of the road. She imagines the horror of losing sterility, of the diseased air surging over skin and into lungs: of knowing you will never be Clean again. It must be like drowning. Sy checks her biomonitor, but it blinks normal.

A bar flashes past as the cab starts up again. The windows are bright, bulletproof, full of light; the people inside are twisted by the curve and thickness of the glass as they shoot coy glances at themselves to an audience of empty streets. Mirrored on the inside. The stripes on the sign are white, Clean. So many all together, a vivarium of the rarest, most endangered species.

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The barman mixing her cocktail is suitless, obsequious, understatedly handsome. The bar is underground, a wide white room that, with the appropriate codes, leads into the once-famous restaurant behind. Sy has arrived half an hour early, unaware and uncaring that the traditional female entrance must be made late and loud if at all. She and a few uneasy-looking couples are the only occupants: the décor is laboratory and her cocktail arrives in a Pyrex container marked with fluid measures. Every time they hear the swoosh of the bar's airlock over the glassy background music, everyone whips round ferally to observe the new arrival. The bar's sweeper system excludes those who do not belong: the blue-strippers, the contagious yellows. Sy is claustrophobic: a pair of bare-skulled women in surgical greens are far too close, exchanging gossip and sly, charged glances at the next table but one. Sy heads abruptly for the bathroom to take her pills: calm, contraceptive, and the other one. She hopes they will not kiss: lesbianism doesn't disturb her but physical contact does. The last human being Sy touched was her dead mother: the latex of her glove as she stroked the cold cheek had left a ghost of white powder on the corpse's skin. She had not died of the disease, unusually, but the funeral director had murmured through his mask that Sy was better safe than sorry.

Alex sits at the counter, still as his own photograph. Unusually, he hadn't sent the standard 3D download, but a black-and-white digitised headshot, like an actor might use. He and Sy had messaged at first: once, he had called her, but she hated the barren silences that swooped in on them like vultures in the middle of conversations. She is used to listening, not speaking: her words come out of hiding in their own sweet time.

His profile is old-fashioned, like one of the retro cocktails they mix here: a sharp nose and chin, very black hair, a reassuring starburst of smile lines around the eyes. The music is louder, or her ears have adjusted to the bathroom's silence, and she can barely hear her own voice as she says his name hesitantly, like a password. He doesn't turn round. In the angle of the bar mirror he studies the few lone women guarding tables for two with ferocious hope. Though it's more difficult for men to catch the disease, it hits them faster and harder, and once they have it they always die sooner. There aren't many healthy ones left. Half the couples in the bar are female. Despite government breeding incentives it's not children women want these days: just someone with whom not to have them.

He searches for Sy's face, for he has seen her just as she has him, through a glass darkly: he's looking for his tower-trapped maiden, his pure princess. Her breathing is fast and shallow as a bird's as she taps his shoulder, and extends her hand to shake, lowering her eyes to a point a fraction below his own. Even through her gloves, his hand when he grips hers has an unsettling warmth.

They are served in their decontaminated and sealed-off booth, by a human waiter who looks like Jace Gohan and seems to Sy's trained eye as though he too might be Amended. The thought warms her chest as no amount of Alex's smiling and careful compliments can. She is not sure what in him she distrusts, as he flicks carelessly, bare-fingered, through the leather menus (why aren't they laminated? Sy

does not remove her gloves) and talks about his work: something worthy, forgettable. He asks about her job and she tells him she works from home (who doesn't?) for the Department of Statistics, monitoring population, demographics, rates of birth, marriage and death, contagion indices. She doesn't tell him that always beneath the ebb and flow of numbers and the staggering ascent of graph lines she can sense, almost see, the disease moving like a shark underwater; like a worm beneath skin.

He smiles at her and says it must be interesting.

They order. She's used to home-cooking, an old-fashioned skill her mother taught her, which she indulges partly out of respect for the dead and partly to make the long hours of the lonely day go faster. She orders only vegetables tonight: although in theory animals cannot be carriers, she has seen the rise of the disease, the blue stripes lapping at her door like waves, and she doesn't know how not to be afraid. One of the things that attracted her to Alex, allowed her to imagine his monochrome face opposite hers at the breakfast table, on the sofa, perhaps even in the bed, was that he too chafed against the institutionalised fear: found it more pathological than the disease itself. Sy is not superstitious or ignorant: she knows the exact figures and is still afraid and hates herself for it. Even the calm pill has not dampened her anxiety enough to stop her shrinking instinctively from the touch of uncovered skin, or allow her to eat meat in a strange place.

They both start at the hiss of decontaminant in booth's atrium, but it is only the pearl-skinned waiter with their starters. As he slips them onto the glass table Sy studies his hands: they are smooth and impregnable as latex. Amended skin is difficult to tear or break, a far better first line of defence against pathogens than mere evolution could have designed.

Alex orders champagne. She isn't sure whether to be charmed by his impulsiveness or a little alarmed by it. He is not cautious, but perhaps that is a good

thing? Sy revolves the concept in her head. Looked at logically, three-dimensionally, if he is what she is not, if he is up to her down and vice-versa, might they not complement each other better? She imagines them fitting together as neatly as protein and receptor: two pieces of the same biological jigsaw. The calm pill's effects seem to be enhanced by the champagne: she meets Alex's eye and begins to see that, unlike Gohan's sincere, all-embracing gaze, his is hers alone. It is the closest to closeness she has felt since her mother, and at last it is not like looking into the dead eye of a mirror.

She is relaxed enough to smile as she decants her with-alcohol capsule: she would have popped it with the others but hadn't thought they would be drinking. Alcohol mixed with her usual regimen of drugs has unpredictable, unpleasant side-effects: the capsule negates them, for a few hours at least. He smiles back but doesn't produce a matching container, nor ask for a pill. Sy is puzzled: to drink unprotected is more than incautious, it's reckless.

'Where are yours?' she asks. He shakes his head gently.

'No need.'

'What do you mean?' The agency promised it would never match her with anyone on alternative therapy or at an advanced, drug-impervious stage. She feels her throat closing up and the pill lodges in her throat, its soluble plastic case slowly melting. Blue stripes shiver before her eyes. She who has been so careful. No.

He smiles again and pulls his contagion indices out of his shirt, a gesture as blatant and shocking as stripping naked in the vacant streets. Her own indices, the dogtags hidden between her breasts, are striped like a barber's pole with the red of remission. His are a blank slate: stripeless white.

She leaps up and backs away, cringing as far into the corner of the room as she can. Tears clutch at her choked throat. She yells at him, incoherently, to go away, to stay away. He stares and does not move.

She had been so cautious, chosen the place so prudently: pleasant, discreet, remitters only. No. Remitters or above: what would be the point in refusing a Clean client, if they chose to come in? Because no-one Clean and in their right mind would choose to, of course. She thinks of their hour in the booth, together alone, breathing one another's air, her infected words entering at ear and mouth, at eye and wound, his blood dirtying with the disease.

She opens her eyes and he is almost on her, his Clean fingers brushing her face. She flinches violently and shrieks. The booth is soundproofed by a walled vacuum for the sake of privacy and hygiene.

'I wanted to meet you,' says Alex, as though it were the simplest and most obvious thing in the world for people to meet in person and like each other and touch mouth to mouth at the end of the night, like some Hollywood fantasy from last century. His hand touches her cheek, hot to her cold skin as fever. She has not breath left to scream: she gasps and shudders. She looks at him with the hate and despair of a trapped and tricked animal, the despair and hate of the dying for the suicide.

'You're Clean,' she spits.

'I'm not afraid.' He strokes her cheek. She imagines a ghost of white on a corpse's skin. 'Not if you're not.'

But she is.

END