

Click

As soon as Mother Desired, I could feel it. A click, that switched my entire being to what she wanted me to be.

Some twentieth-century fringe psychologists, if they ever got to experience what was in my mind, might have called these iterations of my being *alters*. But for me, it was as real as the diaphragm I needed to breathe. In an instant, I was someone else, yet still Mother's daughter. For Mother.

Late at night, I read archived Mummy Blog posts from the twenty-first century that spoke of mothers' heightened heart rate in response to their baby's cry. It was the closest description I had come across to the feeling of being Desired. Reading that made me realise there was a me-self that was separate from Mother.

I stood up and walked out of the room where, while I was home, I waited until Mother Desired.

Mother was in the living room, sitting on last decade's sofa, her shoulders slumped, flannel shirt loosely hanging off them. I felt Mother's defeat and weariness, of the metaphorical handcuffs of employment, of barely make a dent on our quality of living.

'Ma, you do so much for this family,' a voice came out of me, echoed as if shouting through old aluminium cans connected by a length of twine.

I sat down by Mother's side and stretched out my arms, holding her to my chest. Mother's wasted muscles pressed against my budding breasts.

'I appreciate you,' the voice – my voice said again. 'What would I do without you?'

The voice – my voice's tone was hollow as I continued to placate Mother.

Eventually I felt Mother's mood lighten, like the city lights over a highway at dusk. That was when I knew it was time to start making dinner. Mother looked after outside matters whereas, if I was not getting Educated, I looked after all that was inside, a space we called Domi.

Saturday Morning

The Oceanic Metropolis was a sprawling city, fifteen minutes by hyper-bullet from the Docks where Mother and I lived. On Saturdays I accompanied her during rotating coffee dates with various Aunties. The places we went to were cost effective as each entrance had free aerosolised caffeine dispensers.

Today we were at Addiction, a café attached the Oceanic Botanic Gardens, one of the few green spaces not protected by cooling domes. We sat at the European patio-style table closest to the caffeine spray. The sharp, sweet aroma was everywhere, more potent due to the humidity. I jabbed my bamboo straw into the thin wedge of lemon at the bottom of my glass of water. The flesh came apart easily in disintegrated juice sacs with a couple of seeds mixed in. As the minutes skulked by, I became more uncomfortable, conscious of the net-like pattern on the aluminium outdoor chair pressing into my thighs, bare below my pleated mini-skirt.

But the Desire kept me busy clicking.

For Auntie Rose, a child-free woman, immaculately dressed in a linen pantsuit and silk shirt, I was quiet and shy. I only spoke when I was spoken to. And when I was spoken to, I responded precisely and politely to comments about how big I had grown. Mother's Desire indicated that children (although my mind-voice, that is, my *real* voice did not consider myself a child), were safe and unobtrusive, waiting around until awkward adults forgot our existence.

Auntie Mai, a mother of young children and I had a perfect five-minute conversation, purely consisting of small talk:

‘How are the kids?’

‘Oh gosh they have grown. I can see that from your JPEG. They’re very cute.’

‘Is your basil growing satisfactorily?’

After this exchange, Auntie Mai turned to Mother. I clicked back to being demure and quiet.

Auntie Mai intermittently glanced at me, ‘And she is on the oldest Instrumentation?’

‘Yes,’ Mother said. Her tone was cautious. Through the Desire I could feel a rise in her heart rate and a tingle in the pores under her armpits. Her hands became sweaty, and she wiped them on her linen capris.

What is it? Mother thought. How are you judging me?

Auntie Mai’s outback-red lipstick lips broke into a toothy smile, ‘Remarkable!’ She clapped her freshly manicured hands. ‘Who says vintage technology is dead?’ She turned to me, ‘Your mother did so well with you. You’re a lucky girl who will Care well in life.’

I smiled, demure. The coffee fumes were making my head spin.

‘I don’t know how you do it privately, all on your own as well,’ Auntie Mai turned back to Mother. ‘I personally am glad I signed mine’s rights to the Army – they installed all the Modifications I would ever need. They’re very disciplined young things.’

Education

Subjects of Instrumentation like me formed the majority of each class, of each school, in Oceania. There were sensors on each doorway, and we responded as Desired by the AI Educationalists during Education hours. The few Unmodifieds were often troublemakers, needing Real Educationalists to step in.

A few years ago, Education Oceania trialled a school run by only AI Educationalists. But the program locked an Unmodified kid in a classroom for detention. They were forgotten over the

weekend and, being diabetic, they died when their insulin pump ran out of medication. So, every school across the city now had to have at least one Real Educationalist. How odd that of all organs, pancreases were so difficult to biosynthesise.

Parents of Unmodifieds generally valued things like outdoor play and exploration, fulfilled by twenty-first century style overnight excursions. I had never been on one, of course, because Mother needed me to Care.

I wondered why we needed to go and be Educated in such an archaic way as sit in a classroom. Could everything I needed to know be linked into my chip instead? But I was told by AI Educator 265 it would not be fair on the Unmodifieds if that was standard. Education was a human right, Modified or not. Additionally, the knowledge linkage technology was not quite certified on an Oceanic level yet.

When I entered High School, I appreciated my time away from Caring. The AI's Desire was nowhere near as demanding as Mother's. All I had to do was sit in my seat and act interested. Unmodifieds needed breaks from learning every two hours otherwise they started acting out. Because of my vintage chip, I was probably the closest to them cognitively and emotionally. It made sense they gravitated towards me during their breaks.

Abcde, her name a testament to how lazy and unoriginal her Bio-parent was, came up to me second term and asked, 'What's it like having that chip in you?'

I looked up from my Vegemite sandwich, 'What do you mean?'

'What's it like? You have to do what your parents want right? But what does it feel like?'

'Mother,' I corrected her, as she sat down beside me on the cold aluminium bench. The head-voice, my head-voice, ticked over the question for a few seconds before I gave up, 'I don't know. I've never known any different. I know what Mother wants and I do it because it's the only thing to do.'

Abcde looked at me with wide eyes before turning away to look down at the black bitumen of the break area. ‘I guess there’s really not that much difference between us. I don’t need a chip to know when my parents are upset though. I just don’t feel good when they’re mad, you know? Like how I feel when their face looks like this.’

Her face scowled like a character in the PEAR MOTION SYSTEM game, Angry Wombats. A rip off of the early 21st century game of a similar with the birds. The expression was so pronounced, I laughed. It was spontaneous and sudden, gone before the AI Educationalists could even register it.

That night was the first time I stayed up beyond my recommended Instrumentation and found those Mummy Blogs.

Abcde

‘What’s being tired like?’

It was lunchtime. Abcde was fighting back the yawns. I could see her cheeks stretching and her jaw opening and closing under the soft medium beige skin of her jaw. The AI Educationalist sprayed her with water last period, out of the remote-controlled fountain that could pop up at any moment from the desks. Everyone except the Unmodifieds and I laughed, pressured by the AI Desire. Lately, Desire, from anyone was a little easier to push away.

‘You don’t get tired?’

I considered it. ‘I think I do. But the chip just stimulates more adrenaline and I wake up again,’ I shrugged.

‘Well, it’s like there’s a blanket on me and I just want to crawl into bed. But like a weighted blanket. But I can also be mind-tired and that’s different. Like there’s neo-cotton wool

blocking my thoughts.’ Abcde muffled another yawn. ‘I sometimes wish my parents had just installed the Instrumentation in me. It’s so embarrassing having this body sometimes.’

She pressed on a pimple that was red and swollen, underneath a yellow pus plug. Subjects of Instrumentation did not have pimples, and menstrual cycles were regular as soon as we turned twelve. I did have to take hormone modulators for a few months, though, because of my old chip.

‘You’ve got freedom though. Choice. Not Mother or their Desires in your head.’ I glared behind her at the AI Educationalist, rolling around the outdoor grounds on their tracks. I pushed the feeling down before they could register it.

‘Mmm,’ Abcde said. ‘You know, you could ask Misty what being tired feels like. I might be different, weird.’

‘Do you ask any of the others about their chips?’

‘Yeah fair. You got me there,’ she laughed. Her laugh was as natural and clear as the call of a Bellbird.

Differentiation

‘Do you want me to die? Is that it?’

Mother’s complexion was pale for a woman of Asian ancestry. Pink undertones, like the skin of a water apple, a fruit I had never seen in real life. The pink was typically preferred because it was feminine, soft; she had to be protected and not go out into the sun, especially in Oceania where the ozone layer had shrunk steadily since the 20th century.

But today Mother’s face was puffy, her eyes rimmed with red, sunk into her face. Mother’s thin lips quivered; spittle hung from the corners of her mouth.

My hands, fisted in my pockets were freckled and brown. Mother might have got what she wanted with my Instrumentation, but my phenotype had not been altered. Because she did not have enough money when Bio-Father walked out.

So, I was dark and muscled and did not look like her, except for my eyes.

‘I just,’ the Desire screamed and my mind voice punched it again and again until it came as my outside voice, ‘want to go on the school camp like Misty, Abcde and Glassthorn!’ It came out with more force than I thought it would, a deep-bellied roar.

Mother’s voice in response came out as cold as aluminium composite, left outside in winter. ‘I got you Modified, brought you to existence, so you and I could have a decent life.’ She spat out the word existence as if it was an unexpected lemon peel in her food. ‘And you now go and listen to those Umodified freaks,’ she said.

She did not say what she wanted to. She did not have to. I knew at that moment, she wished I had never been born. The sense of her disgust and disappointment lingered in my digestive tract, even after she left the room.

My legs moved me to my bedroom, my usual place. But my head-voice drowned her Desire out with what I could only describe as discordant music, screeching.

Off

The Desire fell to the background level for the night. Mother must have fallen asleep at last.

After our fight earlier in the week, I was taken out of Education for “extra Domi duties”.

I had no idea when Mother would let me back. It could not be too long, because the Authorities would start buzzing-by, a major inconvenience.

But for now, I enjoyed the darkness and stillness of my mind-body. I reached for my room remote and closed the door, as slowly and softly as the controls allowed. I breathed out the air I had been holding.

Closing my eyes, I focussed on my body – mine, untouched by another's Desire. My toes were cold and distant, my fingers were closer, heavier, with will.

A hand-my hand reached down into my underwear and felt the warm, moist lips between my legs. My fingers moved up until it found the spot, a bump that when I pressed on it, sent a tingle, like electricity through me.

In the past, I had usually stopped there but tonight I kept moving my fingers and hand, slow and careful first, then faster. Abcde's face, her lips, jaw, soft hair moving in and out of focus in my mind-sight.

The electricity built inside my pelvis and then released until I bucked against the mattress and let out a gasp. My mind was buzzing, as if it was a highway streetlight. There had been a moment when I had felt out of my own body and get never so much in control of it. It was my desire, raw and unmodified.

I opened my eyes as my heart thumped. I lay there for minutes, as my breath quietened and my heartbeat slowed. Eventually my body-mind feel dark and silent again.

I did not want to go to the bathroom and risk waking up Mother, so I licked my saltiness off my fingers. I sniffed them. They smelt faintly of fresh yoghurt, not bad but not like the Dettol of home and school.

The same hand reached up and searched under my hair, a centimetre or town above the nape of my neck until I felt another bump. It was hard and almost octagonal but if I pressed harder and ran my fingers around its sides, I could tell it was an eight-point star. The Instrumentation, linked from infancy to my nervous system.

I ran my fingers around and over it, as I had touched my clitoris moments before. If I didn't know how far and deep the whole Instrument lay, I could have thought it would have been as easy to remove as slicing through the flesh of a lemon and popping out its seeds.