

Template

Davina stared at her naked body in the smart mirror. She could remember nothing of the journey home and her mind still bordered on numb. The tears had stopped, leaving both cheeks striped with mascara, and she could feel rage building where before there had just been witless acceptance. Her image was partly obscured by the rosy reflection of the flashing neon sign across the way, but not enough to hide the match indicator in the top left-hand corner, which read 80 percent. By rights it should have been enough -- was enough -- but she knew reclassification always held an element of personal perspective. Quality control they called it, 'though free reign to shaft anyone you didn't like the look of was closer to the mark. She could only assume that the adjudicator had an issue with some aspect of her countenance or attitude. Maybe he thought her eyes were too close together, or felt she didn't carry herself with the optimum balance of confidence and obsequiousness. Or perhaps he'd just got out of bed the wrong side that morning. Whatever, it made no difference now.

Eighty percent of perfection, or at least what was decreed to be perfection, which, in reality, amounted to the same thing. Eighty percent. She had worked to achieve that figure all her adult life. For nearly twenty years it had been her touchstone; the only thing that mattered. Her eyes started to fill again, but she focused on the fury inside and the tears held back. She had been so certain -- had convinced herself -- that this time she would crack it; that at last she would be classified Marginal. She was close. More than close, she was there. The numbers said so. She had felt as if she must explode as she held her breath in advance of the decision, but then she'd looked in the adjudicator's eyes and she knew. Her lungs had emptied with a noise like a deflating balloon and despite herself she had cried out. She had hung her head in anguish and barely heard the adjudicator tell her, in stilted, formal, tones, that she had failed

and must keep her Sub-par classification. Only three bids for advancement were permitted, so, two down, one to go. Screw up next time and she would be condemned to spend the rest of her life as an SP -- shit job; shit pay; shit home. Nothing to work towards any more. No light on the horizon. No possibility of redemption. Basically, she would be fucked.

When she was classified SP at sixteen, she was physically sick. She knew she had no chance of being rated Normative, but she'd hoped and expected to follow her parents, who had both been clear Marginals. Mum was a bit of a looker; touching 90 percent of the Norm. Dad had his good points, but rated just a little more than 82 percent; barely over the Marginal line. She'd hardly remembered her dad, who had walked out years back, but she had been desperate not to let her mum down. She would never forget her face when she told her the news. Her mum had tried to be brave, accepting, but then her face had crumpled. Ever after she had seemed diminished, desensitised, turned inwards. She had worked herself into debt and exhaustion trying to ensure that Davina would be classified Marginal, but it wasn't to be. Genetics had dealt her a bum hand and with the cost of enhancements, the only tinkering her mother could afford had got her nowhere near the Marginal template. Her mother had blamed herself to the end. In a way, it had been a blessing when the tornadoes took her a couple of years back.

Davina's gaze took in the templates now, in the mirror. An outline of the female archetype was marked out in glowing green. The form to which, from birth, every woman on the planet paid homage. In tandem with its male counterpart, the form that ruled the world; that marked out the movers and shakers. The form that guaranteed wealth, luxury, respect, adulation even. The beautiful people. The Normatives; the Norms.

Outside the green contour was another, less obvious and marked in red. A second-string template for those to aspire to, who could never attain the dizzy heights of the Norms, but who, by dint of nature,

nurture, the surgeon's knife -- or a combination thereof -- at least came within range. The executors; the middle managers. Comfortably off; attractive. The 80 percenters; the Marginals. Davina's expression mixed despair and disgust. She loathed the template that ruled her life, but at the same time couldn't stop herself lusting after it with all her being. Failure, once again, to make the grade made her feel like dirt; like she was a piece of shit on the shoes of those who made the rules and ruled the world.

The mirror cast into palpable relief the many deviations of Davina's body from the Norm, but what made her so desolate was that she fitted the Marginal template in every respect -- just. She breathed in and turned side on to the mirror and the templates matched her move. Her stomach was by far her worst feature. It bulged well beyond the Norm, but matched the thinner, red line of the Marginal template. Even that had taken some doing. Constant dieting and three sessions under the knife -- she'd barely started paying off the debt on the last op -- and all for nothing. Her bottom lip began to tremble as she turned to face the mirror again, gaze tracing out the manifestations of more than two decades of pain and sacrifice. She remembered the first intervention, an eighth birthday present. A minor op to shave a small bump off her nose. She recalled how delighted she had been, despite the pain and a couple of transitory black eyes. Then there had been been the boob jobs, the first at fifteen. They had always been underpowered, and it had taken five implants to bring them up to speed. The procedures had cost an arm and a leg, given her a lot of grief, and left behind a tracery of silver scars. The lipo on her thighs and the buttock enhancement followed, and all the rest.

But the real issue had always been her face. She had been cursed with an asymmetry that made her features clearly lopsided. The targeted implants and balancing had helped, but had been as uncomfortable as hell. Still were. Worst of all was her jaw. Despite the bone reshaping a few months back, her jaw still tended towards

square, whereas the template adjudicators demanded gentle curves. Nonetheless, it had done just enough to squeeze her profile onto the marginal line. She wiggled her jaw from side to side and winced. It still hurt. A small piece of loose bone lodged in a tendon they had said, but she couldn't afford to pay again for someone to find and remove it.

Suddenly, she could stand it no longer; had spent long enough analysing the marks of failure. Turning away, she crossed to the small, battered, table, where she had her meals in the tiny bedsit. On it stood a bottle of golden liquid. Somehow -- on autopilot -- she must have stopped at one of the SP shops in the neighbourhood and picked up a bottle to help her cope. Nothing more than raw spirit with a bit of food colouring added. She would regret it in the morning, but it would do the job; numb the pain -- for a while at least. She unscrewed the top and raised the bottle to her lips. Then paused and glanced at her phone on the table. Just eight hours before she needed to be up and out. Another 12-hour shift polishing the turds of the Norms.

"Fuck 'em!" she thought. "Fuck 'em all!"

She raised the bottle again and took a long swig. Wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she clutched one hand to her throat as the spirit burned its way down. When the fire had subsided, she gulped down another few mouthfuls, screwing up her eyes and grimacing.

"Jesus," she croaked to herself. "It's like drinking fucking acid."

But it was hitting the spot. She hadn't eaten all day -- too nervous -- so the alcohol went straight to her head. Already, she was feeling giddy. She half staggered a few steps backwards and slumped down on the faded, overstuffed sofa. Leaning back, she closed her eyes and let her mind drift. Another couple of deep draughts and her latest tribulation didn't seem quite so awful after all. She should be used to disappointment by now and, in any case, nothing had changed. Her life would go on as it always had. Shit, right enough,

but there was always someone who had it worse. She breathed a silent prayer that she wasn't one of the Contemptibles -- the crippled, the wretched, or just plain ugly -- destined to do the dirty work in the lithium mines, the biohaz dumps and rad waste vaults; anywhere sufficiently out of sight not to offend sensibilities. And, above all, she did have one last, desperate, shot. As always, when she gave herself up to drink, the rosy spectacles came first; the glass half full. It never lasted.

She went to take another swig, then jumped as a sound like a small explosion announced that the air-con was working again. It had been out for hours, turning the room into a hothouse. Now she shivered as a blast of freezing air saw her nipples pop up like a pair of button mushrooms. A dribble of escaped spirit followed a meandering trail down her cleavage. She rescued it with a finger, which she licked clean. Tonight, she felt she needed every drop of alcohol she could get.

The air-con was still clattering away and seemed as if it might actually stay on, this time, for more than its usual few minutes, so she pulled out the throw she was sitting on and snuggled under. That was better. A few more mouthfulls and the warmth of the cover began to make her feel sleepy; sleepy and serene. Now she viewed the calamitous event of earlier in the day as if through a window, as if the pain and despair had been inflicted upon someone else. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she recognised the second stage of inebriation -- for her at least -- detachment. She lay half asleep and as warm as toast and considered the options. She could stop drinking now and let herself drift off. It would mean a bit of a sore head in the morning, but at least she would be in a fit state to work. She'd been late twice already that month and there was a scrupulous three strikes policy; a week's pay docked. The alternative was to carry on with the booze. She knew from many past experiences that this was not a good idea. Then again, if ever there was a time she could justify getting blind, fighting, drunk, then surely this was it.

She must have dozed off for a bit then, because when she opened her eyes again everything was different. Her mouth as dry as the dust she spent almost every waking hour cleaning up, and her lips gummed shut. She could feel a headache coming on too. The obvious solution was more drink. She still clutched the bottle in one hand, somehow avoiding spilling anything during her unconscious interlude, and upended it to take another long pull.

The other thing that was different was her mood. Gone was the dozy acceptance, replaced with simmering rage. She welcomed it, embraced it, stoked it with feelings of injustice and righteousness. She tried to stand, but fell back on the sofa in a heap. She took the opportunity for another swig and to examine the bottle through bleary eyes. Still half full, she was gratified to see. She attempted to stand a second time and this time managed it. Staggering across to the mirror, she considered her swaying image. Her bobbed red hair was a mess, and her make-up stale, so that her face looked washed out. The green eyes were dull; the bags beneath revealed as the concealer had faded. For a long time she just stood and stared. Then she tilted the bottle, took a long, long, draught, and hurled it end over end at the mirror. Her aim was to splinter it into a thousand pieces, shattering the image of the person she had spent her whole life becoming. But the mirror was made of sterner stuff. The bottle bounced and the clearplas remained intact. Following it's curved top, the illuminated words continued to shine in a friendly shade of pink. The Shibboleth by which all were judged -- undimmed; immutable. "Appearance is Everything."

Davina felt the rage drain away, replaced by feelings of misery and impotence. She retrieved the bottle, which was still a good quarter full, but had no urge to drink more. Suddenly she couldn't breathe. The drink and the clatter of the air-con were making her head throb, and she felt a desperate need for fresh air.

The door to the small balcony was warped in the frame and she needed all her strength to force it open enough to squeeze through

onto the tiny space. After the chill of the air-con, the heat and humidity hit like sledgehammers. Beads of sweat sprouted immediately across her face, neck and breasts. She'd heard temperatures had been due to top fifty-five that afternoon, and it felt like they had. To left and right the gargantuan concrete monstrosity that housed Davina and a third of a million fellow SPs stretched as far as the eye could see, curving out of sight in both directions, following the sweep of the beltway far below. Just one of a hundred or more that encircled The Hub - the city's exclusive heart.

The view ahead was obstructed by the rear of an identical block. The windows all faced inwards, leaving the rear free for advertising; for proclaiming what every aspiring SP dreamt of. Davina gazed beyond the pulsing neon promotions for enhancements and body swaps, towards The Hub; the world of the Norms and the Marginals. As unreachable as paradise to those, like her, whose lot it was to endure a bleak existence in the hinterland. Maybe more so.

Just a waist-high metal panel separated her from a drop of eighty-two stories to the service road far below. She had always thought that this bare minimum of protection reflected the disdain with which SP health and safety were regarded. She wondered, now, if it might not have been designed this way as an active encouragement to end it all. She smiled wryly to herself. As if that was something an SP close to their wit's end would ever need.

The deadly heat meant that she rarely ventured onto the balcony these days. Now, emboldened by the alcohol, she leaned out as far as she could, mesmerised by the bumper to bumper traffic clogging the twelve-lane beltway and the people scuttling, ant-like, along the rammed side-walks. Looking up she contemplated the slender glass pyramids and peaks of The Hub that -- beyond the blockhouse in front -- climbed far into the sky. So close, yet so far. So very far.

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The driver of the meat wagon had never boxed, but he looked as if he had. Both ears were lumpy and stuck out at right angles, balanced by a large, bulbous, nose. Only a few teeth remained in his gums, but this was less blows to the head and more the trash the Contemptibles were made to eat. He had a vague feeling that he had once been called Frank, but for as long as he could remember he had been Operative 35/398; just 398 to his supervisor and his few friends.

398 squinted through the grubby windscreen at what looked like a bundle of clothing on the roadside up ahead, shook his head and sighed. Another one. He reduced pressure on the pedal and the truck's A-minor whine slowly descended the scale and ceased altogether as he pulled over and came to a halt in a lay-by. The sun wouldn't be up for hours, but when he opened the cab door the residue of the previous day's heat meant it was like stepping into a furnace. This was his tenth pick-up -- way up on a normal night -- and the repeated switch from cold, conditioned air to baking humidity was starting to make his sinuses ache like hell.

One leg dragged behind the other as he crossed the service road over to the spreadeagled body. It lay face down, but was clearly female. Naked too. That was unusual, but not unknown. He eased a booted foot under the torso and, with a deft flick, turned her over. Something -- cat maybe, or raccoon -- had chewed at an ear, but otherwise there wasn't too much obvious damage, other than the exploded bowel and escaping intestines. She had landed on the grass verge rather than the concrete, which always meant less of a mess. But he knew from past experience that inside she would be a jigsaw of shattered bones and liquidized organs. He stood for a few moments taking in the red hair, pale skin and generous boobs.

"Pretty little thing," he thought, "for an SP."

He wondered if she'd fallen or jumped and, for a moment, felt something that might have been concern; sadness even. But there really was no time for sentiment. He needed to shift if he wanted to clock in on time. He was uncomfortably aware that he was on a final

warning; had been for the best part of a month now. One more lapse and it would be the lithium mines for sure. He shuddered at the prospect, turned on his heel and shuffled back to the truck for a body bag.

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A wave of pre-dawn heat hammered at Davina as the lobby doors juddered open and she took a step back under the onslaught. Her head was a disaster zone and the pain so bad she could barely open her eyes. It felt as if the alcohol had sucked every last drop of moisture out of her body, leaving her desiccated, shrunken, like an ancient prune. She'd done her best to disguise the worst effects of the previous evening's binge, but beneath the makeup her face glowed with inebriant heat, while the stench of strong spirit oozed from every pore. As she stumbled along the path leading to the shuttle bays on the service road, she became aware of the meat wagon; a common sight of a morning. The operative was crouching over what she assumed was a corpse, struggling with the zip of a body bag. As she drew closer, her breath caught in her throat and suddenly she felt sick. The bag was zipped to the neck, leaving only the lolling head exposed; its dead eyes seeming to follow her progress. She stopped short and put a hand to her mouth. It was the woman from the day before; from the classification audits. She had been in the waiting room when Davina arrived and they had giggled nervously at the matching red bobs they had settled on for the big day. They had chatted politely for a minute or two, but were too anxious to say much. Conversation had soon subsided to an embarrassed silence as they became locked up in their own thoughts and fears. It was the woman's third and final attempt at a Marginal classification, and she had clearly been terrified. There was a tremor in her voice and she spoke so quietly that Davina had struggled to hear. Davina had thought at the time that the omens weren't good. The adjudicators

could sniff out weakness a mile off. Marginals had to walk the walk as well as fit the template. Needed to look confident in their skins; to have what it took to fawn without irony over their betters and dump with enthusiasm upon those less fortunate. Nervy and fainthearted wasn't going to cut it.

Davina closed her eyes, trying to put to the back of her mind the thought that next time she would be the one drinking in the last chance saloon. When she opened them, much to her relief, the operative had managed to free the zip and cover the woman's face. He was a giant of a man and the body bag looked tiny as he stood with it draped across his massive arms. Davina caught his eye and the man gave a shy smile. She bridled at the temerity and looked away. She knew, deep down, that appearance wasn't everything. In her experience, the very opposite was almost always true. But he was just so plug ugly. For a moment, she felt remorse. Then she thought of her mum's sacrifices and hardened her heart. Well, he shouldn't have presumed. She drew herself up and, nose in the air, marched past, eyes front.

The brief encounter with the Contemptible had bolstered her resolve to go all out for it one final time.

'Fuck it,' she thought. 'I can do this.'

She'd done the hard bit; matched the template, so a bit more work on the incidentals; face; demeanor; and she reckoned she'd crack it - - given a spot of luck and maybe a different adjudicator. She looked around at the graffiti-adorned blockhouses and the filth-strewn concrete. Out of this hole; a home in The Hub. Good job; decent pay; respect. And if she failed again? She flicked a glance in the direction of the meat wagon heading back along the service road.

"Well," she said to herself, feeling bullish now. "Shit happens."

END