

# Planned Obsolescence

Why do I feel so empty?

I've always gone through life without much thought. Nothing notable about my younger years. And now I just work an office job, like so many. Living paycheck to paycheck, I have no savings or ambitions for the future. Now that I think about it, I'm unremarkable in its entirety - it's the norm now. So why do I have this feeling now? Like something important is missing.

A month went by trying to understand what was wrong. It was the most I had thought about myself that I could recall. "Huh. It's my birthday". Was I thinking to myself for that long? I couldn't tell you what happened if I tried. "How old am I now?" I said aloud. There was no one to give an answer in my small apartment.

It wasn't *that* long ago that I graduated and moved out. The date in the corner of my eye says March 5th, 2053, so that should mean I'm 25? I was told that this was one of the best times to be alive in human history, but it's never felt that way. The neural network should be the biggest example of this. It's installed in all healthy babies' brains after birth. Named "Viewport," everyone can access information and be connected faster and easier than ever before. "That's how it's always been told to us in school," I said. "But it's never felt that way."

I started to feel a pressure in my chest. Thoughts began to race: What am I doing? How much time have I wasted? When was the last time I was happy? Why am I alive..?

I was hyperventilating. I felt hot and realized I was sweating. I race to the shower and run the water. The freezing cold shocked me, and my breathing calmed. It seems I'm not overthinking anymore either.

"God, what was that?" I dried myself off and made some tea. The warmth feels good after such a terrible experience. I lay on my bed. I tried to think some more, but I felt heavy. And everything faded to black.

I was met with a gift on my desk the next day at work. The tag says 'Aysha.' "Yo, Reice! Good morning!" I feel a tap on my back. My coworker Aysha had a glowing smile on her face. She's always been like that. She's my complete opposite. "Happy belated birthday! I hope you like what I got you. I think it's perfect." I ponder what it is for a time. I've never told Aysha much about myself, aside from the standard small talk you'd have at work - the same things I say to everyone. How could she find something "perfect" for me? Then I was reminded of my problem. Aysha seems like she has fun with life. "Aysha, I have a question." "Hm? What's up? You have something on your mind, Reice?"

"How..." I hesitate. Isn't this too personal to ask? And this isn't something people ask each other. It'd be weird, right?

"Yooooo, you there?" I snap back to the scenery of my office. "Oh, yeah. My apologies." My eyes focus on Aysha again.

"How are you so happy?" I ask. Aysha stared at me for a second.

"Hm? What do you mean?" she asked back. "I don't think I'm any different from you, Reice."

That was unexpected. I didn't know how to continue the conversation. "I'll explain after our shift, I've already held you up. That okay with you?"

"Yeah, sure! That's strangely considerate of you, Reice." She has a wide smile on her face now. "I'll bite. See you later, then!" She gives a wave and heads to her cubicle.

Another day of typing up spreadsheets and cross referencing numbers for projects I don't quite know passes by. At this point, I go into a sort of trance when I work. At least the workdays never feel long. I wait at the front of the building for Aysha after punching out. The wind blows intensely between the looming buildings of the metropolis.

"Hey!" I hear behind me. "Sorry to keep you waiting, I had some work sprung on me but I told the boss I'd do it at home. Didn't wanna flake on you."

"Thanks," I responded. I realize that I felt a little warmth inside my chest, and that I have a grin on my face.

"Is something going on, Reice? I never see you smile." Aysha playfully asks.

"No. It just made me feel good that you thought of me, I suppose."

"Oookay, now I'm weirded out. That's not like you at all. Did you smack something?" She goes tapping around my head.

"I'm perfectly fine, I'll have you know." I say as I tap her hand away. "That's why I asked to talk with you. I've been thinking about stuff I haven't before."

"Alright, alright. Tell me more when we can sit down somewhere warm. I'm freezing!" We decided to sit down at a lounge, The Velvet Room. It's been advertised heavily on the Viewports, and for good reason. The establishment is a giant hall with couches and booths lined everywhere. The lights glow a low blue light, and a stage in the center of the hall. A pianist and singer play comforting tunes. We're guided to a booth and get ourselves some drinks.

"Alright, so what do you need? You asked me something pretty vague. Sorry that I couldn't give you an answer then and there. I just need some more info on what you mean." Aysha is smiling, but her eyes are intense. Seems like she knows that I want to ask her something serious.

"Yeah, I figured. I deliberated on some things to add. I asked you to because you seem to have a positive outlook and act like you're enjoying everything - even simple conversation. I've become aware that I'm much duller comparatively. When I realized how I was living my life, something happened to me. I lost control of myself."

"What do you mean?" Aysha takes a sip from her drink, she looks stern. I describe what happened yesterday.

"Reice, that was a panic attack. I'm surprised that you had one, to be honest. They aren't supposed to occur anymore."

"What do you mean?" I ask with curiosity. "Why would something like that just not happen to people? Is there a cure for it?"

"No no, it's not a disease." Aysha responds between a few giggles. It's a reaction that the human body has when you feel like you're stressed or in danger. They're a natural phenomenon, no mutation or anything like that."

"So why would they occur less?"

"Uh..." Aysha is looking down at her drink, fiddling with it. "It's complicated, to say the least. I'm not supposed to talk about it, but you definitely aren't a normal case either."

"What?" I'm bewildered from what she just said. That's so vague that I want to know everything now."

Aysha sits there for a bit, then looks up to me. "I'm willing to fill you in, but there are some conditions."

"One - You can't talk to *anyone* about what I'm about to tell you.

"Two - From now on, please only talk to me about this verbally, in-person. Never discuss this on our Viewports, okay?"

"Three - I *need* you to stay calm and believe the info I give you."

My heart starts beating faster. I feel similar symptoms to a panic attack, but not as intense. What could *this* be? I nod in agreement to Aysha's terms.

She cracks a small grin and her gaze lightens up. She sighs and says, "Okay. Glad you're understanding. This is going to be a lot." I'm focused as I listen to what she says next.

"You remember how I told you that I'm no different than anyone else? Sorry, but I was being dismissive and lied. I technically am different from most people. You know how the Viewport is installed on the optical lobe of our brains at birth? It's how we have our Viewports in our vision without a physical object displaying on us - the feed is directly inside our eyes. The thing is, there's another function of the installation. The viewport is attached to the parts of the brain that are responsible for our emotions. The installation is used to suppress them. It's

probably the reason you noticed that I'm a bit different from everyone else. I couldn't get that part of the implant installed, it would've killed me. The doctors didn't explain why to my parents. It's a very rare case, but it doesn't seem to be an actual issue. The thing that has me interested is, you were able to pick up on that. It's always been apparent to me, but no one else in my life has told me that. I think you're a bit different yourself, Reice. From my perspective, you were emotionally suppressed and in that same foggy awareness as everyone else. Then, all of a sudden you ask me something like that. It made me nervous and interested at the same time. Sorry but this is also a bit of a selfish act. I want to know what caused this chain of events that's shaken up my daily routine."

I didn't know how to process what I had just heard. This sounds like something out of science fiction. But Aysha doesn't seem to have any reason to fake such an elaborate story. I was running through her story over and over to try and make it seem real, but my thoughts were interrupted.

"The fact that you're even trying to process what I told you shows that you're not the same as everyone else anymore. People just shrug off anything that doesn't seem to be normal. I tried asking the same question to others, sides flipped of course. No one reacted like I was crazy or weird. They just dismissed what I said and acted the same as ever. I don't blame that you're confused and skeptical, but that in of itself proves what I'm saying about you, Reice."

"So, in return for telling you all this, I'd like your help on something. Help me figure out what this is all about. I've always felt alone on this, but you've given me a tiny spark of hope that I can solve this mystery. What do you say? If nothing else, I think it'll be interesting, right?"

She reaches out her hand, gesturing to me with a smirk. What can I help her with? Do I really want to get dragged up into something so strange? This seems like something outside my capabilities. I look at her hand, and I feel that warmth from when she smiled before. I realize this is the first time someone else has asked me to do something for them, and I've wanted to help them. I reach out and shake hers.

"Yeah. I hope I can be helpful to you Aysha. Thanks for sharing that with me."