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Erasure

Michelle stood alone in the quarry. It was dark out and what little light there was reflected intermittently off the piles of chipped obsidian surrounding her. It was black...like her heart. No one came to the obsidian quarry at night, which made it the perfect place to do the deal.

Five years ago, the government decided that “love” was a basic human necessity. They employed armies of scientists, doctors, psychologists, sociologists, and every other kind of “ologist” you could name to determine the basic level of love a human needed to live, as they put it, “a happy and fulfilling life.”

Michelle saw it for what it was—total bullshit. Just another way to manipulate the masses. Control and secure voter bases. Happy people were easy to control.

Ever since the Basic Love Quota was discovered it was distributed as a small chip by mail. All one had to do was to insert it into any virtual simulation device to use it. The user could then choose what type of affection to receive: emotional, physical, or spiritual. The simulation prompted the brain to produce dopamine, giving people feelings of euphoria. But for some, the love became addicting, like a drug habit. Some people ran out of their love allotment shortly after it arrived, and they would have to wait for their next disbursement from the government for their next fix. That was where Michelle stepped in.

Michelle heard the crunch of footsteps behind her. A deep voice said, “you got the stuff?” She turned to see a tall man glaring at her seriously. He looked like an ex-military sort: clean cut, well dressed, strong serious features, but he had gone ever so slightly to seed.

“Maybe,” Michelle replied warily. Was he a nark? No, a nark wouldn’t be so obvious, would they? “You got the cash?” The man pulled a fat envelope from his back pocket and wiggled it in the air before him. Michelle grabbed a similar envelope from the inner pocket of her jacket.

She had acquired twenty-five chips this time. They were easily worth ten grand all together. Not a bad haul... all she really had to do for it was to sell her soul. Her typical target was new divorcees—people who had stopped believing in love all together (at least temporarily). Sometimes she caught the odd widow or desperate teen. Hell, some people just wanted the money.

They exchanged the envelopes in a business-like manner. Michelle opened the loose flap on the one the man had handed her and saw the fat stack of bills inside. She would have smiled if she still could. She looked over to the man and watched as he examined the goods. He seemed pleased. He held one transparent chip up to catch what little light there was as he asked, “so how’d you get into the business? The Black Heart Market, I mean.”

“Why do you care?” Michelle snapped at him. Why would he ask that? Maybe he really was a nark, pumping her for information.

“I don’t really. Just trying to make conversation.” He placed the chip back into the envelope. “Everything seems to be in order here. Pleasure doing business with you.” He held out his hand to shake hers.

Michelle just stared at it for a minute before finally giving him her own hand in a half-hearted wiggle. “Sure. Anytime.” She said flatly. He turned and walked away through the quarry. As she watched him go she couldn’t help but think about his question.

Once upon a time Michelle had been a happy, normal girl. She had a loving mother and father. She had an adorable tiny mutt dog named Sisko and three fish named Quark, Rom, Nog. No major tragedy or horrible traumas had affected her life.

Then there was the day Michelle had come into contact with the broken-heart flower. She had been out hiking in the mountains on her own. She had loved to hike alone. It was like meditation for her. It helped to put her soul back in order to be out in the peaceful places of nature. It was a new trail and she had been excited to see what new adventures it would hold.

But she had gotten lost... terribly lost. It was as if the trail had simply dissolved beneath her feet. She wandered through the forest for hours trying to find the trail again when she stumbled upon the flower.

It was like nothing Michelle had ever seen before. The flower stood alone in a small clearing. It had three soft pink petals, each in the shape of a heart, each with a solid black stripe splitting the heart down the middle. As she got closer, Michelle could see the faint shimmer of the sunlight on the petals. It even smelled beautiful, inviting her to come even closer. Michelle wanted that flower more than she had wanted anything in her entire life. She bent down, the smell filling her head like a delicious perfume. She picked the flower and held it to her nose, taking a deep breath.

Rescue crews found her passed out several hours later, the flower dead and crumpled in her hand. When she woke up, she felt nothing. No relief. No happiness. No love. Just nothing.

It took Michelle a long time to figure out what had happened to her, mostly because she didn't really care anymore. Her mom, however, was deeply concerned. She had come to visit Michelle a few weeks after her accident and saw that Michelle's fish had died. She had stopped feeding them because she didn't care. Her mom kept pushing her to figure it out. Michelle decided to look into it for her mom's sake. After all, even if she felt no love for the woman now, she had loved her before. Maybe Michelle owed it to her to find out. Besides, she did take Sisko off her hands after the fish incident.

It took a lot of digging, but she eventually found that what had happened to her was technically called Emotional Erasure caused by her contact with a Broken-Heart Flower. The flower was not a natural occurrence—it was an escaped specimen from a lab several miles away. The best they could figure was that a seed had clung to a worker's coat when he left. Botanists had been developing the flower in an attempt to find ways to stimulate the brain to produce dopamine for the Basic Love Quota, but it was a failure. A horrible failure. The pollen of the flower, when inhaled through the nose, traveled straight to the brain and numbed the area that was responsible for the feeling and processing of emotions. So far there was no known cure and, given that there were so few people who even knew the flower existed, there most likely would never be one.

There were a few positives to not feeling anything. Michelle didn't have to waste time trying to impress people or make them like her. She had cut off her long strawberry blonde hair because she didn't care about maintaining it or looking good. She didn't date. She simply didn't care about any of that. And she didn't need the Basic Love Quota. For her, it would simply have been a waste of time and resources to use it. And it seemed strange to use it when it was indirectly responsible for her current affliction.

Michelle had started slowly, just selling her own chips every month. She would go to the public virtual simulator arcade and find a person who seemed like they needed a fix and sell it for a hundred bucks a pop. Eventually one of her regular buyers began to ask if she could get more and that he had friends who would be willing to buy. It was all downhill from there. Eventually she began to collect other people's chips and sell those too. Today had been her best haul yet.

After Michelle was sure the man had gone, she began to exit the quarry herself. She walked slowly, taking in the glitter of the chips of black stone piled about her. It was beautiful. Even if the beauty gave her no joy, she could recognize that it was a picturesque scene. She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't notice the woman in black who came out from behind a rock pile.

"Michelle Flanagan?" Michelle snapped her head around to look at the woman.

"Yeah. Who's asking."

"I can smell the flower on you," the woman said cryptically. Michelle looked at her blankly. How had this woman known about the flower? She hadn't told anyone but her family about that.

"Who are you?"

"A person who may be able to help you."