

Great Beauty

By Rebecca Cao

I was supposed to be perfect. My eyes were supposed to be amethyst with gold flecks that reflected in the sunlight (the trend among parents in my birth year of 2068). My hair was supposed to be pin-straight and silver, already down to my waist at birth. My nose was supposed to be narrow, straight, and slightly upturned. My lips were supposed to be pale lavender, as if a light frost had settled on my body. I should have radiated in the moonlight, the reflective quality of my pale, milky skin shimmering in the light. My body was supposed to be slender and firm, never topping 110 pounds and 5 feet 6 inches. My parents were thorough; they considered every detail down to the shape of my fingernails. Regarding the Attributes, they gave me six bars in memory and vision, probably hoping that I would enter the Creation field. My parents divided my last 17 bars fairly evenly among the last six Attributes: intelligence, happiness, ambition, capacity for love, and compassion for others. In Fixers lingo, I am a 6-4-2-3-2-3-3. I guess the emphasis on memory worked – it's probably the only genetic alteration that took its proper course.

Silver Commons disengaged her mind from her letter as she heard the approaching footsteps of a Fixer. The steady taps echoed through the stark, vacant halls of the Laboratory. Silver perched on the edge of her bed, scanning the four glass walls around her that constituted her habitation. She didn't bother turning on the theater or pretending to be asleep because the camera had been monitoring her anyway. The last thing she wanted was to appear suspicious.

"Good morning," Fixer #4 unlocked the inviscreen door and stepped inside his patient's room. "It's time for your extraction."

"May you fix," Silver replied in the customary greeting, keeping her eyes trained on the theater window in the North wall. Of course she knew the Fixer's name after fifteen years of interaction, but she had not addressed the Fixer by name the first day and so she would not change the behavioral pattern.

Fixer #4 swiped his finger over the electronic switch, instantly reviving the glass wall into a complex digital system. Silver stood up unprompted and entered the extraction field, a square space two feet from the wall. The Fixer typed in codes directly into the glass and the wall lit up as radiation began to spread over Silver's body. She shivered although she could feel nothing physically. It was getting more difficult to block out the extraction rays and prevent it from entering her thoughts, especially since she was simultaneously sending out signals of her own. However, every minute was crucial and she immediately resumed her letter.

I don't blame my parents. They were horrified to receive a brown-haired, hazel-eyed baby with ruby-red lips from the Incubator, but they nursed me for nine months before giving me up to the laboratory and the Fixers. My parents never saw me again, but I continue to watch them here in the lab. Like I said, I don't blame them. In an age where everyone is physically perfect and mentally adept, no one has ever encountered a creature like me. I am a freak of science, a terrible mistake that has to be corrected.

I suspect that the Fixers, my current caretakers, know that I am special. They try their best to keep me comfortable in my home for the past 15 years; I cannot be seen by the public. My life depends on the Fixer's inability to find the source of my mutations. When they understand why a creature was created in the Before likeness and how this error can be prevented in the future, I will most likely be terminated. And so, I tell them nothing. I have kept my secret because it is so dangerous to the society that they could choose to abandon their research and terminate me immediately.

You must be wondering what is wrong with me physically. You are probably imagining a monster with bulging eyes, a skeleton-like body, deformed limbs, shriveled skin. You will be surprised to learn that, by your standards or the standards of Before, I am quite beautiful. Or, perhaps you are not surprised. After all, I am your great-granddaughter. Are you thoroughly confused? I would assume not; most likely, you have a good idea how this catastrophe came about. Either way, I will begin by explaining to you the secret I have kept for the entire 16 years of my being. My secret may not seem harmful at the present, but you will quickly understand its destructive power. You might have already guessed it – how else would I know you? Yes, it is true. I can see the past.

The visions come and go, but currently, I am focusing my sight on the year of 2008. You are 38 years old, a pioneer of human genetic engineering, a respected physician, and a mother of two. I see you in your white lab coat, critically studying the incubators, where hundreds of embryos lie at your disposal. In the next few hours, you succeed in what no one else has done before: create a genetically altered baby.

Silver sensed a breach in her conscious thoughts and had to return to the present state in order to guard against the rays. This was always the hardest part for her. She was struggling to keep a smooth face; she couldn't tense a muscle or even narrow her eyes. The camera poised directly above her face had a perfect view and it was no doubt recording vigorously. The fixers upstairs were possibly analyzing every breath she took and every blink of her eyelashes. She longed desperately to cry out, to let the fixers take whatever they wanted, and pass on the responsibility of saving mankind to someone else. But she couldn't. She couldn't give up when she was so close. To refuel her energy, she cut off her signals and paused to glance around the habitation. By the inviscreen, the Fixer stood with erect posture, but his glazed eyes revealed his disdain for the arduous procedure.

He was the first one. She could recall the day (or perhaps, the memory had come from a vision) of her arrival at the Laboratory. Frightened, hungry, and cold, she was delivered into the welcoming hands of this very Fixer. In his arms, she had looked up into his fawning, sapphire eyes and felt safe for the first and only time since departing from her parent's house. Years later, he was still her primary caretaker and his perfectly sculpted features had not changed at all. Sometimes, she could still feel the security of her once-innocent self when she looked into his eyes. As if sensing her thoughts, the Fixer locked onto her face with his gaze and searched her face.

"Silver." Her name was a wisp of air on his amaranth-tinted lips. A chill ran down Silver's spine, the familiar sensation of thoughts fleeing her mind.

Still, he would not release her. "Why do you resist? You could be happy. You were happy."

Quivering, she permitted herself one truth. "I have to."

“No, you don’t! You could give them what they want. You could end this now.” The Fixer’s eyes bore into Silver’s soul. She had to look away, biting her lip to hold back the thoughts.

Her voice broke, “No, I can’t. You don’t understand. I can’t.”

“I know you. I know you don’t want to give up. But if not for me, do it for yourself,” he continued, his movements now animated. With a stride of his long legs, he was nearly at her side. “You are my—my…”

Child. Friend. Lover.

Silver knew the words he was struggling for, but his lack of interaction with the outside world had deprived him of the concepts and vocabulary of love.

“You are my experiment.” He concluded, slightly winded by the effort, yet triumphant to have found a word adequate—at least in his opinion—for his emotion.

Silver could not suppress a laugh. She had not laughed in so long, the chuckle sounded false even to her ears. The Fixer retreated as if she had inflicted physical pain on him, his hurt feelings evident in the contortion of his face. But how could she explain to him that she was not mocking him? How could she convey to him how lacking and inappropriate the word “experiment” was, especially in the context of love? No, she couldn’t. So even though it tore her apart inside, she let him go. Silver whispered an inaudible, undetectable “I’m sorry” in her thoughts before exiling him from her heart without a trace of regret. Taking a deep breath in preparation, she dutifully resumed her communications.

I cannot help hating you. How could I not? Singlehandedly, you produced the catalyst for every atrocity that has since occurred. You destroyed the Before and created the After. You thought you could be God without consequences. I am bitterly angry that you did not survive to see the ramifications of your actions. In 2014, shortly before the intended publication of your work, you were murdered by the man who stole your techniques and proceeded to market the first M&M (Mix-and-Match Baby Factory). I don’t know his name, just like I don’t know yours, but I burn with hatred for both of you. With his socialist notions, he formed a uniform society in which parents are encouraged to decide every aspect of their newborn child. It must have been during the mid-21st

century that Before was completely extinguished and After firmly implemented in its place. In the After, all traces of Before have been destroyed. Newspapers, books, and records that contain references of normal conceptions, births, and individual rights no longer exist. Words such as “beautiful”, “ugly”, “smart”, and “stupid” are no longer in our vocabulary. When every human is a work of art by masters of the trade, there can be no comparisons among them. Without “ugly”, there is no “beautiful”. Without “stupid”, there is no “smart”.

Infants are predestined to become Commoners, Creators, Makers, or Fixers, depending on the distribution of their 23 bars. The Commoners are the largest in population but occupy the lowest status in the society, having no particular job except to form a perfect baby. Creators use After records and current technology to introduce new options for M&Ms every year. Makers are the ones who apply the technology and maintain the factories which create M&Ms. Finally, the Fixers oversee all operations and imprison mutations like me in order to “fix” the problem. All Fixers eventually become Beauties, the innermost circle of the society. They are the truly evil ones. They know everything and carefully orchestrate the continuation of the totalitarian society that their forefathers constructed. Machines and robots perform all labor, providing food and shelter for the three billion people in the world. As I can only see the past and only segments of the past at best, the information I know is pieced together roughly and it may not be entirely accurate. For example, I do not know who is currently running the Beauties (a man we call the Great Beauty). Locked inside a laboratory, everything I know of the outside world comes from glimpses of the past. I have to be especially careful with the Fixers because they assume that I know nothing of the outside world. In any case, I am always several years behind the current situation because my visions come with a gap of two or three years.

I was never supposed to happen. I am in the likeness of Before: a normal girl without god-like enhancements. This society has never seen freckles, natural-colored features, a flat chest, hair in areas other than the head, or menstruation. It is not hard to imagine why they consider me a monster. From my observations, I am the only mutation of my kind in the history of After. The only other patients in the laboratory are a boy

whose top speed of 30 miles per hour is not the 35 miles per hour his parents chose and a girl whose eyes are a shade of jade that the Creators are attempting to emulate.

The single reason I live is to change your mind.

Silver's breath quickened as she sensed the impending realization of her task. She needed to pause for moment in order to compose her emotions; her skyrocketing heart rate was, even in a best case scenario, likely to cause alarm in the analyzing quarters. All she needed were a few more sentences. In less than a minute, she would be able to invite the Fixers into her thoughts without fear of termination and relinquish the shield she had protected her mind with. Above all, she wanted to share a gift before everything ended. Just as she was preparing to deliver her last argument, she saw Fixer #4 shudder in her peripheral vision. Normally, she wouldn't have noticed it; however, in that moment, she did—perhaps prompted by her own intuition. Already slipping back to her subconscious, transmitting state, she looked towards him just in time to see his lips mouth *T-M*. Termination.

Silver gasped. She had not thought that the Fixers could break her barrier, interpret her intentions, and respond so quickly. Now, there was no use in guarding against the rays. She allowed the radiation to seep through her mind; there was not a minute to waste.

You must know my final secret: I can communicate with people in the past. Only recently have I discovered this talent, and as soon as I succeeded in using the skill, I felt the burden to stop you from your research. Please, I beg you. As your great-granddaughter, the future generation, and a victim of the After world, I beg you not to commit the act that began this world of terror. Please, put down the dish in your hand, destroy the incubators and the embryos, and never give genetic engineering another thought! I urge you; I have not much time left and I have done the best I can to save humankind. Now, the survival of humanity lies solely in your palm. There is a world of Commoners, Creators, Makers, and Fixers awaiting salvation. Make the right decision; deliver us.

A powerful force knocked Silver back into consciousness. When she regained her senses, she saw a swarm of fierce, black-suited Fixers (the mysterious and rarely sighted Department of Critical Management) surrounding the four glass walls of her habitation. She found that she was no longer on her feet and then realized that Fixer #4 had lifted her into his arms. Up to the very end, he was still trying to protect her, but they both knew that once they exited the habitation, the D.C.M. would envelop her like an army of wasps. Without hesitation, Silver wrapped her arms around the Fixer's neck and raised her voice just above the noise of the people outside.

“I love you, Pat.”

He looked at her in bewilderment, but she smiled knowingly. “Remember when you asked me why I never smiled?”

“Silver, this is not the time—”

She put a finger over his lips and continued, “It's because there's nothing here worth smiling for. True happiness is great and...well, beautiful. Here, let me show you.”

She spread her fingers over his eyes, transmitting a memory of love—her first and favorite. She felt his shoulders relax and an expression of utter peace and calm wash across his face. Silver, too, lost herself in the joy of her parents' adoration for their child. She was certain that the After world was coming to an end. It seemed quite fitting that the second and last time Silver felt safe would be in the arms of the man who loved her most.

The memory ended and Patrick Fixer opened his eyes. Smiling at Silver Commons, he finally understood. “You are my daughter.”

