

TISSUE

If swallowed, it's said to stay in your system for seven years. It is meant only to be placed in the mouth and chewed, one of those things you do because it's offered, because it is there, a little pleasure for the tongue, a fleeting memory.

Mary watches the subject in front of her and chews her gum, rolling the little boulder over with her tongue, though it's long since lost its flavor. It's the fifth hour on her shift, and the fluorescents have become grating in the way of angels, visible in the corners. The security cameras bug-eyes creep along the sides of the floral wallpaper. This had been easier once, when there were two harvesters doing the job, her companion taking over halfway through. But now it is only Mary.

The subject is a boy of around ten, his locks of curly hair sneaking out of their careful rows. He fidgets, rubbing his velcro shoes against each other, the scraping of a little cricket.

"It can't be true," the subject mutters, eyes fixed to the floor in consternation.

"It is true. You can ask the kids at school," says Mary.

"I don't believe you," His voice is soft, unsure.

She looks down at her notes. These things rarely go according to the bullet points, especially with children. It's a formality, having them fill out the forms. A good harvester can tell what to go for just by glancing at it.

"I promise you, Santa isn't real. Why would he be? It's impossible for a man to visit billions of houses in one night."

"He's magic," says the subject.

"Magic. Right. That's not real either," says Mary.

"Yes it is."

"No. They lied to you."

The boy stomps his feet lightly in frustration, dark eyes cast downward. His little fists clench, and it begins: the crying, the bursting feeling behind the boy's eyelids just as the pressure begins to build. The attempts to stop the sensation rolling down the cheeks edge. Mary watches on impassively. It seems such a flawed response, to cry, she thinks idly. After all, what use is it to shed water? Watching the subjects often makes her feel like a snake in a room of mice, some creature better adapted for the stressors of daily life. She watches like the fluorescents, like she's some creature from another planet taking in this earth-response.

"It's alright," she says mechanically.

The interviews must be conducted to increase target emotions, in order to assess how the chemical identity of that emotion interacts with the product. Tears sit in several identities. An onion tear's chemical composition differs from that of a stress tear, which differs from one of fear, or sadness. The emotion is important to their understanding, to ensure that the tests are accurate to the actual emotional absorption abilities of the product.

Mary reaches over to produce a box of Gentlex tissues. "We're here to dry your tears," the package says. "Gentlex Wipes- They take the pain away. With grief-absorbing technology, we extract the feelings of pain from your body and store them in the tissue!"

It's all ethical, consensual. The subjects sign the forms, and the sessions only last an hour or less. They get their money, all for the price of a few genuine tears. The tests have been in progress for several years, and they did quite a bit of good in the world. They brought jobs to the entire city. They paid the subjects to come in and fill out the paperwork, stating whether they were here for themselves or for their child, and what exactly would make the subject cry. They would be paid, tears or not, to try and avoid bad data.

Some do this for a living, some for a perceived greater good. Not so, for Mary - the thing that keeps her coming to work each day is the gum of it all. There's something voyeuristic in it as she calmly documents the heartbreak. Some days it's a grieving widow, some days a depressed teenager, some days a veteran who tearfully confesses to all his kills. She hadn't always been so numb. Once there had been two harvesters.

"Can you point out how you're feeling on this chart?" Mary taps the chart with a manicured finger. Happy, sad, or angry, 1-5, red, yellow, black. The boy points at the sad column, at 5, blue. A perfect score. He's feeling especially upset. "You're sure?"

The subject wipes his wet face to little avail, shoulders still shuddering with emotion. Mary holds out the Gentlex wipe, and he takes it, dabbing his eyes. The change is instant, the crying stops instantly, all the shaking subsides, and he blinks, the sudden swing in his mood likely disorienting him.

"Now, after that, how do you feel?" prompts Mary.

The subject points at the happy column, 5 yellow. Sun on a kindergarteners drawing yellow, the kind of yellow that is the favorite only of people who build a life for themselves that they don't want to forget. The yellow of exasperated highlighters and of buttercups and deep-set tooth decay beside dark gray gums. Yellow had been the other harvester's favorite color, Mary recalls. It's another perfect score, yellow. As the boy snuffles, wiping the last of his tears away. His feelings have been effectively cut, the last string of a violin pulling in his head toward the multifingered embrace of happiness. He's likely uncertain of why his feelings have changed. He's a young child. Young enough to believe in Santa Claus. Mary supposes his parents didn't tell him where they were going, today. Maybe they said it was the doctor's office, or the dentist.

"Here," says Mary, reaching into the pocket of her lab coat, "because you were brave."

"What is it?" asks the subject, peering curiously forward as Mary holds out the small object in her palm.

"A mood ring. It's supposed to tell your mood. It doesn't. It just measures your body heat. So the only moods it can tell you are 'alive' versus 'not alive'."

"Yours is blue," the subject points out.

"I run cold," she says.

The subject takes his prize gratefully, and admires it on his pudgy hand with a small smile. She always gives trinkets to the children, candies or mood rings or those little toys where you try and get the ball into the hole. She carries them in her pockets as she goes to each extraction appointment, the easiest and most surreptitious method of transport, as she is not technically allowed to be giving out anything to the subjects. And, them being in her pockets, she cannot help but indulge in the candies herself, and the mood rings, and the little toys, trying to get the ball in the hole, a simple task at which she often shamefully fails.

Mary writes a final note on her clipboard, and clicks her pen. She reaches out expectantly and stands.

The boy hesitates, and takes her hand, allowing her to lead him out of the room and down the hall under the white lights that mirror themselves on the tile floor. The fluorescents allow for no rest. Their white glow is eternal. Day, night, those words mean nothing in the stark white halls, productivity is from the beginning of one day to the beginning of the next, an ever holding circle of study. The only things holding the process back are the finite- the human element, unfortunately necessary, though they need breaks, need sleep, need the ability to regulate. And there are, of course, the machines, made of metal, the vats where the Gentlex wipes soak, the chemicals slowly eating through them as time moves through them. Time, then. Perhaps time is the true enemy of progress, the eater of all things. If the process were to be perfect, it would need to defeat such an enemy, and allow the artificial cycles to repeat themselves indefinitely with no wear and tear, no intermittent sleep, no injury nor healing, only singular, unadulterated progress.

They arrive, finally, at the twin doors of the waiting room. She releases the boy to his parents, and he latches to their legs magnetically.

"He was excellent," Mary says to the mother. "The check will be in the mail within the week."

"Thank you," says the mother in response. "We'll be back in soon, won't we, Darius?"

Darius, the subject, shakes his head into his mother's leg, and she laughs softly. Darius, thinks Mary, is a lovely name. Still, she finds herself still thinking of him as 'subject,' even with his mother holding his little head, even with the mood ring on his human little finger.

"You all having a hard time finding people these days?" asks the father gruffly.

He means the lawsuit, of course, the debilitator of the harvester's entire department, and the drainer of their research funding.

"It's a job," Mary says reflexively, a curt laugh exiting her mouth, dead on arrival.

"Still, that must be scary for you all. Knowing it's that dangerous," says the father sympathetically. "I think I'd have quit."

They had never *technically* proven that the suicides were caused by the exposure to the grief, and all the chemicals therein, but the publicity had been enough to deal a blow. There had been another harvester, once. They'd found her in the bathtub just days after exposure, pale blue and sunken in. Mary hasn't thought her name since, has only taken on the remaining workload as her own, laying claim to the secondary hours-block like an orphaned child.

Mary is not sure what to say, then, and she only smiles tightly as the silence stretches on. There is some faint buzzing in the distance of an air conditioning unit, circling like flies to carrion. She must say something, but she cannot recall what, too lost in nameless thoughts of the past.

At last, the couple and the subject turn away and go through the front door, out to the parking lot. She doesn't have any more appointments for an hour, her lunch block. She once would spend the hour half eating half talking. Back when there were two, not one. She returns to the room for cleanup, deciding to use some of her lunchtime to get a head start on the rest of her days work. Leaving the used wipes out can be dangerous, as the way they collect emotions chemically leaves an invisible residue throughout the wipe.

Mary takes the baggie full of used Gentlex wipes, damp with tears. She places them into the receptacle with gloved hands, careful not to touch the grief directly. It's not potent in small doses, but the buildup can be dangerous. The title of harvester is, in a way, a misnomer. The tears and Gentlex wipes aren't kept or used in any way after their structure has been scanned and the readings recorded. They're simply discarded into pressurized pipes made corrosion-proof with sacrificial anodes, and pumped into double-walled storage tanks made of reinforced fiberglass. Once every six months they're barrelled and brought to a haz-waste dumping site to sit out in the sun until the chemical compounds break down naturally.

Mary spits her gum into a receptacle and reaches into her pocket for another piece, only to find it empty, only the rattling of trinkets inside, all the candy gone. She tosses the empty gum packet in the receptacle too, and turns. She takes the stairs down, turning at the black door and going into the yellow one, to the basement floor. The vending machine glows gently, the light bathing her in dark blue and reds, little packets of snacks and gum held out like fruit on branches.

She purchases two packs of gum, each falling with a little clack into the bottom of the vending machine, and sticks them both in her pocket with practiced grace. She turns away and there is a quiet splash as she steps into something wet. There is a dark puddle at her feet. She follows its trail where it leads to a low, steady drip down the concrete in a seam in the wall. Mary frowns. The vending machine is just on the other side of the piping leading to the holding tanks. There must be a leak, she thinks with horror growing inside her.

It isn't her *job* to deal with leaks. That would be haz-waste's job, carrying out the waste and dealing with inspections of the piping lines. But something grips her, some name she doesn't say, some fear sinking into her bones and she runs, knowing *she* has to patch it, *she* has to be the one, the immediacy of the feeling like an ill wind whipping across her face. She descends the steps quickly, the echoes of her footsteps following her down with a small delay, like she had outrun time itself, leaving only shadows in the places she was meant to step. The last step trips her in her furious hurry into the dark room that houses the tanks. The tank is opaque, clear enough to show the used Gentlex wipes through, like organs in some great animal. It makes gargling noses, the sound like muffled, soft weeping under water. The piping runs along the walls in veins, and she can see clearly where the break has occurred, a little crack in the piping by the east wall.

She kneels, runs a finger along the seam, and gasps as the grief hits her like a slow electric shock, seeping into her in vibrational waves. The unadulterated grief, having been absorbed from thousands of subjects. Her nerves seem to judder away from her flesh, moving her outside her body. Memories flicker at the edges of her mind, enough to simulate the feelings but not to recall the specifics. Another drop hits her hand and she jolts as something familiar trickles through her, and she is ripped from the present into a memory from long ago. A river that she had stood in, the ice gripping her, and she had thought to herself, alive. A drip of rain that landed beaded on her wrists. Alone at home as every night, in the complete silence, watching the clock and waiting for time to sleep, and to wake, and to go to work. The chemical drip eats away at her and she finds herself sobbing, tracking little labyrinths down her cheeks. Sadness had always been a sort of emptiness in her, a hunger in some unnamed secret orifice that human beings each have that grows with every blow, but this time it seems to swell, a fullness of feeling like pregnant rainclouds. It's giving it all back, she thinks. Everything she's ever missed. This creature has breathed something into her that has been absent in droves, which had flocked together in its nothingness like so many bushels of nothing making up a mountain of nothing. And now there is something, and the something is pain.

The tank of grief does something strange, then. The grief seems to shift, the wads of tissue moving just slightly in the tank like an animal, like it had taken a life of its own, registering her presence and her touch within the room. It speaks to her in a voice she hasn't heard in a long time, a low, soft voice, a nameless memory of someone she had known once, when there had been two harvesters, and not one.

Mary, it calls. I've missed you.

She fumbles for her gum, and stuffs her mouth full with the pack, opening the foil packets one by one and chewing harshly on the fleshy pink sticks to make a glue, a temporary patch for the leak in the absence of adherent tape.

The tissue creature wails in the pipes, spilling its entrails out from the pressurized pipes onto the floor, dribbling tears across the cold concrete. The gum, then, is sufficiently wet and sticky in her mouth, her jaw sore from the chewing. Her hands shake as she takes the sticky mass from her mouth and brings it forth to the opening. Her finger brushes the liquid again, and she sees the long winding halls of gray and white that tied knots around her neck, the water flooding down, down, down, a bathtub filled with water and a blue corpse within it. As she spreads the gum across the leak, the wailing stops all at once, and silence spreads across the room.

She catches her breath, and feeling the wetness still on her face, takes a Gentlex wipe from her pocket. She prepares to wipe her face, to feel *Happy, 4, yellow, calm, easy*. Some part of her stays her hand, hesitating to wipe her eyes with the delicate piece of tissue.

She could reach for the gum covering the opening and pick it off, the claw of her nail catching on the wet edge, the pressure of the tear-soaked tissues squelching as they fought to get out. She could tear the gum back off and dig into the tissue, letting the water fall from the pipes across her, and she could bathe in it. Mary rubs her fingers over the mood ring, hot with the bloodrush below. She reaches in her pocket, finding the second pack of gum loyally sitting against the fabric. She unwraps it from its foil, taking the piece upon her tongue. She chews, and then swallows it down.

The sensation passes down her throat, where it sits in her stomach, seven years more.