

A Formula for Intimacy

Joseph got an offer to work at a new wing in a museum in the city. It's a big museum, prestigious and well-known. Certainly much larger than our modest, crumbling little building. It's not quite as intimate, not quite as carefully crafted as our one-and-a-half-person affair. But, it's vast. And it's stable. Joseph wouldn't have to salvage old specimens to make ends meet, the letter said. He could craft something more permanent. Of course, its wording was more delicate than that. But the whiff of Pity wafting from the paper was unmistakable to Joseph's expert nose. That might have been on purpose.

There's just one condition, the letter said. He comes alone. Makes a new start. Nonnegotiable. Which means I can't go with him. I told Joseph he should take it.

"I don't want a new assistant. You're the only person I can work with. Everyone else feels too... I don't know, but it's distracting. And it contaminates the specimens. You know that."

"I feel very content right now. Is that distracting?"

I was wearing Contentedness at the time. It was from a new exhibit: a blend of three parts Satisfaction, two parts Secureness, one part Amusement, and a faint undertone of Ignorance.

Joseph started to squeeze his hand. I rubbed at my face with my sleeve.

"But I made that. That's different."

I rubbed the last of the Contentedness off and returned to normal. I felt clear as a cloud and as featureless as the face of the sun. Joseph's hands returned to his sides. I could see him

studying my face, his eyes trawling over my every feature. His eyes moved liked swampy gemstones grinding in a socket, wet and unreal. His gaze was like seaweed's engulfing caress. But, in my natural, emotionless state, I was unaffected by it. My impenetrable neutrality seemed to calm him, as it usually does.

"I still think you should take the offer. You wouldn't have to sell off specimens to make space anymore. And it won't be long before the repairs become too much for me. I know you love this place, but you deserve more than a little museum with just the two of us that's about to fall apart. The world is going to drag you out of here eventually. Why not now? It is a good offer."

Joseph began squeezing his hand again. His eyes darted to his desk, to his research. He had been dissecting a mass of crude Bliss, and its pulsing, organic form was still pinned down on a board. He poked at it and rubbed the glowing, blue residue between his fingers.

"But we work well together. I'd miss you. I mean, I know I *made* you, but you're more than just a doll. I can't even remember what it was like before you worked here. And what would you do?"

"I'd find something. I'll be fine. This will be good for you."

Neither of us said anything for a while. A brick nearby started to crumble and shake. I went over to gather the bits of stony Certainty and piece them back together with a sticky solution of Comfort.

Then, with my back turned to him, Joseph spoke, "I'll think about it. Why don't you close up for the night?"

Joseph acted strangely after that. I didn't think much of it at the time. After all, Joseph built this museum himself. He constructed every brick out of Passion and Desperation and Wanting. He made me shortly after it opened, after he had fired three assistants for being too disappointing.

In the front, beyond the vestibule, were three exhibition rooms. They had an order, but the rooms didn't always follow it. And sometimes a room would get infested—Loneliness, in particular, could be persistent—or break in half and I'd have to weave a quick tunnel out of Determination and/or Apathy for guests to get from one room to another.

The first room was dark. The only light came from spotlights that illuminated rows of emotions. They were in their crudest, semi-organic form, dissected and pinned to the wall. This was what he crafted me out of.

The second room was the biggest. It had a large pit in the center. Joseph sometimes set emotions free in it to see how they would interact. There were glass cages built into the walls. These cages held emotions in their liveliest forms, bestial but amorphous. A menagerie of sorts.

The third room was the smallest, but it was the most valuable. Crowded shelves loomed over crowded aisles. They held hundreds of meticulously labeled bottles of clear liquids. Tight on space, that room was where Joseph stored emotions in their most refined form, locked behind glass doors. He allowed me to leave some bottles out on tables for visitors though. We are a museum, after all. Though we've learned to be more discerning with our samples after that incident with an overdose of Doubtfulness.

There were two private spaces in the back. One was for Joseph and one was for me. Joseph had the larger space, since he needed room for his experiments. My office was adequate. I didn't need much space to write labels and record repairs.

I had to pass through Joseph's lab to get to my office. I set it up like that on purpose to make sure I could always check up on him. I'm not sure he ever realized that was the reason. He was always so easily distracted.

It had been two days since Joseph received that letter. I tried to bring it up a few times, but Joseph kept saying he'd think about it. He didn't seem to be able to meet my eyes anymore. When I came into work that morning, I found Joseph at his desk. He was snoring on a pile of folders and papers and diagrams. His chair leg was melting, so I propped it up with a book he didn't seem to be using.

I looked over his shoulder to see what he was working on. There was a formula for Intimacy on the corner of the desk. Joseph had been working on it since before he made me, but it always eluded him. No one had ever figured out how to effectively create it in the lab. Joseph was determined to be the first. It was his life's work.

Joseph's formula for Adoration was in the center of his desk. There must have been other formulae lurking underneath, but the various notes and figures for Adoration hid them. I took a moment to glance at his latest work.

Adoration

1. Heat 14 ounces of Affection until it comes to a roiling boil.

2. *Add 8 ounces of Longing.*
3. *Let temperature rise to 325°, stirring continuously for 45 minutes until concentrated.*
4. *Use eye dropper to add 2 ounces of Awe, one drop at a time, with 5 seconds between each drop.*
5. *Let cool to 160°, then alternately add 3 ounces of Loneliness and Humility, 1 ounce at a time, counting 1 minute between each addition.*
6. *Expose mixture to a UV lamp for one hour.*
7. *Add 5 ounces of Admiration and blend in an industrial mixer at 500 RPM for 3 hours.*
8. *Let settle, then stir in 1 ounce of Certainty.*
9. *Add 1 drop each of Fear and Hope and let dissolve.*

I also skimmed over his notes, even though I already knew what they said. I tested Adoration the previous month. It worked a little too well. Joseph was so surprised he couldn't speak for a good twenty minutes. Then he locked himself inside my office for the rest of the day. He couldn't look at me without blushing for a week.

There was something new scrawled in the margins, but it had been crossed out.

I went to get Joseph some coffee. He was still sleeping when I got back, so I tapped him on the shoulder. Joseph lifted his head and blinked. Bits of plaster had fallen onto his hair and eyelashes through the night. He brushed and blinked these away. He struggled to make sense of

what was in front of him, shuffling around papers and mumbling to himself. He was surprised when he finally noticed me. He stuttered and scrambled for words. I held out the mug of coffee to give him something easy to say.

"I brought you some coffee. You looked like you might need it."

"Thank you, Phoebus."

Joseph brought the mug to his nose and inhaled. That seemed to calm him some.

"Do you think Adoration might be a part of the formula for Intimacy?"

"How did..."

"You left it out on your desk."

"Oh, yeah."

Joseph tapped his nails against the ceramic mug. *Plink plink plink plink*, one after another like a nervous refrain. I looked at him pointedly. The sound was distracting.

"Any progress?"

"Not on that. I think I might have found a way to stabilize Adoration, though. I need you to test it for me later."

Joseph caught himself clicking his nails and instead wrapped his palm around the mug to absorb its warmth. His thumb rubbed the handle in absent arcs. The surface turned soft and tan at his touch.

"Should we close early, then?"

"No. No, there's no need for that."

"Alright. Have you given the offer any more thought?"

Joseph's eyes widened then quickly narrowed. He shifted to angle himself away from me.

"I told you, I'm still..."

"...thinking about it. I know. But the offer won't stand forever. You need to at least tell them something. It'll look bad if you don't reply at all. It'd be best to stay on the good side of the scientific community. You never bother with publishing your work—I practically have to hold it hostage for you to let me submit it to journals—and if they forget you..."

"You know I don't like talking about that."

"Then don't let it happen."

"I... We'll talk about this later. I promise. After we do this test... I promise."

"Good. I'm going to open up. I'll hold you to that promise."

"Fine. Whatever you say, Phoebus. Just let me get back to work."

Joseph remained in his lab the whole day. I brought him lunch and some water every once and a while, or else he would have forgotten. The ceiling started to sag at one point and I went to prop it up with some Optimism. After I closed the museum for the day, I stood outside the door of the lab and knocked on the lintel. Joseph nearly jumped out of his chair. The poor thing finally had enough and melted all the way. Joseph had enough wherewithal to avoid falling face first into a puddle of Purpose but staggered and flung himself at my feet, looking up at me, embarrassed.

"Phoebus? What are you doing here already? Shouldn't you be leading a tour or something?"

"It's 8:30, Joseph. I just closed up."

"Oh..."

"Is the new version of Adoration ready?"

Joseph plucked a half-full bottle from a pile of empty ones. He walked toward me and said, "It is. I was just double checking some data. It should work."

Joseph held out the bottle.

"Here. Try it."

I took the bottle and waited, but Joseph just stood and stared at me. A deep crack sounded somewhere in the walls. It sounded big, and I could hear spidery little cracks spread out after the initial fissure. I could almost feel the crumbling of the walls reach out to suffocate me.

I pointed and started to turn, "I should check that out before..."

Joseph grabbed my arm. His eyes fluttered like curtains around a broken window. His voice sounded like air rasping through a rusted gutter, "I'll take care of that later. Can we just do this now? Please?"

"Are you sure? That sounded serious."

"Of course I'm sure. I built this place. I built you. It'll be fine."

As if creeping across ice, I reached out to unstopper the bottle.

“If you say so, Joseph.”

"Alright. Put it on now."

I splashed some of the mixture on my hands and rubbed it into my face. Joseph picked up his notebook as his face lit up in victory. There was a moment right before it took effect that I realized something was wrong. Like turning a corner on a tidal wave.

Joseph's notebook was nowhere to be found when I woke up in his bed. Joseph was looking at me with stardust eyes.

"So? How did it feel? Amazing, right?"

"You lied to me. What was that?"

Joseph moved closer. His eyes flashed with starlight. His skin glowed red with heat. His sweat boiled and filled the air with steam. Looking at him through the sauna-like air, his flesh rippled and became indistinct, like looking at dyed gauze through a cloudy glass. His words condensed and dripped with Anticipation in the thick air and bumped against me with their squishy heads. I swatted them away.

"Intimacy! I finally found it!"

"That's great, but why did you lie to me?"

"Because I wasn't sure if... It doesn't matter. It felt amazing, didn't it?"

The Milky Way condensed in his eyes. It was so bright it almost hurt to look at. The sheets around him started to smoke.

"Of course it did. But why would you lie to me?"

The light in Joseph's eyes still hadn't reached his mouth. It gaped open until a trickle of starlight found its way out.

"I'm going to turn the offer down. I promised I would tell you my decision afterwards, didn't I? Well, I'm turning it down. I'd rather keep working with you. Just the two of us. I know things are unstable at the museum, but we should have enough money to renovate soon. And we don't have to tell anyone I found the formula for Intimacy. It could be our secret. It's exciting, isn't it? All this? Unfortunately, we used all of the Intimacy last night, but I think I can make some more by tonight and we can do this again and..."

"Again? Why would we do this again?"

Joseph flinched. His eyes flickered.

"Why wouldn't we do this again? You said it was fun, didn't you?"

"Yes, but those weren't my feelings. You made them. I don't have emotions, remember? It's why you made me. So why would *I* want to do this again?"

A black hole opened up in the back of his eyes and pulled all of the heat out of the air. Impotent scorch marks scarred the bed.

"Because... Because I love you. I love you, Phoebus, and I just thought that..."

"But you didn't think about me, did you? You lied to me."

"Yes, but..."

"Then you don't really love me. You want to, but you don't."

The starlight in Joseph's eyes slipped beyond the event horizon. His skin glistened with frost.

I got up and got dressed. I opened the door and took a step out, but stopped to turn back and check on Joseph.

He was still frozen. Not even his eyes had moved. He was frozen, but he would thaw. Light from the rising sun was creeping through the window toward the bed.

Still, I felt like I should say something.

"If there is a work to go back to, I'll see you at work."