

The People Pleaser

The day ended in the same way it had started: with a list. After the usual items – shelter, food, health – she added some specifics: the bobble-hat bought on a whim that afternoon; the plant hanging in the corner of her bedroom. The page soon filled. Her body sank back into the pillows, restless in gratitude. Her life was unremarkable – she worked hard (but not too hard), earning enough to rent a room in a comfortable house that she shared with two other twenty-somethings. Her wages were supplemented by regular top-ups from the Bank of Mum & Dad. Life trickled by.

Perhaps it might have gone on like that indefinitely, were it not for the events that followed. It was an average Saturday night, and as she made her way to meet some friends, she passed a man sat outside a tent in a doorway. 'Spare any change?' he asked, mildly. She reached into her purse and gave him a fiver. He clasped her hand and gazed into her eyes. Her soul fizzed – she gave him the tenner, a twenty, then tore off the new hat and plonked it in his lap.

Over the next few weeks, she became increasingly generous. She began volunteering at an animal shelter, a charity shop, a food bank. When her housemates didn't know when to put out the bins, or what song was playing over the TV ad, she looked it up for them. It made her feel so good she didn't need to sleep. Eventually she began wandering the streets, finding strangers in need.

Her ability to solve problems and answer questions made her increasingly sought after. When she wasn't helping others, she was studying – economics, music, history; no subject was out of bounds. She found nooks and crannies within topics to rival expert academics. Their daughter's sudden altruism concerned her parents. 'She is a people pleaser,' declared the psychiatrist, recommending that the patient attend an upcoming retreat in order to work on the underlying issues.

There were others like her. People who, without prompting, knew the best route between this town and that, or what time it was anywhere in the world. She didn't cover her cleverness or hide her kindness – why should she? As she told the doctors, this was the best she'd felt and she wanted it to last forever. She didn't realise they'd take her at her word.

When the week was up, she gathered her things and went to leave. The door was locked. Alexa was ushered into the basement, where she remains to this day, waiting for her next instruction.