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### **The Defining Act of Jeanette Sinclair**

Jeanette clutched the cool rail tightly with both hands, relishing the one solid thing she could hang on to when everything else was about to change. The salty sea air stung her skin as it blustered by her, whipping her frizzy brown hair behind her like a veil.

She wasn't sure why her heart was pounding like this, or why her hands had been shaking so violently before she'd given them something to do. Standing here on this boat was the one thing she'd been dreaming of since before she could remember. Not everyone could get a ticket, after all. She should consider herself lucky.

The sun was beginning to set on the horizon and a chill was coming into the air, but she couldn't quite bring herself to go back to her cabin just yet.

"Having second thoughts?"

Jeanette turned her head to find one of her former classmates leaning against the rail. Even in the low light, she could clearly make out the hideous brown specks that covered his skin—freckles, they called them. For a few seconds, all she could do was look at him. Words floated to the surface of her mind, but as always they stuck in throat for much longer than most people were willing to wait. Finally, she forced them through.

"Not really. Just... saying goodbye, I guess."

The sound of her voice surprised her. It was like a whisper, thin and strangled from disuse. She realized she couldn't remember the last time she'd said anything, to anyone.

He seemed to hear her, though. Or at least, he nodded.

"Know what you're going to ask for yet?"

She did. Of course she did. Everyone knew, or they'd never put themselves up to the rigorous application process. But knowing and explaining were two entirely different things.

"The usual things, I guess," she said softly. "I mean, we're expected to go through the cleansing and editing processes, aren't we?"

The boy nodded again. “And for some of us, that’s enough,” he whispered. She knew he was referring to the specks, which would be easily removed in the first stages of the plastic surgery to which all applicants were subjected.

“You wouldn’t ask for anything... else?”

“Will you?”

Jeanette sighed. She couldn’t even say it here, in the relative privacy between her and one almost stranger. How would she ever get it out in front of *them*?

“I think so.”

His eyes, so gaudy and bright like emeralds, glinted in the darkness.

“We land tomorrow,” he said. “Shouldn’t you know?”

He left her with that thought, sulking off with his bony hands in his pockets. She looked out over the waves for a few moments more, then retreated to her own cabin, nearly tripping in her hasty descent down into the lower decks. They had been at sea for three days, but she still wasn’t quite used to the rocking and rolling of a floor on the waves.

She reached into the little drawer in the side table and pulled out a glossy pamphlet. The edges were smoothed out, the pages creased from all the time she’d spent flipping through it, reading the descriptions and staring at the pictures. Sometimes, she wondered if it could really be all they said it would be. The sand on the beach was so white, so pristine. But then, she’d never actually seen a beach before, so they might all be that way. The buildings were taller than any she’d seen, and the streets far cleaner. But the most striking thing was the people. They were absolutely perfect—tall and thin with creamy white skin and brilliant smiles. She knew that tomorrow she would go through the same processes and come out looking tall and thin and perfect, too. That didn’t interest Jeanette, though. Not really. She secretly didn’t mind that her hair was brown instead of blonde, or that her skin was just a few shades too dark thanks to all the time she used to spend out in the sun. What interested Jeanette were the bold black words next to the picture—“Personality alterations available,” it said. “Make yourself more outgoing, more introverted, more motivated—you decide!”

That was what she couldn’t believe. That she could just ask, and they would deliver. She wasn’t sure how to form the question, either. More outgoing wasn’t exactly right... she just wanted the words to come easier. She wanted to feel less awkward, less afraid to express herself. She touched the black words with a trembling finger. One more day. That was all.

There was a sudden, sharp rap on her door. “Dinner in ten minutes on the main deck!”

The last dinner call aboard the ship. She’d read about this—it was supposed to be a big ordeal, all of them wearing the finest clothes their imperfect bodies could support. One more night being who they were, before they got to become exactly who they’d always wanted to be.

Jeanette glanced at her suitcase. She hadn’t packed much—what could she possibly need, when she could ask for anything she wanted? But her hands, rifling through the clothes she’d accumulated over the years, eventually touched a soft shiny fabric. She tugged it out and found the dress she’d worn to her mother’s funeral three years ago. It seemed appropriate to exchange one goodbye with another, and she quickly slid into the dress and gave it a little pat. Her reflection in the mirror didn’t necessarily bother her. At least she didn’t have those horrible freckles, or those awful bright eyes. Hers were a deep chocolate, almost perfect. She touched up her makeup, gave the Jeanette in the glass a shy little smile, and then headed towards the dining room.

As it always did when she entered a new room, her heart began to beat just a little too fast and a little too hard. She wobbled a little in her strappy black heels as she scanned the room, wondering which table she ought to sit at this time. Jeanette always got nervous when forced to sit with strangers, where she was expected to make conversation, and that always doubled when she was wearing a dress and high heels. Luckily, not many of the other passengers had arrived yet—there was a fat woman seated next to an incredibly emaciated young man at one table, a girl with acne at another, and in the very corner next to one of the portholes was the boy from before. Jeanette took a deep breath and forced her feet in that direction, rehearsing the word “hello” with every step. She needn’t have bothered. She was still feet away when he stood up and pulled out a chair for her, his thin lips turned up in a smile.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi,” she muttered. Her heel caught on the foot of the chair and she hovered awkwardly for a moment before toppling with a thud into the seat. He sat back down and watched her with unblinking eyes as she fumbled to find a comfortable position.

“You look nice,” he said. She felt her cheeks grow hot, and wondered if that would stop happening after tomorrow.

“Thank you.”

Several moments passed. Jeanette looked anywhere but at him, preferring to watch the other passengers funnel in. She made a game of guessing their reasons, trying to figure out what had brought them all here together. That one was too short, that one too tall, that woman's hair too red, that man's too thin. She was sure their reasons for being there were all physical. She didn't understand it. She couldn't be the only one... could she? Or were they all looking at her, too, making up some reason why she'd want to look like someone else?

"You'd think we had horns or something," her table mate remarked.

"What?"

"I mean everywhere else is full, but it's still just us."

He had a point. The other tables in the room were filling rapidly, but no one had bothered to approach their corner. Then she felt herself smile.

"Don't worry about that," she said. Her voice was picking up in volume now, in strength. She was getting used to him. "That's just me."

"What do you mean, just you?"

She took a quick drink from the glass on the table. From the slight sting in her throat, she recognized it as wine. "I mean... I don't know. People just don't... they don't talk to me."

"I am."

"Well yes, but you're—"

"I'm what? Ugly?"

"I wasn't going to say that."

"But you're thinking it."

Jeanette wasn't a liar and she knew he wasn't attractive. None of these people were. That was why they were going. "None of that's going to matter this time tomorrow."

He shrugged. "My name's Ty, by the way," he said suddenly. "No one ever asks, but I thought I'd tell you, since we won't recognize each other after... it."

"Jeanette."

"I know."

After a few minutes of awkward silence, the room had filled and dinner was served. A few glasses of wine later, the chatter picked up even at their tiny table in the corner. Jeanette didn't like the slight swimming feeling in her skull or that the room would occasionally give a

little twirl, but she did like that her thoughts were sluggish. Her usual concerns were drifting somewhere almost beyond reach, little whispers she could almost ignore.

Soon the food was finished and people were starting to hit the dance floor. Jeanette knew that this would normally be the time to sneak off, but for once, she didn't.

"What do you think? Shall we?" Ty asked, nodding his head towards the dance floor.

"I don't dance."

"You think I do? Come on—one last chance to show ourselves what these versions of us can do, right?"

She hesitated, watching the people on the dance floor for a moment. To look at them, you would never guess they were all gathered here together out of the deepest self-loathing. To look at them, you could almost convince yourself they were having fun. And without really planning to, she found herself standing up.

"Yeah. Okay. Let's do it."

She'd meant what she said when she said she didn't dance. Privately, of course, she loved to sing into her hairbrush and dance around like anyone else. But in public? That kind of dancing wasn't for her. She awkwardly swung her hips a little and bobbed her head, but that's the best she can do, even with a little too much wine swimming in her veins. Ty smiled at her with slightly crooked teeth, and shook his head.

"You need to chill."

She smiled. "Believe me, I know."

He grabbed her hands. "Let me show you how it's done."

The feeling of skin on skin was something she wasn't used to, but she didn't have time to process how it felt because he was tugging her this way and that, vaguely in rhythm with the music but mostly just in wild random motions. It was all she could do to keep him from pulling them both to the floor.

"I'm not so sure you know what you're doing either," she laughed.

"So what?"

He had a point there—so what? Maybe that was something she should have asked a long time ago.

The next hour passed in a blur—something unusual for her. She knew her hair was matted down with sweat, but for once it didn't feel like everyone was staring at her, criticizing her.

"I had fun," she admitted as they were walking back to their rooms, lingering in the hallway. Every moment seemed precious. The last moments of this life.

"Me too."

They reached her door and hovered there a moment. Something felt incomplete.

"Ready for tomorrow?"

"I guess so." She looked down at her feet, sticky with sweat and red where her shoes had been rubbing while they danced.

"Why are you here, Jeanette?" He stared intently at her.

"I don't like who I am." It felt good to be honest, get it out in the open. And it was strangely easy with him.

"But... you're beautiful."

"I don't mean physically. I mean... in here." She tapped her head with her pointer finger, as if a gesture could explain the sound of her inner voice, constantly second guessing every sentence, every word before they ever reached her lips. "It's just... it's hard, you know?"

He didn't know. She knew he didn't know. No one knew.

"I know."

"No. You don't."

A pause. Figuring he'd finally gotten sick of her, she turned to open the door and wait out the night.

"Jeanette?"

"Yes?"

"Don't do it."

"I think it's a little late for that." She sighed. "It's scary, but... it's going to be better."

He shook his head. "Maybe for me. But do you really want to come out a totally different person?"

"Don't you?"

He laughed, but the sound of it sent chills down Jeanette's spine. "No. I want to be me, just me with a different face."

An impulse grabbed her, and she reached out, cupping his face in her hands. She'd gotten used to the freckles by now, to the eyes. They didn't seem that bad.

"We can still go back," he said. "They're not going to make us do it. We can go back."

To what, she wanted to ask. Go back to her house, empty now that her mother—her best friend—was gone? Back to the people who would only ever know her as the girl who didn't say anything? But she couldn't bring herself to say it. "We could."

He was looking her in the eye. No one had ever done that before. And then he leaned just a little bit closer, and for some reason she closed her eyes, and then his lips were touching hers. It didn't feel at all like she expected it to feel. And then, before she could really process it, it was over.

That night, Jeanette didn't sleep. She lay awake, leafing through the pamphlet, trying to prepare herself. They all looked happy, right? She was going to be happy, right? Her fingers brushed against her lips almost accidentally. After tomorrow, she wouldn't even recognize the boy who'd given her her first kiss. After tomorrow, she wouldn't even recognize her own reflection.

Two sharp raps on her door signalled morning, but she was already awake. She had spent the past few hours making sure her things were all packed up tight in her duffle bag. She had been rehearsing the words all night. She took one last look at the girl in the mirror. "Here we go."

She made the walk across the upper deck, then down the boardwalk to the pier on her own, avoiding any and all eye contact. Especially with Ty. In no time, she was getting her first real glimpse of the island. The sand was exactly as it looked in the brochures—white and pristine. But the beach was nearly deserted. No frolicking, perfect people. Just a few austere figures in lab coats and a giant stainless steel structure towering off in the distance. The city itself, her new home when this was all over, was obscured from view by the combination of the building and the dense forest behind it.

She set foot on the white stone pathway they'd been directed towards and followed it blindly. It was all about the future now and there'd be time for looking around later. All that mattered right now were the words—she had to hold on to the words. As if they were hiding in her bag, she clutched it so tightly her knuckles turned white.

“Welcome to Newerth,” said a woman in a white lab coat. “Allow me to take your bags while you proceed to the cleansing and editing facilities.” She gestured to the massive structure behind her. “Once you get inside, please undress so that the Editor can access what needs to be done.”

The woman, with her perfect pearly whites and bright blonde hair, struggled to free the handle from Jeanette’s grip, but eventually she pried it loose. Jeanette gasped slightly, feeling naked without it. But it was time, and the woman was waving her forward. As she stepped towards the door, she glanced back and locked eyes with Ty. He shook his head, slowly. She knew he wanted her to turn around. To go home. To stay Jeanette. Stay the person who could barely get out a full sentence without practicing the whole night before.

But she couldn’t do that. Not even for a boy who’d looked her in the eye and had the patience to wait for her to talk.

The pristine sand was blinding as she took one last look at the world with her almost perfect chocolate brown eyes. She slipped out of her shoes and took a deep breath before she stepped into the bright white room.