

Façade

As usual, she starts with a prompt.

“Tell me about your family.” My therapist asks. “How did they handle your autism?”

“‘Handling’ doesn’t describe it.” I answer. “All they knew was that I was different, and that was a dangerous thing.”

“Why? Isn’t it a good thing to stand out?”

“Only if it benefits those around you. Autism is a double-edged sword, and my parents decided it was better to keep me in line than risk me drawing the wrong sort of attention.”

“Keep you in line? How?”

I fall silent as I wade through a fog of anxiety, groping around to gather my thoughts before arranging them into trains of sentences. “First, they relentlessly attacked my flaws.” I say slowly, so that my tongue won’t trip over a word and derail the train. “My grades, my clothes, my picky tongue, my sensitive ears. Every day, they demanded I fix something new, and encouraged my guilt when I couldn’t keep up. Self-awareness was key to self-improvement, they told me, so I listened.

“Then, they demanded I suppress the parts of me I couldn’t fix. That’s the least you can do, they said. That’s the only way you can keep these broken parts of yourself and still be a functioning person. By the time I learnt how to accommodate my autism, it was too late. I’d already learned to hate myself for having a label I didn’t know how to wear.”

She nods empathetically. “It sounds like your parents were more concerned with...what’s the word for it? It means false appearances.”

I wait a few seconds, then blurt out the word when her silence drags on. “façade?”

“Yes! That’s the word.”

All of a sudden, a rogue train charges through the fog and barrels out of my lips before I can stop myself. “You know, ‘façade’ is French for ‘face’ which is interesting because it originally referred to the front face of a building, but nowadays it most commonly refers to a false ‘face’ that people put on. Engineers actually use façades to increase a building’s energy efficiency, but most people are only capable of recognising its aesthetic value. That makes it kind of like a human façade, doesn’t it? They don’t care whether an autistic’s ‘face’ is best for the autistic, only that it doesn’t fit their idea of a ‘face’. There’s actually a term called ‘autistic masking’ that refers specifically to a autistic’s—” I stop in my tracks. Ah, crap. I’ve jumped onto the wrong train again. “Sorry.” I mumble. “Sometimes, I get distracted by my own thoughts.”

Strangely enough, when I look back up at my therapist again, her expression isn't that of someone who just got hit by a runaway train of thought. If anything, she looks surprised that the train had merely detoured instead of flying off the rails like she'd expected.

"It's alright, this thought is actually quite relevant to our session." She smiles. "If we follow your analogy, does this mean that autistics have to maintain a façade on top of their original façade?"

"Oh, um. Not really. Imagine if the front face of every building looks the same, and engineers are only allowed to make minor changes." I can already feel the anxiety fog lifting, and my voice lightens enough to be heard clearly. "Meanwhile, the builders refuse to give them the extra resources needed, because they'd rather sacrifice diversity for a unified, one-size-fits-all façade that's easier to mass-produce. So engineers have to modify the building to accommodate the façade, and not the other way round. Sometimes, they're even forced to demolish the whole thing."

"That must be frustrating for buildings that don't fit the mold." My therapist nods. "Why do you think that happens?"

This time, I let the second train loose, starting with an answer drier than the Sahara desert. "Because diversity gets in the way of efficiency."

Her smile freezes this time. "Can you explain further?"

Just in case, I take a deep breath and brace myself. "People in a diverse group will inevitably clash with each other because of how different they are. So when the goal is to do something efficiently, then it's in the best interests of the group to make sure everyone is as similar as possible to minimise conflict."

"Well, that's for the best, isn't it?" She frowns. "Humans didn't get to where they are now by encouraging conflict."

"That's not true." I lower my head and start fiddling with my watch. "We only got to where we are now because we stopped focusing on survival of the fittest, and started making sure there was a free exchange of ideas that helped the whole community thrive. By definition, this meant that diversity in a group was an asset, because innovation is only possible when different ideas and values clash. The problems only started when people started seeing each other as cogs in a machine, then started demanding that everyone must either fit into the machine or risk being left for dead."

"And that is why you feel that everyone is forced to have the same façade on their buildings?"

"Yes." I finally look back up. "To me, the only way a society can function is if they recognise that the real waste of resources would be to demand everyone who's different put up a façade. Otherwise, they'd just have more and more people fall through the cracks, and the worst of us will end up needing therapy just to keep going."

“That’s true.” She nods. “I can see why you feel so anxious about being different.”

“Yeah.” I answer, smiling awkwardly. “So how do I deal with the anxiety?”

My therapist opens her mouth again, but then she realises something and the words die in her throat. After 5 seconds of silence, she looks me in the eye. “...I can teach you some coping strategies?” She says with a sheepish smile.

I almost laugh. For just a moment, her façade looked exactly like mine.