

Facial Feedback Theory

By Lucy Fleming

cognitive dissonance, the complex morality of towelettes, and a forgotten(?) birthday. the parable of unremarkable hotels and a question in a pool.

You find yourself in a hotel in an unfamiliar town, surrounded by comfortingly emotionless floors and identical hallways and patterned carpets and barely-heard snippets of conversations that tell stories of lives that have nothing to do with you. The soulless art in the hallways on your floor look so different, and yet similar enough to make you second guess if this is the way to your room every time you walk the path.

You sat at the side of an indoor pool for three hours. Two separate people have passed by in the hours you've been still and neither of them talked to you or swam into your direct line of sight. They weren't unfriendly. They were content to stay happy in solace, time and quiet lapping of waves surrounded them with memories foreign to you. The scent of chlorine diluted your senses and surrounded the world in a haze. It is not advisable to sit next to the spa pool for periods longer than 15 minutes. It is not advisable to sit in the spa if you are under the age of 13. It is not advisable to sit near the spa for extended periods of time if you are pregnant, have neck injuries, have spine injuries, or are suffering from an illness. You wonder if you are sitting near the spa. You wonder if you are any of those things. You think you remember your thirteenth birthday.

You walked back to your room long after the pool should have been closed to guests. The carpet beneath your bare feet was the most you've felt in a long time. The small white towel slung around your waist was clean and registered as warm to more than one of your senses. There was a bin in your room to collect guests' towels. At least you thought there was. You hope so. You vaguely feel that stealing is bad, which is odd, because it's just a towel. There are quite

literally hundreds, and taking it to your room isn't really stealing, because it's not really your room. But the voice in your head persists. Stealing is bad. The towel will be returned.

There is a woman in the lobby who smiles at you from behind a desk. She knows that you are a guest. She doesn't need to talk to you though, you are not checking in.

She smiles anyway.

It is very late at night. Maybe very early in the morning.

You aren't sure anymore.

She asks if you are alright while handing you a paper cup with lemon water.

You take the cup. You don't remember there being a water dispenser anywhere near the woman.

She asks if you are alright.

She has a smile on her face and you think it's odd how happy she is this late at night.

She asks if you are alright.

She has a smile on her face and you think it's odd how happy she is this early in the morning.

The lights in the lobby are warm, but the lemon water is cold, and the lights aren't actually that bright because there are shadows in the corners and very far behind you and the woman behind the desk is still smiling and she feels warmer than the lights and the desk between you is cool and worn and her smile seems sadder than you thought originally and there are a hundred ways you could answer her question and there are a hundred towels that you could steal but aren't going to and there are a hundred answers on your tongue but open your mouth and you say none of them.

You sip from the paper cup, which is cool in your palm, but you don't answer the woman.

She nods in understanding and disappears through a doorway behind the desk.

She doesn't come back out.

There are no customers this late at night.

Your best friend is 8,000 miles away and there's a phone ringing somewhere where you aren't there to pick it up.

Your father is on a worn couch with a sharp metal cap dancing between his fingers, and thinking of things far beyond you.

Your neighbor is out with his wife who doesn't love him and who he doesn't know beyond her favorite color and drink, wondering if a divorce is worth the effort it would take, he wonders if you know anything about his life.

Your elementary school crush has a daughter who knows nothing about you or her parents and feels nothing towards anything and wants to know why.

Your mother's best friend who isn't actually your uncle is holding a pill he doesn't want to take and wondering if it's been too long since he last visited you.

Your thirteen-year-old self is in the room you just left, staring up from the bottom of the pool, thrashing and screaming while pounding at the surface of the water but unable to break through the fragile surface tension. The chlorine eats away at your former self's tears and leaves tracks of acid running down their cheeks. You don't remember leaving them there. You don't remember what they were wearing. You don't remember why they were there. You think they might have been pointing accusingly at the towel around your waist as you walked out the door.

Maybe you should go back to the closed pool and tell the child in the reflection that you're not stealing. You should explain it to them, assure them. You should go back to the pool and remind them that it's closed. You should remind them that you're not thirteen and shouldn't be there. You remember your thirteenth birthday. You don't think they should be there, you don't think they should be thirteen. You don't think you are thirteen. You don't think you can breathe underwater. You think you remember your thirteenth birthday, and you think you don't like stealing. You think that stealing is against the rules. You think that the person in the pool shouldn't be there. They shouldn't be there after hours. You shouldn't be there after hours. You should tell them that you didn't mean to steal the towel. You should tell them you're sorry. You should apologize.

You should apologize.

You should do a lot of things.

The elevator in the hotel dings one too many times and the door opens more slowly than it should. The flower in the vase by the elevator is in perfect health but it looks sad. It's weird that the flower looks sad because it's a flower and not a person and it doesn't have a face to look sad with and it is in perfect health and it's a mystery who waters these plants and is that person

happy and do they think that the plants look sad anyway too? Someone said that the muscles in your face control emotion and that's why a plant couldn't be sad but you think that maybe that person was a little bit too happy or maybe a bit stupid because people smile for too many reasons and not all of them are happy. The muscles in your face can't control emotion because people don't always show what they feel like the people who smile when they're sad or the people who laugh when they're angry or don't smile when they are happy and maybe the plant could smile too if it had a face with human muscles but it would still be sad. It doesn't matter what the plant feels because plants don't have emotions and if they did it wouldn't matter because humans wouldn't know and wouldn't care. The emotions that plants can or cannot feel don't intersect with the range of emotions and perceived importance of senses and chemicals that humans can or cannot feel. The elevator door dings shut, once again ringing one too many times and closing slower than it should.

There's a painting on the wall with no signature and somehow it's unique without being special and there's chlorine on your skin and you think that acid would feel worse. You want to pick up a call from your best friend that you don't know is there and you want to visit your father. You think that you should tell your neighbor that relationships are worth effort but his happiness is worth more and his wife deserves to feel compassion and love for someone but you might want to tell him that his porch has screens but no soundproofing and he might want to get his hearing checked first. You should tell your classmate's daughter that she deserves to know something and above all else deserves to know herself but it might be difficult because you don't know her either and you don't remember her parents' name. You should tell your uncle that his happiness is worth everything and that he owes it to himself to at least try and that you always thought he really was your uncle and he should visit more so you can understand why he isn't. You should give the child in the water the towel. That's why they're upset, isn't it? You should give yourself the towel, you didn't mean to steal because stealing is bad but you should tell them not to break the rules too because they'll remember won't they? You should tell them that the pool is closed. You should give them the towel because they're crying and chlorine shouldn't do that to tears but acid probably hurts and the hotel has more towels and the hotel has rules and they're thirteen so they're technically allowed in the spa but maybe crying acid is an illness and that would be against the rules and you could give them the towel but then the towel would be wet and if they took it from you it would stay under the water and the towels are

supposed to stay dry and maybe they don't understand because they're thirteen and they've been in the water a long time and the pool is closed and maybe you should just return the towel and apologize instead and you should tell them that you're not stealing and you should apologize because they're angry and crying and upset and in pain and you should apologize and you should apologize. The woman behind the desk had a question that you didn't answer but it seemed ok because she didn't seem upset because she was smiling but she still looked sad even though she was smiling and she left and there was a plant with a human face that was smiling but was still sad too but plants don't have human faces or human muscles and someone said that facial muscles cause emotion so the plant can't be sad because it was healthy and had no face and it was pretty and the elevator might be broken just a little bit and lemon water is cool and you should feel temperature with your skin but you feel it inside of you and all your skin feels is chlorine and the carpet is patterned and the art on the walls have colors but don't feel colorful and you weren't near the spa but but maybe you shouldn't have stayed so long anyway and the acid on your cheeks burn and you aren't thirteen but you don't remember your thirteenth birthday and you don't remember your thirteenth birthday and the towel is damp and are you alright?

You don't remember your thirteenth birthday.

Are you alright?

You don't remember your thirteenth birthday and there's a deep hole in the ocean filled with a hundred answers that surround you in the water and a hundred towels couldn't dry up that much water and a hundred reasons not to steal a towel are drowning you because it's not stealing and you want to answer a question but you breathe to speak and the water tastes like chlorine and someone is walking away and they're stealing a towel and don't they know that stealing is bad and you're not thirteen.

You're not thirteen... right?