

Addictive Touch

The world slowly slipped away, right in front of us. Too many people were too busy to notice, heads down, engulfed in the gleaming piece of technology clutched in their hands. Some people saw and tried to save it, tried in vain to scream through the screens that the natural world was crumbling. But their voices were drowned out, lost. The governments of various ruling nations claim they tried to lift the world back up, help people find peace, through isolation, but we were losing the world to overpopulation, a war that no one could win.

Now, we are surrounded by machines. Machines to house us, hold us, keep us company. Outside, is a distant memory. It's strange how softly the world withered away. Many thought that we would go up in flames to climate change and then resource wars. But it was quieter than that. We only noticed the world was gone when we finally looked up from our screens and saw that the trees had crumbled, the natural world had fallen to human inflicted damage and dissolved under the weight of overpopulation only to be replaced by more technology to sustain the overburden of life on a fragile planet. The government solution was to have us look back down again, have us absorbed in screens once more in order to maintain the peace. The screens were designed to fill the void, to keep us ignorant and zoned out from doing anything that involved looking up, or looking at all.

In the new world, people don't look each other in the eyes. We don't talk face to face. We don't touch. All communication occurs through screens and people move through human

created structures looking down, living through the reality presented through technology. Our screens remind us how touching ruined our world. The screens explain to us how touching is the root of all our problems, how touching leads to emotion and emotion leads to procreation. Nothing could stop the inevitable over saturation of humans except the absence of touch. The collective wanted to do away with touch long before it was gone. And eventually they found a way. When the collective discovered the key to procreation without physical contact they finally and fully did away with touch.

I have never lived in a world with touch. The collective reminds us that we are separate but equal. Separateness keeps us safe, keeps us from trying to engage each other, while our screens keep us connected. We are never alone, truly, but we remain separate and therefore order is maintained. And yet, desire has started to creep back into conscious, the collective cannot explain where or how the epidemic began, but somehow the technology is breaking down and people are starting to touch each other again. I saw a story which appeared on the screen of two people who had been found touching after being reported. They were immediately removed from the collective and the reporter was praised and received an upgraded screen. Touching is a crime punishable by removal. According to the collective, once people become touchers, they never come back. That addiction was too strong to cure. The only solution is to do away with them entirely. Though, before people touch, they inject.

Injecting arose from the curiosity to feel, and the desire to escape further to understand the old world where touch was common. Injecting was as close as I could come to stepping out of my skin and into someone else. The closest I could come to knowing, feeling, another person close to me, and what an orgasm may have felt like. After the first time, it came easily. It felt human, something most of us had forgotten. Before I started, my starvation for connection had

become visceral. First, I tried to escape in the screen but its effects were no longer strong enough to keep me looking down. So I had started looking up, and one day almost locked eyes with a person on the train. The pull to glance in their eyes was strong, the desire to connect. I felt a welling in my stomach and immediately looked down, back to my screen, but that taste of connection only made me want more. I knew looking was too dangerous; it involved another person, higher risk of detection. Instead, I turned to injecting. By physically injecting the power of the screen into the bloodstream the high is as close as one can come to experiencing orgasm, or so I had heard. Everyone knows about users, it's not a secret, but it is punishable. Trying to simulate bodily feelings is dangerous, it's easy to get lost and not come back, easy to want to touch after that. The collective is frantic to find the solution, seal the glitch and with it extinguish the threat of a touch epidemic.

I remember the day I started. The illusions of the virtual world were skipping, and I was craving true connection. I had never experienced touch, but it was beginning to feel necessary and the possibility became real. I'd heard of virtual skipping happening more frequently, and with it, the epidemic of injecting was increasing. A dosing cord was easy enough to come by, click the right buttons find the right screen and dosing cord acquired. It was a small flexible cable with a needle on one end, covered with a plastic cap and an injection outlet on the other to hook into a screen. Once I had the cord, slipping the needle into my skin and opening the screen was not difficult. There was a pinch, and a small amount of blood the first time. But opening my screen and watching the power move through the cord and into my arm was ecstasy. When the power entered my bloodstream, I felt a shudder through my body, like fire consuming a forest so dry, so starved, that it burst into flame upon impact. The injection didn't last long, and as the fire

within me dissolved, I felt alive, in a way that the new world aimed to snuff out. After that, I never turned back.

Injecting became routine. I would inject to remember what touch and connection felt like, despite having never felt such things. Soon after I started using, I knew I would touch one day. Injecting could only sustain me for so long before I needed a real person. I would prepare to inject and lettering would cross the screen about various tenants of the collective, and the screen would remind us of the dangers of injecting. It would remind us that injecting, if discovered, meant complete isolation, temporary confiscation of one's screen and blood purging. The blood had to become pure, free of any injection residue before a person could be remitted to the collective. The consequences of being discovered injecting were strong, but the need to feel, the need to simulate connection, was enough incentive to dodge the rules, enough to pass the reminder screens, insert the dosing cord and let the injection fill and sustain me. Injecting was enough, until the day I touched another person.
