

ADAM-TROY CASTRO

EGO TO GO

Artemus Feeble's greatest asset as a Persona Tailor had always been his ability to know what the customer needed at first glance. Not merely what the customer wanted-- that was easy. But knowing what the customer needed: that was a different knack entirely, one that marked the dividing line between the merchant and the artist.

His talents had served him well over the years; he'd moved from humble beginnings sculpting trendy neuroses for the Soho crowd, to his humble but lucrative sinecure in the Megalopolis Galleria, where he set up shop after that vast shopping mall elected a governor and declared statehood. True, his store was just a hole in the wall, really, tucked between an anal hypnotist and an endorphin bar; and he deliberately kept it tacky to honor the long and distinguished tradition of talented backstreet tailors-- but the grunge was as much a simulation as his stooped back and liver-spotted scalp. Anybody who sampled his work knew that Feeble was among the best.

Take the pudgy man who wandered in at 17:37 Metriday afternoon. Feeble pegged him as the sort of man who felt embarrassed all the time, by everything he said

or did, and therefore tried to be as anonymous as possible. At this the poor fellow ultimately failed; though he'd stuffed himself into the kind of suit designed to be invisible against any background (a suit of real cloth, not see-thru plastic or holographic projection), the powerful blush that had taken up permanent residence on his cheeks made his face stand out like a searchlight. Feeble registered all that, and, incongruously, the man's eyes (which were a remarkably bright shade of blue he couldn't recall ever having seen before -- the kind of blue that even the sky itself achieved only in poetry written by shy thirteen-year-old girls), before he turned his attention back to the flashily dressed young lady already standing at his formica counter. "It's up and running," he said, in his usual yiddish intonation. "If you ever need any adjustments, let me know."

The young lady flashed an improbably dazzling smile and floated out the battered wooden doorway on wings of pure bliss. The pudgy man watched her until she disappeared up the gleaming escalator to the garden level. "S-she looks happy."

"She is, now. Deliriously. She'll never be in a bad mood again. She'll never even be cranky. She'll also be incredibly annoying, but there's always a trade-off. And you, mister? How may I help you?"

The pudgy man dabbed his forehead with a sonic hankie, which emitted a chorus of high-pitched squeaks as the sweat beads vaporized. "Well, I, uh...hmmmm. This is embarrassing."

"I'm not surprised," Feeble said. "Let's start with your name, shall we?"

"Porter," the pudgy man ventured, in the quaver of a man never at rest even in his own skin. Almost at once he licked his lips, turned a sickly fishbelly-white, and looked away, studying the various low-rent furnishings of Feeble's miniscule waiting room -- the three folding chairs, the standing ashtray gray with recent ash, and the coffee table covered with issues of Personality Today. "I mean, Wallace? Wallace Porter? I was -- I mean, I was told to come here by somebody I work with? Annie, I mean, Annette Crosby? You know her?"

"Certainly," Feeble said. Annette was one of his regular customers: the parthenogenic only child of virtual sex magnates Janet and Enid Crosby, who liked to stop by over lunch to pick up an adorable giggle or temporary/Parisian accent for a dinner engagement. Feeble liked Annette, even when she was being fashionably unlikeable. He fingered the fatty tape measure he wore around his shoulders as an old-fashioned badge of office, adjusted his traditional bifocals, and prompted, "She sent you here.?"

"Yes, I, uh, was, sort of, apologizing to her, for uh, something I'd said to her the week before, that I wasn't entirely sure she hadn't taken the wrong way, because, uh, I don't really want to give offense, because I'm not that kind of person, and, uh, she sort of gave out this big loud sigh and said that I should come here. She, uh," Porter's blush was now as bright red as a Caribbean sunset, "said I should buy an Ego."

"She's right. You need one."

Porter looked like he would have been happier cowering under the musty carpeting with the rest of the insects. "I'm sorry."

Feeble slammed his fist against the countertop, raising a mushroom cloud of carefully placed dust. "Don't apologize! That's the major problem with people like you -- you're always apologizing! You believe that every single move you make causes the world mortal offense, and therefore you either shy away from doing anything even remotely self-assertive, or fall all over yourself making excessive amends for words and deeds that never really required amends in the first place. In the process, you reduce yourself to a forgettable cipher at best and a major-league annoyance at worst. For God's sake, Mr. Porter, we're not living in medieval times, when people actually had to live with a handicap like that! Why didn't you get this fixed long ago?"

Porter addressed an invisible person somewhere in the vicinity of his plain brown shoes. "I'm s-- I mean, I guess I never realized it was a problem."

"You treat yourself like a criminal and you never realized it was a problem.?"

"I guess I thought I deserved it," said Porter.

Feeble appraised him critically, then disappeared behind the deliberately tacky curtain (faded flowers in a shade of old tobacco stains), into the dimly lit closet, returning with a metallic disk that reflected the single overhead bulb

with a burst of incandescent color that bounced rainbows off the beads of sweat on Porter's forehead. "Here. Try this on."

Porter's eyes bugged.

"Surely this can't be your first prosthetic!"

"No," Porter said, in the awed tones of a man reliving a long-forgotten horror.

"When I was two years old, I was last in my class to learn Differential Calculus. My parents fitted me with a 75-G Sony Prosthetic Genius for Math. They didn't remove it until I was seven. It was years before I learned to communicate with other people without using polynomials."

"That was a less enlightened age," Feeble assured him. "I myself was a spectacularly unlikeable child and was almost ruined for life by a prosthetic Cute. But these days we know how to properly adjust the prosthetic to the individual personality. We can even implant them subdermally so nobody knows you're wearing them. Go ahead. Try it."

Porter nodded wanly and placed the disk on his forehead. All at once his entire bearing changed. He stood up straight -- gaining two inches of height in the process-- shrugged his shoulders experimentally, and for the very first time, smiled. "Wow."

"You're a wimp," Feeble said, his face rippling with waves of palpable disgust.

No longer Yiddish, he delivered words resonant with echoes, like the voice of God in old Bible movies. Beams of blue light burst from the walls on both sides, turning his cheekbones to caverns and rendering him monstrous. "A nerd. A loser. A butthead. A weiner. A dope. A waste of oxygen. A sloth with a human face. If you were worth twenty times what you're worth now you'd still be a worthless slug."

Porter's face fell. "You really think so?"

The blue light receded. "I think you need a more powerful model," Feeble said, sans echo, his voice suddenly Yiddish again. He plucked the disk off Porter's forehead, disappeared through the curtains, then returned bearing another disk which he applied where the first one had been. "Boy, are you pathetic. I mean, jeez, I look at some of the gobs of human waste who come shuffling in here on their hind legs and I think they're pretty hard to take, but you, mister, you're a --"

Porter hauled off and punched him. Or tried to, anyway; Feeble's personal force-field engaged as soon as it sensed the onrushing fist, deflecting it harmlessly into the empty air by Feeble's side. Even as Porter tried to regain his balance, Feeble was plucking the prosthetic from his forehead. All at once Porter's face fell again: "Oh, dear. I'm sorry. Did I --"

Feeble wagged his index finger, which was yellow from tobacco smoke and had altogether too many joints to look comfortable on any human hand. (He'd had it reconfigured twenty years earlier, so he'd look more formidable lecturing

people.) "Didn't I tell you not to apologize? --This is all part of the fitting process. It seems we have a slight problem in your case, Mr. Porter; you've abused yourself so much that you've created an incredible deep-rooted anger. Any attempt to give you an Ego will unleash that anger and create, instead of a fuller, happier human being, a serious menace to himself and others."

Porter tried to shrink to the size of a period on a printed page. "I'm s --"

"Oh, please, give it a rest. This isn't an insoluble problem; people in my profession encounter it fairly frequently. What you need, Mr. Porter, in addition to a new Ego, is an outlet for all that anger. Something that will vent your rage in a socially acceptable way. Perhaps..." He drummed his fingers, including the extra-long one, on the countertop. Wherever he drummed, nanotech Carefully replaced the dust immediately, to preserve the impression of sloppy genius. He said, "A Talent, maybe?"

"I, uh, don't have a lot of money..."

"You don't need much, Mr. Porter. Talent's cheap...historically, one of the cheapest things you can buy. And considering the sheer amount of angst you carry around on your back, you need it. After all, angst from a Talented person is fascinating; angst from a Common Everyday Nobody is just an annoyance. -- Hmmm. Let's see. I could equip you with a standard Knack for Playing the Blues, but then you'd have to buy an instrument, and you said you were on a budget..." Feeble drummed his fingernails some more, then brightened. "I've got it.

Poetry."

"I think I'm too self-conscious to be a poet..."

Feeble chuckled. "A more unusual sentence I've never heard. Besides, on your budget, you won't be a good one. In fact, the Prosthetic I have in mind is a rather old model, which is only good for Post-Modern Acrostic Haiku. You won't want to show any of it to anybody. But once every couple of weeks or so you'll scribble some doggerel into a notebook, and save that notebook on disk, and you'll feel that you've purged the pit of festering despair at the darkest corner of your soul."

"Pit of Festering Despair?"

"Don't have one of those, either, eh? Well, worst comes to worst, I can always equip you with one. Anyway," Feeble said, as he put the first disk back on Ponees forehead, "here's your Ego, and here," he said, as he placed another disk on top of that one, "Here's your Talent. And now, I want you to know that you've made an incredible fool of yourself throughout this entire conversation."

"Yeah," Porter said derisively. "Right." And then he brightened immediately.

"Hey! It works! I asserted myself without excess anger and didn't feel even remotely guilty about it! What a tremendous relief after an entire lifetime of self-denial! I should have bought a prosthetic long ago!"

"I agree," said Feeble, "though you should also realize that your prostheses

have yet to be tested in your everybody life and thus cannot be said to be 100 percent adequate to your particular circumstances. The vast majority of my customers come back for adjustments."

"Nuts to that! This is a brand-new me talking here! I've got vim and vigor! I've got pep and zowie! I don't need anything but my faith in myself!"

Feeble nodded. "Very well," he said. He pressed a button under the counter, summoning the implantation chair from its recessed home in the ceiling. "Let's implant them and write up your order."

It was a week later. The mall was stringing brightly colored banners for its yearly independence celebration. The public-address systems were playing a grunge-muzak version of the Minnesota-Wisconsin War. Feeble had spent the past hour administering to a bulky young man whose relationship with his girlfriend had suffered due to his appalling lack of emotional vulnerability. As it happened, the young man had no reason to be emotionally vulnerable; he'd lived an uncommonly happy life, irritatingly devoid of formative angst. There weren't even any Deep Shameful Secrets in his Past. Feeble had accordingly equipped him with one. From now on, whenever the young lady in question mentioned Thursday, the young man would automatically flash a startled look filled with the pain of sudden remembrance, look away dramatically, and, while steadfastly denying that anything was wrong speak in a hesitant stutter utterly at odds with his normally ebullient personality. The young man didn't see how such a tiny thing could save their relationship, but Feeble assured him the mystery would drive her wild; and

he definitely knew what he was talking about, because he'd fitted the young lady with an Inquisitive Streak only two weeks earlier.

He was ringing up the young man's purchase when Brad Porter entered. Porter had changed in the past week -- the nondescript clothes he'd been wearing on his last visit had been replaced by an ensemble that went beyond flashy into the realm of the egregiously loud. His jacket was tailored from a silvery material upon which scenes from post-modernist pore, projected via fiber-optics from a tape player secreted in an inside pocket, faded in and out in a smoky montage of noir chic. Yet neither this outrageous fashion statement nor his stylish holoshades, which shot successive bolts of multicolored lightning at the open air before him, succeeded in hiding the unhappy soul behind the flamboyant mask.

To preserve the shreds of the poor man's dignity, Feeble didn't let on that he saw through his pose at once. "Yes, sir! How's your new personality treating you?"

"Terrific!" Porter exclaimed, in the kind of flamboyant delivery used by actors playing to the thirty-fifth row. "For the first time in my life I feel perfectly comfortable with myself! I am completely in charge of my own destiny! I'm a real firebrand filled with zest and enthusiasm!"

"What's the problem, then.?"

"With me? Absolutely nothing! I'm a great conversationalist and a wonderful human being! Every social gathering I attend should consider itself fortunate

that I'm there! Unfortunately," Porter said, the cloud that passed over his smug self-satisfied expression perfectly at home next to the lightning storm of his holoshades, "I've also been told everybody thinks I'm a self-centered creep."

Feeble bit the tip off a fresh cigar, spit it into the dark comer where it joined a small mound of predecessors already being consumed by simulated roaches. "I was afraid of this. You see . . . Brad . . . you do call yourself Brad now, don't you? . . . a personality is like a suit of clothes. It can look wonderful on the mannequin, but unless it's properly fitted to the individual, it's just poorly tailored cloth. And while your peers might have found your current level of self-appreciation perfectly appropriate for a man truly as remarkable as you now consider yourself, they're unable to tolerate the same level of egocentrism from somebody who isn't all that special at all."

More bad news and Porter might have collapsed into a semiliquid puddle on Feeble's dusty floor. "Can you help me?"

"Of course." Feeble fingered the activator at the tip of his cigar and blew out a small cloud of malodorous synth-smoke. "Here at Feeble's, the customer's satisfaction is our top priority. The question is, just how do we tackle this problem? Do we merely modulate your Ego so it's less irritating? Admittedly, that might make you easier to take-- but it won't address the real core of the problem, which is that when all is said and done you really don't have a lot to be egotistical about."

"That can't be true! My Haiku alone --"

"First rule of human social interaction, Mr. Porter: If you have to lead with Haiku, you've already lost."

"But you're the one who --"

Feeble dismissed the previous week with a wave of a hand. "Last week we fixed a symptom. But you need more than confidence, Brad. Something actually valued by society as a whole. Something that would make your self-admiration a logical outgrowth of your own actual worth. Something, in short, that will render you a valued commodity in the commerce of interpersonal relations."

Porter removed his mirrorshades, revealing eyes that, this time out, bespoke a deeply troubled soul beneath the flashy, self-confident exterior. "Something expensive, in other words."

Feeble shrugged. "You want a quick fix, buy your prosthetics from a vending machine. There's a Slick Charm dispenser on Mall Level Twelve. But people are sophisticated. First time the conversation turns to something substantive, they'll be able to spot you as the phony you are. It takes a top-of-the-line prosthetic to make people leap from their chairs, clap their hands over their chests, and exclaim, By God! That Porter Fella's A Titan Among Men, Somebody I Feel Damn Privileged to Know."

"Right now," Porter said glumly, "given the current state of my finances after

last week's fitting, I'll settle for a budget prosthetic and not being universally despised."

"As you wish. You can always upgrade." Feeble looked around for an ashtray, found none, then placed the cigar at the tip of his counter to let it flake spent ash onto his carpet. "Hmmm. You said it was Ms. Crosby who first directed you to this establishment. Is she your closest friend at your place of employment?"

"I don't have any close friends there," said Porter, "but she is one of the few who don't run shrieking from the sight of me."

"And does she concur with the common opinion that you're a self-centered, egotistical creep?"

"She told me just this morning that she does. -- In the friendliest possible way, of course."

Feeble's gaze went deep and penetrating. "And how friendly can that be, Brad?"

Porter colored. Lowered his eyes. Dug his hands into his pockets and bashfully kicked at his heels. "You had to be there."

"I see. -- Well, sir, since she's the closest thing you have to a friend, you must know a lot about her. Tell me, is she happy in her job? Does she have any

pets? What does she do for fun in her spare time? What's the one thing she'd do differently if she had her life to live over? How's her health? Is she married? Has she ever had a brain-rinse? Did she ever indulge in sentient fusion? Do you know the answers to any of these questions? Even one of them, Mr. Porter?"

"Of course not. Why would I care?"

"She's right, Brad. You are a self-centered, egotistical creep." "Hey!"

Feeble raised both hands in mock surrender. "Don't take it personally, my good man. That's a professional diagnosis. And right now it's my professional opinion that you've been wrapped up in your own problems so long, without break, that you don't have even the slightest clue how to show an interest in anybody other than yourself."

Porter wore the expression of a man who's just learned he was wearing his underwear outside his pants. "Really?"

"Don't blame yourself." Feeble patted him on the shoulder in sympathy. "It takes the average person half a lifetime to develop the knack, and even then it usually comes off as forced and unnatural. But with the proper prosthetic in place, you can be a warm and caring individual artificially, without the nurturing life experiences that inefficiently take years to make you one. Here," he said, placing a disk on Porter's forehead. "This is a Sanyo GZ-57 Prosthetic Empathy. How do you feel?"

"Is it on yet?" Porter asked.

"Yes. Highest possible setting. How do you feel?"

"The same."

"Maybe it doesn't work. The quality control is--" And then Feeble's face contorted, becoming a tormented parody of itself. "ARRRRGH!"

Porter's eyes widened in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Just some . . . heartburn . . . my . . ." Feeble fell to his knees.

"ARRRGHHHH!"

Porter leaped over the counter in a single bound, landing beside Feeble with the silent grace of a jungle cat. "You can't fool me, Feeble! That's not heartburn, that's a massive coronary! Isn't it? ISN'T IT?"

Feeble's mouth worked silently for all of ten seconds before he managed to get out the word. ". . . yes . . ."

"I'm taking you to the hospital right now!"

". . . no . . . don't . . ." Feeble went three shades paler and fell the rest of the way to the ground, in the kind of death scene that every actress who ever

played Camille might have envied. "...you have your own problems . . ."

Porter cradled him in his arms and rocked back and forth as he declaimed his infinite caring to the heavens. "Damn my petty little problems! They're not important, anyway! You're a fellow human being in distress and you take precedence!"

"Of course," Feeble said, in a normal tone of voice, the color returning to his cheeks even as he continued to gaze up at Porter's pathetically concerned face, "this is just a demonstration. I once tested this little beauty myself, by wearing it as I paged through a magazine looking at the save-the-children ads. Were I not also wearing a Prosthetic Cheap Bastard just as a precaution, I'd right this very minute be supporting a family of twelve on the Mars colony."

"Let me help you up anyway," said Porter.

"You don't have to."

"No, I insist."

"I'm telling you you don't have to. I can get up by myself."

"But you've gone to so much trouble, I feel so bad for you . . ."

"I think we're going to have to use a lower setting," Feeble decided, as he lithely jumped to his feet and physically thrust the hovering customer from his

side. "If you show too much concern for the feelings and concerns of others, they consider you intrusive and once again come to the conclusion that you're a self-centered creep."

"I don't care what they think about me," Porter declared fervently, an unnerving messianic light shining from his remarkably blue eyes, "as long as they're comfortable with themselves."

"Oh, please." Feeble reached out and switched off the prosthetic. "If I let you walk out of this store acting like that, I'd never have another customer again.

-- I suppose you'll be more-or-less okay if along with the Prosthetic Empathy we also implanted a Prosthetic Reasonable Sense of Perspective to keep you from getting obnoxious about it. That will be more expensive, of course, but even so..." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Swaying slightly, Brad regarded him with an expression very close to terror.

"Yes?"

"Frankly, Brad, you have one of the most seriously deficient personalities I've ever encountered. Even if we draw the line at the Prosthetic Reasonable Sense of Perspective, and it works for you, then that still means it's taken four major prosthetics just to make you even minimally tolerable. I say we shouldn't settle for that. As long as we're getting up into that price range anyway, I say we dispense with the expensive band-aids, declare your old personality a dead loss, and install a complete brand-new one direct from the factory in Tel Aviv. I'll

even give you a generous payment plan, and credit you the full purchase price of the prosthetics I've already installed. What do you say?"

"Can I have a week to think it over?"

With one smooth, efficient movement, Feeble pressed a Prosthetic Decisiveness to Porter's forehead.

Porter's jaw set, becoming an iron thing that even cannonballs couldn't have dented. "Let's do it."

Feeble smiled. "Let's."

A year later, Feeble was in his store adding a new line of Laughter Enhancers to the window display, when the dashing and heroic Lash Porter strode in like the titan of a man he was. Porter had lost all his previous pudginess over the past few months, gaining in its place a muscle tone well-suited to his safari jacket, jhodpurs and pith helmet. His steely blue gaze and determinedly set jaw bespoke a man of action well-versed in the harsh laws of jungle survival. But his was not an entirely grim soul, either-- for even as he saw Feeble his heroic eyes lit up with the joy of a man as unsparingly generous with his friends as he was unstintingly cruel to his enemies. "Artemus!" he exclaimed jovially. "Can you spare a drink for a thirsty man?"

"Always for you, Lash." Feeble set a shot glass on the table and poured Lash a quick one.

Porter tossed it back, said, "Ahhhhh!" and slammed the empty glass to the counter.

"How's life treating you, Lash?"

"Could be worse, my friend. Annette and I have finally set the date. We'll be getting married en route to our villa in subtropic Antarctica."

Feeble clapped Porter on the back. "Mazeltov!"

"Yes," Porter said dreamily, looking past Feeble, past the walls of Feeble's establishment, to some vision of perfect happiness known only to him, "she says that I come very close to being the man she's dreamed of all her life. --Though she could use a little work herself. I've asked her to stop by so you can give her a Sense of Humor. She doesn't get any of my jokes."

"I'll give her the top of the line," Feeble promised.

"And she's always cranky when she first wakes up. I've always been a morning person, so maybe you can work on that too."

"It would be my pleasure," Feeble said gravely. "And you, Lash? Are you shopping for yourself as well?"

Porter retrieved a sheet of paper from his breast pocket. The sheet had been folded four times, but Feeble could tell even so that it was covered on both sides with many, many words in a cramped feminine handwriting. Porter unfolded it carefully, smoothed out the creases, and started to read. "Neatness. Table Manners. Punctuality. An Interest in Opera. An Appreciation for Fine Art and French Food. An Encyclopaedic Knowledge of the World's Great Wines. An Affection for Cats. More Tolerance for her Explosive Meditation Techniques. Tact When Dealing With Her Mothers. More Stamina When..."

"Whoa!" Feeble put out both hands in mock surrender. "That's going to cost quite a bit, Lash! Are you sure you have the budget for all that?"

"Annette's mothers are paying. It was a condition of our engagement."

"Ahhhhhhh." Feeble nodded. "Sounds like the young lady knows what she wants."

Porter placed the sheet of paper on Feeble's countertop. "She always did. She says she wanted me from the moment we first met. My eyes, you see."

"I see," said Feeble, though of course, with his years of experience in the trade, he wasn't exactly surprised. He grabbed the list, scanned it quickly, saw that it contained any number of items that even he would have never considered, and heaved the sigh of a man who knew his work was cut out for him. "Well, then! We better get started. Since this is going to take a while, and you are by far my best customer, I'll just close up shop, so we can take our time with this."

"Thank you," Porter said humbly.

Feeble came around the counter, pulled the fly-specked shades, activated the CLOSED sign in the window, then pressed the button that summoned the reclining Implantation Chair from its recess in the ceiling. But just as Porter climbed aboard and grinned at him expectantly, Feeble paused, a strange expression on his face. "Lash?"

"What?"

"Before we do this, I want to say I admire you."

"Me?" Porter's heroic visage twisted in surprise. "Why? You're the one responsible for the man I am today."

"Not at all," said Feeble. "The truth of the matter, Lash -- and I'll deny this if you repeat it to anybody, since the entire profession lives in fear of people finding this out -- is that personality is nothing more than a shallow mask we show the world. Even when we add to it, or subtract from it, or rebuild it from the ground up, or, as in your case, raze it to the ground and then replace it entirely, we like to think we don't touch the soul itself. And I can't help admiring a soul brave enough to re-invent himself so completely."

Porter smiled and shook his head. "You're so full of crap, Feeble. Bravery doesn't enter into it."

"No? What would you call it, then?"

"I did it for Annette," he said. "The only woman I ever met who loved me for myself."

Feeble smiled then, though for just an instant -- an instant he very carefully hid from the man who now called himself Lash -- the smile was neither friendly nor professional, but sad and wan.

Then he activated the chair and made Porter a brand new man.