

The good news is that they are just like
you.

by Hannah Cockroft

We scroll through the faces in quick succession. Awake, beaming, enlightened. They glow, from the incandescence within their own bodies, and from the network of lights embedded in the glass window that they wait behind. The emotion that they are presenting is happiness. You can recognise this emotion from the exposed teeth. The lines in the corners of their eyes. The melody of their voices. They are good at looking happy. The criteria have been met. They grin. Their faces are different but indistinguishable. The same expression replicated on similar features on a similar head on a similar body.

The faces behind the glass can show you how to be happy. We need them, because we are not. They show us how easy it can be. Their happiness is the result of one thing, the thing that they hold in their hand. The supplement, the drink, the powder, the 6-step-program. All different, but indistinguishable. All with the same result. Perfection. Fixing you. Cleaning you up. Giving you permission to be happy. You just need to follow the link. So you do. You also buy an extra water bottle to meet the requirements for free shipping. Your happiness will be with you in less than three business days for metropolitan areas. It is so easy to be happy these days.

We are so grateful.

The faces behind the glass tell you their stories. Greg, 32, lost 37 kilos and won his wife back. Melissa, 49, managed to quit the booze and stop taking sick days for hangovers. Amy, 23, got bikini-body ready with only three weeks left till summer. Xavier, 18, won his battle against cystic acne with no visible scarring. Vanessa, 26, got over her agoraphobia and finally found a boyfriend. Rodney, 39, found happiness and enlightenment moments before he planned to hang himself with his mother's stockings. Harvey, 31, doesn't hit his wife anymore.

The good news is that they are just like you. But better, because they got what they needed. There was a time before they ever knew that their saviour existed. They used to be cheap and greasy and useless, just like you. But the remedy was so simple. And now they offer it to you, so you may be glowing from that incandescence within. You may even be allowed to join them behind the glass. Your face can join the infinite grid of smiles.

You will be so grateful.

You face yourself. You look at the bags under your eyes, the hot red beads of cystic acne under your skin, the oil creeping its way out of your scalp and soaking into your hair. Red threads intertwine within the whites of your glassy eyes, and your tongue is covered in an acrid grey film that smells of stomach acid and bile. You need help. Something. You don't know what to do. No matter how much time you dedicate to stomach crunches and early morning runs and deciding how many grapes and celery sticks you are allowed to eat for the day, nothing changes. You remain repulsive. Then, you find it. Glistening at you. Just follow the link.

You are so grateful.

Cradling your phone late at night, cocooned in unwashed sheets came a light. A new post rewarded from the muscle memory of constant refreshing: A post mountain hike selfie.

Its an old friend from your school days, except now they look different, as if glowing from somewhere between the backlit glass and the soft warm light piercing through treetops above them to the stream below.

You can't tell if it's just the oil from your fingers smudging your phone screen or if their post mountain-hike outline is blurring.

Staring into the pixels that make up the image of their face, you can feel your own pores vibrate, and although alone in your musky inner city apartment you can hear the sound of the water trickling. You can smell the fresh mountain air.

Double click.

A heat travels down the length of your fingers, dancing across your ribs and settling in your core. From their hand to yours they offer it to you, so you may be glowing from that incandescence within.

You just have to click the link.

It doesn't start off easy. At first you dip into your savings. It doesn't matter how much it costs to begin with when you've been promised that your profit will be doubled in the first two months, probably. But no one wants it. No one wants you. They don't believe you. How could they, with your spots and your yellow teeth? Why would they want anything from you? You can't promise them a chance at absolute physical perfection looking like a before picture. Another week with no income, another spot on your chin. You dip into your savings again. Notice more bags under your eyes. But you keep going, because you need to be like them. Just better.

One day, someone buys it. A friend. You don't know why, probably out of pity. And once their payment comes through and you make your commission, you can afford to buy an apple.

You are so grateful.

The momentum picks up. It's slow, sure, but it's there. Your chin's clearing up. Your hair is starting to shine. The film on your teeth has gone. People take notice. They ask you what's changed. They ask you how they can do it too. They see your progress from behind the screen. They see the photographs of your vibrant smiling face and shrinking body. Athleisurewear morphs with flesh. Happy and lean. The more people see you, the more they ask for your help. So you send them the link, and they hand you their soul. You continue this reaping. The more you buy, the more you give, the more you get.

You can feel it starting at the centre of you. It's small at first, barely noticeable, then expanding. The incandescence. It's like the flame in a hot air balloon. The light within your core backlights your body like the brightness of the screen that feeds you. You can feel the warmth and power filling out your entire shape, as it grows hotter and brighter. It's fuelling you, lifting you up above the cloud line. You soar. Your friends, your followers, your loyal consumers, they watch from below, all of them blowing into the air, helping you levitate. The likes, the shares, all of it. Your lifeline.

One day, you receive a notification. An invitation. They want to meet to congratulate you on reaching your milestone. 10,000 associates gained in 18 months. It hasn't seemed like a long time, and yet you've changed so much.

You are so grateful.

The glass walls of the building glow, just like your screen, and you can see your reflection on the door before you step inside. Once you enter, you notice the tiny lights, millions of optical fibres embedded into the glass, a network of neurons firing and flashing all around you. A water feature is placed at the centre of the lobby, with channels expanding out from it, circling underneath the glass floor. The sound of the fountain fills the lobby like a relaxation tape, and you think you can hear a bird call in the background. You ask the woman at reception where you are supposed to go, but she doesn't respond. You look around for another person, but you are all alone. No offices, no toilets. The only other door, besides the one you entered through, is a lift. You look at the woman closer, seeing right through her, realising that she is a projection, an image manifested into the space. You look around you again, and notice that everything in this space is a projection, simply made of light. Illusory substance. The sound of water plays over a speaker. You look at the woman's image once more, before you enter the lift. You think you see her turn to face you just as the doors close, but you can't be sure.

Double click.

You press the only button on the wall, an upward arrow, and feel the jolt of the lift rising up. You feel a buzz at the centre of your body, and your stomach begins to curdle. You clutch at it, trying to soothe it, and a different sensation begins. You begin to feel weightless, like turbulence on a plane. The glow in your stomach is becoming brighter, burning hot, red with fear. Then, there is a glow in front of you. The doors part to reveal a great bright room and your nostrils sting with the smell of crisp mountain air. You're blinded by the light from the huge window at the opposite end of the room. Soon you see the clouds weave their way in between the tips of Pyramids, thousands of them, holding still in the view. Along the walls you see hundreds of faces, the happy people from behind the screen, morphing and changing. All different, but indistinguishable, manifesting and disintegrating, they disperse into the optical fibers. The same expression replicated on similar features on a similar head, on a similar body. Then you notice the other smell underneath.

The creeping smell, a grey slug oozing its way into your nose. That's when you see the figures. Hundreds of them lining the room. Your eyes begin to adjust. You can tell that they are people, but you can't tell what is wrong with them. You can't see their faces.

You suddenly feel tiny pinpricks in your face. Your pores tightening into nothing. You put your hand to your face and feel pieces of paper-thin skin fall away, revealing smooth and pure flesh beneath it. You feel the corners of your lips inch toward one another as your mouth closes up, your teeth crushing together so hard that they crack. The cartilage of your nose pops as it flattens into nothing, and just before the pinpoints of your eyes are sealed forever, you notice that the figures on the ground are missing their faces. The light inside you bursts through its vessel, and nestles itself within the glass.

We are so grateful.

Hannah Cockroft graduated from The University of Western Australia in 2017, with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) majoring in English and Cultural Studies. Hannah was the resident creative writer for Pelican Magazine in 2017. She was also selected as a finalist for the Frankie Good Stuff Awards in 2017 and 2018 for the writing/podcasts category, with her entries placing in the top six across Australia and New Zealand.