

The Ambiguity Broker

By
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If Dan Casterson didn't sell his last Ambiguity patch soon, then he would lose his job. He checked the client list on his computer and found a single lead. Sandra Sukorvo had sent a package showing interest in Possibilities Inc. Seeing his career flash before his eyes, Casterson hopped in his car and sped down there.

He stopped outside her house and checked everything. His hair was slick and his suit was well-pressed. But his breath still tasted like the pepperoni pizza he had for lunch. He gulped down two breath mints, cleared his throat, grabbed his briefcase and got out of the car.

Outside the sun beat down on him and he started to sweat. Casterson sighed and tried not to think about what would happen if he failed. He'd lose everything. His house, the car, his health club membership, his Certainty tech, his silk bathrobes. And his wife, Denise. If he lost this gig, she'd divorce him.

Casterson walked up to the front door. A dog emerged from the backyard. His Certainty contacts activated. Dog, German Shepherd, female, five years old. Name: Daisy.

The dog growled.

Casterson froze and tried to smile. That dog didn't look like no Daisy to him. "Good girl," he said.

The dog wasn't buying it, though. She growled and started towards Casterson.

Shaking, Casterson backed up, fearing the dog would rip him to shreds.

But at the last second, a fat man in a bathrobe emerged from the house and said, "Get the fuck back in here, Daisy." He smacked the dog on the hindquarters.

She yelped and ran back in the house.

Casterson sighed with relief. His contacts blinked out information. Alexander Sukorvo, thirty-five, husband of Sandra Sukorvo (maiden name: Pechard).

Casterson frowned. He preferred to deal with the woman of the house. They usually had control of the money and were susceptible to his charms. But in this case, he was desperate. He activated his Ambiguity patch with a mental command and it deactivated all of the Certainty tech in his body, including the contacts.

"Hello, Mr. Sukorvo," Casterson said.

"What do you want?"

“My name is Dan Casterson, Sir. I’m an Ambiguity agent from Possibilities Inc. Your wife asked for some literature about our ambiguity programs and I thought I’d stop by for a moment and discuss our—”

“Not interested, pal. Take a hike.” Sukorvo belched, reached down into his robe and scratched his balls.

Dan felt depressed, but he kept his smile on. Never give up on the customer. Keep at them until they crack. Besides, he had tried cold calling all the other leads and gotten jackshit for his trouble.

“I’d only take a moment of your time, Mr. Sukorvo,” Casterson said.

“I don’t need ambiguity. Now get lost.”

Casterson walked up to him. “Are you sure? Many people like living in Certainty, but aren’t you bored knowing almost everything in life? Don’t you long for the days when you could look at a tree and not be sure there was a cat or a raccoon behind it? Or maybe the chance to mishear a conversation? Or the ability to have two different interpretations about what you’ve read and watched?”

“No. I’m a freelance biographer and I deal in facts, Mr. Casterson, not ambiguities. Now I have some work to do, so if you’ll excuse me.” Sukorvo turned to go back into the house.

Get in the customer’s confidence, Casterson’s mentor had once told him. Appeal to their ego. Make it seem like you’re genuinely interested in what they do. “May I ask what you write?”

“I write biographies of famous figures in the pre-Certainty age. People like Kant and Jan Horsk?”

“Jan Horsk? I’m really interested in his life. Could I come in for a moment and look at what you’re writing?”

Sukorvo frowned. “I usually don’t show my work off before it’s complete.”

“Of course not. But I’d be interested to hear your theories about Horsk.”

“I don’t know. Sandra will be home in an hour and I have to start dinner...”

“Then maybe you could just give me an overview.”

Sukorvo seemed uncertain. But after a moment’s hesitation, he said, “All right.”

Sukorvo let him in the house. Deep inside, Casterson smiled. Once he got inside the customer’s home, he was halfway there. Sukorvo led him into the kitchen where there were stacks of papers and books. Sukorvo also had a neural-link word processor set up next to them.

“Here’s my notes,” Sukorvo said. “I got a three book contract with Cassidy Publishing and I’m planning a fourth book about Horsk and the coming of the Certainty Age. Sandra doesn’t think I’ll get anymore published, but what does she know? I got enough money from my parents to last me a couple of decades.”

Casterson feigned a deep interest and waited for the right moment to bait his hook.

“Can I ask you something, Mr. Sukorvo?” Casterson said.

“What?”

“Have you ever tried ambiguity?”

“No. And I’m not interested.”

“Why not?”

“I like having certainty of my senses and of information. I mean, look how chaotic and disordered society was before the introduction of Certainty. Sensory information wasn’t filtered, misinformation ran rampant, people couldn’t always hear or understand each other’s words, even when they spoke the same language. And people were given far too much range to engage in multiple interpretations of thought and image—”

Before Sukorvo went off on a long spiel, Casterson jumped in and said, “Yes, but couldn’t you say that we humans lost something when we gave up ambiguity? The ability to see and interpret the world in a myriad of different ways. What about art and film and ideas?”

Sukorvo snorted. “Who wants to see a picture or a film or read a book with multiple interpretations? Most people want one concrete interpretation of the world, Mr. Casterson, not a bunch of different ones. Now I appreciate your persistence in trying to sell me on your old-fashioned idea, but I’m afraid I have to ask you to—”

“Just wait a second. Can I show you something?”

“I don’t think I—”

“It’ll only take a minute.”

Casterson placed his briefcase on the table, opened it up and revealed the Ambiguity patch. He took it out of its case and held it up.

“I don’t think I’d like—” Sukorvo said.

“Just consider this a free sample,” Casterson said. “If you don’t like it, then you can always take it back.”

“What does it do?”

“It temporarily inhibits all Certainty technology in your body. Here, try it.”

Sukorvo hesitated for a second, but then he put the patch on his head.

“How does it work?” Sukorvo said.

“Just click it on,” Casterson said. He reached over and activated the patch.

“If you agree to our offer, then they’ll have a patch implanted in your spine. You can turn your Ambiguity on or off at your leisure.”

Sukorvo glanced at the kitchen window. “I don’t feel any different.”

“Just look at this,” Casterson said.

“Look at what?”

Casterson took out a Rorschach card and showed it to him.

Sukorvo blinked and looked closer.

“What is this?”

“I’m not sure. It looks like a cat. Or maybe...it’s some people...”

“Actually the ink blot’s of a couple of maidens cavorting sexually together. If you still had your Certainty technology still active, then it would have automatically given you the maidens. But without it active, you can come to your own interpretations.”

“But how does that help me?”

“Ah, read this.” Casterson handed him a card with a sentence on it. The sentence read: She left the maze to find herself.

“So?”

“Well, think about it. Did the woman literally leave the maze to find herself or did she figuratively leave the maze to find herself?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Exactly. With Certainty technology active, it would have forced you to favor a literal interpretation of the sentence. But with it deactivated, you can accept either a literal or a figurative interpretation of that same sentence.”

“But that still don’t help me with anything.”

“Let me ask you this. What if the Certainty and its technology are fallible?”

“That’s an obvious statement. Everybody knows that nothing in the universe can be a hundred percent certain.”

“Yes—”

“But our society does argue that most things can be known to a near absolute amount of certainty.”

“True. But the need for ambiguity still remains. If you accept the idea that Certainty technology is fallible to some degree, then you must also accept the idea that there is a need for subjective interpretation. Certainty technology eliminates that ability, but we restore it. Let’s say you witness an accident at an intersection. Two people crash into each other. One is into the wrong.”

“There’d be cameras.”

“Then a street without cameras. You’re the only eyewitness and you catch the accident out of the corner of your eye. Who is in the wrong?”

“Whoever went out into the intersection first.”

“What if it’s a blind corner and they hit each other within seconds?”

“I’d see who it was.”

“Yes, but what if you only catch a glimpse of it? Your Certainty technology would ascribe blame to an individual. But what if it’s wrong? What if it was the other person’s fault? What if subjective interpretation and analysis allowed you to determine who was properly in the wrong? Wouldn’t you argue that the ability to perceive two different interpretations of the same event and make a decision based on the same evidence is more important than having the Certainty impose only one interpretation on you?”

“Perhaps. But your premise is flawed in a number of ways.”

“How so?”

“First, the cops would determine who is guilty by analyzing the tire tracks and the angle of impact. Second, subjective interpretation would not automatically allow for the right conclusion to be drawn. Third, Certainty technology would allow me to back up to the moment of the accident and run a frame by frame analysis to determine who was in the wrong. So you see, I have no need for ambiguity.” Sukorvo took off the patch and laid it on the table.

Casterson sighed, feeling defeated. He should have known the husband would be a tough nut to crack. But he would try. “You ever hear a conversation and feel uncertain what a person said, even with Certainty technology enhancing audio playback?”

“No.” But to Casterson it almost sounded like a yes.

“Take your wife. She’s on the phone.”

Sukorvo appeared annoyed.

Casterson knew he'd have to tread lightly.

"I don't listen to my wife talking to her friends on the phone."

"I'm not saying you do. But if you overhear only a part of a conversation, how can you be exactly sure what she said?"

"Certainty technology enhances my hearing and analyzes voices for clarity..."

"But it can't do that if you're not close enough for it to pick up the sound from her voice. What if she said something important that she didn't want you to hear? What if Certainty technology only caught part of the conversation and gave you the wrong interpretation?"

"Like what?" Sukorvo's face grew tight.

"I don't know. Perhaps she forgot to pay a bill or—"

"Look, my Sandra is a good woman. She'd never do anything behind my back. I love her."

"I never said she would. But you know, what if..."

"Sandra isn't cheating on me." Sukorvo trembled. "Now you get the hell out of my house before I throw you out."

"I'm sorry." Casterson frowned, closed his case and started to leave.

But before he could get to the door, Sukorvo said, "Wait."

Casterson tried not to smile. He had Sukorvo.

"You said it allows me to come to my own interpretation."

"Yes, it does."

"Do you use it yourself?"

"Of course," Casterson said. "Every day." Perhaps it wasn't the whole truth, but he did activate his Ambiguity patch when dealing with customers.

"Then maybe...maybe I could...do you have a free trial?"

"Not free. But if you make a down payment of three hundred, you can have the Ambiguity patch for thirty days."

"Thirty days. Then maybe I..."

"It's only temporary. If you don't like it, you can always return it."

"I don't know. Maybe I should talk to Sandra about it. You see, she doesn't like it when I—"

"Just try it."

"O.K., maybe I could try—"

Casterson heard the door open. He turned.

"Honey, I'm home," a female voice said.

Casterson frowned.

A tall woman with red hair entered the kitchen. She had big breasts showing through a thin white T-shirt, deep red lips and fair skin with a sunburned nose.

"Hi, Sandy," Sukorvo said.

"Who's this?" She looked at Casterson and frowned.

"This is...this is...I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

"Dan Casterson. Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise."

He gripped Sandy's hand and shook it. She had a firm grip and smelled like lilacs. Dan struggled not to look down at her breasts. The nipples were showing. God, they were beautiful breasts.

Sukorvo stepped in between them and said, "He's an Ambiguity broker. I think I'm going to try—"

"Oh, we don't need it."

"But I was just telling your husband how much you could—"

"That fellow broker of yours, what's his name? Petersen...yeah, that's his name. He already sold me an Ambiguity package the other day."

That son of a bitch, Casterson thought. He beat me to the sale. Great, now I'm screwed.

"When?" Casterson said.

"This morning. But it ain't worth it." Sandra turned and smiled. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Mr. Casterson, but we're not interested."

"I..."

"You can go now. We're rather busy."

"Yes, fine."

Casterson felt faint as he walked towards the door. Maybe he could get a job selling used cars or stock portfolios. He wanted to cry. But looking at Sandra made him feel a bit better. God, she was hot. If her husband wasn't around, he would have loved to tear that sweaty T-shirt off, kiss her breasts and fuck her right there on the kitchen table. But she didn't look that interested in him.

Casterson frowned and walked back to his car. Along the way, he glanced back at Sandra for a split second.

She winked at him.

He blinked and looked again.

Or did she?