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Gladly Unconventional

Chapter One

"No. I'm not going to do it."

"Oh come on, honey. She's a lovely girl. . . I'm sure that if you just took the time to call her and get to know her a little bit better, you two would hit it off wonderfully!"

"But mother. . . it's 1995, for goodness sake. I was under the impression that arranged relationships were slightly outdated."

"Nonsense! Look, I know that you prefer having a more. . . solitary life, but getting into a relationship could really give you the push you need to get out of that little bubble you put yourself in. Plus, your father and I would finally be able to invite someone else over during the holidays! Oh it would be so fun! We could do photo ops, family game nights. . ."

"That's not exactly *my* idea of fun. . ."

"Don't be silly! I'm sure that you and Ellen would get along great! You're tall, smart, attractive – all qualities you inherited from me, of course!"

Letting out a soft sigh of disbelief, I rest the phone between my head and shoulder and pick up my handheld recorder as my mother starts to laugh hysterically at what she perceived to be a witty anecdote.

"Mental note," I whisper into the device, making sure that the phone's receiver is completely covered. "Never again divulge details about my love life - or lack thereof - to my *mother* of all people. . ." my voice trails off as I mentally chastise myself for making such an obvious and irrational error.

As I turn the recorder off, I shut my eyes tightly and rub my temple, becoming increasingly frustrated with my mother's relentless naiveté. I thought that she understood that absolutely nothing could increase my chances of being in an actual, functional relationship. I had attempted - or at least *thought* about attempting - to form relationships several times, but all of my efforts had been painfully unsuccessful.

I sit in silence and keep my eyes closed while contemplating this, hoping that enough time had elapsed that my mother decided to hang up, when I hear a muffled voice coming from the phone.

"Honey, are you still there?"

Drat. I open my eyes slowly and exhale with annoyance, lifting my hand away from the phone receiver and sitting up straighter, physically preparing myself to tolerate whatever idea my mom would try to convince me of next.

"Yes mother, I'm still here."

"Oh good!"

"Yeah. . ."

"You mean yes."

"Oh. . . sorry."

"Now where was I... oh yes! Like I was saying before, I've always talked about getting you to step out of your comfort zone, and I think that giving Ellen a call would be a good way for you to do that."

"Again, I *really* don't understand how you've come to that conclusion."

"Well... listen John. Your father and I are concerned about you – you know that. You live alone, you don't go out with friends... aren't you ready for a bit of a change?"

"... No." Lie.

"Really? You're perfectly content with where you are?"

"Of course." Lie. "Just like I've always been."

"You know Mr. Crowley is always available..."

"I don't need a therapist, mother." Do I?

"... Well if you're sure –"

"... I think I am." Far from it.

"... Alright honey. Just promise to consider this, ok? You know how hard your father and I have tried to make this work over all these years," she said softly.

A familiar pang of guilt hit me. "Yeah... I mean yes, I know."

"I love you."

"... you too. Goodbye."

"Goodbye John."

Click.

I hang up the phone, let out a groan of exasperation, pick up my handheld recorder and switch it on. This moment needs to be documented for future examination.

“Why?” I begin. “Why in the world does my mother think that calling *Ellen* of all people will be the answer to all of my problems? That’s not going to fix anything. . . at least, I don’t think it will.” I mutter uncertainly. “I mean, why can’t I simply. . .” I stop and think for a few moments, an idea suddenly occurring to me.

“Huh. Come to think of it, the word “why” is actually quite interesting. It can be inserted in front of any ordinary sentence and completely transform its significance . . . take the phrase “I went to the store,” for example. Your standard sentence – structured according to proper grammatical rules, containing a subject and a predicate. Now take that sentence and see what happens when the word “why” is added to it. “*Why* did I go to the store?” This sentence now becomes much more interesting. The person who reads or hears this sentence is suddenly much more invested in the person that went to the store and this person’s purpose. Did this person go to the store in the middle of the day to simply purchase a few groceries? Or did they go just before closing time, so that they could buy their significant other a present for the anniversary that he or she nearly forgot about? . . . Maybe this person isn’t married – maybe this person is a teenager who is going to the store with only twenty dollars in his or her pocket, a teenager who can buy only twenty dollars’ worth of food to sustain his or her family with for the next few days.”

I sit back in my chair, brow furrowed. What was my point again? Oh, yes.

“Usually, the “whys” of life make living more interesting – they create a sense of mystery, of intrigue. My “why”s, on the other hand, do not have the same effect. My “why”s only seem to instill a sense of confusion and extreme aggravation within me... I guess that’s what I’m trying to change by doing this... get rid of all of these “why”s... or at least find a way to become less frustrated with them. I understand – I’m not normal. That much has always been painfully obvious. But... going to a therapist? Talking to someone about my feelings, having some Freud-wannabe convince me that my frustration can simply be attributed to experiences and desires that I’ve hidden in my so-called subconscious? ...I know that mother wants the best for me... I appreciate her help... but I’m going to try and see if this is a better alternative.”

I pause for a second to catch my breath and take a drink of water. Talking for an uninterrupted, extended amount of time can really be exhausting.

“... Anyways, I don’t know what else I can say... I suppose I’ll continue tomorrow when I have something interesting to discuss.”

The Escape – Page 20

She peeked out from behind the curtain, eyes widening as she gazed at the sight in front of her. Fearfully, she immediately ducked back out of sight and laid her head in her hands.

"I can't do this," she groaned.

"Of course you can, sweetheart," he drawled. "They're all nervous on the first day - you'll warm up to it eventually."

She leaned against the back wall, yelping lightly when the cold surface of metal touched her bare back. With a frustrated sigh, she decided instead to sit on the floor until she was called out. As she made herself comfortable, a million questions began running through her head: Why was this happening? Why was she doing this? Was it worth it? They all seemed unanswerable. There was no way to identify a specific moment in time that would explain why she was here at that moment. For a while, it seemed as if she was heading in the right direction - when did all change?

"Alright princess, you're up."

She stood up carefully and, brushing herself off, tried to walk confidently towards the curtains. Remember what you were taught, she instructed herself. Back straight, head held high, shoulders back.

"I'm ready."

She tentatively strode forward, stepping from the relatively dim-lit back stage area onto the stage, where the glaringly bright lights caused her to instinctively shield her eyes. Though she could not see anybody, she could hear the sounds of the audience - some taunting, some cheering. 'You can do this,' she scolded herself. 'Look up.' As she uncovered her eyes, she took a deep breath and finally began.

Chapter Two

The next day was a Monday – and it certainly *began* just like every other workday. I woke up at 6:30, got dressed, brushed my teeth, ate breakfast – two pieces of toast with scrambled eggs and half a glass of orange juice – brushed my teeth again, washed my face, and boarded the bus to go to work. Everyone I called throughout the day was understandably aggravated and tired after the first workday of the week and absolutely nobody had time for any of my – pardon my language – shit. Every time I attempted to make my overly rehearsed, robotic-sounding sales pitch, people would respond with a rushed and terse “no thank you,” or a “not interested.” That is, if people even chose to answer the phone at all.

When I wasn't dealing with difficult or nonresponsive customers, I read – I always make sure to bring a book to work every day. It doesn't exactly take much concentration to recite a sales pitch that had been memorized for years, after all – though I make sure be discreet about my reading habits. As mother always insists on reminding me, appearing professional is always of the utmost importance. Of course, at lunch I sat alone and finished my food as quickly as I could. I didn't want to risk getting anything on my suit, risk looking like a fool.

At any rate, it was almost 4:30 – a mere half-hour before I was finally allowed to go home – when I made the call.

“Hello?” the person on the other end answered. In retrospect, I should have immediately realized that she was odd. Her voice had a peculiar, harmonious lilt that was difficult to place, and the way she pronounced that single word suggested an air of distractedness, as if her mind was going in thousands of different, yet equally frightening directions at the same time. These thoughts, however, passed wholly disregarded into the back of my mind, as all I could think about was my impending escape from work and return back home, where I could sleep off my exhaustion.

“Good afternoon,” I began in a monotone, tired voice. “This is John from Bright Life Incorporated, and we were wondering if you would be interested in purchasing a set of our self-help videos. They-”

“What? You think I need self-help? You think I’m crazy?”

I sighed with annoyance, assuming that this was yet another customer who was eager to make my job as difficult as possible. “Not at all ma’am. Here at Bright Life, we simply try to offer our customers-”

“Because if you do, I don’t mind... actually, it’s sort of refreshing. People usually don’t say that to my face, even though I though I know that it’s probably what they’re thinking. Ha!”

I was confused, tired, and didn’t have the patience to deal with this person, especially when it was almost the end of my workday. Freedom was imminent, and I wasn’t going to let a woman who was obviously mentally unstable decrease my level of excitement and anticipation about finally being able to go home.

“Look, ma’am, if you’re not interested in the product, that’s perfectly acceptable. Have a nice—”

“Who said that I’m not interested?”

“What? . . . You certainly seemed to be offended when I offered you the videos. . . .”

“Far from it. I’m intrigued by your offer. What do these videos entail?”

I was caught off-guard. It had been days since a customer had given me the chance to describe the product and I felt out of practice. I searched my mind for the correct information and hurriedly tried to give her an answer.

“Er. . . well, a group of health professionals will give you step-by-step guidance about how to manage each aspect of your life. They will give you exercise advice, instruct you on how develop a positive mindset, how to develop healthy eating habits. . . .”

“Sounds great.”

“. . . Really?”

“Really. Why?”

“Well. . . .”

“Come on, spill.”

“. . . Well, to be honest, I think that this self-help paraphernalia is all utterly ridiculous.”

“Oh contraire! I’ve watched a bunch of self-help videos, I’ve read all the books – they’ve helped me a lot!”

“Really?”

“No. But Oprah’s always talking about being a better you and all that, and everyone knows that she’s a genius!”

“Sure. . . um, well if we’re finished here. . . have a good day.”

“Wait! Have you watched the videos?”

“What?”

“I *said* have you watched them! You seem to be pretty smart, using those big words and all – you can help me make my decision!”

“Um. . . to be honest, I don’t actually own a cassette player. . . or a TV. . . so no, I haven’t. Watched them, I mean.” I closed my eyes and cringed. What in the world was happening? I like to think of myself as usually being put-together. . . not this stuttering, scatter-brained fool who was showing himself now.

“No freakin’ way! You don’t have a TV?! That is so cool. . . I mean, I tried getting rid of my TV one time but I can’t miss watching *Ricki Lake*, you know what I mean? Wow. . . so what do you *do* all day?”

“Um. . .” I wasn’t sure how to answer. My days consist of what most people would classify as “nothing”, so I wasn’t used to describing the events of my day-to-day life to others. “I guess I just . . . engage in standard, everyday tasks. Listening to the radio, sitting next to my window and reading. . .”

“Really? Hmm. . . what’s the view outside your window like?”

I was taken aback by this question. The window seat looking out to my front porch was one of my favorite places in the apartment – it was solitary, peaceful, quiet: just the way I like it – and I spend a lot of time looking outside the window. I didn’t, however, realize that I wasn’t the only one who cared about what I saw.

“Why do you ask?”

“Cause I’m trying to see it in my head! You know. . . you, listening to the radio, with no TV, thinking about how shitty those self-help videos are, looking outside your window to see. . . what? I’m a visual learner, you know! We did all of these tests in school and I scored high in the visual section just about every time!”

“Er. . . there’s nothing very exciting. I mostly just see the street, and the sidewalk. There are a small number of convenience stores nearby as well. . . and there’s also a park in the distance. . . with a swing set, sand, grass, a gathering of trees. . .”

“You’re gonna have to be a little more descriptive than that, buddy.”

“Oh, very well. . . alright. . . there is a small collection of trees directly adjacent to the entrance of the park and a couple of benches right under the trees. In the summer, the trees surround the bench with the perfect amount of shade, but in the winter it looks like they can protect people sitting there from the wind. There’s a bright blue jungle gym with yellow stripes on it. . . and one half of the swing set is freshly painted from a few years ago. I suppose someone became lazy and forgot to take care of the other half, because it remains completely covered in rust.”

“Ok, yeah, I know the one! Wow, you’re so lucky! When I was younger, I always begged my mom to take me there, but she always said that we lived too far away and that she didn’t have the energy to walk with me.”

“Yeah well, I don’t really know if I’m that lucky... I mean, I’m not a child anymore so... there isn’t any point in me going over there,” I explained hurriedly, checking my watch. “Look, this has been an... interesting discussion, but I really must to get back to work.”

“Alright, fancy-pants, I’ll let you go for now... even though I know you’re probably just using that as an excuse to get rid of me. Ha! Bye then!”

“Alright then... goodb –“ Beeeeeeep. Before I could finish my sentence, I heard a dial tone, indicating that the stranger had hung up. I was appalled. Who did she think she was, talking a mile a minute and then hanging up before I could have the last word? At least she was out of my hair.

Or so I thought.

As I walked to my desk the next day, no sooner did I sit down at my desk than the phone in front of me started ringing. Puzzled, I reluctantly picked up the receiver. I didn’t think much of the situation – it was probably just my boss reminding me to pick up some forms during my lunch break.

“Good morning; John Terry, Bright Life Inc.”

“Hey Buddy! You know what, I wasn’t sure that I had gotten the right number but what do you know? I must be smarter than I think! Ha!”

My heart sank as I immediately recognized the voice on the other line. This was not my boss, oh no – this was that whack job from yesterday.

“What in the . . . how in the world did you get my work phone number?”

“Well lemme tell ya, it was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I mean, I know Caller ID is all the rage and all, but to be honest, I haven’t had a chance to get myself a new phone – too expensive and all, ya know? So I had to do a little digging, but you, good sir, are surprisingly easy to find.”

“While I find that information unsettling. . . what disturbs me even more is that you even went to the trouble of calling me back again! Look, I know that I called you crazy. . . or at least, you *think* that I called you crazy. . . but that doesn’t give you the permission to. . . to *stalk* me! I mean, I have another phone right beside me. . . I can call the police right now! I’m picking up the receiver. . . now it’s in my hand. . . I’m dialing!”

“Will ya shut up! Jeez, for such a fancy-pants, you sure are easy to scare! All I wanted was to talk to you again. I mean, I know you called me crazy and all, but you sure were nice to talk to!”

“As I said, I never actually. . . never mind. You claim that you want to *talk* to me?”

“Yeah, is that so hard to believe?” she laughed.

“Of course not,” I said defensively. Lie.

“Well alright then, let’s get to chatting! I was particularly interested in that thing you brought up yesterday–”

“Wait a minute. . . just because you claim that you aren’t trying to stalk me doesn’t mean I can just. . . sit here and have a casual conversation with you while I’m at work. I’m expected to do my job and. . . while I admit that being employed here isn’t exactly my first choice. . . well, I pride myself on being a professional.”

“Okay, Mr. Professional, well then how about we talk every day for. . . hmm, let’s say 20 minutes? Think your stand-up reputation will be damaged then?”

“Every day?” My head began to pound just thinking about having to hear that strange drawl for one more second, much less every day. Strangely, however, something in the back of my mind prevented me from refusing her offer. Perhaps I could treat this as an experiment, I rationalized. After all, I was quickly running out of interesting anecdotes that I could reflect on. As much as I yearned to get to the root of my many problems, recording myself wax philosophical about taking a bubble bath wasn’t exactly thrilling.

“...I suppose that would be alright.”

“Well, then we should become more acquainted with each other, shouldn’t we? Don’t you want to know my name?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she started speaking enthusiastically before I could respond.

“It’s Marla!”

“...hello, Marla.”



Chapter Three

“At any rate, now I’m more puzzled than ever about what to do,” I sigh into my tape recorder as I finish describing my strange encounters at length. “After that, we talked for several more minutes. . . I don’t even remember what the rest of the conversation was about. And I know that she’s just going to call back tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that.” I pause and take another sip of water. I had been going on for quite some time. Granted, I am able to get much more in depth about my phone conversations than I am about my bathing habits, as suspected, but all of this talking is certainly taking a toll on my vocal cords.

“I’ll admit,” I continue. “The problem isn’t that I’m scared of her. . . she may be strange, but she seems harmless enough. . . but I’m having difficulty accepting her claim that she wants to talk to me – me, of all people. What could I have said on the first day that she found so interesting? I know just as well as anyone else that I don’t exactly have the most compelling personality or an especially charming disposition. . .”

That is, if the fact that I spent a good 75 percent of my childhood holed up in my bedroom was any indication. I didn’t mind it, though. My room was familiar and comforting, and it was filled with everything that I enjoyed. After getting over the initial frustration of trying to approach classmates of mine to invite them over, per my mother’s instructions, and failing time and time again, I eventually came to the realization that there was no good reason for me to even try – I had everything I needed on my own.

Even well into my 20s, I am still perfectly content to stay in my bedroom – where I sit now – to read or to listen to the radio. It's exhausting enough to try to make sense of my already confusing thoughts without having someone else's thoughts to worry about.

After setting the tape recorder down, I turn my head and catch a glimpse of the alarm clock that sits on my nightstand. Already 9:06! I sit up in a hurry, realizing that it is already time for me to begin my nighttime regimen.

It's remained the same for as long as I can remember– get dressed into my pajamas, wash my face, brush my teeth, moisturize, and settle in for bed as I mentally prepare for my favourite part of the day.

As I slip under my bed covers, I reach over to my nightstand discreetly, look around nervously even though I know that I am the only one in the apartment, and take out the only object kept in the top drawer. As soon as I grasp it, I nearly emit an audible sigh of relief but catch myself just in time. “No,” I mentally scold myself. “You can't be this pathetic – you're acting like some sort of drug addict, for goodness sake!” As much as the angel on my shoulder tries to convince me of this, the devil on the other side, as always, assures me that everything is alright, that it is acceptable to feel this way. And – as always – I listen.

I sit up straighter and open up the deck of cards, carefully setting the cards on my lap as I put the box to the side. As I start shuffling the cards I lie back in my bed, letting a feeling of extraordinary calmness wash over me. It was something I'd started doing since I was young – shuffling and sorting my cards, inspecting each one for any

crack or crease but never finding anything. I take great pride in the fact that I've managed to take such good care of them for this many years.

It wasn't an especially unique deck of cards – the standard brand, with a couple of instruction cards thrown into the box for good measure. And it was given to me by my grandfather, my father's dad, when I was seven years old. I never managed to form an especially close relationship with him, but after he gave me those cards I began to develop a new level of respect for him. He didn't exactly make any effort to get to know me or understand me, but he was quiet – never felt the need to intrude or ask me questions, like my mom or dad. I appreciated him for that.

No, it certainly wasn't the relationship that I had with my grandfather that made the cards seem special – I don't know *what* it was. Regardless, almost immediately after I ripped the thin, plastic packaging off of the box and looked through the deck, I – in all of my childlike wonder and innocence – became oddly enraptured. Each card was unique, whether it was the suit or symbol of the card that made it so. And after taking a trip to my school's library, I soon realized that these cards weren't simply meant to be gazed upon or admired – you could play games with them, a whole myriad of games! As my research revealed, however, most of these games required more than one person for them to be played.

My parents were more than happy to oblige when I first asked them to play cards with me each day after school. Of course, we played simple games first, as I didn't want to start in on anything more challenging until I knew that they understood

the basics. It was only a matter of time, however, before I convinced them to start playing poker, black jack – games that required a certain amount of strategy. Not to sound pretentious, but I believe I was quite good. Their facial expressions, their posture – every move they made gave me a clear idea of what move they would make next. In the context of the game, their thoughts seemed extraordinarily clearer than to me than their thoughts in the context of our everyday lives.

After a few months, they began to refuse to play with me without any explanation. I was confused – I thought they enjoyed playing with me. My mom tried to convince me that playing cards was counterproductive, that instead of staying inside and playing my games, I should be going outside and trying to make new friends. But I couldn't do that. I didn't explain why – I couldn't, not even to myself. Did I want to make friends – at that age, yes, I still did. But something kept holding me back – a little voice in the back of my head that warned me, "You're going to look like a fool. Nobody will understand you – not even your family does." And I listened. At seven, eight years old... what else could I do?

Against my mother's wishes, I kept playing with my cards. Yes, I couldn't play poker anymore, but there were still many games I could play by myself. And, of course, I could always sort my cards. I found it soothing – feeling the cool, rectangular pieces of plastic in my hands, organizing them in different ways – sometimes by suit, sometimes, by number or character. Everything was organized, structured – and my mind followed suit. Instead of feeling imprisoned by my own confusing, often startlingly complex

thoughts, I could think clearly. I soon found that it was the only way that I could get any work done. When I was trying to think of ideas for my book, for example. . . or when I was doing interviews after university in order to try to find a job. The entire time I was talking during the interviews, I had those cards in my hands, even though I attempted to be as inconspicuous in my actions as possible.

Nevertheless, nothing had changed, even though I was trying as hard as I could to make things change. I somehow managed to alter my routine slightly, so that I only allowed myself to play or sort my cards once a day. I was hoping to get over whatever I had – these repetitive, obsessive behavioral habits of mine. My situation has not improved, however. It isn't difficult to recognize – getting hold of the cards – something that reminds me of my old, comforting routines – is disturbingly relieving. But I know that I can't continue like this. . . I have to try something else. . .

“Harold, we can't let this go on. . . no child his age is this antisocial!”

“We've already talked to the doctor about it – everything seems to be fine, health wise.”

“It's not his health I'm worried about. . . he's doing this to himself. . .”

“. . . Are you sure? I mean, I've asked him about school before and he seems to at least be *trying* to make some friends. He's probably just shy.”

“Well, he's never going to grow out of it if he insists on staying in his room, playing with those cards all day.”

“But we shouldn’t push him, Patricia. He’s only seven – let him learn on his own. I mean, I was shy when I was his age. . . maybe it’ll just take time.”

“And how long are we willing to wait, hmm? Every time Jane or Linda calls me and asks if I want to arrange some sort of play date, I always have to make excuses. Do you know how humiliating that is? I must seem like I. . . I *want* to ostracize myself or something.”

“Honey. . . you can’t just force John to change like that because you’re having a problem.”

“. . . Who says I can’t try? I only want the best for him, sweetie. . . you’ll see, you’ll thank me for this eventually.”

Chapter Four

“Hey buddy!”

“Hello. . . uh, Marla, was it?”

I couldn’t help but smile ever so slightly when, once again, the phone rang almost immediately after I sat down at my desk chair at work.

“Oh you, you think you’re so sly, already pretending that you forgot my name! Face it – I’m unforgettable.” That much was certainly true.

“Very well, you caught me,” I played along, deciding that it was much simpler to do that than to protest. “So. . . what have you got in store for me today?”

“Well I dunno... I know that we learned each other’s names and all, but I have a feeling that I can get to know you a just a *little* bit better than that, don’t ya think?”

“Well... I don’t know about that... I’m perfectly comfortable with discussing... you know... politics... books... the weather.”

“While those are all super-exciting topics, I have to say that I think hearing about you would be even *more* interesting.”

“Well, if you’re so eager to discuss our personal lives, why don’t you go first?”

“... Uh, sure! ... Not much to talk about, though. Grew up in Manchester, moved to B.C. when I was about... hmm, twelve years old.” So *that’s* where that odd accent came from.

“My accent’s mostly faded away,” she continued, as if reading my mind. “But some of it’s still there. Not to mention some of those British mannerisms and all... boy, when I first came here, I thought you Canadians were out of your mind!”

“England... you don’t say? What was it like living there? That is, uh, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“Aw, well I don’t remember much, since I moved really young and all. I’ve been back there a few times to visit family though, and it’s great! I’m sure there’s a lot of cultural, historical stuff and all – in England, I mean – but most of that goes right over my head! It sure is pretty, though.”

“Er... right. It is a fascinating place, I must say... I actually studied British history in university.”

“You don’t say! Well, go on then, tell me something you know.”

“Well, let’s see, it seems like it was ages ago. . . ok, did you know that York was the first English city to be taken over by the Vikings?”

“No, I certainly didn’t! See, John, talking to you has already helped me – I’m learning new facts left and right! But tell me something – how did a smart fella like you, studying British history and all – end up being a telemarketer? Not that telemarketing isn’t a respectable job, but it isn’t exactly the most mentally stimulating thing in the world – and that’s coming from me!”

This is what I was afraid of. I thought about it quite a bit yesterday, and I came to the conclusion that I would eventually be asked to talk about myself. . . I just didn’t expect it to be this soon. Still, after rationalizing back and forth in my head I came to the conclusion that discussing my personal life wouldn’t cause any harm. . . it would just make me extremely uncomfortable. But wasn’t I uncomfortable already?

“Well. . . back when I was living in Toronto, my mom actually encouraged me to pursue telemarketing after she saw an ad in the local paper. I hadn’t found a job yet and she thought that telemarketing was something that was practical enough. The company was looking for employees, and the wages were adequate for my needs. Then, a few years ago, I got transferred. . . she. . . my mom, I mean. . . she never really approved of my field of study or my career aspirations, to be perfectly honest.”

“Well if you weren’t here, what would you want to be doing instead?”

“... I always wanted to be an author. I don't know why. I've always thought of myself as a keen observer, and I supposed that writing books about whatever caught my fancy would be a good way to take advantage of that skill.”

“But you never thought about exactly what you wanted to write about?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well, if it was up to me – and don't worry, I know you're not gonna listen to me, anyways – I would tell you to go for it! Nobody wants to be sitting around being bored for the rest of their lives. Heck, I would know. I've been stuck in the, uh... *family* business for years... can never manage to get hired anywhere else.”

“... I'm sorry.”

“Aw, don't be. Yeah, it's pretty shitty, but I'll be fine. You, on the other hand, you sound like *you're* still young! Hell, you've got the whole world ahead of you!”

“Wait, how old are *you*?”

“Well, that's a bold question if I've heard one!”

“Oh no, I – I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to be invasive! It's just that thing you said about me being young... I just assumed that you were...”

“Ha! I'm 22 – sorry about that, I have this habit of telling fibs every now and again. To make things more interesting, you know, and for convenience. Just when I know that it won't hurt anyone.”

“Yes, well... I seem to have a similar problem.”

“Oh yeah? What have you lied to me about so far? Are *you* really the crazy stalker? Do you really work as a telemarketer? Oh my god- is your name even John??”

I couldn't help but laugh at her sudden overdramatic concern. “No, no, it's more that I'm untruthful to myself, I suppose.”

“Woah, that sounds pretty heavy. I couldn't imagine lying to myself – I mean, if anybody knows the truth about who I am, it's me!”

“I know that's the way it should be... though it never has been for me, for some reason. I'm not making any sense, am I?”

“No. But that's alright. Our session's almost up, anyways! Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“I still find it utterly ridiculous that you haven't read *The Catcher of the Rye*.”

“Well, what can I say? I didn't really live in a cultured household... unless you consider watching *Happy Days* culture...”

“I would recommend it to you, nevertheless. I used to read it all the time at the library as a child. It's written for a younger age, of course, but you're only 22 – I'm sure you'd still enjoy it.”

“What, now that you know I'm younger than you, you think you can tell me what to do?”

“What? Certainly not, I only –“

"Relax, fancy pants, I'm only kidding around!"

"Oh. I knew that."

"So really, it's much easier than people think."

"Really? I don't know... I've never really had the desire to... cover another person's house with toilet paper..."

"But it's so much fun! Me and my girlfriends used to do it all the time back in high school. Anyone who fucked with us - they knew they had to watch out!"

"...Remind me not to say anything else that could offend you"

"So I noticed something - why don't you swear?"

"What?"

"Jeez, are you deaf or something? I said WHY DON'T YOU SWEAR?"

"Well, there's no need to shout about it! ... I suppose because I think it's rudimentary... people only use swear words because they can't think of anything else to say... it reveals that they don't have a very impressive vocabulary or refined way of speaking. I always felt I had to make excellent first impressions to everyone I met, and language is a very important part of that... in fact -"

"But it's so fun! Fuck, shit, crap, assmuncher, bitch, piss - see?"



“You record yourself talking? About what?”

“Oh, you know, just whatever happens to occur in my day to day life. I talk about our conversations quite often, actually.”

“Well, I’m flattered – but what made you think about doing it? I mean heck, why not write in a journal like a normal person?”

“Firstly, I would never write in a journal – I’m not a fifteen year old, for goodness sake, I need to preserve at least *some* shred of dignity.”

“Oh please, you’re a big softie, I know you are.”

“I’m going to choose to ignore that. Secondly... I suppose I started doing it in order to try to find out more about myself. My... never mind. The point is that... simply thinking about why I acted the way I did never worked for me, so I decided to put it all on tape.”

“Is it working?”

“... I’m not sure.”



“So what other card games do you know how to play?”

“Oh, you name it – war, blackjack, solitaire, euchre, poker.”

“Really? If I do say so myself, I’m not too bad of a poker player.”

“Oh really? Who did you play with?”

“My older brothers would sometimes let me play when they had friends over. Of course, they figured I would be easy to beat, but I held my own! I got better as I went along – you should have seen the looks on their faces the first time I won a hand!”

“I’m sure it was priceless.”

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At first, she didn’t realize that she was trapped. She spent most of her days surrounded by people, people who constantly complimented her and genuinely appeared as if they wanted to be around her. It felt good – she had never received this much attention before.

“Honey, you absolutely killed it tonight.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Don’t be modest, you know it’s true.”

“Yeah. . . remind me why you don’t do private shows?”

“Oh my god, don’t!” she protested jokingly, reveling in the praise. She couldn’t believe why she was ever so reluctant – this was the best she had ever felt in her life. The admirers, the attention, the freedom – it was all more than she could have hoped for.

Chapter Five

“After about two months of daily conversations, the feelings of regret about deciding to talk to Marla each day are finally beginning to wear off.” I explained into my tape recorder. “This is something I can handle. I suppose talking was never the real problem for me... maybe it’s actually communicating face-to-face? I mean, how else can I explain why I feel more comfortable with someone who’s still essentially a complete stranger than I did with people I knew for more than ten years? Progress is being made, nonetheless... I think I’m getting closer to answering some of my ‘whys’. But with every answer, there seems to be even more questions that arise, I’m afraid.”

With a sigh, I shut off the recorder and lie it down on my desk. That was enough for the day. After all, I had to start getting ready for bed soon. I start to get up from the couch and go upstairs to the washroom when I hear a phone ring. I pause. Who in the world could that be? ‘Marla couldn’t have possibly gotten my phone number, could she?’ I think amusedly, and with a small amount of fear. As she’s repeatedly reminded me, she’s odd, but far from crazy. No, there had to be another explanation. I head over to the phone and pick up the receiver.

“Hello?” I ask reluctantly.

“John? Honey, it’s me, mom.”

“Mother... this is certainly unexpected. You usually call on the first of every month.”

"Honey, you know I'm trying to get you to rely less on those silly routines of yours!"

"Right." I look down. "What did you call me about?"

"Is that any way to talk to your mother? No, 'how was your day mom?' No, 'how are you feeling?' Well, I'm not feeling too great, just so you know! I was talking to Dr. Crowley the other day..."

"...What?"

"I know you told me you didn't need any help, sweetie, but I'm only trying to look out for you. Anyways, I asked for his help and wouldn't you know it, after looking through some of your old files he told me about this new thing the doctors are just starting to get wind of. I forget what it's called... I think it starts with an A, but I think you should fly over here, honey. So we can talk about it. Answer all of those questions you've always had."

"I'm managing perfectly well by myself."

"... Well, your father wanted me to wait until you got here to discuss this... but we were hoping that you'd move back in with us." I nearly drop the phone in shock. I'm surprised. More than anything, I'm angry. How could she expect me to do such a thing - I'm a grown man, more than capable of taking care of myself. When I tell her as such, she simply laughs me off.

"I know you are, but I think that it'll be best for all of us if you come back here. There are people you know here, all eager to see you! I heard James Bronson and

Eric Stevens are back in town for a while, and would probably be happy to spend some time with you. And Melinda Bates is working at the school now. . . she's a wonderful girl, still single."

"Mom, I don't know how many times I can tell you this - I don't want any of that. . . not now, anyways."

"John, this is for your own good. I've already ordered plane tickets for you, for a week from today."

"What?"

"You'll thank me later. Everything's going to be alright now, John."

Dial tone. Just like that, she hung up on me. Typical - always avoiding confrontation, doing anything to prevent me from arguing with her about one of her ideas about me. But was she right? Did I really have some sort of. . . disorder? It would certainly help to explain a lot of my questions. . . perhaps it was best to just go along with her.



"John, sweetie, we're home."

I looked up from my cards distractedly. "Oh. Hello."

"We brought you some of those crackers you like from the grocery store."

"Thanks."

"Did you have a good day at school?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, good news! I was talking to Mrs. Harper on my way to the store and she said that Brian and some of his friends are going to go away for spring break. She said that we'd be more than welcome to join – doesn't that sound like fun?"

"Um... I was planning to just, you know... study during spring break. For my finals, I mean. Since it's my final year... I... I know grades are really important."

"You know better than to stammer and hesitate in front of me like that. You really need to start working on your speech habits."

"... Sorry."

"And besides which, you're already getting good grades, honey, you're always sitting up in your room with your head buried in books... or playing with those cards. This will be fun! Getting to spend time with the Harpers and other families sounds much better than sitting around and studying, doesn't it?"

"Well... um... oh sorry, let me start over. I... was actually thinking of doing some research over the break."

"For what?"

"A book."

"A book? For heaven's sakes, don't tell me you're going to start writing about fairies and wizards and all of that."

"What's wrong with that? At any rate, no I'm more interested in writing something fact-based."

"Fact-based? Facts based on what?"

"I'm not quite sure yet... I was thinking - "

"No matter. You know that I'm so proud of you for doing well in school, John, but don't you think that there... needs to be a change?"

"A change?"

"In your behavior, your lifestyle! You can't tell me that you're satisfied with simply being alone all the time! Why, when I was your age, I was going out all the time!"

"But... I am satisfied. I like it."

"Don't ever lie to me, John."

"But..."

"Don't. You'll do this for me. How many times have I had to sacrifice going out for you, hmm? How many times have I had to try to explain your behavior to my friends?"

"...I'm sorry. I - I guess I'll go."

"Good. Don't worry John. It'll be fine."

Chapter Six

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like if you were born in another person's body?"

"...Not, particularly, no."

"I do. Whenever I'm sitting around bored out of my mind, I think about how things would be if they turned out differently, in an alternate universe. Like, what would happen, say, if I was born in Kenya instead of Manchester. Or if I was born a boy! Now wouldn't *that* be a trip."

"I must say... I already have enough difficulties trying to understand my life in *this* universe... I think I would go crazy if I started thinking about other universes." I sit back in my chair and shut my eyes. I couldn't sleep last night – all I could think about was my mother's call, her insistence that I see the doctor and move back in with her. Of course I don't want to go... but I couldn't just refuse. I knew that I had already disappointed her enough.

"Well, according to you, I'm already crazy."

"As I've said a million times, I – oh hell, I'm not even going bother. At any rate... why did you bring this up again?"

"... I was thinking about running away." My eyes fly open in shock. Surely she can't be serious.

"... From home?"

"Where else?"

"But... you said you work for your family, right? Don't they need you?"

"Well... I think they can probably manage without me. They tell me I'm useless half the time anyway. Ha!"

"Why... what made you think of doing something so reckless?"

"I'm just tired of doing the same old thing, you know? Going to work, always wondering what it would be like to live out on my own, make my own decisions. . ."

"To be honest, I've always like doing the same thing. It's comforting, somehow."

"It's not really the routine that's the problem, I guess. . . it's the parts of my life that seem to repeat themselves even when I don't want them too. I mean, sometimes I feel like I'm just trying to. . . play by some sort of rulebook, you know? Doing what I *have* to do instead of doing what I want to do."

"I suppose I can understand that."

"I was thinking of going back to Manchester, actually. I mean, I know that it's where I grew up, but I hardly ever get to go there anymore. . . It'll be familiar, but at the same I'll get to feel like I'm starting a new life, you know what I mean?"

"So when were you planning on leaving?"

"As soon as possible. Hopefully as soon as I can get my shit together."

"I see. . . so we won't be able to have any more these conversations, then."

"... I suppose not. I mean, I would, but. . . calling here from England would be pretty darn expensive!"

"But. . . don't you think that you should reconsider this? I think that you're going to be fine. There's no need to run away."

"No."

"... What?"

“You’re wrong. I need to leave. I just... I haven’t been completely honest with you. There are things that are just... too hard to handle, you know? And I’m sick of it! People always telling me what to do, how to act... what to wear... I don’t feel like I’m a person anymore. And I know that I can... feel like a person, I mean. There’s a better life for me out there, I know that now. It’s unavoidable...”

“What do you mean?”

“Look John... what I’m saying is that –”

“This can’t be...”

“John, listen, I –”

“However bad it is... I’m sure that you don’t have to move all the way to –”

“John, LISTEN TO ME! ...!... There’s no fucking family business... I’m a stripper, ok?”

I was silent. I didn’t know what to say. “... I don’t know what to say.”

“Well then don’t say anything. I mean, I know what you’re probably thinking right now, anyways. What a slut, a sellout – I’ve heard it all before... it’s ok if you say it too.”

“... I don’t think that at all.”

“Oh, please.”

“I’m being honest for once.”

“Jesus Christ...”

“Well... anyways... you said that you likely aren’t leaving until a few days, right?”

“Can’t we continue our conversations until then?”

"Jesus, *that's* what you're worried about? To be honest, I don't know if we can... things are going to pretty hectic if things go as planned... not to mention the fallout once... shit... I haven't even begun to think about how to deal with them..."

"I suppose we should just say goodbye then," I blurted out. It was clear – we were to end all contact with one another after today. If that was to be the case, it was better to terminate everything sooner than later.

"...What?"

"You certainly seem like you're going to be busy... I don't want to keep you."

"But John, that's not..."

"Goodbye." Click.



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"What... what do you mean, it's not good enough?"

"Look, they were all over you at first. But they don't have much of an attention span – you have to do something more exciting, sexier. Or else they won't be interested anymore. And you know what I'll have to do then."

"No! No... I... I'll do something. I promise."

"That's what I like to hear, darlin'."

As he walked out of earshot, she started to vent her frustration.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" she screamed as she banged on the wall furiously. "Why can't people fucking shut up about my fucking life and deal with their own fucking problems!"

each swear word emphasized with a kick to the hard concrete surface. "They fucking – ow, shit!"

As she sat down to nurse her now throbbing foot, she began to sob; she was too exhausted from the events of the last twenty-four hours to try to keep up the façade any longer. What more did they want from her? They had already demanded that she change her hairstyle, her body, even her name – did anything left of her remain?

She knew that this was a ruse all along. Who was she kidding? Trying to be sexy... where was the awkward, carefree girl she once knew? Doing this didn't give her any shred of confidence – quite the opposite. True, she always knew that she was odd, some may even say eccentric – but she embraced it. Now she was beginning to question everything about herself. Something had to be done.

Chapter Seven

"For goodness sake, why must the wind be so c-cold..." I muttered as my teeth began to chatter. When I arrived home from work, all I could manage to do was go over to the window seat in my living room and look out into the street. It was something she asked about during that first conversation – what I saw outside my window – and for some reason I couldn't think about anything else. As I looked out my window, everything appeared to be the same... reason told me as much. But for some reason, everything seemed just slightly off. The sidewalk, the convenience stores... I couldn't

describe the change. And the park... for some strange reason, I felt like I had to go there after examining it so intently after all these years. It was strange – I had never actually bothered to visit the park, but I had managed to memorize every detail of the way the trees hanged, of the ways the trail leading up to the swings twisted and turned. I had always been an observer... but I felt that I owed it to myself to finally and truly experience what I was observing.

“So that’s how I ended up here, in the cold.” I explain into my tape recorder. “I’m sitting on a bench... under the trees – which, granted, are at least blocking the wind a little bit – and... just looking around, I suppose.” If I do say so myself, I have extremely keen observation skills... but I have to admit that up close, there are several details of the park that I wasn’t able to spot from my window seat. For example, I never realized that the slide had so many cracks in it... or that several of the benches next the one I was sitting on were practically falling apart. It’s actually quite depressing. Though somehow it seems much more... real. It would probably more comforting and certainly warmer to continue to observe the park from the apartment... but then, would I ever really know whether or not what I was observing was accurate, or whether I knew the truth?”

“There’s this philosophical parable that I learned about in university,” I suddenly remembered, bringing the tape recorder closer to my lips and covering it with my gloved hand in order to prevent the sound of the wind from overpowering my voice. “Plato’s cave... about a group of people who were stuck in a cave, chained to the

floor and forced to look away from the entrance. . . all they could see were the shadows of objects from the real world – they never actually saw the world itself. One of them, they eventually had the opportunity to become unchained, to be let out of the cave. At first the sun nearly blinded him, and he was so startled by what he experienced outside of the cave that he barely survived. He got used to it, eventually. . . but then he was forced to go back into the cave. He knew, unlike the others, that the shadows that they saw weren't real. They were just observing the faint outlines of the world, not experiencing the world itself.”

“And I suppose. . . I've thought about that situation for quite some time. I like having routines, knowing what lies ahead. It's comforting. . . but on the other hand, I know that there's something more than I'm letting myself experience. I don't want to have to. . . to stay in some cave. . . I *want* to know as much as I can. But I don't know if I want to risk being blinded, or lose anything important by making too much of a change. I can't just. . . go from darkness into blinding light right away, I know I can't.”

“After the conversation from earlier today, I don't know what to think. Talking on the phone everyday. . . it's become part of my routine. A part that I was admittedly reluctant to include at first, but a part nonetheless. It became something I was willing to alter my schedule for. . . because although it was a change, it wasn't completely blinding. I could handle it, talking to someone over the phone and not their face. And I felt comfortable, talking to someone who didn't always judge me. . . who doesn't

apologize for being herself, however strange she may be. But now I don't even know if I have that. . ."

I silently shut off the tape recorder and lift my head, gazing around the park one more time, at everything that was either rusted, broken, or falling apart. In a strange way, all of its faults made the park more compelling, not deterring. It showed that people cared for it, that it had been appreciated and well used. I take out the pack of cards that I brought with me, just in case I needed something to relax me. As I take each card out of the box, I begin to wonder; why had I spent so much time making sure they remained spotless over the years? Was I trying to prove something to myself? To my mother? That I could take care of something if I put my mind to it? I mean really, they were just playing cards. . . would there really be any harm in deciding to drop it on the ground right. . . now?

I reluctantly let the four of clubs fall beneath my foot and on to the sand, where the strong wind threatens to blow it away. "No!" I gasp worriedly, and without thinking, step on the card to prevent it from being carried away into the wind. A split second later, I realize the consequences of what I did. Carefully, I lift my shoe from on top of the card and, horrified, see that I left a dark, dirt-stained imprint on the pristine white surface of the card. As I pick it up and begin to examine it, I decide that I could do one of two things: I could panic, rush to my house and make a futile attempt to wash the dirt away. . . or I could accept what had just happened. Deciding to choose the second option, I begin to laugh hysterically. Ha! Ha, ha! I know I probably look

ridiculous. . . oh no, people are looking in my direction. . . you know what, I don't care! Let them stare! Ha! You in the blue hat? I'm laughing on my *own* terms buddy! You with the ugly pink purse? Yeah, that's right, walk away. . . this is my turf now! Ha ha!

Marla was right – maybe it's me who's the crazy one. But I don't care. Maybe it's about time I embrace it.

Chapter Eight

"John, may I have a word?"

It had been nearly a week since I experienced my near-breakdown in the park. I had certainly been acting differently. I hadn't changed completely, of course, but I was evidently less put together than I usually was; my mind was too scattered to even begin to try to think clearly and this morning and I had accidentally worn two different socks. When my boss came up to me as soon as I walked in the door at work, I assumed that he wanted to address my noticeable lack of professionalism. And to be honest, I couldn't blame him. That didn't change the fact that I wanted to get the conversation over with as soon as possible, however.

"I know that I haven't been acting like myself, Mr. Turner." I said in a rushed, tense voice. "But I promise to improve my behavior. I've just been a little out of sorts lately."

"I have noticed that you've been acting a little strangely. But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about." I stopped walking towards my desk and looked up at him, puzzled.

"What?"

"It's come to my attention that for the last couple of months you've been using your work phone for personal calls, is that correct?" I opened my mouth slightly, shocked. How could he have possibly known? I tried to defend myself right away.

"No! They weren't exactly personal calls. What happened was - "Mr. Turner held up his hand to silence me.

"No explanation needed, John. I'm going to have to ask you to pack your belongings as soon as possible, however."

"I... I'm getting fired?"

"I'm afraid so."

"... Fired?"

"Er... yes. To be honest, John, your performance hasn't been up to par, recently. Your sales records are abysmal... I always sensed that you weren't entirely happy here, but you've begun to lose any sense of motivation. It's clear that it's time for you to move on." I shut my eyes in agony. What was I going to do? What would I do with myself every day... but then it hit me. What this could mean for me, for my future.

"You know what Mr. Turner," I began softly. "You're completely right. . . I'll be packed up as soon as I can. If someone calls my phone this morning, though. . . do you mind giving them a message?"

"I suppose so. What's the message?"

"Do you have a scrap piece of paper I can use?" Mr. Turner nodded and handed me a page from the notebook he had under his arm. I scribbled something as quickly as I could and handed it back to him. He hastily looked it over.

"Very well, then. I'll be sorry to see you go John, but I really think that this is for the best."

"Yes. . . I think it is."

Marla,

I know you're having a difficult time. You're not a sellout. I know you're angry about the other day, understandably so. I'm hoping that you decided to call despite my poor behavior. I know that we won't be able to talk on the phone anymore after you leave, but we can find some other arrangement. You need someone to talk to. My address is 5715 Burrows Drive. If you ever feel as if you need help, I will be glad to help. I think I finally understand what you meant about playing a part. You have certainly helped and inspired me, in more ways than one, and I so I want to do anything I can to help you in return.

Sincerely, John

Chapter Nine

"Hello."

"Hello mother, it's me."

"John? Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise! Have you started to pack your suitcase yet? You know, it will save you a lot of stress if you start packing *at least* three days ahead of time –"

"No, actually. I called to tell you that I'm not coming home."

"Not coming? What do you mean you're not coming? I already booked your tickets, remember?"

"Yes, and I'm happy to pay you back for them. But I've decided that I'm perfectly content to stay here."

"But what about Dr. Crowley? What about your father and I?"

"I'll still make sure to call you and dad, you know that."

"We need to fix this, John," her voice suddenly turning into more of a growl.

"Your behavior has been going on for far too long. . . we need to fix this."

"I don't think I need fixing, mom. I know you wanted to help me out when I was a child but. . . this controlling. . . *that's* what's gone on for far too long."

"... So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that it's time to change the fact that every conversation that you and I have is about something I can change, or something I need to do to 'fix' myself."

I'm an adult – I can make changes on my own. As a matter of fact, I just got fired from my job this morning.”

“You *what?*”

“Yes, but it's going to be alright! I have months of pay checks saved – you know I never liked purchasing anything I don't need. Nothing much will change really, I spent most of my days at work reading, anyways – and actually. . . I was planning to finally start writing that book. You know, the one I mentioned back in high school? I think that I finally have an idea of what I want to write about.”

“Dear, I thought you had gotten over that. A writing career isn't practical. . . it's not professional!”

“Well. . . does it really matter? I'm tired of always trying to put on some façade, to act. . . well, like someone you and I both know that I'm not. I'd be willing to try therapy if I thought that you were doing it for me and not for your own benefit, but I. . . I think that I finally can see through you now, through *your* façade, at least a little bit. And I truly don't think that's the case. Besides, I know that I have strange habits, that I'm not exactly the easiest person to get along with. . . but I think that I can accept some of those things, why can't you?”

“. . . I don't know what to say.”

“That's fine. . . to be honest I rehearsed this whole speech and I've forgotten almost half of it so now I'm sort of at a loss for words. . . I suppose I'll call you soon then. Goodbye Mom.”

Click.

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She was free in every sense of the word. Free to go wherever she wanted, see whatever she wanted, be whoever she wanted. Of course, that freedom came with a great amount of responsibility - but she knew that she was prepared to accept that responsibility. A new life, endless possibilities ahead of her - what more could she ask for? For she had finally been able to emerge from the darkness, slowly but surely, and see herself for what she truly was. True, she still had some questions that needed to be solved - but why rush to solve them all at once? Why not be content to allow the answers to reveal themselves as they may? After all, she pondered, life is full of surprises - the most important sources of wisdom can be completely unexpected.

FIN