

The Hang Up

It was four o'clock on Saturday; which meant it was time to make the call. Shondra was the staff person on duty that day and knew that any minute Stacy would be driving up in her wheelchair; head bobbing, ecstatic grin on her face, impatiently motioning for Shondra to come dial the phone. She sighed at the sound of Stacy approaching – bumping the wall with her wheelchair as she did every time she tried to roll out of her room. Plastic coverings had been put up to try and protect the chipping plaster on the corners throughout the house but it did little good. With a forced smile Shondra turned to face Stacy, "Time to call?" she asked with raised eyebrows. Stacy nodded and squealed – turning her chair around too fast and bumping into the dining room table.

The address book was already open by the phone. With her right hand Stacy pointed to the name and number even though Shondra had made the call several times before. Stacy's left hand remained clenched to her chest in the spastic grip of cerebral palsy. Her right hand had more freedom and flexibility but her fingers were forever rigid and could do little besides point. It was stunning for Shondra to imagine how much Stacy could accomplish with such limited mobility. How long did it take for her to simply take the address book out of her drawer and open it to the correct page? She had probably started preparing for the phone call at least a half an hour before. Besides the phone book she had to type everything she wanted to say into her communicator, just in case someone answered the phone. The communicator was a machine that sat on her wheelchair tray and was, for the most part, a large keyboard. With her one useful finger Stacy would laboriously type everything she wanted to say. A robotic sounding voice would then read her words without expression or pause in a way that contrasted starkly with Stacy's ever beaming face and enthusiastic squealing.

Shondra dialed. In all the weeks that she had made this call no one had ever answered. Afterward Stacy's smile would fade and she would mope in her room all afternoon. She would perk up by dinner time but the memory of the dial tone would stay with her for the rest of the week. By next Saturday she would begin to prepare again – convinced she would pick up this time. Her hopes were raised just as easily as they were crushed.

It was all too familiar to Shondra. She engaged in the same disillusioned battle of hope versus reality on a daily basis. She had recently given up calling him – tired of hearing the same cold, chiding voice on the other line. *the person you are calling has a voice mail that has not been set up...* She had resolutely decided to never dial his number again. But how could she resist texting him now and then? She had so much to tell him. So many things left unsaid. And each time, a small bit of hope sprung up inside. Maybe this time he would respond. Though history had proven otherwise time and time again....maybe this time was different.

Shondra put the phone on speaker as the empty ringing sounded. It rang. Stacy leaned toward the sound. It rang again. "Hello?" a voice answered. For a moment

Shondra was speechless as Stacy's body rocked with pleasure.

"Hello," She quickly recovered, "My name is Shondra I'm here with Stacy..."

"Hello Stacy," the voice interrupted, smooth as silk with a faint African accent. "How are you, honey?" Stacy threw her head back and mouthed the sound "goo" which meant good. Much of Stacy's communication was body language though you learned to identify what words various sounds were meant to be. The voice on the other line seemed to have no problem understanding this. Her name was Kaite, she was a former staff person who worked with Stacy for years before moving across the country. Stacy had become despondent after she moved. She put pictures of her up all over her room and would stare at them; transfixed in her grief. She called her everyday until finally the once a week rule was established. No one knew exactly why Stacy has become so enamored of her. Some say it was because she doted on Stacy and called her, "my baby." Shondra could understand this attraction; in her mind she could still hear the deep gravel of his voice as he would gently whisper *baby, baby...*

Shondra shook her head and brought her attention back to the phone. Stacy pressed play on her communicator. The robotic voice read back what she had been furiously typing in one long run on sentence *I miss you so much I thank God for you everyday your baby needs you they didn't put a coat on me yesterday and I was cold outside I wonder what you are doing...*

The voice on the other line cooled, "OK Stacy," she said briskly, "it's been good to talk to you."

Stacy giggled and squealed.

"Good bye now," she was gone again.

Shondra looked at Stacy. She nodded to herself – not really looking at her.

Shondra wondered what to say. She forced another smile and tried to sound cheery, "Well that was nice. I'm glad she picked up....this time."

Stacy nodded, her grin fading.

"Should I put your address book away?"

Stacy nodded again. She wasn't looking at Shondra anymore.

Shondra tucked the book in the drawer and got up quietly. She turned at the door and saw only Stacy's back, bent in the usual way over the tray of her chair. Something about the slack in her shoulders made her seem deflated. She got what she wanted – but she didn't seem any happier for it.

"Do you think Stacy's a lesbian?" Shondra asked her coworker as she walked into the kitchen.

Britney laughed, "What? Are you crazy?"

"Why is that crazy? Just because she's disabled you think she doesn't have any sexuality?"

"You are creepin' me out. Stop talking about it."

Shondra shrugged. Britney turned around to do the dishes.

"What do you think she'd be like if she wasn't disabled?" Shondra asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Can't you see it sometimes? I imagine her as one of those old ladies in an oversized cat sweater – walking around the grocery store. She'd still be friendly and petite, maybe a bit more meat on her hips, smelling the oranges, squeezing tomatoes to check for ripeness. Probably putting up a stink about her expired coupon that the check out girl refuses to accept."

"I can see it," Britney said slowly, "maybe the receptionist at a dentist's office.."

"...or a manager of a small retail store." Shondra added.

"And a total lesbo according to you."

Shondra laughed. "I just think she fell in love with Katie and that's why she can't get over her leaving."

"Really? I thought it was more of a maternal thing like she loved her like a mother."

Shondra shrugged, "Could be. But the way she acts when she picks up the phone or looks at her picture....it just reminds me..."

"Reminds you of what?"

"Of how people act when they're heartbroken."

Britney thought about this for a moment. "Yeah could be."

Shondra didn't say that it reminded her of herself. Being a married woman who was heartbroken would've required explanation that she wasn't willing to give. She had shared the story of her affair with very few people and planned to keep it that way. It was a stupid mistake; a ridiculous fling, a temporary madness. Yet here she was again, wondering if he would text her back today.

"So is she sad?" asked Britney.

"Huh?" Shondra came back to reality with a jolt.

"Whenever she doesn't pick up the phone she gets sad."

"She did pick up."

"Really? That never happens."

"Yeah. They just talked for a minute. She seems even more sad than usual though."

"That's because she doesn't just want a phone call. She wants all of her – not just her voice...if she really is in love with her. Which I still think is gross."

Shondra chuckled and walked over to the dryer. She pulled out an armful of static filled towels and sheets. She began to fold but stopped, "I guess these phone calls are torture aren't they? I mean if she'll chances are she'll never see her again and just continue to get these bits and pieces of her once in awhile. Someone should try and convince her to just stop."

"Someone could try...but it won't help. She'll never stop."

She'll never stop... Britney's words stung Shondra deep as she drove home. It reminded her of the other phrase she'd been thinking over and over again *we'll figure it out*. It seemed like the most worthless cliché she could say. She'll figure what out? How she could fall head over heels for a mess of a man who dropped out of her life as suddenly as he appeared? How she could cheat on her patient and trusting husband who

was now dissolving in front of her eyes – living in the ruin of their marriage. Sure, she'll figure it out; while living in suspended animation, unable to move forward while constantly looking back. Shondra checked her phone – he hadn't responded. *I'll figure it out.* Those words rung hollow as she thought, *I have no confidence in my ability to do just that – and no evidence to support that I'll ever be anything but a complete and utter fool.*