

A Real Life Experience

“Things matter only *when they matter*. After that there is no good use for them, so you should throw them away. If you try to hold on, there won't be room for *now*. You have to find out what *now is* by *living*. A Real Life Experience will get you into that moment. Why not Live a *real* moment?”

But this caller isn't an easy sell. Sylvie, her name is.

“Why not? I'll tell you why not. Because it could ruin my life. How could I go back?”

“That's future talk, worry, exactly what we're getting you away from.” I can hear her breathing, like she's been running or crying or both. I wonder what she looks like.

“Have you had, consumed, what's the verb? *Done* a Real Life Experience yourself?”

“Yes. I have *lived* one,” I tell her.

“What happened? After? How terrible was it to come back?”

“I'll be square with you. It wasn't that easy. But I did it and it changed me, showed me something I could strive for, in the everyday. Now I grab moments. I don't squander.” I suggest she live a Cat Life.

“Cat? I haven't heard about that. It's not in the brochure.”

“It's new.”

“I was thinking Homeless Gypsy Child.”

“That’s a good one, too. Excuse me for being forward, but I sense something adventurous about you.”

“You’re paid to say things like that.” Her laugh is open-throated, like a waterfall.

“Let’s meet, and I’ll show you some brochures. Are you well-rested? Cats sleep a lot.”

“It’s not sleep I need,” she says.

I say, “Let’s meet, so I can show you visuals. We could both use some visuals, couldn’t we?” I don’t know if she picks up on my flirtatious double entendre but she agrees to meet and the following afternoon I wait for her at a coffee shop that we both know of.

I told her I would put a potted plant on my table so she could find me. I order a latte and wait. The employees have tattoos creeping up their napes and hardware stapled to their faces. One tries to start up a conversation with a little kid carrying a guitar. “You like a deep tone or bright tone?” He’s steaming milk and talking at the same time. The kid shrugs.

She arrives 10 minutes late. Her greenish eyes fit nicely above cheekbones whose prominence lends her face a soft slope, as if the whole thing had been carved by a geological event. At the top of her forehead, the center of her hair makes a V like a small, groomed forelock.

“You look like your voice,” I say. She hums bemusedly and sits into the chair I am sliding underneath her. “This is for you.” The plant. A begonia. I push it toward her. She picks it up and then drops it quickly as though it is hot, puts her hands in her lap.

“Okay, do your thing. I’m here for you to do your thing.” She says, straightforwardly.

“Tell me why you’re considering a Real Life Experience. What’s going on with you?”

She tilts her head, avianlike. “I went to a therapist when I was a kid.”

“I’m a *tele*therapist. It’s different. It means *you’re* in control. You’re the consumer.”

“So it’s me against the world.”

“No. I’m here for you.” She puts her hand over her mouth, as if she’s got a gun to her own back and is demanding something from herself. Finally she visibly softens. “I can’t shut up,” she says. “It’s not as though I have any special insights, but quite honestly I’m becoming a kind of savant.” Her arms are bent at her sides; her elbows stick out, making her seem geometric. I’m starting to love the tiny triangle of hair at the top of her forehead. “I tell people what I think. All the time. It’s leaving me lonely.”

I scan the room, a challenge for her to say something, to prove her claim.

“Things just come out,” she says, following my gaze. “Oh come on. It’s not a performance.”

“An example?”

She thinks for a moment. “Okay, just now, on the way here, I was on the bus. And there was a lady sitting across from me, with this white fur purse. It was disgusting, really, made from a rabbit. I told her that it looked as though her familiar had kicked the bucket.”

“Was she witchy?” I ask. I like this Sylvie. She’s funny and I’m feeling playful.

“Evil-witchy, not really; not Glinda the good witch either. She just looked like one of those people who fill voids with merchandise.”

I’m calculating her condition, matching it up with a remedy. “It sounds like a Cat Life might be suitable.” I slide a brochure from the briefcase at my side.

“You don’t believe in yourself,” she says.

I’m stopped cold, my fingers on the brochure where it has stalled next to the begonia. She apologizes.

“It’s not true.”

“I didn’t say it was. I told you I didn’t have any special insights.”

I have a dark grey stone in my stomach. It doesn’t make any sense, but it feels true. I push the brochure toward her. The paper is smooth like the begonia’s petals.

“As a cat, you won’t speak to anyone. There will be no one to speak to. Look, here is an example of the space.” I show her the cushion bathed in rays of sunshine streaming through a high window. A window with a wide sill that can be reached with a pounce. It’s south-facing, sunny and warm—even if it’s raining.

“Looks comfy,” she concedes.

“How does fifteen hours of lazy pain-free sleep a day sound?”

She smiles and her eyebrows push her hairline up, rounding her face into a heart.

“There are drugs involved? There must be.”

“They’ve been tested and refined by highly-trained specialists.”

“I understand they may be necessary, but doesn’t it compound the re-entry problem?”

“Upon signature of the contract, analysis begins. Specialized for you only. Today, I could take some blood.”

She draws back, squints.

“Nothing is more honest than blood. Not even you,” I add, hoping to make her smile. She does. “Our technicians are among the best. After you’ve lived your life, all effects are counterbalanced and your body is completely returned to you.” I feel a jolt when I say the word *body*. She looks down. I think she’s blushing. “No come-down. Just the muscle memory of lazy purring stretches and bursts of focused pouncing and hunting.”

“Hunting?” she flips through the pages, looking for confirmation. I explain: the chase, the pounce. Eating the creature is optional. If you want to leave it under the bed, that’s up to you. I explain the engineering. It thrills me. It’s all so fucking cool. I mean, you start as a human and before you know it, you’ve got nails that are killing machines and they burst out from the tips of your fingers with a thought. The mice have been decontaminated—not only are they safe to eat but they are also fortified to be the most nutritious meal you’ll have in your life. If that’s not for you, there’s always a bowl of kibble that you can graze on at will. Just like some cats are

killers and some aren't, you can be the cat you want to be. I bet Sylvie's going to be a hunter. I'm imagining her with nails. There can be a sexual aspect. There always can, no matter what life you're living. Though it's not in the brochure, it's exceedingly popular. Cats scream. I almost purr as I gaze at those eyebrows, her soft lips. I can picture her in fur, naked underneath.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm in education. That's what happened. That's why I can't shut up."

"You don't seem overly talkative."

"No. I mean. I told you, my filter is gone. I need to get it back. It's miserable living without one. I've lost nearly all my friends."

"They don't understand you?"

"What does that mean? Nobody understands anybody. That's not it. That means nothing. But I couldn't keep my mouth shut."

"Maybe because you're a woman, you need do that more than a man does. If you were a man, you'd be CEO of a self-help empire."

She smiles again and it makes me feel good. I care less about the sale than I do about knowing her, helping her. A tiny voice says that's what always happens. It's part of the process. It's what makes me good at my job, and also what makes it fulfilling.

"Maybe I should be a man, not a cat...."

"What do the kids think?"

"Kids?"

"You're a teacher?"

“Oh god no, not anymore. I got out of that. Now I work for the school district. I’m in data retrieval.”

As Sylvie explains her problem to me, I start to realize that a cat life might not be what she needs. There would be no talking, so thoughts could get bottled up, clogging her systems. Verbal constipation. “I know just the thing.” I pull another brochure from my briefcase and slide it across the table. “This could be perfect.”

“I had thought homeless gypsy child,” she reminds me, fingering the pages.

“This is even better, for you. Children don’t blurt—well, of course they do, but what they say is reasonable, forgivable. Do you want forgiveness?” She shakes her head. “Children say simple things. In this life, you can be boisterous, prophetic, profound. Whatever.”

I explain the technical details, the options. The client can have schizophrenia, Tourette’s, dementia, alcohol-induced hallucinations, or whatever else he or she desires (after consultation with the teletherapist). This will temporarily afflict the brain through carefully regulated medication, or, if she is seeking a more holistic experience, she can go pharmaceutical-free; she can blurt to her heart’s content. Perfect for Sylvie.

“People want to feel schizophrenic?” she asks, incredulous.

“They come back, completely. They do it for a plethora of reasons—sometimes to mine their instincts, sometimes to cultivate compassion for a loved one, sometimes just out of curiosity. It’s a Real Life.” There is fluidity to the homeless life as well, in terms of where the client can roam. While, as a cat, you have to remain on-set (we can’t have human-sized cat creatures running the streets with

claws and flossy mouse intestines in their teeth). But the homeless experience can flow into the actual world. In fact, I've seen strangers give change to people who are paying money for their experience. Sylvie looks skeptical. I explain that the customer's looks are altered so completely that they won't be recognized. Afterward, if desired, you can have your corporeal memory wiped clean, leaving intact only the resultant insight and compassion.

Sylvie has been feeling it. That's what we're here for—when actuality escapes its tomb at the core of a person. What with the state of things—the unreality, the overcrowding, internal and external. There are elements to be wary of, preying on those whose tomb is cracking. Religious freaks looking for followers. Militia groups, anti-everything and armed. Online communities ranging from violent ex-nuns to sexual exploiters to people ready to convince you that you're not whole if you are in possession of all your limbs. Or kidneys. They're ready to take them. That's why it's important to pay money. If you pay a reputable organization like mine, you know you'll be taken care of.

* * *

She is in pre-production. The structural artists are creating tiny popped veins in her nose, sunburnt eyes, sagging chin. The laryngeal specialists have created a voice that gives her the scratchy sound of lifelong drug and alcohol abuse. And the teeth. Like she's been chewing tar.

Making the decision to purchase this Life was an anxious process for Sylvie, but now that she's committed she is calm. She looks almost beatific. I tried to convince her to use pharmaceutical therapy, to allow her to sleep better—the sleeping bag doesn't offer much comfort. It's infused with homeless smell and she has a couple of tattered T-shirts for a pillow. Most people have the pharma team regulate their sleeping patterns so that they can get some rest, but Sylvie doesn't want that. She is also planning to go off-set. Everyone on-set is an actor and none of the shops or restaurants is real. On-set, your entire experience can be structured: our actors can beat you up, they can spit on you, or you can be taken in by a sexy restaurant owner who gives you a sandwich and brings you to AA. Whatever the client wants. Sylvie wants to find out what will happen. She doesn't want to hide. She wants to perceive. I'm impressed by her spiritual nature. Even inspired.

"We've gone over the dangers..."

"Ad nauseum."

"It's important you understand the risk."

"I signed the contract. I agreed to the terms. Why do you keep..."

"Because I care. I've come to care. About you. I couldn't.... I wouldn't like it if something were to happen."

"You're half full of bullshit." She laughs and I laugh too because she's right.

"I'll be checking on you," I say. "But not all the time."

She kicks her foot up from the floor, to indicate the tracking device on her ankle. "You'll know where to find me." Her tone—is it playful or derisive?

"You'll be afraid at night," I counsel. "You'll be alone."

“Of course I’ll be alone. That’s what this is about.”

“You know the borders are porous. We’ve been through this. It’s possible to wander off-set without realizing.”

“I know. You told me. Are you always this much of a worrier? Did something bad happen to you? Oh shit. Sorry. That’s what makes me lose people. Don’t answer.”

Lots of bad things have happened, but I’m beyond them. And I’m not really worried. I’m flirting. She’s not as intuitive as she thinks.

Sylvie’s transformation is nearly complete. “Be careful,” I warn her. “Even like this ... you’re beautiful.” She runs her fingertips down my jawline, just for a moment. Her hand is warmer than my face. It is blackish and looks swollen, but smell hasn’t yet been applied, so despite her ugliness, I want to slide my arms around her waist. But I don’t. If I’m wrong I could ruin everything. Some Lives are better experienced than lived. I can become a part of Sylvie’s experience, but only if she wants it and only temporarily.

As Sylvie leaves with her escorts, I remind her that I’ll be around, never far, that she shouldn’t worry, because nothing will go wrong. Nothing bad will happen. She turns and smiles at me. With gratitude? With pity? Her escorts lead her to the elevator that brings clients to the underground shuttle.

I return to my office and look into leads, people who’ve shown interest either through online clicks or aborted phone calls, and scan for ways to get them to buy. But Sylvie’s smile haunts me, and I’m not sure why. It’s as though she took something from me, or shined a light on emptiness, so now I feel vacant.

A few years ago I sold an anorexia. She wanted more than skinniness; she wanted cramps, stomach pains, pity, dizziness, and a completely warped self-image. Anorexias were popular that year, but most customers wanted the appearance without the pain. If you ask me, those never really counted as Real Life Experiences, despite the marketing. But Eve was different. She wanted to Live it. I fell for her and became part of her experience. I was her lover, battering her frail body with lust. She went off-set (most anorexics do—they want people to stare, to wonder at their malnourishment). But Eve swallowed poison. I didn't see it coming. Why would I? I couldn't understand it. Why did she bring me with her on her suicidal mission? Like she had aimed it at me personally and had taken a part of me with her.

At home, I moodily sip wine; I open a second bottle. My wife is glaring at me because I'm being sullen, thinking about Sylvie. I turn away from the TV set that sits on a high shelf in the corner of the dining room to meet her gaze, and she gets up, starts to clear the table, her movements loud and harsh. But I'm drunk and I don't care. In fact her anger disgusts me. I'm in no state to have it out with her so I put my plate into the dishwasher, kiss my kids' foreheads where they are slouched in front of the living-room television, and take my tablet to bed.

I check on Sylvie's movements. The blinking green light that represents her ambulates in small circles and then, after a while, I see that she is in the bank-entrance sleeping bag. I imagine her going to sleep, her head on the dirty T-shirts, the unwashed smell of homelessness a veil around her, closing her eyes, coughing the smokers' hack we engineered, muttering, blurting to her heart's content. No one will be offended. No one will care. She's just a homeless lady now.

The bottle and a half of wine I drank makes it easy to doze off but difficult to stay asleep later, so at about four I wake up. My wife chose to sleep in the guest room, which is fine by me. I go to the bathroom, take a pill, and lie down again in the half-dark.

In the morning, I feel like shit. I pass my kids' rooms and push each door a crack, look in to see that they are asleep. Their chubby faces remind me of the moon. Pink lips, wet with saliva. Eyelashes like caterpillars wriggling with the movement of their eyeballs. In the guest room, my wife sleeps in a worn-out T-shirt. Repentant, I open the cover and slide in next to her. I'm cheese and she's ham and we're inside a pita pocket. Her body is warm and I latch on but when she comes to she tenses and just that tiny movement sends me back and I roll away readying an apology that I know will sound insincere.

"I've been preoccupied. I'm sorry about that."

She takes a big breath of air and sighs it out. "Tim, you're selfish."

"I'm apologizing."

"Okay. That's fine. Good. Great." She sighs again, audibly. "Fine," she says, and rolls out of bed, pulling her T-shirt down to cover her underwear and going into the bathroom.

I recognize the feeling that comes over me. It's not something I could ever describe when I'm not in its throes, but when it comes it's more familiar and real than the bed sheets. It is, simply, hopelessness. Nothing will ever be nice and fine and fun anymore. Ever. I can't conjure anything good—not from the past and not anticipated. And it's probably my fault, even though it feels like I don't have any

other way of being. I wish I weren't this way. I wish I were someone completely different. I roll into a ball and listen to my wife wake the kids, rustle around in the kitchen. I pull myself into the shower and scrub hard, trying futilely to clean something that's on the inside.

On the subway, I check my tablet. One-thousand-five-hundred-forty-one spam emails. One group email from Doug, in biological engineering, to the teletherapy team, reminding us that we need to fill in the correct requisition forms, which means we need to get more specific diagnoses for clients. Everyone on the engineering team is a dickwad when it comes to interpersonal relations and the email has a snarky, patronizing tone, like we're supposed to recognize his greatness but what we do is akin to unskilled labor. Fuck him.

I check on Sylvie. She hasn't moved. Last night she chose to sleep in the bank entrance. Teletherapy is a highly nuanced skill and we are trained to read signs. In the homeless life, there are two main options for sleeping: bank entrance and church entrance. We are extra vigilant of the church-entrance sleepers: while they are the most volatile, the most likely to go off-site without training or even kill themselves, they are also the most likely to benefit, and to achieve greater psychological profit. The bank-entrance sleepers are more stable but less able to accept the transformational possibilities of their experience. In general. Sylvie is smart. She's not flighty about this and I venture to guess she'll profit.

I compare her to my wife, unfavorably, and wonder how I got here.

I'm three stops from work.

I could get off at the next stop—where there’s a line that will take me to the site—and check on Sylvie. It’s a legitimate reason for arriving late into the office, and one of the things I love about my job—not having to sit still all day. I imagine the actors passing her, some sneering, a few throwing coins onto the crumpled piece of cardboard that we’ve fashioned for her. Most with tight-lipped guilty smiles. One will bring her coffee—a little cold, but nutritionally-enhanced, to keep her healthy.

I met my wife in college. Tuesday mornings we had class at the same time. I don’t remember when it started, but we’d gotten into the habit of sleeping together at her dorm on Monday nights. It was a glorious arrangement: her roommate was interning as an overnight nurse and wasn’t there, so we would have some noodles on Monday evenings, a romp in her narrow bed, and Tuesday mornings we’d go for breakfast before taking the subway two stops to school. One day we sat on the train as it shuddered into the station. Her hand was on my knee and my arm was around her shoulders. I stuck my nose into her ear and breathed in her scent. Let’s not go, I whispered and she looked at me, shocked at first, but then she softened, shrugged, closed her eyes, tightened her grip on my thigh and we took the train to the end of the line, got off, got on a bus, and spent the day sitting in the powdery sand by the brown ocean. Surfers like lanky spiders bobbing on the water.

I don’t want to go into the office. I can’t face it. The email from Doug has put me in a bad mood. Or is it my wife? Our relationship peaked that day at the beach. Ever since then it’s been a downward slide into this terrible standoff. Accusation. Defensiveness. Disappointment. I want to break rules and she wants me to be bland.

As I get off the train and make my way to the connection that brings RLE clients to the sites, I try not to cry. I am indignant and hopeless and in the elevator down I give myself a talking to. I'm hungover, that's all. This despondency will pass with the hangover. But I can't remember a good day with my wife, except for that one, the day at the beach. She's happy when I perform well. She loved that I got a good job. Loves it when I remember birthdays, anniversaries, and when I flip burgers on the goddamned grill.

I crave Sylvie, who after just a couple of encounters feels like a friend. There is an observation deck for RLE employees, but I creep right onto the set and amble as though I'm one of the actors. I scratch at the gel in my hair to mess it up. I drop my jacket next to a mailbox. In a trash barrel I find a half-eaten chicken burrito and rub it on my shirt and into my hair. I try to rip the cuffs of my pants with a key, but they are well-made and resist tearing. I leave my shoes with my jacket. While I am 90% faithfully devoted to what I am doing, 10% of me—these are estimates, I didn't do any statistical study of my brain—knows that I wouldn't go through with this if I didn't have a spare shirt at work. I start to limp and find an empty coffee cup, put the change that's in my pockets into the cup and stand in a doorway shaking it at passersby. They are actors and they assume I'm an actor too. I stop and buy a pint of whiskey from the "liquor store."

When I find her, she is sitting up, drinking coffee. There is a dog with her—he's not part of the plan, but he's lying there, his head on her knee. I hold out the whiskey, an offering. It is electrolyte-, mineral-, and vitamin-enhanced.

"You're a saint or a bastard," she opines. "I'm not sure which." She pulls a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the bundle next to her and offers me one. I ask a passerby for a light and the gentleman lights both of our cigarettes and also drops fifty cents onto the cardboard.

"Are you supposed to be here?" She says, and coughs. A glorious chesty smoker's cough: the bioengineering never ceases to thrill me. She's never even smoked before; I taught her a few days ago. I am impressed by the thin clouds snaking out of her nostrils. "It interrupts my experience," she says, looking at me with hard eyes. Then she softens as I tense. It's like we're the same person and the tension moves from one of us into the other like water in a balloon. "I don't mind, though," she amends and we both relax, our backs against the glass wall of an ATM vestibule.

"I'm in trouble," I say, and she nods her head.

"We're all in trouble."

"That was like something you'd say, wasn't it?"

We're both getting a little drunk. I squint at the sun like a sunflower. She looks thoughtful. She takes a swig. "Kind of. I don't wish it on you. But it wouldn't happen. You're too self-involved."

The insult is like a knife. "I'm a teletherapist! I don't even *think* about myself! My whole *life* is about helping others."

She laughs at me. "Sure," she says.

"You told me I don't believe in myself. How could I be both? How do you seem to know all of these things about me anyway? How is that possible?"

"It's not possible. It's not the way it is either."

I grab the bottle and take several big swallows. "My wife says I'm selfish," I tell her, "but my wife is selfish."

"Maybe you're both right."

Suddenly I can't stand talking, and I don't want to think either. I take her face and crush it against my own. She tastes tart and salty: fresh whiskey and cigarettes, before they've gone sweet and stale. "You're amazing," I say, mad with the desire to desire her, but limp as cooked spaghetti. The dog growls and sidles away.

"I'm not your wife," she says, pushing me, crawling away from the bank and into the street. The dog gets up and follows her. I watch her lean over and unclip the tracking device; there is a metallic thud as it lands in the gutter.

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At the hour of her scheduled return, I head to the debriefing center. The tracking device is in my desk drawer. I've been worrying all week that someone will find out that I lost her.

"Where you been?" Carl, in deconstruction, asks. "Weren't you following her?" He and a few others have already reconstructed Sylvie. She must have returned several hours early. She glows.

"Hey," I say, nonchalant. "How'd it go?"

"Wonderful." She is twisting her hair and fastening it with a clip at her nape. "Everything you promised. Perfect. I'll be back at work tomorrow, and I think I'll be

fine. Thanks for everything." She sticks her hand out and I put mine into hers and we shake. I can read nothing from her expression but I still admire the thick black hair that dips down the middle of her forehead.

"You'll be okay?" I say. "You got what you needed?"

"Yes. I did," she says.

Then she is gone.

* * *

My wife has cooked a roast. It seems like a celebration, but I'm not sure for what. I'm afraid to ask and I'm preoccupied going through the calendar in my head. It's not our anniversary. It's not either one of our birthdays or our kids' birthdays.

My wife sees me looking puzzled and says, "It was on sale, and I thought, well, why not?" We dig in. It's delicious. All three of them—my wife and my two kids—are sort of giddy as they eat. When we've finished, my youngest clears the table and the older one goes to the kitchen and brings out a cake with strawberries and whipped cream.

"Okay," I say. "I give up. What's going on? It's not anybody's birthday." Then I get it: they want something.

"Have your dessert first," my oldest kid says.

"I'll have it after. Tell me what you want." They are a team. They move in unison. They go out the back door and return with that dog. Sylvie's dog, a rope around its neck. They explain that it's been hanging around the yard for the past

week. The kids practically jumping out of their shoes chanting, *Can we keep it?*

Please, please, please.

What could I say? I let them keep the dog.