

### **Problems of Living**

Amy still had the good looks of a slightly pudgy cheerleader, the kind with a peppy little ski-jump nose and strong, stocky thighs—the one who made the squad but would never be chosen for homecoming queen. Now entering her thirties, happily married and solidly careered, she wheeled her supply cart along Tri-City’s main hallway past the smiling portrait of President Reagan. The brisk click of her pumps on the freshly-waxed linoleum tapped out an unshakeable professionalism.

*“Attention all East Unit residents,” a voice announced over loudspeakers, “Problems of Living class will begin in five minutes in the Recreation Room. That’s Problems of Living, East Unit, in the Rec Room.”*

With almost a decade of experience in Adult Education and the near perfection of the French twist and side-swept bangs she’d been sporting for as many years, Amy conveyed a sense of well-earned confidence. Recently, however, a corporate takeover had threatened her balance. The adult education agency for whom she’d worked since the early 1970’s, had been sold to Atwell Enterprises, a private family corporation, whose holdings included a wide range of Skilled Nursing Facilities, or SNF’s (pronounced “sniffs”). Whatever mild trepidations Amy may have had about this new assignment in Tri-City, a locked inpatient psychiatric facility, she outpaced with her brisk stride.

The sunny yellow administrative corridor, with its brass nameplates and solid oak doors

bolstered Amy's spirits. As she passed through the locked double doors that separated the administrative offices from the residential treatment area, she pulled her shoulders back, took a deep cleansing breath, held her head high above her neck, and imagined herself as a slightly robust Audrey Hepburn.

She was immediately met on the other side by Walter, a hunched elderly resident who stood guard by the entry to the unit.

"WELL HELLO and GOOD MORNING TO YOU!"

Walter's foamy white spittle sprayed toward her name tag as he peered forward. "MRS. FIRST NAME AMY LAST NAME FIRST INTIAL R. WHAT EXCITING AND EDUCATIONALLY STIMULATING FORAY HAVE WE PLANNED FOR TODAY?"

Walter was a bit unpleasant to look at and listen to, but his quivering physical fragility prevented any sense of threat.

"Good morning, Walter. Would you care to join us today and find out?"

"OH THANK YOU BUT NOT FOR ME TODAY. I'VE GOT TO GET MY WORK DONE. TWO MORE POINTS AND I EARN MY WALK PASS."

"Okay, Walter, maybe next time." She offered a warm smile, even though he'd uttered this reply verbatim every day for the last two weeks since she'd started her assignment here.

Amy pulled a Kleenex off her supply cart and wiped her nametag. She clicked past the nursing station with its Plexiglas windowed walls, where the last few residents filtered through for their meds. She passed the white-tiled grooming rooms where the aides wiped down the metal mirrors and locked away the toothbrushes in corrugated plastic cabinets.

LaVonne, the lead aide called out, “Alright people! Teacher’s here for you. C’mon folks, let’s go get yourselves some Living Skills.” She winked at Amy, and flashed a sparkling white grin with a tiny diamond chip embedded in one eyetooth.

“Thank you! I just need a few minutes to set up,” Amy replied over her shoulder as she continued toward the cafeteria. On Friday mornings, she slid the heavy accordion-pleated dividers along their aluminum railings, creating a temporary classroom. A laminated sign on the front wall euphemistically identified this as the Rec Room. If you looked closely enough, you could make out a W and K that a fingernail had etched in the lamination to read WReCK Room. Amy tried to squeeze the room dividers together as tightly as possible to meet in the middle where the latch was supposed to be. The thick pleats helped minimize the clanking of trays and clanging of giant pots against the large burners of the institutional stovetop in the Tri-City kitchen. There was little she could do about the invading odor of steamed vegetables, potato flakes, and applesauce oxidizing against metallic ladles.

She strode to the other side of the Rec Room and pried open the heavy hinged doors of a wall cabinet to reveal bookcases and all their contents. She paused to inhale deeply. For reasons she didn’t fully understand, the lingering aromas of old glue, tempera paint, mosaic tile and plaster of Paris always lit up the pleasure centers of her pert nostrils. She recalled the Instructional Media Center in elementary school and fondly remembered being picked by her teachers to shepherd photocopies back and forth from the IMC to the classroom. She’d stand at the receiving end of the big, churning copier and inhale the scent of fresh toner as she watched the printed papers shoot out and drop into an orderly stack. Those elementary school experiences

had developed an early sense of instructional formula: educational materials plus pungent chemicals equals fun with a sense of purpose.

“Morning, Joe.” Amy said to a catatonic man posted in his usual spot against the east wall, staring down at his puffy white Nikes. She’d been forewarned against any attempt to move him, but never gave up on respectful encouragement.

Preparing institutionalized adults for life in a board-and-care home required an arsenal of engaging activities that were simple, but not demeaning. The hands-on, comparative shopping experience she planned for today had always generated enthusiasm and yielded satisfying results. Amy pulled one of the long caster-wheeled cafeteria tables up to the front of the room, and placed several large, brown grocery bags on top. From each bag, she pulled out empty cereal boxes, egg cartons, milk jugs, rolls of toilet paper, and plastic produce—realia, as they called it in the field— and arrayed them across the plastic sheeting covering the table. She folded down the tops of the bags and ran her thumbnail crisply along the rims to prop them open. Each bag boasted a fictitious name that she’d carefully lettered to look real: “Big Max” stenciled cheaply in black, “Mighty Mart” in bold red italics, and “Greta’s Gourmet” in flowing green calligraphy.

She pulled a stack of handouts from her briefcase. As she tapped their edges into a neat rectangle against the table top, a small manila envelope slipped out onto the table. She scooped it up and slid a couple of old black and white photos out with her thumb. Amy stared at the first image— a dark, fuzzy mass on a surgical steel background. Underneath, a second photo revealed a ragged, crescent-shaped bald patch behind a youthful ear. She’d started carrying these old pictures around with her the last couple of weeks as a reminder to rein in an old compulsion that

had recently tried to resurface. Then, always quick to separate the personal from the professional, Amy shoved both pictures back in the envelope, and stuffed the envelope in her briefcase. She placed a box of yellow golf pencils alongside a stack of clipboards. Clipboards, like handouts, provided an official touch.

“Hey Amy,” drawled Chad, the first attendee to shuffle through the door. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“Thanks, Chad,” Amy answered, smoothing her bangs across her forehead and smiling. “You’re looking pretty good yourself.”

Chad did look good—tan, slim, tons better than most of the residents. He always wore one of those old western dress shirts with the pearlized buttons tucked into his neatly pressed and creased jeans, and secured with the tooled leather belt he’d created in occupational therapy. He was such a sweetie, too. Polite, smart, down-to-earth. If they could get his hallucinations a little more under control, he’d be a great catch for someone. To be honest, Amy felt a slight attraction to him—but in the normal way that everyone in the helping professions acknowledged. They’d spent a whole class session discussing this in her practicum training. The key was to neither avoid nor deny the thoughts, but to simply acknowledge them and let them go. Amy had mastered this skill years ago, before her marriage. Truthfully, in the aged and intellectually disabled populations she’d worked with for the last ten years, there weren’t many opportunities for attraction.

Here in Tri-City, things were more complex. Some of the residents were clearly out of touch with reality on an everyday basis, like Joe, the catatonic. But others—when their

medications were in balance and working effectively— seemed so normal: nice, pleasant to talk to, and self-aware of their problems. For some, like Chad, their illness brought a unique sensitivity and understanding that even her husband, God-love-him-for-all-his-supportiveness, sometimes lacked when she felt short of her strong, competent self. Residents like Chad were the ones who were going to get out and live out in the world successfully, given the proper supports. These were the people Amy was here for, to help them build the tools they'd need for life outside.

Amy's left hand fluttered up to her bangs and wound a hair around her finger until it snapped, bringing her back into sharp focus. She glanced at the large wall clock, with the date, and location map posted beneath it. No more time for wandering thoughts. Class was starting in two minutes.

"Come in, come in," she urged the residents in warmly.

"Good morning," mumbled Debbie, the second resident to arrive. Her string-bean of a boyfriend, Art, followed silently behind, his bony fingers entwined in hers.

Warren, the oldest of the residents, glanced furtively over his shoulder as he swept past the others. "Hey, what day is it?" he asked in a coarse whisper. He leaned toward Amy's ear. "I just got back from Mesopotamia. Bit of a jet lag."

Amy smiled. "Good morning, Warren. Today is Thursday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1980. It's ten a.m. and we are in the great state of California." Orienting patients "times three"— time, date, and location— was a simple but important task that she enjoyed.

"You know," Warren continued, in his hushed voice, "that fucking Tut is after me again.

He's been pissed ever since I got into all that white magic back in the sixties and had a fling with that slut Nefertiti. The weird thing is sometimes he chases me, but then other times he's actually inside me. That's how I got involved with that bitch in the first place."

Amy pressed her lips together and smiled.

"Well, I don't think he's in here now, Warren. No pharaohs allowed in my class. Go ahead and take a seat . . . and please, watch your language."

"Sorry, heh." Warren grinned, exposing his gummy, cobble-toothed smile.

Eleanor came in scowling, as usual. According to local legend, Eleanor was once an actress, a New York stage star who'd traveled the world in her prime. Unlike the other residents who (according to her) were completely out of their minds, Eleanor claimed that she merely had a chemical imbalance. Her doctor had clearly told her so, and her relatives were coming to pick her up soon, probably tomorrow, she reminded everyone daily.

"Save the smile, sweetheart," she snarled at Amy. "You're giving me a toothache. The only reason I'm here is to get my walk pass points. So, let's cut the crap and get on with it."

Amy held her smile in place. She'd learned not to take these insults personally. Eleanor's supercilious, eye-rolling affect was a classic symptom of her delusions of grandeur. Of course, winning Eleanor's favor would be something of a coup, but that kind of victory wasn't really necessary for Amy's gratification. She'd prepared a quality lesson, a lesson that would benefit all who chose to participate, as Eleanor was free to do or not. As soon as the last stragglers wandered in, Amy cleared her throat and closed the door.

"Welcome everybody, and good morning." Amy beamed a smile out to the waiting

group. “I’ve noticed many of you looking curiously at the table here in front of me. Does anyone have an idea what we might be doing today?”

“Sampling a new strain of salmonella?” Eleanor called out.

Amy ignored her and nodded encouragingly at Chad.

“Maybe some sort of comparison shopping, Amy?” he replied.

“That’s exactly right, Chad! Today I’m giving you all a chance to shop as you would out in the real world in a regular grocery store. And as you know, those stores are always competing for your dollars, trying to get you to buy from them.”

“Oh goody,” said Eleanor, “another day of play-acting!” She jerked her chin toward Joe, in his fugue state next to her. “He’ll do great as a mannequin! Seriously, these people make me look like I’m 100% cured.”

Amy ignored the remark, fanned the handouts with her thumb and began passing them out. “On these forms, I’ve listed three made-up grocery stores. Under each one, I’ve listed five items and how much they cost. Each store has the same items, but they’re different prices. Your job is to figure out which store is offering the best deal overall.”

About a dozen faces stared back blankly. “So, for example, you’ll have to decide if three apples for a dollar at Greta’s are cheaper than two for fifty cents at Max’s. Like this.” Amy quickly worked the problem, marking broad, chunky numerals on her portable whiteboard, enjoying an uplifting whiff of her fruit-scented markers.

“If you do this for each product, you’ll all come up with the right answer. Does anyone have questions?”



“When do we get our money?” Warren shouted out.

Amy laughed and pretended to slide some cash into his hand as she handed him a paper. “It’s imaginary, Warren. You know that.”

Warren peered into his empty hand. With a shrug, he jammed the invisible dollars into his pocket, mumbling and chuckling to himself as he settled in to work.

Amy circulated through the room, offering encouragement to the residents as they considered the relative worth of the 300 one-ply toilet tissue squares versus 250 luxury two-ply sheets. Allowing everyone enough time to work without rushing in to help was tricky, but as Amy knew from experience, “wait-time” was critical to success.

Mindlessly, she wound another loose strand of hair around her finger until it came loose. Trichotillomania, they called it. As if she loved to create bald spots that she spent a half-hour every morning covering with a careful arrangement of hair mousse and bobby pins. Luckily, she’d married a very accepting man. Her husband, Ed, knew about her history and understood it wasn’t her fault, this inherited neurochemical glitch. He always told her how in awe he was of her ability to resist such an unwanted, powerful urge. He admired how through hard work and therapy she’d never let it prevent her from having a successful personal and professional life. In a tender moment, he’d even once confessed that if anything would make him cry, it would be the sight of his beautiful, competent, warm, loving, healthy wife plucking at her head. She knew he was trying to help her stay strong and attractive, and appreciated the intent of his comments if not the delivery. He wasn’t perfect either, but who was?

In fact, she’d learned in therapy that perfectionism was the enemy. For most pullers, it

was about grazing for those rogue hairs—the rough wiry ones that didn't fit in the ironed, smoothed-down style of the times. The compulsion was chronic and could relapse at any time, particularly during times of stress. Other times it seemed random—hormonal changes, the tides, pull of the moon. At those times in the past, a return to therapy did the trick. But it had been such a long time now, such a long pull-free stretch, that Amy wanted badly to believe—sometimes allowed herself the belief— that perhaps she really had grown out of it. Paradoxically, the longer the pull-free stretch, the more perfect she felt, and the more perfect she felt, the more the urge to pull returned and the more she had to resist. This was the part her hubby had more trouble understanding. She would have rather admitted an incestuous affair than tell him she had started up again. She would keep these few small slip-ups to herself until she got back in control, and then maybe tell him. Fortunately, she and Ed were highly compatible in the cleanliness department. The sight of a single hair in the sink or a curled pube on the shower floor would send them both scrambling for a disinfectant wipe. She would be vigilant during this minor setback and he would not suffer.

She returned her attention to the class, surveying the range of participation. With the exception of Joe, whose highest level of activity was occasionally blinking away the white eyebrow dandruff that collected in the fringe of his lashes, all the residents seemed genuinely engaged. Even Eleanor appeared animated, hunched over her clipboard, scratching with her pencil and talking to herself. Amy knew better than to comment about Eleanor's participation. Even a positive remark could bring her work to a dead halt. Instead, Amy made a calculated effort to provide positive reinforcement simply by her silent presence. She continued to wander

among the tables, trying to appear nonchalant as she paused a couple of feet behind Eleanor.

“By the time you figure out the math, your ice cream’s melted,” Eleanor grumbled, chewing on the end of her pencil. Amy glanced down at the outlandish floral doodles surrounding an indecipherable configuration of quasi-algebraic expressions on Eleanor’s paper.

“The store will close before I can finish these calculations!” Eleanor’s voice began to rise in agitation.

“It’s okay, Eleanor. You don’t have to do anymore,” Amy said softly. “I’ll give you a walk pass even if you don’t finish. We’re going to go over it all together.”

Amy walked to the front of the class and cleared her throat. “Okay folks, please go ahead and put down your pencils, and we’ll share out your results.”

“Wait!” Eleanor hollered, “Five more minutes!”

Amy’s eyebrows rose with the realization that Eleanor had been spurred into honest-to-goodness action.

“Alright, I’ll give everyone a few more minutes and I’ll swing around one last time to help with individual questions.”

Eleanor frowned at her paper again, but waved Amy away as she approached.

Amy sat back down and surveyed the room from her seat as her hand drifted back up to her hair. She looked down at the loose strands that collected in her lap, for some reason startled at how rapidly they’d piled up and formed like the cobwebs. She checked the floor and swept a few more webs together in her hand, making a second pass with a tissue to get them all, then balled up the tissue and buried it at the bottom of her briefcase.

Pulling out hairs was one thing. Eating them was another. The life-threatening mass that had necessitated surgery and years of post-operative behavior therapy into her late teens and early twenties had more or less cured her, although she understood there was no real cure. Yes, she'd started to pull again in this time of accelerated stress, but up till now, she was able to stop herself from ingesting the hairs. At least she didn't swallow the whole thing. She brought the root to her mouth, and felt its gelatinous bulb between her lips before placing it between her teeth and mincing it off. It wasn't so different from scraping the fleshy nub from a miniature artichoke. The root alone posed no danger, she told herself, so long as she didn't start chewing on the rest.

Amy returned her gaze to the residents once again, just in time to see a wash of clarity passed across Eleanor's face as she methodically filled in each blank.

Finally, Eleanor looked up from her clipboard and laid her pencil to rest. "Got it!" she declared triumphantly.

Even after so many years, serendipitous moments like this reminded Amy that you could never write anyone off completely. Given the right conditions and a twist of good luck, even the toughest nut (no offense intended) could soften. With a light lift at the corner of her lips, Amy embraced the pleasure of this small victory.

"That's wonderful, Eleanor. We'll go around the room and share our findings. Would you like to go first?"

"Certainly. I chose Greta's." Eleanor smiled and took several deep bows to her imagined fans as they applauded.

"Greta's?" Amy echoed. Her eyes flickered across Eleanor's face, trying to detect a joke.

“They would actually be the most expensive, Eleanor. Maybe you made a little addition error. I do it all the time,” she added, “forget to carry the one or something. May I take a peek?”

Eleanor jerked her clipboard away and slapped it down hard on the table.

“I . . . did . . . not. . . make— a— mistake! I chose Greta’s because their produce is always fresh and their bag boys are always friendly. I like their *quality!*” Throwing her shoulders back triumphantly, Eleanor stomped out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

Startled, Amy stepped backward and her foot caught in a raised crack in the linoleum floor. The pointed tip of her kitten heel snapped off as she yanked her foot out.

“Shit!” Amy bent to pick it up and when she regained her balance, found the whole class staring at her wide-eyed.

“I’m so sorry. I was taken by surprise.”

“Don’t let her get to you,” Chad drawled. “You know how she is. You can’t take it personal.”

“Oh, thank you, Chad. I’m not . . .”

Debbie’s trembling wail interrupted.

“I didn’t know the shops were for *real!* I thought they were all make-believe. I guess that shows how dumb *I* am!” She rose from her seat in a panic, causing her clipboard to clatter onto the floor.

“Oh, sweetie . . .,” Amy started to follow with her shoe in hand, but Debbie was already halfway out the door sobbing.

Her scraggly boyfriend, Art, chased after her yelling, “Debbie! Come back. You were

right. None of it's real!"

Warren scrambled to his feet next. "What does he mean '*None of it's real?*' This whole thing's a sham? I thought we were finally going to have a decent meal for once around here! Forget this! I'm heading back to Mesopotamia to get me a jug of wine!"

Warren swiped his arm across the long table on the way out, sending plastic tomatoes and cabbages rolling across the room. "Follow me, folks!"

The room cleared in thirty seconds, as did the table, bumped and jostled by the fleeing residents. Bags, milk jugs, everything lay strewn across the floor. The contents of Amy's briefcase also scattered. Amy stared in shock at the disarray, but stopped abruptly as soon as she spotted the manila envelope containing the tell-tale photos. She picked it up and started to slide the pictures out again, feeling not so different at this moment than she had all those years ago: freakish, weak, helpless. She shoved the photos back in without even looking, grabbed her broken shoe, and flung it across the room.

A soft shuffling of feet stirred Amy's awareness, and she realized Joe had broken his frozen presence in the room. She followed his gaze to the spot where the heelless pump had landed.

"WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT?!" The sharpness of her own voice pierced any remaining hope of regaining her cool. She propped her elbows on the table and held her head in her hands. One tear after another dropped into dark, connecting splats on the tan envelope, and blurred the images whose edges peeked out of its opening.

"Looks like a Rorschach! What does it mean?" Chad's voice came from nearby.

His warm hand grazed hers as he reached toward the tear-stained paper.

“Oh, Chad! Please tell me you weren’t in here all this time. Just now, especially.”

“I stayed . . . well, I was waiting to see if you needed some help.” He smiled kindly, as though he hadn’t heard or seen a thing. “Nothing serious, I hope,” he added, nodding toward the pictures.

Amy swallowed back a snotty lump and clamped her hand down on the photo envelope, pushing the pictures in tightly, and tying the figure-eight string clasp before Chad got hold of it.

“*Trichobezoar*. Medical terminology for a hairball.” She managed a flaccid smile.

“Anyway, these are ancient history.”

“Ah, well, no wonder.” A wistful look of understanding passed over Chad’s face. “I had a cat once, when I lived in my own apartment. That’s one of the things I miss the most being here. No pets.”

“Chad,” Amy sniffed, “I appreciate your concern, but I don’t think you quite understand.”

“Well, maybe not. But I do know that you shouldn’t underestimate the impact of a sick pet. Can I help you clean this up?”

Amy quickly resumed packing her things with tight efficiency. “Thanks Chad, I’ve got it.”

“Are you sure, Amy? I’d be glad to . . .”

“No, thanks, Chad.” Amy’s voice sprang back to business. I’m fine. Please go on ahead. And do you think you could take him too.? He seems to trust you.” She cocked her head toward

Joe.

Chad lowered his voice. "Sure, whatever you think's best."

"Thanks, Chad." Amy spoke more steadily now, with the authority of appreciative instructor to helpful student.

He tipped his head politely but kept his gaze on the floor.

"Chad, I'm sorry."

He raised his eyes. "For what?"

"For not finishing the lesson and acting unprofessionally."

"It's okay, Amy. You're human, too. You know, it's okay to show it once in a while."

"I know, but it's important to keep professional boundaries, so I apologize."

"I accept your apology, Amy, but it actually helps to see that you can have problems sometimes, like the rest of us. I wish I could have more control, but it's the voices, you know?"

She nodded silently as Chad went on.

"I want to have a normal life, like everyone else, and I did kind of have one when the meds were working. But the voices came back. I wish I could just stop them, but they're always around. I wish I could have a relationship and get married like you. I do miss it."

Eyes met. Big and brown. Brimming.

Amy swallowed. "I'm so sorry, Chad. I wish I knew how to help you better. I know my lessons don't do anything for you. You already know all this stuff, shopping, balancing a checkbook, paying a tip." Her voice broke off and she wiped her nose with a paper towel.

"This is exactly how you help the most, Amy. By showing you care and treating us like



regular people. Please let me help you clean up.”

He and Amy refilled the brown grocery bags, quietly scooping up the remains of the lesson, and loaded everything into a neat bundle onto her cart. They swept up the remaining debris, shook it into the trash can, and tucked the chair seats under the tables. Amy located a bottle of Crazy Glue and squirted a drop onto the broken bit of heel, tamping it down as it dried.

“Thanks again, Chad. And I really am sorry for all the chaos. I know it was upsetting.”

“It’s really okay, Amy, like I said . . .”

“I know. You’re right. Just because I’m a teacher doesn’t mean I can’t be human.”

“So, can I give you a hug? A teacher-student human hug?”

Amy felt herself blanch, but loosened her arms for a quick superficial embrace. Then Chad led Joe out of the room by his elbow, and back to residents’ quarters. Amy tested the integrity of the Crazy-Glue with her finger pressed on the heel. She gingerly stepped into the shoe, shut the lights, and exited toward the administrative wing.

At last, smoothing the wrinkles out of her skirt and tamping her bang down with a few quick licks to her fingers, Amy wheeled the supply cart back down the freshly waxed hallway. The oddly-syncopated beat of her mismatched heels tapped out a muted warning of the sacrifices she’d continue to make in order to keep her profession.