

The puppet master

- Lord Almighty, oh sweet Lord, do not abandon me, as I am the sheep that lost its way. Please guide me back to you, as I am lost and scared, and I pray to you and ask for forgiveness for everything I've done. I am pregnant, Lord, and I need you now more than ever, to help me in my troubles. I am poor and young, and I am frustrated Father, what should I do? Please, give me a sign, any sign, and I will do as you please. Amen.

The girl held the lit candle in one hand and crossed herself with the other. She then stood up, put the candle in the candle rack and left the church with a hasty pace.

- What took you so long? – Asked Tom and leaned over to kiss her. They were sitting in his car. A blue Ford Fiesta with an orange back door and a few bumps here and there. Tom always picked Eve up after Sunday church. They used to go for a walk in the park, or in their favorite café for some hot chocolate and cheesecake.

- I was praying. – Answered Eve after their mouths departed.

- What were you praying for? – Asked Tom with a bit of irony in his tone. Eve hesitated to answer.

- Is there something wrong? You seem upset. – Said Tom, reaching out for her hand.

- There's something I need to tell you. – She can't hold her tears any longer. Breathe in, breathe out,

– I'm pregnant.

Quite often in our lives, especially in the night of darkness, there is this silence, this empty wave less space, ready to suck in all your troubles with every breath you take. But there are other times when one does not even dare to breathe and at that times, silence becomes unbearable:

- Oh... Well... Are you sure?

- Yes.

- Did you check?

- Yes.

- How many times?

- Four.

- How long are you..?

- Probably not more than a month.

They sit there in silence for a while, maybe longer.

- I'm scared. – Said Eve finally and hid her face in Tom's chest.

- I'm scared too. – He whispered and stroke her hair. – What do you think we should do?

Eve held on to him even stronger, started crying even harder:

- I don't know.

- What... What about those plan B pills or something? Doctors say a baby is not a baby until two months or something, and it's not counted as killing...

- Stop it! – Screamed out Eve and straightened up. – How can you think like that right now? You may not believe in God, but He is still watching you, you know.

The silence broke out again. Heavier than before.

- Whatever you decide, I'm on board. – There, he said it. The best answer he could've given. "Where do you want to eat?" "Whatever you decide, I'm on board." "What should we watch?" "Whatever you decide, I'm on board." "What should we do with the baby?" "Whatever you decide, I'm on board." Always the best answer.

- I want to go home. – Says Eve. Tom insists on taking her but she refuses, jumps out of the car and runs. She sees no faces, no moving cars, only her sorrow. She runs the stairs to her apartment, wipes away her tears before entering the house, tells her mamma she's not hungry and closes the door to her room behind. She picks up her phone and says:

- Okay, Google.

The command is heard and it is heard well. The phone lights up, and so does the small red dot on one of the gazers' screens, indicating every activated profile.

- So, how many do we have online? - He was circling the room of the office, with a microphone tied to his ear. The square room had around twenty people in it, the gazers, with their eyes locked on the screens. The only one standing and giving orders was called Jeremy and nobody knew it. Not because it was unnecessary, but because that was the rule. All he did was walk and talk, and he earned big money for it, just like the other walkers – oh, and the building was full of them. All in square rooms, all with people to obey their commands, and all overseeing the lives of thousands at a time. You would read "For Good Inc." on top of the entrance of the ten-story building - hanging in space, the hologram. The building was stretched out wide and if you looked up, all you'd see would be the dark beige curtains covering up everything inside.

“For Good Inc.” was a privately owned marketing company, or so they said. One of the best. One of the leading. It promised a success rate of 100% on any orders it received and although the company was somewhat new, not once has it yet failed. It served only governments and billion dollar companies because of its high rates, obviously. Nobody knew exactly how they operated, but they had a good guess.

- Hello Eve, how may I help you? – Answered the phone in a calming voice. On Eve’s end, that’s the only answer hearable.

- Turn on Spotify.

- Alright, asking Spotify to play some music.

“It's like a storm
That cuts a path
It breaks your will
It feels like that

You think you're lost
But you're not lost on your own
You're not alone

I will stand by you
I will help you through
When you've done all you can do
If you can't cope
I will dry your eyes
I will fight your fight
I will hold you tight
And I won't let go...”

She was lying on the bed, holding her pillow tight and close, listening to the song and sobbing. She thought how alone she was, with nobody to share her pain with. Well, except for Tom maybe, but he wouldn’t understand a thing. “Tom’s a man”, she thought, “and men know nothing about women’s troubles. I need someone who has been through the same, someone who has felt what I’m feeling know.” She barely managed to hold her scream and started kicking the bed as if it was the one at fault. After a while, she calmed down, started wiping away her tears. At least to make the feeling of loneliness disappear, she reached down for her phone and started thoughtlessly scrolling and scrolling through Facebook. What Eve didn’t know though, was that she was not alone at all. Maybe on her end, in her room, she was, but somewhere in the world, somewhere far away, all girls facing same responsibility were brought together in one building through the screens of soulless hardware:

- They’re entering their Facebooks, already 40 thousand and counting.

- Great, you know what to do. Start with prepared posts and monitor their reactions. Make them believe that having a baby is a bigger crime than getting rid of one!

The picture of a lit candle instantly caught Eve's eye. It was followed by a long text that read:

“Who is a God like you,
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance?

You do not stay angry forever
but delight to show mercy.

You will again have compassion on us;
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

Not even realizing that the verse wasn't from the Bible but the Jewish Book of Mikah, she jumped up and held her phone like a sacred gift from Him himself. “Into the depths of the sea”. That's all she can see. Her sins drowned into the depths of the sea.

- God is forgiveness. – She mumbled, only now remembering that she wasn't alone after all. She raised her head up, closed her eyes and said:

– Oh Lord, will you forgive me too? Is this the sign I asked you for? As you see through me, and you know me better than I know myself. – She prayed and prayed until her eyes stopped dripping. It took her a while to realize what she'd decided, and when she did, she hid her face in her pillow and screamed without making a noise.

The algorithm heard Eve's prayer and ticked off her number as “hallway through”. In the meantime, walkers were walking and gazers were gazing, all working together for a single purpose - to complete the order of a client they never knew, have never met. Since all workers were equally important for this job, and none of them more valuable than the other, they all had the same possessions. Same rooms, same screens, same microphones. There was only one exception...

You would immediately spot the mainspring of the company. There, right in the middle, the only room jumping out of the square form, stretched on the edges like a yawning man. The only one with just one employee in it.

He was sitting in a leather chair, bright yellow, just in the center of the whole room. Every wall, except the one with the door, was covered in screens and on every screen were different people. All real, all now, this minute, trapped in the center room of the entire building. And this room, with Freddie Johnson in a yellow leather chair, was connected with all the walkers. He was talking to all at once and each by one, instructing next moves:

- Broadcast the documentary on Plan B pills on every Central Television. Let Facebook boom with posts on freedom of action. Send out ads for that documentary on fucked-up single mothers. Big bonuses are coming, people!

Samantha was at home. Alone, as usual. She was standing next to a window in the living room, watching how the sunlight poured down the littleleaf linden trees. It was a strange feeling she was experiencing, the kind of butterflies in her stomach she hasn't had since her first crush. The only discomfort at that moment was the unbearable desire to light up a cigarette, but she was bearing it. She had to. Samantha went into the kitchen to grab herself some wine. "One glass won't hurt", she thought for herself as she poured the red wine in her favorite glass.

"There is nothing to worry about. I dreamed of this day for a long time. Maybe a bit differently, with a man by my side, but it's okay, I can handle it alone. I mean I handled everything else on my own, why should this be any different?"

Soon her thoughts transformed into inner discussion: Who'll take care of the baby when she's working? A nanny. What will her friends think? That she's a strong independent woman. Will the two fit in this tiny apartment? For now, they will. Will the baby be okay without a father? Of course, it will. Why not. If she'll be a good mother. A lot of kids are raised by one parent, they're okay. Right? Samantha took a big sip, just the way she used to every time she would get little nervous. Suddenly an idea popped into her head, she put the wine glass on the table and reached for her laptop.

"Raising a baby as a single mother" – she typed in and waited for the overwhelming answers.

"How to reduce stress in a single-parent family";

"Where's daddy? – how to answer such questions";

"15 harsh truths of raising a baby alone";

"How being a single mom affects your child".

Samantha clicked on the last one. She's reading and reading, without moving an inch. Only her eyes move over the screen. Her face is stone-still. She reaches for the wine glass and drinks it whole.

“Victim of bullying... problems at home... if a boy, highly sensitive. If a girl, hardly ever trusts men... some run away to find the father... No social life for the mother... but you can stand it all. You’ll be a good mother, with our help obviously. Enroll in our online courses and get ready for...”

She closes the laptop and sets it aside. “Another glass?” She thinks, then shakes her head. “No way! I haven’t started yet and I’m already a bad mom! What should I do? I need someone to talk to...” she picked up her phone and called her psychologist. Linda is free at 7 p.m. Great. Three hours to kill. Go for a walk maybe? She gets off the couch, goes in her bedroom, takes around forty minutes to get dressed and leaves the apartment.

Samantha is an atheist. She does not believe in God. Only in facts. Pure, scientific facts. Just like those studies done on single-parent children. Just. Like. Those. “Fuck this.” She thinks to herself and takes out a cigarette.

- Well hello, Samantha. – Greeted her Linda with a welcoming smile. – Come in, come in. Coffee?

- No thanks. – Answered Samantha and went straight to the therapy room.

- Okay then. – Said Linda after both of them took their seats. – Tell me what’s wrong.

Samantha talked and talked, she even cried once or twice, so unlikely of her. Linda was listening carefully to what she was saying, making notes in the process. Suddenly she remembered the book she received today via e-mail. A welcome gift from that website with ads all over Facebook.

- You know, - Said Linda when Samantha stopped to wipe her tears. – I have a nice book for you. Maybe it will help.

- What book?

- It’s called “How I raised two kids alone.” Received today from a website for psychology books. I haven’t read it yet, but it seems quite nice. I’ll forward it to you.

- Oh, please do. – Said Samantha hopefully.

Now Linda took the lead in talking. She calmed her down, told her two or three terms and then skillfully explained them, persuaded her to leave her cigarettes there, and even gave her a hug at the end of the session.

When Samantha entered her home, all she did was take her shoes off, and then straight to the laptop. She opened the e-book Linda had sent her and started reading it.

Now she's out, seamlessly walking around, smoking a cigarette she bought in a nearby shop. She knew single parenting would be hard, but not this hard. Tears are coming down her face, calling for a man that will not arrive, and she's thinking:

“What the hell should I do?”

Seriously, what would you do in her place?

That night millions of Christians dreamt of their guardian angels. Some had long talks with their psychotherapists, some – just long walks. On the next evening, they went in a drugstore far away from their homes.

And another day was gone. The sun set again, and again without reaching the floors of “For Good Inc.” It set beautifully, the sun, releasing yet another stream of warm energy on us, but the building was blind to it, and so was its mission accomplished. Time for Freddie to rise.

He stood there for a while, resting his hand on the tip of the leather chair, watching how complete strangers obeyed his commands. Right behind him was a painting hanging on the door. It was sitting in a baroque gold frame, the kind with patterns like a well-curved hair. It was a painting of a brain in vibrant colors, cut in two, with a curved hand in-between. The hand, it seemed, had risen from the brainstem as if coming alive. Departing the mind, it held a puppet controller tied to different parts of the brain. Freddie watched the people on the screens and imagined the same picture in their heads. Then he imagined a puppet controller in his own real hand, tied to all of those in people's minds. “How easy it is to guess what the hand wants”, He thought. Then he returned to his desk and started typing:

“Dear client8996788,

We identified 4 000 000 (four million) potentials for taking the plan B pills in the past month. Success rate – 100%. Birthrate decrease by 12%, as agreed. That should help a little with the overpopulation issue.

It was a pleasure doing business with you.

Yours truly,

For Good Inc. “

Faxed.