**LAUGHTER**

Someone was [Laughing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VTBMznLrWs&ab_channel=SamGordonRHK), and *it wasn’t me*.

“Well, why don’t you go down with Eric and meet his friends,” the oddly-familiar-looking balding man instructed, with an amused paternal smirk. “*Some* of them aren’t that bad.”

**BE FUNNY. BE RESPECTFUL. BE SCARED.**

It was a command, one I could *not* truly resist, though it was not coming from the man before me, but from *every direction*, a wordless imperative that I could *barely* buck enough to just smile, nod, and tell him, “Yes, Sir. Will do. Have a nice night, Mr. Forman.”

Looking to the other boy my age, now that I was apparently *seventeen again*, who was staring at me with wide eyes while trying to hide the two beers in his hand, two more in his pockets, I shot him a look that hopefully conveyed, *‘Let’s fucking go!’* even as another woman handed him two more cans, instructing him, “Oh, honey, honey? On your way to the basement, could you put these in the fridge? They’re *warm*!”

“I uh, sure thing mom, I’ll *definitely* put them away,” the boy told her, and, again, there came Laughter. Not from the other adults in the party, but seeming to bubble up from the *walls themselves*.

*Am I crazy?* I thought, but following who I hoped was Eric into the kitchen, as the omnipresent Laughter faded, I could hear the woman comment, “He’s *such* a good boy.”

*Did she wait for the laughter to fade, or did she just wait until we left?* I pondered, still with *no* idea where I was.

I’d completed Basic Company training, and while our final exam’s thunder run through Shinto Teito had been a *bit* touch and go, nabbing Sekirei while avoiding MBI’s goons, we did a good enough job to pass. Well, the *survivors* had, but the rest of us had gotten seventies and eighties on our ‘assignment’. If Stacy was still alive, that delusional perfectionist probably would have pitched a fit, but the crazy bint had tried to get MBI’s pet aliens to ‘throw off the shackles of their oppressors’ and had gotten her *head* thrown off her *shoulders* in response. My squad had gone our separate ways after we’d gotten back to Basecamp, only for me to be informed that I’d been traded off from Class B, the Fey, to Class A, the *Devils*, and I needed to meet my *new* manager, Ronove, an infernal creature that held a black staff that practically *radiated* power.

*That* asshole had informed me that I was going to go fight in the Blood Wars, the eternal conflict between chaotic demons and lawful devils, and hadn’t been too happy when I’d told him, in no uncertain terms, that my contract, the one I’d made with my *original* recruiter, *specifically stated* that I’d be taking a heroic role, and that *any* dealing with anything evil would be my *own* choice.

“All contracts can be. . . *renegotiated,”* the deformed mockery of a man had purred.

“Only if both parties wish to. And I *don’t,*” I’d shot back, having done my research in Basic, after realizing how badly I’d screwed up, though not as badly as some of my squadmates. “Either break the contract, and pay me my forfeit, or let me do what I *agreed to* for the Company*.”* I already wasn’t a fan of my employers, my recruiter having lied, both by implication and *outright,* but I was still *trying* to salvage this shitshow.

The creature had tried to threaten me, lied to me about what he would do to me if I didn’t give in, and more, for what felt like days, *right* up until, I realized, he was about to cross the ‘unneeded delay’ clause, whereupon he’d relented and let me choose where I was going to go.

I’d upgraded my Catalog to the newer, somehow even *more* broken model in Basic, and had figured out my ‘build’ beforehand, all of my allocated resources earmarked. I was going to head off to the Wizarding World, as Hogwarts was in *dire* need of a Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher, when reality stuttered and I found myself walking towards a house that was hosting a party, with two adults I vaguely knew were my parents, and *no idea where I was.*

“How did you convince my pops to let you have a beer? I’ve been trying that for *ages,* and he *always catches me!”* the boy commented, and, yeah, there was that creepy omnipresent Laughter. “And do they really let teens drink in Germany?” he questioned.

And *again* came the overwhelming urge.

**BE FUNNY. BE FLIPPANT. BE RELAXED.**

“Uh, probably?” I replied, slipping my cellphone out, and wincing as I saw I only had a mere *fifty-four* points to work with. That meant. . . *sonufabitch.* I was on a *Tier One* world, as safe as safe could be, despite what felt like an *Eldritch God* breathing down my fucking neck, ordering me about, which gave me thirty-five points, and I’d apparently ‘chosen’ to go the ‘Have Stamped purchases but have no Stamp yourself’ option which meant that *getting* more points to spend on a way *out* of here was going to be nearly impossible. “I don’t know, I’ve never been.”

And *more* creepy Laughter from every direction.

Yeah, this was going to get old *real* fucking quick.

“But-But you said it was legal to drink in Germany!” the boy sputtered.

**BE FUNNY. BE SNARKY. BE ARROGANT.**

*Fuck you!* I thought, trying to fight the impulse, as I scrolled through the Catalog as fast as I could. Whatever was happening wasn’t affecting my *thoughts,* thank all that was holy, but I knew it was a *when*, not an *if*, I’d be forced to act on it, trying to stave it off for as long as possible. However, the *second* I had an even mildly amusing thought, my mouth moved independent of my brain. “Yeah, but when did I say *I* was from Germany?”

That got more Laughter, because of *course* it did, as Eric looked thoughtful. “You think *I* could say I was from Germany?”

“To your own father? I think he’d know,” I pointed out automatically -*was that a lingering effect of the command-* provoking that source less ‘levity’ into a round of hearty chortles, finding **Mind Defense** on my phone’s version of my Catalog. *That* purchase would cut off *any* kind of mind control if I got both ranks in it, though even getting it up to *resistance* set me back twenty-five points, and, while I *really* wanted to go full immunity, that’d be my *entire* starting budget.

Buying the lower, level, though, wasn’t even a choice.

In the common sense way, not the ‘mind controlled’ way.

I paused, my finger over the button, as the world Laughed, *again.*

*Can it read my thought?* I worried, setting off a new round and, thinking *fuck that,* I clicked the selected purchase, confirming it, and breathed a sigh of relief.

The boy blinked, asking in response to my statement, having waited an uncomfortably long time, though long enough for the Laughter to die off, which created *so* many questions, “*Maybe?”*

*More* fucking Laughter.

Rallying, he asked, “So, uh, I didn’t get your name? Just these beers. Not that I’m complaining about the beers.”

*Be funny. Be odd. Identify yourself.*

The pressure was still there, as the Laughter sounded, but it was lessened, a suggestion instead of a command from on high.

*I can deal with this,* I thought, flipping to a different screen. I felt like the seventeen year old version of myself, glasses, pudge, and all, but I was listed as an **Extra**, which mean I’d been dropped into this world as a ‘native’, and falling back on my training, I scraped this body’s memories to know what I was dealing with, and. . .

*You cheap bastard.*

Instead of a full life, full of local knowledge and experiences to let me slip into my role, an artificial soul setting things up for me to seamlessly take over for, I only had a few bullet points in my mind, *none of which told me where the fuck I was.* My ‘parents’ were homunculi, only existing to deflect issues, and boring in a way that wouldn’t raise suspicion, but completely *unable* to do anything else. I might as well have been a **Drop In**, only I’d been forced to spend points without getting my metaphorical money’s worth. A single one, but, when I had this few, *every point mattered.*

“Richard Koch,” I told him, knowing the ID in my pocket had that written on it, *thoroughly annoyed.*

The other boy blinked. “Wait, your name is Dick Cock?”

And there was the [laughter](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1keMoq3wg-A&ab_channel=DaSoundBoss).

*Again.*

*“Koch,”* I corrected, pronouncing it ‘Kosh’. “German for cook.”

“But you’re *not* German?” he checked, confused, to more laughter.

“German-American, but I’ve never been to Germany,” I explained. “So, uh, basement?”

The faster I could get some time to figure things out, the faster I could call Company HR and *get some answers.*

The plain looking boy nodded, and then the world. . . *shifted*, and I was at the top of some stairs, Eric in front of me heading down them, like we’d teleported.

Only, I could *remember* moving, my **Mind Defense** meaning the memories couldn’t be planted fully, and I’d recognize them if someone tried to, I just. . . blanked out for a moment.

*Something to figure out later,* I thought, making a snap decision, and settling on my next purchase, even as Eric walked down the stairs, calling out, “Hey guys! I got the goods! And, maybe a friend?”

Out of time, I picked up **Body Tune-Up**, sinking five points to instantly shift myself to ‘perfect fitness and health’, shooting up to 6’3”, fat evaporating as my muscles filled out, my clothing shifting to match, and my vision going blurry as I no longer needed my glasses, stowing them in a pocket, my own Captain America upgrade, though without any *actual* superpowers. I walked down the stairs slowly, thankful that it took care of muscle memory, or else I probably would’ve fallen, everything close enough to be familiar but *just* different enough that it would’ve caused problems otherwise.

It *was* a bit of a vanity option, but it was *also* required for some of the other more necessary Defenses I’d eventually be picking up.

And being attractive was its own low-level superpower.

Turning the corner, there was a stoner looking guy, a cute redhead, and. . . Ashton Kutcher? But young?

. . . Yeah, I still had *absolutely* no idea where I was, other than it was somewhere with *terrible* fashion sense.

The redhead looked me up and down, stating appreciatively, “*Definitely* a friend.”

I stiffened as the sounds returned, but instead of laughter it was. . . an [Oooo?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2XIxbanEv0&ab_channel=SamGordonRHK)

*Fuck, I’m in a Sitcom,* I thought, the borderline eldritch Laughter starting to make sense, which *also* explained the rock-bottom threat rating this place had. Problem was, I *hated* sitcoms, except *maybe* Fresh Prince, and, unfortunately, I didn’t see Will Smith anywhere.

Eric looked up at me, as I’d stopped halfway down the stairs, frowning a little, before doing a double take, staggering back comically. “Uh, what? Didn’t you, uh?”

“Didn’t I what?” I questioned innocently, leaning on my Basic training. It was a simple lesson, when you did something impossible, pretend it was normal, and, most of the time, people would fool *themselves* into believing it was normal rather than embrace the reality-breaking nature of what they’d just seen.

“Didn’t, you, uh. . . have glasses?” he offered lamely, provoking more laughter.

*Be funny. Give excuse.*

Ever be told to do something you were already going to do? Stomping on my first instinct to tell. . . *something* to go fuck itself, though noting that it only provided *two* commands this time, I did what I was planning on already, nodding, and telling him, “Well, I’m inside. You don’t wear glasses inside.”

The confused teen gave me an incredulous look, even as the stoner said, “Yeah man, everyone knows that!”, getting more laughter.

“So, who’s the new guy?” the only girl present asked.

“But first, beer!” Not-Ashton Kutcher announced, getting up, but paused, seeing the four drinks in Eric’s hands, and noting there were *five* of us now. When I lifted my own purloined beverage, he grinned, nodding, “I like the way you think, New Guy!”

With the alcohol being distributed, I grabbed one of the chairs off to the side and dragged it up to the empty industrial-sized wooden spool serving as a table, cracking my own beer and taking a sip.

It was *terrible*, but that didn’t stop the others.

Stepping to my side, Eric lifted his arms like he was on Jeopardy, announcing, “May I present, Dick Cock!”

The other three laughed, Not-Ashton actually spewing foam out of his nose, the world Laughing with them, and, at *my* unamused look, the stoner asked, “Wait, Forman. *Really?”*

“Richard *Koch,”* I stated, pronouncing it *correctly*.

*“Holy shit, your name’s actually Dick Cock!”* the stoner exclaimed, and I rolled my eyes, using my free hand to scroll through my Company Phone, and hit the button to contact Human Resources, as, *wherever* the hell I was, getting dumped here violated *so* many different Company rules. And the Company *didn’t have that many rules*, which, for a multi-dimensional ‘talent’ agency, meant that breaking the few that existed was a *big deal.*

However, instead of time freezing, as the stasis effect let the Company handle issues before they got *really* bad, a prompt appeared on my phone.

*Function Disabled due to Active Mission*

I’m sorry, *what?*

“So, *Richard,*” the redheaded girl said, looking at me intently. “What brings you to Point Place?”

*That. . . doesn’t help in the slightest,* I thought, unsure if that was the name of the street, neighborhood, town, or county, shrugging. “Parents decided to move out of,” I checked my memories, and, thankfully, this *was* one of the few things I knew, “LA, and wanted somewhere quieter. I, of course, didn’t get a choice. Also, I didn’t catch your names?”

That bought me a few seconds, as the redhead was ‘Donna’, Not-Ashton was ‘Kelso’, and the stoner was ‘Hyde’.

*. . . Yeah, still nothing.*

Thankfully, I was able to open up the ‘Missions’ tab of my phone and what I found was. . . *not good.*

‘High-Degree Status Quo Elasticity Testing’ was what I’d apparently ‘agreed’ to, when, *no, no the fuck I didn’t,* and, just *looking* at the wording, I was *absolutely* in a tv show, as I was getting paid ‘per episode’.

And by that I was getting *one point*.

**Singular**.

I’d get a second if I managed to ‘divert fate’, which suggested I *should* get **Destiny Defense** but to even get *resistance* instead of full immunity cost a *full fifty points*, which I was *already* past having. And, even if it was something as simple as changing how an episode played out, that was kind of hard when *I had no idea how it went in the first place.*

Furthermore, I’d get three points for ‘minor ongoing changes’ and a whopping *six* for ‘major ongoing changes’, which was as vague as it was *cheap*. If I had my *Stamp*, I could earn *ten times* that much in a single afternoon by just collecting the engrams of the locals, but *nope*, I was stuck here. And, to ‘isolate variables’ I wasn’t allowed any help *whatsoever.* I couldn’t call HR. I could only communicate with my manager by *text*. And, worst of all, I couldn’t even purchase any Talent to come in and help me as backup, so I was well and truly *alone.*

Well, *fuck.*

“Oh!” Eric perked up, speaking in shortened phrases for emphasis, “Good news! My dad, is thinking, of giving me, *the Vista Cruiser?”*

Kelso perked up, asking, “You’re getting a car?”

*Right, we’re teenagers. That’s a big deal.* Deciding the minor purchase was worth it, I asked, “Oh, you have one too?”

That brought the conversation to a *screeching* halt. “*Too?”* Eric asked, confused, and a little distressed.

Cue Laughter.

*Fuck, did I mess up?* I couldn’t help but think, but, I’d already opened my mouth, trying to seem cool, which. . . was my head *still* being messed with?

I was flying *completely* blind here, and I *hated it.*

Hell, in our final exam in Basic, I’d ended up dealing with *Karasuba*, but that katana-wielding battle-crazy super-soldier sadist had been clear about what *she’d* wanted, namely killing me in as an enjoyable way for *her* as possible. She’d even let me hit her with the Stamp as part of a punch she’d pretty much no-sold, thinking it harmless, and nearly *gutted* me in return, my dodge only *allowed* to barely work, as she cut a crimson line across my chest, because she’d thought my human-level fumbling attempts, when it was clear I was completely outmatched and I *knew it,* were *hilarious* to her. I’d bled, *a lot,* and lost a few fingers, as well as an ear and an eye, but I’d managed to run out the clock of our extraction, outing *right* before she’d taken my head, *knowing* she would’ve gone on a killing spree through the rest of my squad immediately after.

And that had been *less nerve wracking than this.*

*Be funny. Be deferential. Be supportive.*

*Fuck. Off.* I thought, not even sure what that last one even *meant.* “Yeah,” I agreed, spending the five points needed. I only had five options if I was going cheap, and I *was.* Of the three, one was full of the A-Team’s military equipment, one was a futuristic motorcycle, one was *half guinea pig,* and the fourth was ***Herbie,*** so my choice was clear. Thankfully, it didn’t appear there in the room, but I could feel it in the back of my mind, waiting to be summoned. “I have a car. Uh, want to see?”

The teens all looked at each other, and got up as one, heading for the stairs, before Eric stopped, the other two boys almost running into him. “Wait! Beers! *To the back*!”

Laughter sounded, as they went for a different door, and I started to stand-

*Shift*

And, all of a sudden, we were standing in front of a different house. *My house,* I realized, as the teens ambled over to a blue sedan, as I tried to understand *what the fuck just happened.*

We were going to go, and then. . . we were here. Instantly. Only. . . hefting the can in my hand, half of it was gone, but I’d only taken a single sip. But I *remembered* drinking it, and. . .

*What. The. Fuck.*

“Nice car, my man,” Hyde commented, looking in the sedan’s windows.

Pulling on my training, I summoned *my* car, placing it on the side of the road, having *meant* to do this before we even had gotten close, but I just. . . hadn’t.

For. . . *reasons.*

It *wasn’t* mind control, I could *buck* that, or at least resist it. This was. . . one moment we were doing something, and the next we’d. . . fast forwarded?

*What?*

*Figure this out later,* I resolved, *again,* as apparently later had come and slapped me in the face with its temporal *dick*, so I metaphorically snoozed it.

“Oh, that’s my dad’s car,” I told them, waving to the now-summoned vehicle. “*That’s* my car.”



<https://i.ibb.co/b5fB4CM/Regalia.jpg>

The four teens stared at the car, then at me, then at the car, then at their *beers*, then at me, provoking more Laughter from, I don’t know, the *grass?*

“Dude, tell it to me straight,” Kelso asked plaintively, moving towards me hesitantly. “Are your parents rich?”

*Why was that funny?* I thought, ignoring the Laughter. “Um, okay, two things. First of all, define *rich*-”

“If you have to ask, you are,” Hyde interrupted, and *no,* the Laughter *didn’t* fade into the background *or* become less annoying the more you heard it.

*Be funny. Be snooty. Be arrogant.*

*Be quiet,* I thought back, ignoring the command. “Well, I’m from Los Angeles, and. . . okay, *yeah,* same rules there, but really in the other direction.”

“Other direction?” Kelso echoed.

“If you have to ask, *you aren’t,*” I clarified.

[*More Laughter*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rv4l6J1qMGg&ab_channel=dumth)*.* But that wasn’t even *funny!*

“Well, in case you noticed,” the stoner said, waving around the suburb we were in, “this ain’t LA.”

*Yes. I’m aware. But I have no idea where* ***here is,*** I thought. “Okay, and, uh, it’s not my *parents* that are rich,” I hazarded.

“Rich grandparents?” Eric guessed, to *yet more Laugher.*

“You guys know Silicon Valley?” I put forward, this place *obviously* dated, but I couldn’t exactly ask what *year* it was.

Not-Ashton Kutcher nodded, “Where they make the chicks with the huge tits.”

“You’re some kind of computer whiz?” Donna questioned, not dignifying the boy’s comment with an iota of attention, but only after pausing for the Laughter to fade, and, hesitantly, I nodded. The upgraded Catalog came with a salary for housing and expenses, equal to two and a half times the average wage of *wherever* the hell an Agent ended up, and this would explain *where* the money came from.

“Did some work I legally can’t talk about. Got the Regalia with my bonus,” I offered.

“It has a *name?”* Kelso demanded, looking at the vehicle with amorous intent, and, yeah, *apparently that was funny too. Woo.* The guy looked to the others, “Wait, we’ve got a rich friend now!”

“We had a rich friend before,” Eric pointed out. “You’re *dating her.*”

Hyde shook his head, “Jackie’s not a friend. She’s more like a nippy dog that occasionally drops fivers.”

“Yeah, but if when ask *her* for things, she gets all needy!” Kelso argued, after the Laughter faded.

“As opposed to normal, when she’s only half needy?” the stoner inquired blandly.

Kelso nodded, “Yeah, but if we ask Dick Cock-”

“Not giving you anything if you call me that,” I informed him.

“If we ask Richard Cock. . .” the other boy amended, pausing for Laughter as the other three looked at me.

*Be funny. Be arrogant. Be cheap.*

The world commanded, trying to put me into some kind of archetype. So, *incredibly* glad I’d picked up **Mind Defense**, I just shrugged instead. “Good enough,” I sighed, and could the world stop Laughing for *ten goddamn seconds?*

“If we ask him for stuff, he won’t make me listen to what happened in Fox and the Valley of Maria Kant for two hours!” the other boy exclaimed.

Eric held his hands up, and waited for the *fucking chuckles* to cease before admonishing his friend, “We *just* met Mr. Cock; we should *not* milk him for all he’s worth.” He paused, as the [Laughter](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MuvNudeU5s&ab_channel=Khoa) rolled in. “Also, I *really* need to work on my phrasing.”

“I don’t mind helping out a little with some things,” I offered, “you know, share the wealth, and stuff. I just don’t want the *only* reason you guys like me is that I have money.”

“Don’t worry,” Hyde offered. “We like Eric, and he’s barely got anything!”

I opened my mouth to respond, when the world ***contorted***, going black for a moment, and we were in my car, and we were [*singing?*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdDC0XzhOEo&ab_channel=SerkanDemir)

It was awkward, and I kind of just went along with it, rapid shifts coming one after another, every six seconds, as I was driving, then in the backseat, then the passenger, everyone *else* perfectly fine with it, the words and song provided to me by the universe, and after a moment of nauseating whiplash, I stopped pushing against it, trying to ‘enjoy’ it, and, while my mouth contorted into a smile, inside I was doing my best not to *scream*.

With a disembodied shout of *“Hello Wisconsin!”* it was over, and, I was back in the Forman’s basement, in a chair, trying not to shake, wondering if I should buy fucking ***Stress Defense*** to deal with this.

*Fuck it, it’s only five points,* I thought, opening it up, only to find it was *locked out*.

It seemed like it *should* work, no ‘I’m sorry Dave, but I’m afraid I can’t do that’ style prompt, like when I tried to contact HR, but clicking the purchase button, the request just *wouldn’t take*.

As Eric and Donna. . . made up dialogue for a muted sitcom, apparently, I focused on my phone and read the *specifics* of my mission and. . .there was *nothing* there saying I couldn’t get specific Talents or Defenses, which would’ve been included in the description. Trying to open up a help-desk ticket, got me that ‘no outside interaction’ prompt, so I sent a message to my manager demanding to know *what the hell was going on?*

And he responded.

And I *swore.*

“What’s up, Rich?” Eric asked, the others all looking at me in concern.

“I. . .” I trailed off, looking for an excuse, also wondering *how the hell I got here, in this basement?* How long had I skipped forward in that. . . weird jerky hellscape? But, thinking about it, I could *remember* going to school, transferring in despite it being *spring*, and going to classes, but the memories were. . . faded. Grey. Lacking in any spark of emotion as I’d laid low, integrating without a single issue or problem, but, at the same time, not standing out in the slightest. “I realized I never went to go see our principal like I was supposed to.”

“Eh, I’m sure you can just see him tomorrow,” Eric reassured me, and I smiled, and nodded, looking down at the writing on my phone.

***You want out? Join the Blood War. For Twice as Long. Geased to never talk about this little ‘Rebellion’ of yours to Anyone. Until then, have ‘fun’!***

***-Your Master, Ronove***

This wasn’t a mistake, it wasn’t even some kind of punishment, this was *torture*. It didn’t seem *that* bad, [to be honest](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYVO5bUFww0&ab_channel=HollywoodLaughTracks)-

As the omnipresent Laughter grated on my nerves, I realized that, *Okay*, maybe it would qualify, and without **Mind Defense** I’d probably be considering it, that kind of loss of control I’d experienced at first, then in that. . . I didn’t know what the thing in the car was, but that was one of my *true* fears, but. . . *I could do this.*

I felt someone grab my hand, and I came up, hand rising, ready to strike, trained to deal with *threats*, before I realized where I was, but, thankfully, Donna had turned away, and no one spotted me. . . *react*.

Looking over, there was Kelso, next to not-Mila Kunis, aka ‘Jackie’ according to my skipped memories, who looked. . . *really* young, though that might just be the odd clothing everyone wore, and, as I hesitated, Donna turned back to me, jerking her head in a ‘*Let’s go!’* way, so I followed her and Eric up the stairs, oddly *not* insta-transitioning this time.

I was confused, hearing Jackie angrily demand from down the steps, “You don’t *want* me to go to the concert, is *that* it?”

“Concert?” I asked, the other two, as they grabbed sodas from the fridge, Eric handing me one.

“Oh, right,” the boy blinked. “Sorry, forgot to mention that. Uh, you want to come? And maybe drive us if I don’t get the Cruiser?”

“Sure,” I shrugged, “How much are the tickets.”

The teen smiled, “Oh, they’re forty dollar-”

*“*Eric*,”* Donna warned.

“Thirty dol-” he corrected.

*“Eric.”*

“Sevente-”

*“Forman.”*

“Ten dollars,” the boy smiled, as though nothing was wrong, though it was a bit strained as the Laughter rang out.

Taking out my wallet, I handed him a ten. “Thanks for inviting me,” I told him dryly, turning to Donna and smiling with honest gratitude. “And thanks for the honesty.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied with a smirk, looking towards the door. “Let’s go see if those two have killed each other yet.”

“Two dollars on it being Jackie,” Eric called. At Donna’s incredulous look, after the Laughter passed, he explained, “She’s short, but *fierce.*”

Heading down, the *Laughter* stopping any response to his statement, we saw the two were certainly getting physical, but not in a *violent* way.

“Jackie,” Eric noted dryly, “I guess you’re going to the concert with us. Well, Rich is too. That’s gonna be one full car.”

“I’ll just have to sit on Michael’s lap,” the small girl smiled, and it took me a moment before I realized that she was referring to *Kelso*, which, yeah, was likely his last name. *Duh.* Something about the apparent age difference between the two set my teeth on edge, but everyone *else* seemed cool with it, so I didn’t say anything.

The couple, after making a quick exit, left the three of us in the basement.

“Oh, they’re so darn cute,” Donna noted, with fond condescension. “The minute you turn your back, they go at it like dogs.”

“Oooh they’re frisky!” Eric agreed with a smile.

*Be funny. Leave now.*

*How ‘bout no?* “I’ve heard the line between love and hate being thin, but that’s a pretty quick turn around time,” I noted, hearing *more Laughter.* “Okay, um, I’m gonna ask you two something. And I apologize if it sounds kind of weird,” I put forward.

“Don’t worry, I’m used to weird,” Donna nodded, “I’ve been friends with Forman since forever.”

“Really? I’m not used to. . . *hey!”* Eric objected, the world Laughing, *as it did,* but he saw her smirk and shook his head, smiling himself as he looked back to me. “So, what is it, Rich?”

Honestly not sure which answer would be *worse,* I hesitantly asked, “Do you guys hear. . . Laughter? Like, from nowhere at all?”

Both teens stared at me, confused, and I felt a twisting in my gut. “What’d’ya mean?” Eric finally questioned, after a long, silent pause, frowning.

*Please don’t have this be a nightmare dimension where* ***naming*** *the break in the illusion turns everyone into monsters,* I thought desperately, but this *was* a Tier 1 world, and those were normally Tier 5, *at least,* according to my training, the optional ‘Alternate Universes, Alternate Rules’ seminar giving us tips to avoid a Coraline scenario.

“Okay, so, like, what you just said a moment ago,” I stated, the twisting in my gut getting worse. “You said ‘hey’, and then there was laughter, and then when it ended, you said ‘So, what is it’. Like you were waiting for it to stop. *That* laughter.” It *couldn’t* just be me as I’d *noticed* them pausing while talking in ways that, if one couldn’t hear anything odd, would be downright stilted and *unnatural. Right?*

There was another tense silence, Donna finally asking, “Do they not have ambience in LA?”

*Be Funny. Leave Now. Stop Questioning.*

That. . . was *not* a comforting command. “Um, ambience?” I echoed, *needing* to know. “What’s that?”

The two of them shared a worried look.

***Please*** *don’t let this be a mislabeled nightmare dimension.*

“You know, ambience?” she repeated, which *didn’t help.*

“Yeah,” Eric agreed. “You know, ‘Laugh, and the laughs with you!’” he said in a jokey tone, a smattering of Laughter reverberating from the walls, and, though it was slight, both teens I was talking to relaxed a little. “Is that not a thing? Because I’ve seen movies. And it’s *totally* in those.”

More [‘ambiance’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1hbmMfoT9c&ab_channel=RyanLloyd) resulted.

“Um, homeschooled,” I offered. “And my parents aren’t. . . it didn’t happen a lot. Or, almost ever. And by that I mean never.”

That got shocked looks from the two, though the world still Laughed. They exchanged glances, and slowly approached me, as I tried not to tense, ready for some kind of attack. “Like, at *all*?” Donna questioned gently.

“Wouldn’t be asking if I knew what it was,” I shrugged, ready to run, and the [‘ambiance’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bR_wr5HRdl4&ab_channel=IISOUNDEFFECT). . . did the world just *pity* me? “But, like, it *does* sound like laughter, and, and other stuff, right?”

“Oh, yeah, totally,” Eric nodded. “But, like, *really?*”

“I didn’t even know what it was *called,”* I argued, looking around. *Well that explains one thing, but the other. . .* I opened my mouth to ask about the *timeskips*, when-

*Shift*

And I was suddenly standing outside, in the Forman’s driveway, as Eric stated, “Ever since yesterday, I can’t stop thinking about you.” To a beat up station wagon. And I was left wondering, *Did the world just fucking cut me off?*

Because if it did. . . that was. . . ***bad.***

Even if it wasn’t on purpose, and that one Command seemed like it might’ve been, it was disorienting as *all hell,* as I quickly tried to sift through *more* faded memories, of school being school, with homework that I, *as a licensed teacher,* blew through in an instant, while my. . . friends? On one hand, it felt like I’d known them for a couple weeks, but, in reality, it was only for maybe an hour, *tops*. Either way, *they* were struggling, and I hadn’t said *shit* to help them because. . .

I really didn’t know.

I was doing things and I didn’t know *why* I was doing them.

Oh, hey, look, *the thing that terrified the fuck out of me!*

I thought I’d *dodged* that bullet, but apparently it was a fucking ***shotgun!***

Donna’s dad made some crack about this being ‘the best days of our lives’ and going downhill from here, which I *knew* was bullshit, but I was still trying to process, as the ‘ambience’ *Kept. Fucking. Laughing.*

There was a lull in the conversation, and I looked up, I started to say that mayb-

*Shift*

e we. . . I was at an arcade? Sitting a table with Jackie, Kelso, and Donna, having to review a *new* fucking set of memories, missing what an Indian boy said about. . . breasts?

“*Michael*,” Not-Mila demanded, gesturing towards the boy who’d just spoken, “who *is* this guy?”

“Oh, that’s Fez,” Not-Ashton said, after a moment of confusion. “He’s a foreign exchange student.”

Looking put out, the small girl asked, “Who did we exchange for him?” and the ‘ambience’ *definitely* felt like it was laughing *at* her instead of *with* her.

“Exchange as in a metaphorical sharing, not a trade. It’s a *cultural* exchange,” I offered absently, and Jackie glanced my way, then blinked, as if seeing me for the first time.

“I, uh, oh, thanks. That makes sense,” she nodded, seeming a little flustered, as she stood, announcing, “Donna, I need to go to the ladies room.”

The redhead didn’t move.

*“Donna!”* Jackie insisted, the other girl getting up and moving with a sigh, Jackie shooting an odd look my way as she left.

The now-named ‘Fez’ walked over, announcing, “I, too, must go to the bathroom! Eric?”

Eric turned around, with a wide-eyed confused look, as the world Laughed, and I spoke *over* it, informing the foreigner, “Cultural thing. Women here use ‘going to the bathroom’ as a way to have a private conversation. Half the time they don’t even *use* the bathroom, other than as a meeting room. Guys-“

*Be Funny. Don’t Interrupt. Don’t Explain.*

*Don’t tell me what to do,* I thought back, wondering if *maybe* it’d be worth the twenty-five points to *shut the world up.* “Guys just use the bathroom for its express purpose,” I finished.

Fez stared at me, before smiling broadly. “Ah, that helps me *so* much. Thank you very much, Rich Cock!” And then he almost *skipped* away.

Hyde and Eric came over, the latter commenting, “Wait, you can just. . . *explain* things like that?”

“Not as funny, though,” the stoner commented, with a frown, and I froze.

*. . . What if* ***I’m*** *not the only one getting commands?* I wondered, as the boys talked, Kelso, *apparently* looking for an excuse to dump Jackie.

“Or you could just talk to her,” I offered absently, the three boys, pausing, before, as one, going ‘*Nah’* and continuing their conversation like I hadn’t said anything.

“Mayb-”

*Shift*

Aaaaaand I was high.

*Very* high.

I wasn’t just tripping balls, I was. . . too high to think of a better metaphor.

***That*** high.

And back in the Forman’s basement.

Again.

It was hard to think.

Hard to focus.

But, yeah, I’d lost another day.

Fucking ***lovely****.*

“So is Red still thinking of giving you the car, maybe?” Hyde questioned.

*Red?*

And then they were talking about gas, and boats, and. . . now Hyde was talking about that ‘water car’ thing, and the world *wouldn’t stop fucking Laughing!*

*“Stop,”* I growled, holding up a hand, twitching, *not* ready for this.

“Nah man, you can’t stop the oil companies,” the stoner replied, which just made ***more Laughter.***

“*Not*,” I spat out, wrestling control over myself from my spinning head, my stomach twisting itself into knots. “Stop *Laughing*.”

“*Dude, no one’s laughing,”* Kelso laughed, and I twitched, as that just made the ‘ambiance’ *worse.*

*Fuck it, the Ambiance.*

*It was a thing.*

*It was a* ***dick****.*

*It was a fucking* ***Proper Noun****.*

“Water cars aren’t a thing, because the science isn’t there,” I stated, with precise words, taking *all* of my concentration to form the words clearly, the Laughter *thankfully* fading. “Hydrogen is *incredibly* flammable and a good source of energy, yeah, and the oxygen you could split off from it would make a *great* accelerant, *but* the issue is in the splitting of that molecule due to the ionic bonds holding it all together. When you figure out the energy required to do so reliably, and in the amounts needed to run a car, it’s more than the energy one could extract out of, say, a more energy-accessible system like refined oil. So that’s why we still need it.”

For a second there was blessed *silence,* until Kelso started cackling, “Well Jackie’s good for gas money!” which started up the Ambience again, and I was sorely tempted to jump the table and *strangle* that stupid-

*“Eric!”* Mr. Forman called, *“I need to talk to you!”*

*Shift*

And. . . and I was still downstairs, all of us by the stairs, listening in, and, *still* high as a kite.

Taking out my phone, I said *fuck it,* and got the first rank of **Body Defense**, getting broad-spectrum resistance to diseases, toxins, and *drugs,* ***instantly*** feeling better.

“*Oh thank Christ,*” I sighed, feeling *blessed relief*. I was still High, but it was *manageable* now.

Glancing up, I realized that Fez, Kelso, and Hyde were all staring at me. No, they were staring at my *phone.* The foreign exchange student pointed directly at the device, and asked, “What is tha-”

*Shift*

I hit the grass, collapsing, trying not to vomit, shaking, suddenly *not* high, and starting to realize, that, *yes, this was fucking torture.*

Struggling to my feet, I took my phone out, looking at my quickly draining reserves, apparently *still on the first fucking episode,* and saw Eric, Kelso, and Donna getting into the car that Eric wante-

No, wait, he’d gotten it from his parents.

And that was another three days gone.

And now it was the weekend.

And time for the concert.

*Fuck.*

Picking myself up, I could *remember* coming down gently from being that high but. . . as soon as the. . . the *Shift* had happened, the three boys had lost all interest in my cell phone.

And I *didn’t know why.*

*And I still didn’t know what year it was.*

The three of them were doing a bit, or something, the Ambiance. . . faint, almost distant, as I dusted myself off and walked over. Eric’s dad was telling them that, due to the age of the car, they weren’t to take it out of town in case it broke down, the man striding away after laying down the law.

“Eric, do you *want* to go?” Donna questioned, and, hey, she looked rather nice in makeup, dressed better, if weirdly.

And *I* was dressed weirdly.

And I recognized what I was wearing.

*Fuck, this is the 70’s, isn’t it.*

To be fair, I was a little kid in the *90’s*, so that entire stretch before that kind of smushed together in my head, but the bell-bottom pants I was now wearing were *very* distinctive.

“He said no trips out of town,” Eric argued, as if that was that.

“He said no trips out of town *with that car,”* I pointed out. “Also, I thought we weren’t leaving for another half an hour?”

“We were gonna get gas,” the owner of the now *local-only* vehicle offered, which made sense.

Donna frowned, “It’s your car, Eric. Do you wanna go?”

“I. . . we’ll just take Rich’s car,” the teen deflected. “It’s nicer anyways.”

The redhead looked pained, before taking a breath, declaring, “You are a seventeen-year-old man. I’m gonna go with *whatever* you say. It’s *your decision.”*

Eric looked my way, and I shrugged, not really caring either way.

“It *is* my decision,” the boy affirmed, the girl slowly nodding. “And my decision is. . . We’re going to the concert,” he stated, the redhead starting to smile, “in Rich’s car.”

*“Yeah!”* Kelso cheered, the Ambiance chuckling omnipresently, while Donna. . . Donna just looked disappointed.

Eric, meanwhile, practically hopped out of his vehicle, relieved, and asked me, “Can I ride shotgun?”

“Uh, sure?” I offered, wondering why the Ambience had cut off completely. Maybe I should-

*Shift*

We were getting in the car, and I paused, wondering what’d set things off, when Mr. Forman came out, looking confused. Eric, seeing him, and a little smugly, called out, “We’re going out of town, but we’re using Rich’s car!”

The older man blinked, gave us a ‘not bad’ expression, and called back with a wave, “You kids have fun!” before heading back inside.

Turning on the Regalia, I toggled the top, folding the roof back, as the three others stared, Eric asking, voice oddly small, *“It’s a convertible?”*

“Uh,” I said, letting the Laughter buy me a few seconds to figure out what to say, still not sure what the big deal was. “Yes?”

“*So* much better,” the boy smiled, leaning back into his chair, as I drove off to pick up the other three. It was going to be a little tight, but, except for Kelso and I, everyone was pretty slight of build, so it’d work. We’d start with Hyde, since he was the closes-

*Shift*

And we were at the concert. And by that I meant the concert was *actively going on.* Going from pulling out in the car to holding a lighter as the band played was. . . *odd,* but thankfully just stiffening up in surprise instead of reacting at being *suddenly surrounded* meant I was good.

The music was. . . aggressively okay, and the sound system the band had. . . well it sucked *balls*,but I wasn’t sure if that was a technological limitation. Having been to a small number of concerts in the 2010’s, one of which having been *Dragonforce,* in comparison this was. . . just weak.

Everyone was having a *great* time, though, and I smiled, just enjoying, well not the ‘Ambiance’ that could fuck *right* off, but the *actual* ambiance.

Looking to my left, Hyde was into it, and I asked him, “I thought you liked the harder stuff?”

He shrugged, “It’s okay. Besides, these guys aren’t that bad.”

I nodded. “I get that. But if AC/DC does a tour nearby, we should do that too.”

“You like AC/DC?” the stoner questioned, with happy incredulity.

Be Funny. Be Snooty. Be Agreeable.

*How do those last two even work?* Ignoring the command, and grinning, I replied, “They’re *Dy-no-mite!”*

I didn’t even mind the laugh track this time, as the teen grinned back, and offered a fist bump, which I returned, going back to moving with the music with a smile on his face. On my other side, Donna was moving to the music, enjoying herself as well, while Eric was on *her* other side swaying with a smile as well.

And, for a couple minutes, I could. . . *relax.*

Doing so, I could almost feel the skip coming, thinking that maybe this wasn’t so-

*Shift*

bad. And we were home. Okay. I pulled into my house’s parking lot, closing up the convertible top, as Kelso, Donna, Eric, and I got out, stretching our legs, tired, as it was *well* past midnight.

“Seeya!” Kelso waved, jogging off.

Donna turned to say something to Eric, but he was walking away as well, calling, “Thanks for the ride!’ and heading home.

The redhead hesitated, looking like she wanted to say something to him, but he was gone before she could make up her mind.

“You okay?” I asked, moving to sit on the trunk of my car. We hadn’t *Shifted* yet, and while I was feeling a little tired, this was *nothing* to what Basic was. And, considering I was likely going to be stuck with these people for the foreseeable future, I might as well try and help.

“I. . .” she looked conflicted, biting her lip, before she jumped up on the car as well. “No?”

“Was that a question, or a statement,” I inquired.

Smirking slightly she nodded, declaring, “Yes,” and I ignored the Laughter from the grass.

“Oh, well thanks for clarifying,” I replied dryly, knowing I was going to get more of the stupid Laughter, but, *sometimes*, humor was required, especially when dealing with feelings.

I waited, and the silence stretched, but, oddly, the expected *Shift* still didn’t come. I relaxed, enjoying the quiet, but Donna started to get antsy, finally telling me, “Thanks. For driving us.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” I replied, the silence starting to stretch once more. “There is one question I have.”

*“Ohthankgod,”* she muttered, the ensuing atmospheric chuckles seeming to help settle her. “What is it?”

“With everyone there, how could we hear *anything?*” I inquired, and, at her confused look, I explained, “With all the people there, shouldn’t it’ve been one giant mass of laughs, oooh’s, awww’s, and stuff? Like there were a couple, but just between, like, the seven of us.

The redhead stared at me, like I was some odd and fascinating alien.

Which, I mean, I technically *was.*

“You really have *no idea*,” she almost whispered. “Your parents. . .?”

Waving towards the house, which I had no *actual* memories of ever entering, I offered, “Go talk to them sometimes. You’ll see what I mean.”

*Be funny. Leave. Make a move.*

*Make up your mind,* I countered, watching Donna’s face carefully, trying to see if I could spot the commands hitting *her.*

She shivered, “Good for getting to sleep, I guess.” And there was a smattering of chuckles. *Was that her getting prompted, or her just trying to relieve tension.* “Can I just say this is. . . weird?”

“You just did,” I offered, getting a bit of Laughter, which, while *annoying*, seemed to help *her.*

“Like. . .” she leaned against the back window, using it as a *very* sloped chair. “No one talks about this. *At all.* It’s like going, ‘Hello there, good sir, why do I keep gasping every few seconds!’ or, ‘My chest keeps throbbing, dear lady. Did I pull a muscle?’” Donna remarked in an old-timey accent, getting more amused Ambiance in the process.

The redhead waved her arms outwards. “I’ve had less awkward conversations with *Fez.* And you’ve *met* him. You *know* what I’m talking about!”

“If it’s that uncomfortable, I can stop,” I offered, once the Laughter had passed, having gotten at least the *basics* down. I could always go bug one of the *others*, after all. “I don’t want to make you feel-”

*“Shut up,”* she ordered, though without any heat. “This is. . . Your parents are kinda shit, you know? This is *basic* stuff. And you *should* know this!”

*Well, if* ***someone*** *had done their fucking job with the insertion, I would,* I thought, crossly. However, I kept that out of my tone, instead focusing on my honest appreciation. “Well, thanks for taking the time. The other ‘friends’ I’ve had would’ve just blown me off, called me dumb, or just lied to my face. And there wasn’t, you know, any odd sounds with them.”

“And that’s it,” Donna said with a frown. “Ambiance is. . . . it’s *connection*.”

I waited, but that was all she said.

“I’m sure that *certainly* means something to someone who *already knows what you’re talking about*,” I remarked, said Ambiance providing Laughter.

“*Sorry*,” she said, wincing, and the world Laughed *at* her. “It’s. . . for Ambiance to kick in, you have to care about the person. At least a little. And any kind of care does it. Even if you don’t *like* them, you still care about them, if only to want to punch them in their smug stupid little coward mouth,” the redhead grumbled, getting more Laughter.

Deciding to handle the *more* pressing issue first, I clarified, “So, because we didn’t know, or care, about the other people in the audience, any Ambiance they had didn’t reach us?”

“That’s it,” she nodded.

“But, the performers? Don’t you care about them?” I asked, frowning.

“Different kind of care,” she replied instantly. “Like, they saw us, but they didn’t care *about* us. And they’re cool, but I don’t care about them as *people either,* not really*.* They don’t know me, and I don’t *know* them, but I also wouldn’t want them to get run over with a car. Well, the bassist maybe,” she offered.

I waited for the Laughter to end before I pointed out, “But, it kicked off, like *instantly*, the second I walked into that basement.”

Donna shrugged, “You seemed like good people.”

“Didn’t hurt that I was hot, I bet,” I mused.

She chuckled, along with the universe. “If that’s all it took. . .” she started to say, then trailed off. “I’ve got a question for *you,* Richard.”

“My *actual* name? It must be something good,” I joked, glancing over to her while the Laughter played. “Lay it on me.”

“What if you knew someone. Someone you know could do better, but they just. . . *don’t?”* she put forward, the Ambiance silent.

I considered that, wondering who she was talking about. Maybe the stoner? “Is it an issue of skill, self-worth, or spine?”

“Aren’t the last two the same thing?” she questioned.

“No, there’s a difference,” I disagreed, noting the extended silence from the world, which was odd, but I focused on helping her understand the issue. “Those that lack self-worth don’t do better because they think they don’t *deserve* better. They just need someone to, likely *explicitly*, believe in them. Repeatedly. It might turn it into an issue of ‘not wanting to disappoint that person’ becoming more important than maintaining their self-image as a loser, but it’ll usually fix itself in time once that happens. Those that lack a spine, on the other hand, are shit at risk-reward assessment.”

“Yeah. It’s. . . *not* self-worth that’s his issue,” the redhead sighed

“Skill?” I proposed, and she shook her head. “Ah. Well, then it’s a matter of *priorities*. So, if you want them to be ‘better’, whatever that means, the question is do they value their own, *whatever,* more than they value your approval, happiness, *whatever.*”

“He’s really concerned with his *whatevers,* that’s sure,” Donna grumbled. Waiting for the *really* inappropriate chuckling to pass, she asked, “And if they’re lacking spine?”

I sighed, “Well, then you need to have adult conversation about their priorities, and what they value, and what *you* value, and *your* priorities, to see if the two are compatible, or if you’re expecting a person to be who they really *aren’t*.”

“. . . You got a second option?” she asked after a moment, provoking Laughter.

“Sorry, not really. This is the deep, serious stuff, when you want to go beyond just being ‘friends who hang out’ and want to be something. . . *more,* whatever that means,” I offered. “You can try and figure out that stuff on your own, looking at what they prioritize, but people lie about their priorities a *lot*, so you have to focus on their actions. And, knowing yourself won’t help *them* change.”

Donna considered that for several seconds, shifting topics as she asked, “If Forman had said to take *his* car, what would you have done?”

“Gotten in the car,” I offered easily.

The girl gave me a skeptical look. “Your car’s like, a *hundred* times nicer.”

I chuckled, “You say that now, wait until you see this baby *really* fly.” Knowing I’d *invited* the Laughter, given that, for ten points, I could turn the damn thing into an *actual aircraft,* it wasn’t so bad, and, after it’d passed, I remarked, “But the car wasn’t important. The *company* was.”

And, yeah, there was the [*awwww*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltjT25GyXTM&ab_channel=whatever101335)*.*

Didn’t make it any less true.

Though, did that add *veracity* to my words, or just line up with the obvious sentiment expressed so I could be lying?

“That’s got to be the *cheesiest* thing I’ve ever heard,” Donna remarked flatly, though she was clearly trying not to smile. “And we’re in *Wisconsin.”*

*Oh, the disembodied voice was right? Good to know,* I thought, nodding. I’d honestly expected the *Shift* to happen, but was surprised it hadn’t ye-

“Hey, wanna make out?”

*“What,”* I asked, my thoughts jumbling, as I looked over at the girl I’d *just met.* Though, I suppose, to her, “Uh-”

*Be Funny. Be Impulsive. Be Irresponsible.*

Okay, so, the *world* wanted me to go with it, so, clearly, I *wasn’t going to*. But, I had a feeling that doing the opposite would be just as treacherous.

*So shift the paradigm, and pick the third option.*

“Want to, yes, will, *no,”* I responded, Donna starting to lean in, before looking at me confused. “You’re hot, and nice, and understanding, but, I’ve met you,” *an hour or so ago,* I thought, instead saying, “like a week ago, and I’ve rushed into shit before. I want to know that you’re who I *think* you are, and that *I’m* who *you* think I am.”

The redhead frowned, clearly hurt despite my best intentions. “I, yeah, okay,” she said, tone full of poorly concealed pain and confusion, sliding off the trunk of my car, and, distantly, I could feel the *Shift* slowly encroaching. “That’s. . . smart, I guess. I’m-”

“*After school*,” I stated, sliding off it myself, the dimness at the edge of my vision pausing.

“After school?” Donna echoed, confused.

I nodded, walking up to her. To be honest, I respected her more for putting herself out there. Even if she *was* prompted, which I wasn’t sure was a thing the way I worried, it only gave vague impetus, not direct orders. Well, other than telling me to leave, and stop questioning, but I had a feeling that left me a *lot* of wiggle room.

That and I’d learned, through having one chick go nuts when I wouldn’t sleep with her on the first date, and from *other* experiences, that most women took getting rejected *way* harder than most men. It wasn’t some innate gendered thing either, just the results of differing experiences, outlooks, and approaches.

In short, I needed to be *specific,* and, more than that, words *weren’t* enough to convince her that I wasn’t just being ‘nice’.

“We get out of school for the summer, and you want to give something a shot? If we’re still friends, then fuck yeah, I’m still on board,” I told her, getting closer, as she gave me an unsure look, clearly not knowing where I was going with this. Lifting a hand up, I gently cupped her cheek, and she went still. “Until then, consider this a taste of things, hopefully, to come.”

Leaning in, I ignored the [Ambiance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2XIxbanEv0&ab_channel=SamGordonRHK), and kissed Donna, gently at first, bringing my other arm in to pull her to me fully, as while I wasn’t *that* good at it, I knew that a proper kiss was a full-body affair. Savoring the feeling for a long moment, I pulled away, the girl leaning in to try and keep it going, her eyes fluttering open.

“I, uh, *wow*,” she commented, as I let go of her, and I took a step back, leaning against my car.

“Good night, Donna,” I smiled. “See you at school tomorrow.”

Slightly dazed, she nodded, turning and starting to walk away.

“Your house is in the other direction,” I reminded her, as she paused, turned on her heel, and pretended that she’d meant to go that way the entire time, the sound of Laughter following her.

Shaking my head, I turned to head inside, looking forward to getting some sleep, and thinking this might not be so-

*Shift.*

bad.

I was sitting, watching a show called. . . Petticoat Junction? I was *still* tired, wanting to get some rest, but, as Hyde asked, “Does it bother anybody else that the women live in ‘Hooterville’?” I realized that I apparently *wasn’t going to be getting any.*

The Laughter sounded, and I blinked, trying to get a handle on. . . yeah, it’d been a week. Only, it hadn’t been? It was. . . March Second? What the *fuck?* I’d shown up on *May* seventeenth, two months in the future from now, and we’d gone to the concert on the twenty-third. But, I’d *arrived* on that day, so, if we hadn’t met yet, why was I down here, in the Forman’s basement, watching a black and white folksy comedy?

What the ***fuck?***

The others were doing a bit, from the Laughter coming every couple seconds, and my phone beeped. Checking it, I. . . was up five points? One for the completion of an episode, one for ‘diverting fate’, and one for instituting a ‘minor ongoing change’, with a little smiley face next to it, that *had* to be from the people running this op, and not my boss.

But. . . that hadn’t *happened* yet, though, as I glanced at Donna, she glanced my way, and then quickly glanced away, reddening slightly, so she clearly *remembered* kissing me, and. . . *what?*

*Right. This is supposed to be torture. I’d forgotten. Fuck.*

During the Seminar in Basic meant to get us to buy Stress Defense, which I *wanted to get,* our teacher, an honest-to-god Cenobite, had gone on *at length* on how even the worst suffering would eventually become boring and routine, and those that thought they could handle pain *might*, after a fashion, even be correct. No, eternal strife was a dish without seasoning, according to that priestess of Hell, who was surprisingly well spoken given that her throat was flayed open, but that *true* suffering could only come when peppered with tiny kernels of *hope,* that got one to relax, to open back up, and let the pain begin anew.

And, for a few minutes, I hadn’t minded being here. I’d thought I’d understood this place. I’d had *hope.*

And now, for a moment, I considered taking up Ronove on his offer.

. . . *fuck that.*

Eric’s mom came down the stairs, to do laundry and. . . apparently it was the boy’s birthday? Okay. *sure*. And he was having an absolutely terribly hidden party. “Oh, um,” Mrs. Forman added, “By the way, your sister, Lori, is coming home from college for the weekend. No special reason, she just is,” the older woman stated unconvincingly, the way she put it odd, until I realized that she wasn’t telling *Eric* who his sister was, she was telling *the audience.*

Who responded with *Laughter*.

“Well, you’re getting a party,” Donna remarked with faked enthusiasm, leaning against the arm of the couch, “and best of all it’s a surprise!”

There was a moment where it seemed like *something* was supposed to happen, but didn’t, an awkward silence stretching, suggesting a void.

*Be funny. Be snarky. Be snooty.*

*How about none of that.* However, as the others seemed uncomfortable, I decided to be the one to speak up, asking, “Anything you want?”

Eric blinked, looking at me in confusion. “I, what?”

“Anything you want for your birthday?” I shrugged. “Party or no, it’s still polite, but I have no idea what to get you.”

The boy’s brow furrowed. “I, uh, you don’t need to get me anything.”

I shot him a flat look. “What do you call me?” I questioned.

“Dick?” he offered, to Ambient Laughter.

“No,” I shook my head. “The other thing.”

“Cock?”

“The *other* other thing,” I prodded.

“. . . Yeah I’m sorry, man, I didn’t know you heard me,” the boy cringed, the Laughter louder.

“Okay, *now* I’m interested, but I meant *Rich,*” I stressed. “So, gift ideas?”

Hyde tossed in a suggestion of, “Booze?”

“For *your* birthday, sure,” I nodded, catching the attention of the others. “But Eric, I’m asking *you.”*

“You don’t need to,” he deferred again. “I mean, we’ve only been friends, for, like, three weeks.”

*So time is experientially linear, but doesn’t follow a calendar. That’s. . . not as bad as it could be.* “And I’d like to be your friend for three *more* weeks. Who knows, maybe even longer.”

The boy got that good old ‘deer in the headlights’ look, as Donna turned to look at him expectantly. However, he just squeaked out, “I, uh, whatever you think is best?”

Glancing to the redhead, she just looked disappointed, and I shrugged, telling the boy, “Okay, I’ll figure something out.”

Practically slumping the birthday boy sighed. “Thanks, Rich. And, uh, again, sorry for calling you. . . you have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

“No, but I have the feeling of I should,” I replied, lifting an eyebrow.

He glanced at me, then down at my arms, then back up at me. “Nah, you’re good.”

Confused at the gesture, I started to respond, “Seriously, Eric, wha-

*Shift*

Oh. [*This again.*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdDC0XzhOEo&ab_channel=SerkanDemir)

Moving on autopilot, I tried to order my thoughts. This thing worked in *scenes*, clearly, and between them I just. . . existed. But what if I tried to make my own? I only had thirty seconds, so, I envisioned it. Tomorrow, we’d be *hanging out*, *down the street*, and-

*Shift*

And we were there. *Did I do that?* Everyone was listening to music, just relaxing, though they all blinked, a feeling of. . . *wrongness* in the air, and I could feel the incoming *Shift,* but stood, everyone’s attention dragged to me like iron to a loadstone.

*Be funny. Be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.*

*Well, that’s. . . different,* I thought, a static feeling in the air, like an old television turned to a null channel. “Anyone want drinks?”

*““I do!””* everyone chorused, calling out preferences over each other.

I turned to Eric, raising an eyebrow. “We’ve got cola,” he shrugged.

*“Colas for everyone!”* I called back, provoking Ambient Laughter, and the static faded.

*Interesting.*

Slipping upstairs, lacking any *Shift*ing, I spotted the person I *really* wanted to talk to. “Mrs. Forman?”

“Please,” the woman smiled. “Call me Kitty.” She paused. “Actually, no, please don’t do that. Never do that.”

“*Mrs. Forman,”* I repeated, and she smiled.

“Yes, Richard?”

I took a second to figure out how to phrase this. “So, I know you’re not having a party for Eric.”

“Oh we’re *absolutely* having a party,” the woman smiled. “Just don’t tell my little baby that.”

“My lips are sealed,” I smiled, “but that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to get him a gift.”

The woman waved the notion away. “You don’t need to do that.”

“My parents are rich,” I stated.

“You could do that a *little*,” she immediately backtracked. “Did you need a suggestion? Because Eric *loves* to bake.”

I really didn’t need the Laughter to know she was full of shit, but it *was* an amusing joke. I just wish I wasn’t so *tired*. “No, I already have an idea,” I told her. “It’s about his-”

*Shift*

<LAUGHTER>

Donna Pinciotti had a problem. Well, Donna had a *lot* of problems, but she had a new problem, an unexpected problem, and a problem with *deadline*.

Like homework.

*Sexy, sexy homework.*

Not for the first time, she was glad that no one else could hear the ambiance her thoughts created. It wasn’t the same as when you talked to *other* people, but it was still nice.

“So?” Jackie asked, as both girls leaned against the hood of the cruiser, watching the boys play basketball.

Well, *most* of the guys.

Rich was dozing in a chair, waving off the others, as he’d said he’d had a long night ‘working on something’. The other guys had demanded he play too, so he’d taken the ball and *dominated* them through pure strength alone, sinking the basket after body-checking Hyde, and then returning to his chair.

While Kelso was tall, and kinda had a pretty-boy thing if you had low standards, or were Jackie, which was really the same thing, Kelso wasn’t *muscular* like Rich was. And she remembered *feeling* those muscles, the hard, warm wall of-

*“Donna?”* Jackie demanded, the way she always did when someone ignored her.

“I, uh, yeah?” the redhead replied, “What?”

Pouting, the annoyed younger girl questioned, *“What are you getting Eric for his birthday?”*

**BE FUNNY. BE SNARKY. BE COOL.**

“Oh, that?” Donna, replied, glancing towards the boy, who. . . . “Socks.”

“You’re getting him *socks?*” the freshman demanded. “Aren’t you. . . *the new guy!*”

*Shit,* “What *about* Rich?” she asked, trying not to give anything away.

“Oh so it’s *Rich* now?” Jackie questioned.

**BE FUNNY. BE COOL. BE EMBARESSED.**

“. . . Because that’s his name?” Donna replied, glancing over to the man, as he laid back on his chair, relaxed, watching the others, like a lion, relaxed yet ready.

Jackie looked at him too, then back at her, then him, then her. “Oh, *you’ve got a crush on the new guy!”* the brunette smirked.

“What? *No.* Shut up,” the redhead tried to deflect, feeling her face heat up.

But that just made Jackie gasp. “*He likes you too?*”

**BE FUNNY. BE INSECURE. BE COOL.**

“I, uh, yeah?” Donna replied, having a moment of doubt. But that was silly. *She* was being silly. “He wouldn’t’ve-” cutting herself off, the redhead corrected herself to, “he wouldn’t’ve uh. . .” And she really had *nothing* to correct to, “wouldn’t’ve talked to just me after we all got home if he didn’t?” It was more of a question than a statement, and the question was if the other girl would believe her.

The answer, of course, was *no.*

“But you and Eric talk to just each other all the time,” Jackie argued, paused, then repeated, “You and *Eric* talk to just each other all the time. Does *Eric* know you’re just talking to other people?”

“Not like *that,*” Donna instantly dismissed, the second the ambiance died down, glancing at the boy who. . . she *wanted* him to do better, be his own person. Kind of like Rich was. But he just. . . *didn’t*.

But instead of letting it go, the girl gasped again, “Oh my god, Donna, you *kissed him!?”*

“What?” she sputtered, “How’d you get that from *that?”*

“So you *didn’t* kiss the new guy?” Jackie checked.

The redhead winced, not wanting to lie, “I, well, *yes,* but-”

*“Get in the car!”* Jackie ordered. “Donna, *get in the car* so we can *talk!”*

For once, she followed the smaller girl without resisting, as the guys hadn’t noticed, only, *ohgodRichhad*. He shot her a concerned look, but she waved it away, and he nodded, going back to resting, and she appreciated the fact that-

*“Donna!”* Jackie insisted, already seated, and the redhead got inside, closing the door. “Okay, *what happened?”* the brunette questioned.

“Jackie, I’m not gonna talk to *you* about this,” Donna insisted, trying to get the other girl to drop the questioning where the others *wouldn’t* overhear.

“And who *are* you gonna talk to?” the other girl shot back, looking to the other boys. All of whom were. . . making fart noises with their armpits. How nice.

**BE FUNNY. BE OPEN.**

“Okay,” the redhead agreed, as she wanted to talk to *someone*, only the person she’d normally talk to, Eric. . . she had a feeling *that* conversation wouldn’t go well. “We get home from the concert, and Eric was being. . . *Eric*, and Rich asked if I was okay, and we got to talking, and, I don’t know, he was being sweet, and vulnerable, but also strong, and, and I asked him if he wanted to, uh, kiss.”

Jackie nodded, smiling, “That’s how *Michael* and I had our first kiss! Well, *he* asked but-”

“He said no,” the older girl interrupted, as Hyde and Kelso carried Fez off to do. . . something. While Eric followed, and Rich. . . was taking a nap?

He *must* be tired.

The brunette was stunned, “Oh, oh Donna I’m so sorry that, wait, but, *then* he kissed you? *That jerk!* To play with a girl’s heart like-”

*“No,”* the older girl interrupted. “He said, he said he wanted to get to know *me* first. That we’d only just met, and that, I think he’s been hurt. He’s weirdly open about stuff, but other things he’s. . . but then, then he approached me, and I had *no* idea, and he told me he’d, he’d ‘give me a taste of hopefully what was to come’, and then he *kissed me!”*

Jackie nodded. “French, or American?”

“I don’t know!” Donna replied. “I, uh, American? But I kind of, and then he was *there*, and then. . . ugh, *why is this so hard?* Why was *he* so hard?”

The girl’s eyes widened, “So it was *more* than just kiss-”

*“Muscles! I meant his muscles!”* the redhead interrupted, thankful for the ambiance to give her a moment to try and calm down, never having really *thought* about it before, which led her to try and think what it must’ve been like for him *without* any and. . .

“Ah, and you’re used to Eric, whose not in nearly as good a shape as my Michael,” the other girl nodded understandingly.

Shooting a cross look the girl’s way, Donna stated, “I’m not ‘used to Eric’, Eric and I aren’t. . . *that.*”

“But you want to be?” Jackie asked. “Oh, this is *just* like-”

Not wanting to hear whatever drama the other girl had watched this week, Donna cut her off. “No. Yes. No. I *want* to like Eric, but, I want to like. . .” She thought about what Rich had said. “I want to like who I want him to be. Not who he is.”

She took comfort in the [ambience](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQj7q5Z8_mM&ab_channel=RyanLloyd), as the other girl frowned. “Well, at least Rich’s hot. He’s no *Michael,* but still okay.”

“Rich is *way* hotter than Kelso is,” Donna disagreed.

Jackie just sighed. “Oh, to be blinded by love.”

The redhead turned a disbelieving look the other girl’s way, unable to come up with words to express how *incredibly* hypocritical that statement was.

<LAUGHTER>

*Shift*

And I was walking down the stairs to the Forman’s basement. Well, *that’d* been a good five-minute nap. Kind of. In some ways, it reminded me of Basic, where they’d put you in an accelerated time chamber for the longer Seminars, so you could receive several weeks’ worth of concentrated instruction in a few hours. They had allotments to sleep, but while it rested the body fully, and the mind a little, it did nothing for the *soul.*

Could I keep going for a bit? Sure. Could I do this four-hundred and ninety-nine more times? I’d almost *certainly* snap. Which meant I needed points, and I needed them *fast,* but the more effort I put in to change things, the tireder I’d get.

Pausing at the door, I heard Fez ask, “Who is the goddess?”

“The goddess is Eric’s sister,” Kelso explained, as I considered just taking a seat on the stairs and trying to catch a few more z’s.

Hyde added, “She’s not a goddess. She’s more the earth mother *whore* type, which works for me.”

*. . . Okay, I gotta see this,* I thought, getting up, hearing Eric come down the stairs, pause, and state flatly, *“Lori.*”

*“Hey Eric,”* a female voice replied, as I entered, seeing a short blonde woman wearing sneakers, white socks, a large red sweatshirt, and *nothing else.*

*Be funny. Be interested. Be bashful.*

“Shouldn’t you put some clothes on?” her brother asked, and, to be honest, I kind of had to agree. There was a *way* to make that ‘casually not-dressed’ look work, but it required a surprising amount of care, which *wasn’t* on display here, and, without the universe able to tell me to *be* impressed because, I don’t know, she was in college and I was ‘in’ high school, I *wasn’t.*

And more than that, her face. . . she looked older, and not in a *mature* way. I wasn’t sure what it was exactly, but the girl did *nothing* for me and her eyes. . . just. . . seemed *flat*. I couldn’t quite put it into words, but it was something I *didn’t like*.

*“Why?”* Lori asked, in what I’m sure she meant to come off as coquettish, but just read as *petulant*.

Her brother inquired, with false concern, “Aren’t you a little cold?”

“No,” she shot back, then glanced past him to me. “In fact I’m *hot*. Speaking of hot, who’s your new hunky friend.”

“Hello,” I waved to her with a smile, as Eric turned on me with a panicked look that seemed to say, ‘*Dude! No!’*

*Be funny. Be impulsive. Be bashful.*

*Two out of three ain’t bad,* I thought, telling her, “Good afternoon Lori, I’m *not interested.*”

The girl’s cocky smirk soured, as the world Laughed at her, the other boys turning shocked looks my way, though Eric’s disbelief was a *happy* one. Turning back to his sister, the youngest Forman declared, “Well, *you’re* clearly not wanted, so maybe you should *go upstairs.*”

I dropped into one of the chairs, and went back to dozing, as she stated that she was waiting for her jeans to finish drying, and. . . I just didn’t care, tuning her out.

“Dick?*”* Kelso questioned, and I didn’t move. “*Dick!”*

“Rich?” Hyde called, and I opened one eye, looking at him, and he pointed at Kelso.

“You don’t think Lori’s hot?” the tall boy questioned incredulously.

I looked at the other boys, who were all staring, interested. “Um. . . no?”

“But she’s *hot!”* Kelso stated, as if stating that the sky was blue.

*But the question is, do you really believe that, or is that just you rationalizing the world’s commands?* I wondered, wishing I could read his mind. And the thing was, for twenty points, *I could,* by picking up an appropriate **Template**, but not only would that be twenty points gone, it’d make the *next* **Template** I wanted to grab cost *forty* instead, as every **Template** made the next one harder to play nice instead of ripping your soul apart like an overfilled water balloon.

“Because she’s older?” I inquired, and the boy nodded. “Wow, by that metric, you must think Eric’s mom is *smoking-”*

“Can we *not* talk about how hot my mom is,” Forman quickly interrupted, grimacing.

“Fair enough,” I offered. “Just pointing out why his metric was bad. And as for Lori,” I hesitated. “Eric, do you mind if I’m *less* than flattering?”

“Go for it,” the boy encouraged. “Go zero flattering. Negative flattering is even better!”

Nodding, I turned, to Hyde. “What you called her? Seems like you were *half* right. But she’s not one of those ‘earth mother’ types. I’m from Cali, where we’ve got a decent number of those, and those woman are, just, *lovely* people. Kind, caring, nurturing, and,” I looked to Kelso, “With *giant* tits and an ass that would stop traffic.”

*“Nice,”* Not-Ashton grinned, bobbing his head, “But, wait, that just leaves.”

“Yep,” Hyde agreed with as smirk. “Forman, Cock called your sister a *whore*.”

Eric frowned, waiting for the Laughter to fade. “On one hand, *yeah*,” he nodded, provoking more Laughter. “On the other, she *is* my sister.”

Shrugging, I replied, “Which is why I asked. And also, why, *dear god,* no one tell her I have money. I’ll outright *lie* to her face and claim that I was lying to you guys about being rich to sound cool if I need to.”

“But, you are *not* lying to us to sound cool now?” Fez questioned.

“Lies like that take an absolute *ton* of effort to maintain, so I don’t lie to people I want to be friends with,” I stated confidently. “And I’d like to keep hanging out with you guys. If I never see your sister again, Eric? Okay,” I told him.

Kelso nodded, “So, what I hear you saying is. . . you won’t get in my way?” I stared at him blankly. “When I hook up with Lori!” he explained.

“Aren’t you dating *Jackie?”* I asked, wondering if I’d missed something.

“Nah, I’m gonna break up with her soon,” the guy told me, and, looking past him to the others, they all shook their heads in unison, while the Ambiance Laughed.

“Nah man, go for it. More power to you,” I told him, leaning back in my chair, trying to go back to relaxing, and hopefully I’d get some extra-

*Ohshithereitcom-*

*Shift*

<LAUGHTER>

Eric Forman stared at his friends, who were all dressed up nicely, and *totally* not here for his *totally* not surprise party. The door opened and Rich walked in, in a crimson shirt, black jeans, and, *was that a tie?*

**BE FUNNY. BE ANNOYED. BE CHILDISH.**

“Come *on*, man, you’re not even trying!” Eric called out, the others turning to stare at their newest friend. The big guy paused, blinked tiredly, then looked down at himself, eyebrows raising like he was only now seeing what he was wearing.

Flicking the neckwear, he asked blandly, “Is it the tie?”

*“Yes it’s the tie!”* Eric stated, shaking his head. “Look, I know what you’re all doing here.”

“Ah, good,” Rich replied, sinking into the open chair and closing his eyes. “Then I don’t need to explain.”

. . . damn him. At least Eric’s *other* friends had the decency to look nervous.

“We’re just hanging out, like always,” Kelso argued, buckling under the pressure of his glare, Jackie sitting beside him on the couch’s arm in a floral dress. “Except we’re dressed nice, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

Eric could see his mother, *also dressed nicely*, come down the first few stairs, before calling, “Hi kids. Um. I need your *help* with something. Jackie, Donna, Michael, Steven, Richard, . . . young man with an accent, could you give me a hand? *Not you Eric!”*

The others all bolted for the stairs, while Rich sighed, and slowly got up, pausing to look at him. “It’s your birthday, right?” the teen asked.

“Like you don’t know,” the birthday boy shot back scornfully.

“That was rhetorical,” the muscular teen returned fire with. “That means you’re more of an adult, and want to be *seen* as more mature, right?”

Eric stared, not answering, until he was hit by Rich’s flat look, where he admitted, more than a little petulantly. *“*Yes?*”* At Rich’s annoyed glare, which, weirdly, reminded Eric of his *father’s*, he tried again, meekly repeating, “*yes.”*

“And, being an adult, being mature, means sometimes not doing what you want to do, because it makes *others* happy, right?” he questioned.

“Ye-” Eric started to answer, before narrowing his eyes. “Did Red put you up to this?”

He blinked. “No, Donna didn’t.”

That just confused the boy, until he realized, “Oh, uh, Red’s my dad.”

“. . . are you adopted?” Rich questioned, and when Eric shook his head, asked, “Then why the hell are you calling your dad by his *first name*?”

“Well, what do you call *your* dad?” Eric argued.

The look the other teen sent him. . . was one the boy didn’t like. “I don’t. Because he *doesn’t talk to me.”*

Eric stared, remembering the fact that Rich *hadn’t known was ambiance was*, and opened his mouth to apologize, as that’d been kinda rud-

**BE FUNNY. BE FLIPPANT. BE CHILDISH.**

“Oh, like Hyde’s dad,” Eric quipped, smiling at the ambient Laughter.

Rolling his eyes, Rich moved for the stairs, “The one who walked out and never came back? Yeah, sure dude. Just think about what I said.”

He went up, Eric’s mom poking her head down a moment later, asking, “Eric? Eric, honey? Honey, could you come up here for a second!” Quickly moving back up into the kitchen, she whisper-shouted, *“Shut up, he’s coming!”*

Eyeing the back door, and possible freedom, Eric shook his head, moving for the stairs, and what was *surely* not a surprise party.

*Shift*

And *hey, it was a surprise party!*

What a surprise.

Starting with his parent’s gift, an eight-track player, when he’d told them he wanted a *cassette player*, ironically, eight times, should’ve been a surprise too.

But it wasn’t.

*“It’s an eight-track player!”* his mom grinned.

Nodding, Eric noted, “I see that. Thank you?”

*“Just what you asked for!”* his father added.

His mother agreed, “You made such a big deal about it I wrote it down!”

Which, of course, made the gift from Hyde, which his friend handed him immediately after. . . *just* the greatest. “Cassettes!” he remarked. “Great! Thanks Hyde!”

His friend hefted the eight-track player, trying not to laugh. “You’re welcome!”

*“Oooh!”* his mother commented, not understanding the difference. “Put ‘em in the eight-track and play them!”

Going through the others, it was a good haul, he had to admit. A hot shave dispenser from Donna’s parents. Socks from Donna herself. And other bits and bobs from the others, until he looked at Rich’s gift which was. . . weirdly big and heavy. Opening it up, he frowned.

**BE FUNNY. BE SNARKY. BE CHILDISH.**

“An. . . old car battery,” he announced. “My favorite. You shouldn’t have. *Really*.”

“Oh, it’s not a car battery,” his mother smiled. “Rich got someone to go look over your Vista Cruiser. That thing wasn’t just on its last legs, it was on its pinky-toes!”

That was news to Eric. “But, it worked.”

His father, however, looked *pissed,* which, yeah, was how he always looked, but doubly so now, as he glared at Rich. “*You didn’t.”*

The boy, instead of looking terrified, as was *proper* when Red’s scowl was turned upon a man, just blinked, surprised. “Ah, *shit.”*

*“Don’t swear!”* Eric’s father growled.

“Sorry, and. . . *sorry,”* Rich apologized with a grimace. “I didn’t realize, and I shouldn’t’ve overstepped. To be fair, though, from the way he talked, I don’t think *Eric* knew he could.”

“Knew I could what?” the topic of the conversation interjected.

Looking to him, Rich said, “You were supposed to ask your *dad* to help you look over your car, and figure out what might’ve been wrong with it.”

“I was supposed to do that?” Eric asked. “Wait, I was *allowed* to do that?”

“Of *course* you were allowed!” his father stated. “What made you think you couldn’t?”

“I. . . thought you’d be mad at me for not doing it myself?” the boy put out, not that he’d even *thought* to do it himself.

The older looked at him, then nodded. “Yeah, but it’s better to have a working car than *maybe* annoy me.”

“Uh. . . sure, Red,” Eric ‘agreed’, and Donna frowned, clearly agreeing with him. “Wait, does this mean I can take it out of town?”

Instead of answering, his father looked to Rich. “What’d they do?”

“I gave the write-up to your wife, Mr. Forman,” the muscular boy replied with respect, but no fear.

“Hmmm,” Eric’s father mused. “I’ll give it a look, and check out the Cruiser, and if they didn’t *bungle it up*, then you can take it out of town, Son.”

Blinking in surprise, the birthday boy grinned. “Thanks, Red!”

“Eh, thank your friend,” the old man grumbled. “He seems like a good kid. Pity ‘bout the name, though.”

“You’ve met my parents,” Rich pointed out. “They probably didn’t notice.”

That got a huffing chuckle from Eric’s father. “Yeah. I can believe that.”

Soon enough Eric’s and Donna’s parents left, going to Donna’s house. Instantly after *that*, Lori, after refusing to buy them beers, headed out as well.

Looking around, Rich asked, “So, beers really would make this party better?”

“*Yes?”* they chorused, as it was *obvious.*

Nodding, the muscular stood, announcing, “Then I’ll be right back,” and heading out the back door to the kitchen.

As soon as the door closed, Donna spoke up. “You weren’t gonna ask your dad about fixing your car?”

*“It’s Red,”* Eric stated, which, really, should’ve said it all. “Besides, I thought the car was fine. It turned on and everything.”

“I’m just surprised how he handled your pops,” Hyde commented. “Thought for sure he was gonna smack ‘em one, but Dick was just like, ‘nah, that’s on me’, and it *worked.”*

Donna nodded. “So, if it works, why change things?” she asked, tone a little queer.

“Like, *yeah,”* Eric smiled at the obvious statement, though he thought he knew where she was going. “Like, having Rich here is kinda weird. *Rich* is kinda weird.”

“There is an intensity about him,” Fez nodded. “Very unusual.”

“Wasn’t he sleeping while we were playing ball yesterday?” Hyde question.

The dark-skinned teen nodded again. “Yes. Sleeping *very* intensely.”

“But, like, even though he’s weird, he’s not *bad* weird, you know?” Eric offered, still thinking about what the guy had said.

The back door opened, and Rich entered, carrying, *was that a cooler?*

“Oh, damn,” Donna yelped, the girl jumping up. “Let me help!”

“Sure, thanks,” the muscular man smiled, shifting to let her help, one hand on the side and another supporting it from the bottom and they both moved the metal crate to the side.

“How heavy *is* this?” the girl asked as she struggled to help him put it down.

Looking at the others, he shrugged. “I don’t know, like, seventy pounds? Well, you guys *said* it would help.”

“We said. . .” Eric started to reply, then realized what he’d said.

*“No,”* Kelso, whispered, moving over to flip open the top, revealing over a dozen beers. *“How?”*

Flicking a hand out, a booklet appeared, like a magic trick. “Remember how I said I did work for the government? Came with an ID,” he said, opening it up, to show it off. “They check that it’s official, not that my birthday’s ‘wrong’. So, everybody who wants one, go ahead.”

“Well, if you’re offering,” Eric grinned, grabbing one, the others doing so as well. “Best. Birthday. Ever!” he toasted.

“Glad to hear it,” Rich smiled, grabbing a chair, Donna, after a moment’s hesitation, perching on the seat’s arm, which put her in *prime* beer-grabbing range.

From there they relaxed, though the fact that the muscled boy prompted them to use the coasters did get a laugh, and had a *great* time.

Even when Red came in, *way* sooner than they thought, and they all froze, it didn’t go to hell!

“*Is that beer?”* Eric’s father demanded.

**BE FUNNY. BE SCARED. BE CHILDISH.**

“Yeah, there’s enough for three each, so not enough for anyone to get drunk,” Rich replied fearlessly, before Eric could beg forgiveness. Possibly on hands and knees. “Well, maybe Jackie.”

“Beer’s *gross,*” the small girl noted with disgust.

“So we’re good. Want one?” the muscled boy asked.

Eric’s mom gasped, and the birthday boy felt his gut drop, as she pointed at the beer on the table, and. . . giggled?

“Look, Red! They’re using the *coasters!* Aren’t they good kids!” she smiled.

Eric’s father looked at them, then at Rich. “Yeah, sure. Just make sure to clean up when you’re done.”

“Will do, sir,” the guy smiled, handing Eric’s father a beer, both adults heading upstairs, though Eric’s mom seemed a bit unsteady.

There was a moment of silence after they left. *“How?”* Hyde asked, incredulously.

“Moderation, and honesty,” Rich shrugged. “And I also wasn’t lying about there only being enough to get buzzed. Anyone want another?”

As Eric accepted his, he decided that, weird as Rich was, he was a weird that *worked*.

<LAUGHTER>

I blinked, finding myself no longer even *mildly* buzzed, once again in the Forman’s basement, and, yeah, it was April. Because *sure*, why not. I was still tired, but the party had lasted a full hour, longer than any ‘scene’ should, but I had no idea *why.* Hearing my phone ping, I smiled, taking it out, ready, with everything I’d done, for the points to roll-

*One point.*

I stared at the phone. I’d gotten a *single* point. Not even a bonus for ‘defying fate’. I’d gotten Eric’s car fixed. I’d given him a pep talk. I’d *gotten him beer.* Was. . . was that supposed to have happened?

I groaned, as the boys did some stupid doorway exercise, and Donna, sitting on the couch, looked up, and frowned. “You okay, Rich? You seem. . . tired?”

“Just a little whipped from Eric’s birthday,” I commented idly.

She frowned, “That was, like, a week ago.”

*Or a month ago,* I thought, quipping, “Delayed reaction,” which got an amused snort for the woman.

I’d been assuming that, with how things flowed, I could mess around each time, doing things, being active without expending *too* much effort, and rake in enough points, either the twenty-five for Soul Defense, the same amount for a Pocket Apartment, the twenty for a Template, or even the full fifty for Paradox Defense so *time would make sense again.*

Five points had been spent on that Whovian **Psychic Paper**, able to make anyone that wasn’t a genius, or psychic themselves, think it said whatever I wanted to, with the assumption that I’d get it right back, as, between it, my good looks, and my car, I hit the trifecta of daytime capability and would become sitcom *superman*. Only know I was barely past when I started.

*No, I can still make this work,* I thought, centering myself, though some part of me flashed back on that lesson from the Cenobite, and the toxic nature of *hope.* Eric came down with sodas, Jackie complaining about the fact that it was all cream soda, Kelso making a crack about how Mr. Foreman lost his job.

*Wait, what?*

“He’s *not* laid off,” Eric said, uncomfortable with the topic, “he’s just part time.” The Ambiance’s chuckles were. . . just inappropriate. “And *shut up”* he added, more angered than his last phrase had tonally been, seeming to react more to the *mocking Laughter* than his friend.

I opened my mouth to offer to help out with sodas, since we were *literally getting them by the case for free* from Mr. and Mrs. Forman*,* but paused as the Universe Spoke:

*Be funny. Be snooty. Be arrogant.*

*Or I’ll say nothing and just get some more sodas later* I thought.

For a moment I looked around at the others, wondering if *they* were being ‘directed’ as well, not for the first time, and if. . . if they were people, to be honest, or just *puppets*, and I *instantly* hated myself for thinking that way but. . . was I wrong?

*I need a way to read minds,* I thought, a magical **Template** of some sort likely able to both do the trick *and* give me access to enough skills that I could try and figure out a work-around to this bullshit. But that’d cost twenty points, which I’d have, if I hadn’t wasted five *like an idiot.*

Mrs. Foreman came hurrying down the stairs, excited, chanting, “*Kids, Kids, Kids, Kids, Kids, Kids, Kids! The President is coming!”*

“What president?” Eric asked, voicing my own thoughts.

“The president of these United States, Gerald R. Ford! The thirty-sixth. . . *Eighth,*” she corrected, to Ambient Laughter. “Fortieth? *I don’t know, he’s the president!”* she announced running off to the storage area.

The others talked, while I?

I *smiled*.

Even the [intro](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdDC0XzhOEo&ab_channel=SerkanDemir) popping off a few seconds later couldn’t dampen my mood, as I was teleported back and forth, joining in with the singing.

I needed points to make this hell more bearable?

I needed to create ‘large changes’ that’d alter destiny?

Well, I knew of one *hell* of a change I could implement, with tech no one knew.

One larger than *any* I could otherwise reasonably create out here in this Wisconsin suburb.

I was going to [*Kill. The. President.*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYjZnI9_kg8&ab_channel=KonoDioDaInc)