

## FICTION

# TWYLA

ALEX PUGSLEY



“I think we’re living in the Golden Age of Fuck Off. I really do. What the fuck even *matters* anymore? Because let me ask you a question, and I’m curious about this, when you talk to your other patients, who all look fucking crazy by the way, I’ve seen them in the lobby futzing with their Kleenex and how you even *talk* to those freaks is beyond me—it’s called personal hygiene, people—but how many of your patients are just fed up with the rest of the world? Because you know on your laptop the X that appears in the corner of pop-up screens? I just want one of those. But for other people. So I can click on the X and they disappear and go back into the darkness. Do you know what I mean, though? What is *with* people? Ah, I fucking hate this week.”

These remarks are coming toward the end of a third appointment with Dr C A Symons—the third of an agreed-upon trial of six sessions of psychotherapy—and Twyla, the young woman speaking, dressed today in a black sheer blouse, pencil skirt, and ankle boots, is just now staring at herself in the mirror on the wall opposite. Or not staring so much as frowning. Her expression is that of someone who can’t quite determine why something looks, as she might say, a little off. She fluffs her bangs. She scrunches her nose. Then, impulsively, she shifts herself on the sofa so she can no longer see her reflection.

Dr Symons, in the chair across from Twyla, looks at her, inquisitive, as if awaiting further details.

“Oh,” says Twyla. “It’s nothing. It’s just I never look good in that mirror and it drives me crazy but whatever.”

Dr Symons crosses her legs and positions her notebook on her lap. “You were talking about your week. What happened this week?”

“Oh, you know. My dad’s in the hospital. My relationship’s in limbo. I hate all my friends. The usual. I think I want to move somewhere where I won’t be bothered by other people’s lives.” Twyla watches Dr Symons jot down a note. “But I need to ask you something.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you think I care too much what people think? Because I think I’ve organized my personality wrong. My personality’s not working. My personality’s so not working. Like, should I just not

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care what people think and do the stuff I want to do and fuck them?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Fuck who?”

“Because I look at people who *are* successful and they’re all totally self-absorbed and focused and don’t care what people think. Which I find to be kind of ridiculous but whatever, it’s working for them. Meanwhile, I keep making decisions to change my life but nothing’s really clicking. I mean I *know* I have to change something. I just don’t know what it is yet.”

“What would be something you’d like to change?”

“Where’s that voice-over, you know? I keep waiting for that voice-over.”

“Which voice-over?”

“You know. The voice-over that goes, ‘For Twyla Bacsinszky, it was a week like any other. But little did she know, when she awoke that fateful Tuesday morning, that her life was about to change forever.’ *That* voice-over. Where is it? Why am I trapped in the same old bullshit? Why am I always fucked up? I mean, I know there are patterns. ‘Look at the patterns. Look at your choices.’ I swear if I hear that one more time I’m going to shove a fork in my eye. But I have three fucking degrees, I speak six languages, I own my own condo. Why can’t I do this?”

“I’m just wondering,” says Dr Symons. “When you have these thoughts all at once like this, what impact do they have on you? What sorts of feelings are you having? How do you feel right now?”

“Frustrated!”

“So these thoughts are—”

“It’s just always the same,” says Twyla. “I need a way to manage my fucked-up shit. And I think I thought by this time I’d be more grown-up. Everybody else my age is getting married and having families. And what am I doing? I’m sort of bopping around la-la-la dating multiple kinds of people and being depressed but—I don’t know—I used to be a happy person. I did. I always had the most friends. At school. At camp. In university. And I used to think people who got depressed were just freaks who lost the brain chemistry lottery.” Twyla looks suspiciously at her ankle boots, as if they

might be to blame for everything that has gone wrong this week. “I guess things are different now. My friends are different now. They’re all in this different phase of life now. Like, I saw my friend, Sally—”

A high-pitched beeping sounds twice in Twyla’s purse.

“I should look at that,” says Twyla, reaching for it. “Could be about my dad.” She takes out her smart phone and reads through a text.

“Everything all right?”

“Fine,” says Twyla, texting a reply with both thumbs. “It’s just my texting personality and my real-life personality are getting farther and farther apart. It’s ridiculous. I could be in the worst pre-menstrual bite-the-head-off-a-squirrel mood possible and I get a text from work and I’m all smileys and exclamation marks. It’s retarded.”

“So it’s from work?”

“No, it’s from Justin.”

“Right,” says Dr Symons. “When you spoke about your relationship being in limbo, did you mean your relationship with Justin?”

Twyla nods. “No one could possibly think about their relationship more than I do. I’m on the verge of insanity every minute of every day. I mean, I’m always afraid I’m not liking my boyfriend enough.”

“You’re always afraid?”

“Well, no, but we kind of had this big, huge fight.” Twyla glances at Dr Symons. “Basically he wants to have a baby and it’s freaking me out.”

“Do you?”

“I don’t know. Usually I just get my period and don’t care anymore. But relationships have to be over sometime, right? Or not.” She sniffs. “We’re supposed to go to a friend’s wedding next week.”

“Are you looking forward to that?”

“*God*, no. It’s going to be disgusting. The bridesmaids are in these really dressy dresses with red velvet bows. It’s just full-on retarded.”

“I mean are you looking forward to going with Justin?”

Twyla shrugs. “I always think a million different things. I mean, I know I love Justin, but there’s been some

weirdness recently. I don’t know—” Twyla makes a sudden sneer, as if to show that sifting through Justin-related complications might be too much for today’s session, and checks the time on her smart phone.

Dr Symons writes something in her notebook. “You said you saw your friend Sally.”

“Sally Ogden-Byers,” says Twyla, nodding. “This friend from Havergal. She’s in town for the wedding and I ran into her at Whole Foods. She’s just this disgusting, overly perfect Forest Hill person who I kind of hate. I don’t really hate her?” Twyla puts her phone in her purse and places it on a nearby end table. “I just don’t agree with the way she understands reality. I mean, Sally wins. She’s winning the career game. She’s winning the looks-exactly-like-she-did-in-high-school game. She’s winning the life game. She’s got the husband, the house, the picket fence. Whatever—fuck it—it just made me want to shoot myself in the head.” Twyla smooths a kink in her skirt. “I mean I’m sort of over Toronto real estate gossip but they just sold their house in Cabbagetown—that her father basically *bought* for them—for two million dollars so they can move to Galliano Island. Because now Sally’s all into sustainable biodiversity and ethical kale and I’m totally just like, ‘Fuck off, murder me now, pardon me while I shrivel up with my desire to kill you.’” Twyla looks over at Dr Symons. “So I ask how she’s doing and she gives me this super-enlightened smile and says she’s in such a good place in her soul right now and how this is a period of real discovery for her.” Twyla turns to the side and makes a retching noise. “Ever notice how people who talk about their soul turn out to be the worst fucking pricks?”

“So seeing Sally again made you—”

“Seeing Sally again made me think why do the ‘Be present, give space’ thing when really I’m thinking ‘Fuck this person,’ you know? Because really it’s sort of like, ‘Oh, thank you, Sally, for your integrity and holistic outlook. It means so much to us still trapped in the commodified world that you would visit from your island dream-home to

participate in the world's inauthenticity." Twyla swings a hand dismissively toward the window. "And I just hate people who say 'Take care.' 'Take care.' It sounds so much like 'Fuck off.' It's sort of like 'I'm not going to care about you so you better take care of yourself, idiot.' I know I'm sounding like the biggest bitch on the planet right now but I don't care. And I don't know why I hate her but I know it's the right thing to do."

Dr Symons nods and glances at the clock on the end table. "You've said a lot today about your beliefs about yourself and your relations with others. And as you're talking, I can see it's bringing up a lot for you. But I'm also aware we're nearing the end of our session. So what do we want to take away from today?"

"Take away? What's the takeaway?" Twyla sighs. "How about I need a way to manage my fucked-up shit. How about I want to be in a happy relationship. Still going with that." Leaning to the side, so she appears again in the mirror, Twyla studies her reflection. "And if I don't cut all my hair off soon I'm going to kill myself."

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"Hello, I suck," says Twyla, swallowing a bite of chocolate and sweeping into the office. She drops her purse on the sofa, takes off her sunglasses, and faces Dr Symons. "Once again? I suck." She sits in the middle of the sofa and flips her newly streaked hair. "This is my third Snickers in a row, by the way. I'm totally in fudge-the-pain-away mode. But these?" Twyla holds up a Limited Edition Snickers Fudge bar. "These are super legit. Just saying." She finishes the chocolate bar, crumples the wrapper, and tosses it into a nearby wastepaper basket. "When I crave chocolate like this it means I'm going to have a mega-period. I mean I'm seriously going to die if I don't start my period soon. And?" Twyla looks at Dr Symons. "I fucking hate my family at the moment."

Sitting in her chair, Dr Symons opens her notebook. "You've said that before."

"I just came from Sunnybrook."

"Where your father's in the hospital. How is he?"

"He might have dementia. They're doing tests. But his new wife, Kewpie LaRoo—she's my age—I just can't deal. Tried to deal. But can't."

"Forgive me," says Dr Symons. "You told me he's been married a number of times. But how many was it?"

"Just five. He must be doing something right. Or something wrong. You tell me. I went with my sister Ruthy and when we got there, there was a clusterfuck of ex-wives in the ICU."

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"Was your mother there?"

Twyla quickly shakes her head. "Getting her nails done. Just the middle wives and Kewpie. But they got in this screaming match by the elevators about when to move him from intensive care. Yeah. Like it's *their* decision. That was pretty charming. It just made me want to cut off my family and move to Australia."

"Uh-huh? Where would you go?"

"Wait. That was a joke."

"Was it?"

"You want me to cut off my family?" Twyla makes a brief snort of disgust. "Well, why not? They've all fucking failed me. They all fucking suck. They're like this posse of emotional retards."

"What happens for you when you talk to them?"

"You know what Ruthy said when I told her I think Justin's an alcoholic?"

"What did she say?"

Twyla flutters her eyelashes and mimics her sister, "You don't have to tell *me* about alcoholics, I've been married to three of them."

"And did you find that helpful?"

"Is that a joke? No, I didn't find that helpful. That's just Ruthy being a fucking bitch."

"How did you react when she said

that?"

"I told her she was being a fucking bitch! Then you know what she says? She says it's because she and her husband haven't had sex in two years. I don't fucking blame him! How he fucked her once is a fucking mystery. I mean, when we lived in Côte-Saint-Luc, Ruthy was the prettiest girl anyone—"

"Twyla, do you mind if we return to what we were talking about?"

"What were we talking about?"

"We were talking about what happens when you talk to your family."

"They're all fucking nuts. They're all

fucking crazy." Twyla scowls. "I mean it's just so ridiculous that Ruthy would be like that. When she didn't come to my brunch for no reason that pissed me off. But I said nothing. And when she asked me to pick up her kid from Tamakwa, I fucking did that too, no questions asked." Twyla stares at Dr Symons. "Don't I get anything?"

"So," says Dr Symons quietly. "When you talk to your family, you're left with 'There's nothing for me here. I don't matter.'" She gazes at Twyla. "And what would you want?"

"For her to *listen* to me. Jesus." Twyla wipes at her eyelash. "And not be some self-obsessed jerk. I tried telling her what happened with me and Justin at the wedding—which is a whole other combo platter—and you know what she said? 'Well, why do you always go out with such sketchy guys?' And I thought, 'Could you maybe not assassinate my life choices at the moment?'" Twyla shuts her eyes, distressed. "She keeps de-self-esteeming me. I don't know. In Ruthy's brain, I'm this scabby alien sex-addict. To Ruthy, I'm the Great Whore of Toronto. Ruthy just wants me to marry one of those guys in blue golf shirts and chinos you always see in airports. You know. Ted from Accounting."

Dr Symons reads from her notebook. “So you went to the wedding with Justin?”

Twyla nods.

“How was that?”

“It was a lot of things. The good, the bad, the fugly.”

“Shall we start with the good?”

“The good was the bride and groom actually loved each other. You could tell. They were like, ‘You give me purity in my day.’ ‘Because of you, I dare to dream.’” Twyla smiles. “So of course all the other couples are immediately trying to act as much in love. It was bizarre. People arrive bitchy and exhausted from the drive but then it’s like, ‘Honey, can I get you another Prosecco?’ And I like weddings but, fuck, the speeches drag on. This one old dude, it was like a dissertation on the Zohar. Anyway, after three hours of people pretending to be happy, I was so ready to explore the fullness of some perversion, you know. I told Justin we should go have sex on the golf course. Maybe try out hole number two. I don’t know. We did the time. Might as well do the crime. But Justin so doesn’t get the thread count.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he started behaving like a little fuck-boat and the worst dick-biscuit possible. I mean, we’re at this beautiful resort for the weekend and all he wants to do is talk about the relationship?”

“Was this about having a child?”

“No,” says Twyla. “Now he’s not sure we should be together because he thinks I have a personality disorder.” Twyla extends her middle fingers, waves them in the air, and addresses the wall. “I don’t have a personality disorder, motherfucker.” She turns to Dr Symons. “He says I have Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Do you think I have that? Is that my problem?”

“I’m not sure what someone else thinks you have is what we should be talking about.”

“Does that mean yes?”

“No. It’s just—” Dr Symons leafs back in her notes. “Last week you said you wanted to find a way to manage your fucked-up shit. Do you remember saying that?”

“Sure. But—”

“Do you think recognizing what you’re feeling would be useful toward doing that?”

“Toward managing my fucked-up shit? Yeah-duh. Obviously.”

“I think it may be more helpful if you honestly identify your own reactions to events rather than worrying if you fit into the categories of a diagnosis someone else wants to label you with.”

“Cool,” says Twyla. “I can second that emotion. But here’s a question. Why do I feel a need to grab a hammer and smash all his opinions back into his little pie-hole mouth?”

“That’s a very good question. Why do you feel that?”

“Because I *hate* what he said to me! I’m like, ‘Fuck you, Jack. Go solve your own life if you’re so smart.’”

“I can agree with that,” says Dr Symons. “What feelings are coming up for you after that thought?”

“I don’t know,” says Twyla, uncertain. “This is weird. It’s making me feel weird. I think I’d rather *be* my emotions than babysit them. I mean, I remember what you said about my behaviour impacting someone, but Justin’s the one who lost his shit on the golf course.”

“How did he do that?”

“By jumping up and down in a screaming rage and pushing a picnic table into a water trap.”

“Has Justin ever threatened you?”

“Once he said I should be bitch-smacked down the stairs and locked in the basement. Does that count?”

“Did he ever hit you?”

“Not really. When we broke up two years ago I shoved him into a door and he backhand-slapped me.”

“How often did that happen?”

“Just once.”

“Has he ever shown you a weapon?”

“What’s a weapon?”

“A knife, a firearm—”

“His father’s got all that shit up in Muskoka. Why?” Restless, Twyla adjusts her sitting position with a hip wiggle. “Because, I have to tell you, this is kind of hot. Are you kidding me? Like, he’s going to break in, all intense, in a ripped-up shirt, staring at me. Because I *love* it when he’s Big Mad Daddy. It’s

fucking hot. I like the intensity of it. I like the tension. I don’t know—” Twyla inhales deeply, her nostrils dilating. “My whole thing with Justin is we never know if we’re going to fuck or not. Even if we’re on a break. Because I know he still wants me. And he can’t have me. But he still craves me. I can see it in his eyes. I fucking love it. Even if he’s not looking at me, I can feel it. I mean, I totally know when he’s thinking about me.”

Dr Symons writes in her notebook. “How were things left when you returned from the wedding?”

“I sort of slammed the car door when he dropped me off. So he’ll ignore me for a while then send some late-night booty text like he always does.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know. Derp. I never know what I’m going to feel until I see him.” Twyla looks at the clock on the end table. “Why? What do you think I should do?”

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In the middle of her fifth appointment, Twyla goes to the windows to investigate the shrill siren of an emergency vehicle. Two minutes later, long after the vehicle has vanished, she’s still at the windows, standing there as if she can’t decide what to do with herself. “I don’t know,” she says, reflective. “I sort of do this thing where, no matter what happens, positive or negative, I can always figure out some way I’m doing better than the other person. I can meet someone from high school and think, ‘Sure, she has more money than me and she’s got a house and a family, but is she happy? Because she looks pinched and her kids look snotty.’ I mean, I could be in a room with Joe Biden and Gwyneth Paltrow and think I’m the one who’s got it going on because I’m in touch with the street or whatever fucking lame-ass nonsense you want to throw down.”

“That’s called adaptive preference formation.”

“Well, I’m the queen of adaptive preference formation.”

"It's a way of reducing cognitive dissonance."

"I've heard of that. What is it?"

"It's when you have two contradictory ideas in your mind at the same time."

"Are you serious? That's my fucking life."

"Do you feel like that today?"

"A bit."

"What are the two ideas?"

"I don't know. Magical Thinking and Blunt Force Depression."

"And," says Dr Symons with a cautious smile. "Which seems to be winning?"

"Well, it's been a weird day. It's been one of those days when I think if I fit into my ultrasuede skirt and give money to a homeless person then everything will be all right. But it's not. I mean, I could barely get out of bed." Twyla crosses to the sofa and sits down. "I just feel like all the other times I was a failure was practice for this."

"So," says Dr Symons, watching her. "You've felt depressed?"

"Yep. I mean, the good news is I've lost twelve pounds. I look fucking great. I totally fit into that ultrasuede skirt."

"How quickly did that happen?"

Twyla shrugs. "A week?"

"Losing twelve pounds in a week can be a shock to your system."

"So is breaking up a shock to your system."

"You broke up?" Dr Symons looks up from her notebook. "With Justin?"

"He fucking *ghosted* me. You believe that? After five years, you don't fucking ghost someone."

"Does that mean you haven't heard from him?"

Nodding, Twyla lounges back on the sofa.

"Have you spoken to anyone else about it?"

"Oh, everybody's *bored* of me, Doc."

Twyla rests her head on the sofa-back and speaks to the ceiling. "I mean, to our friends, it's like me and Justin are trying to win the Come-Here-Go-Away Championship of Southern Ontario. They're tired of me complaining about

my shit. They've heard it all so many times before."

"So how have you been dealing with this?"

"Vodka into oblivion."

Raising her eyebrows, as if to be sure she heard correctly, Dr Symon asks, "And how's that working for you?"

"Oh, look, I know I shouldn't binge-drink." Twyla sits upright. "I mean, it's fun for a while. Then later—*yay*—I hate myself even more."

"What does that mean—binge-drink?"

"Guys buy me drinks and I go with it."

"How many drinks would that be?"

"Maybe three or four. Or six or twelve."

"Are you concerned about how much you're drinking?"

Speaking in falsetto, Twyla says, "Bee-bee boo-boo." Then, in a more direct tone, she adds, "Yes, I'm concerned about how much I'm drinking. But come on. My relationship's fucked. What am I supposed to do?"

"And that's why you've been binge-drinking?"

"Totally. And it's why I revenge-fucked some random guy in a bar."

"To get back at Justin?"

"And I made sure he knew it, too."

"How did you do that?"

"I put it on Instagram. I posted a photo of me and this rando making out."

"With the man you met in the bar?"

"William. We met in one of those King Street bars where the girls are in short skirts and high heels and basically the tiniest outfits possible. This one bartender had the most ridiculous Friday night hair I've ever seen. I mean she looked like a goddamn mermaid. Just the most backcombed, sluttarded bouffant updo possible."

"And this is where you met—you said his name was William?"

Twyla nods. "He's actually fucking awesome. Except he sort of has this weird-shaped head. But his *voice*. His voice drives me insane. It's like when you're getting your hair cut just before the hairdresser touches it. You know

that feeling?" Twyla shivers. "Because, look, not going to lie, sometimes I need someone to pull my hair back and fuck me so hard I won't be able to walk the next day. I mean, who hasn't done that a million zillion times?"

Dr Symons looks at Twyla, a little perplexed. "Do you like him?"

"Sort of. Except when we were having sex he said, 'Bounce your weight on me.' Which pissed me off. Bounce my weight on you? I just lost twelve pounds, bitch. And he called me Shyla. What the fuck is that? I only had your dick in my mouth till you came, motherfucker. And dude doesn't even remember my name? I mean I know I'm a sex addict but come *on*, people. At least I can remember a name." Twyla frowns at Dr Symons. "Hey, I'm funny, Goddamn it."

"Twyla—"

"Ooh. Tough room."

"Do you mind if we return to what we were talking about?"

"Sure, but honestly I can't handle another lecture right now."

"What feels like a lecture?"

"Well, you don't really lecture. But your pauses interrogate me every week. And you don't have to ask me how that makes me feel because it makes me feel like I'm failing some fucking midterm. When you do your little pause thing, it's like it's obvious what everyone should think, so then I have this anxiety that I'm going to get the wrong answer. But wait—" Twyla holds up a finger. "Maybe my *anxiety*'s the answer! You see, I'm learning. Double yay for me."

"Is this binge-drinking—" Dr Symons looks up at her. "Something you feel you need to do for a while?"

"I don't really want to ask myself that question."

"And going out and meeting new men—"

"Yo, I did that *once*."

"Well, in terms of self-care, what have you been doing? Have you been going to sleep at the same time and—"

"Fuck, no," interrupts Twyla. "I'm all over the place. Last night I was online for six hours straight. After clicking on random shit like

'Twenty-five Celebrities You Didn't Know Were Actually Ugly' it was on to 'Top Ten Signs You Might Have Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Number Nine Might Surprise You.' Well, number nine did more than surprise me. Number nine made me want to slit my own throat. Number nine made me want to go out and drink."

"And did you?"

"Nuh-uh. Stayed *home* and drank."

"You were drinking by yourself?"

Twyla nods. "I bought this bottle of red wine? Just took a chance on it and it was disgusting. Seriously. That shit was putrid. I was gagging right to the end of that bottle. So then it's three in the morning and I'm on the weird part of YouTube watching this four-year-old doing a puppet show for her gerbil. And I am literally sobbing. Just tears and sniffing and stabbing pains deep inside and it's like, 'Why am I crying? What's wrong with me? Why does this seem so important to me?'"

"Why did it seem so important to you?"

"Because it was real. It was pure. It was true. She loves her gerbil. I don't know—" Twyla shakes her head, helpless a moment. "Before Justin, I sort of went out with the seven dwarfs, you know? Sleazy. Skeezy. Drunkie. Whoever. What I mean is, I was just in all these weird, random relationships without ever being in love with the person. But Justin I care about. I do love him. I sort of *am* him. We're the same person. And being away from him? I just feel so lonely. I miss him. I miss his man-stink. I miss his man-hands. I can't stand it. I don't know. I don't know. I think maybe I lost it somewhere along the way. In middle school, Sally Ogden-Byers came up to me at this birthday party and said I was weird. And I thought, 'Fuck you, Sally.' But now I don't know. I think maybe she was right. Maybe I *am* weird. Because everything I do becomes a disaster." She sighs. "Like I said, all the other times I was a failure was just practice for this."

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"So we haven't seen each other for a while." Dr Symons takes her notebook from her desk and sits in her chair. "We haven't seen each other in—what is it—three weeks?"

"Sorry I cancelled those appointments." Twyla moves to the sofa and chooses to sit, not in the middle, but at the far end. Today she wears yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt, her hair in a ponytail. "I'm just sort of postponing everything."

"And this would be, I think, our last session?"

"I guess."

"You wanted to try six sessions to see if this is something you wished to continue with."

"Oh, right."

"And if it is, you can let me know."

"Yup."

Dr Symons opens her notebook. "And how have the last three weeks been?"

"Well, my father's out of Sunnybrook. I can't remember when we talked, but the CT scan revealed he had two small strokes. So he doesn't have dementia. At least not yet. And he's talking again. Apparently you can retrain the brain. Rewire the pathways."

Dr Symons nods, taking in this information. "They have a very good team at Sunnybrook."

"Totally true. So—" Twyla knocks twice on the end table. "Good times there."

Dr Symons looks alertly at Twyla. "What about you?"

"Oh," says Twyla. "Little of Column A. Little of Column B."

"Uh-huh?"

From Twyla's purse comes a high-pitched beeping. She takes out her smart phone but chooses not to look at the text. Instead she powers it off. "If I tell you something, you're not going to say things happen for a reason, right? Because whenever anyone says that, I always think about those guys on death row. What do they say? 'If I hadn't done the things I did then I wouldn't be where I am today.' Yeah, buddy. Which is on death fucking row."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"But *do* you think things happen for a reason? Like, it's all part of God's Plan? Or Nature's Way?"

"Maybe a way to think about it is that there are things in life we can't control. And things we can."

"Right. So I can't control some asshole cutting me off in traffic. But I can control how hard I smash my car into his. Coolsies." Twyla leans down, picks a piece of lint from the Persian carpet, and flings it toward the wastepaper basket. "So this therapy," she says. "I don't know what I think of it. It's sort of making me confront the fact that even after thirty-four years on the planet, I still don't know why I do the stupid shit I do."

"Some people go their whole lives without knowing. This takes courage, Twyla."

"Yeah? I mean, I know I can be a megacritical negatron. I'm not really a glass-half-full person. I'm more a glass-half-empty-and-shatters-and-cuts-everyone's-face person. But I'm not a monster. I do have a heart."

"I think you've shown that here."

"But the last few days," says Twyla, a trifle distracted. "I've been feeling fucked up. Like just mood swings and hostility and depression. It's totally like, 'DJ, spin that shit.'"

"What's been happening to make your mood swing?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I know I should probably quit drinking. Maybe it's because I don't know if I *can* quit drinking. Or maybe it's because Justin sort of raped me."

"Oh, Twyla," says Dr Symons, softly. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"He held me down and had sex with me when I told him I didn't want to."

Dr Symons closes her notebook and leans toward Twyla. "When did this happen?"

"Sunday."

"What was happening for you?"

"When he was sort of raping me?"

Dr Symons nods.

"I don't know. It was just sex."

"Was it?"

"Well, I was sort of drunk."

"How drunk?"

“Not blackout drunk. But drunk. But maybe it’s like—” Twyla shifts to a falsetto. “Of all the girls in the world, he decided to rape *me*, you know? I’m special.’ Nah. Lame joke.”

“Twyla,” says Dr Symons. “You’re allowed to take this seriously.” She closely regards her. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Well,” says Twyla. “We went out to have a civilized conversation. I took him for dinner at this place we go. It’s nice. We have a bottle of wine and la-la-la and I’m sort of thinking we’ll go home and have crazy make-up sex, you know? But when we get to my place, in my bedroom, it was weird. Justin was weird. It was like the nice Justin was gone. The weird Justin had taken over. And then—and then—”

“Do you remember what you were thinking when it was happening?”

Twyla looks at the Persian carpet, her eyes unfocussed. “That no one should know. That our friends shouldn’t find out. That I shouldn’t talk about it. Just get through it. Delete.”

“What do you mean—delete?”

“Forget it. Move on.”

“Do you think it’s something that should be forgotten?”

“Well—” Twyla winces, her eyes filling with tears. “Actually, no.”

“Can you say that again?”

“No, it shouldn’t be forgotten. Because it’s fucked up what he did.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Because people should have sex because they love each other. Not because—not because they want to get back at me.” Twyla makes a pained smirk. “And I *hated* him for thinking he could do that to me.”

Dr Symons continues to gaze at Twyla. “Anything else?”

“I felt messed up. And heartbroken and fucked-up. And fucked over. And just putrid and disgusted inside myself and just—and just—” Twyla is searching for the right word when she abruptly lurches to the floor and grabs the wastepaper basket. Placing it under her mouth, she prepares to be sick. After multiple convulsions, during which her airway is blocked for

some seconds, she finally sucks in a breath before her diaphragm contracts again. Then—following two more dry heaves—she spits into the wastepaper basket. Sighing, she climbs back on the sofa, her forehead moist with sweat, a delinquent smear of saliva on her chin. “I tried so hard with Justin,” she says. “And so much of the time I felt I was in heaven with him. But I know what this means.”

“What does this mean?”

“It means I have to forget him.”

“It might mean that.”

Twyla wrinkles her nose and whispers, “It just makes me so sad.”

Dr Symons offers Twyla a box of Kleenex. “Why are you sad?”

“Because I know it’s over.”

“What’s over?”

“The relationship.” Twyla takes a sheet of Kleenex. “But I sort of don’t want it to be. I don’t know. A part of me wants to hope it can still work, you know?” Wiping her chin with the Kleenex, Twyla looks past Dr Symons, as if seeing some other scene entirely. “He was so sweet to me last summer in Montreal. I thought we were going to have the best life together. For one fricking nanosecond I thought maybe—*maybe*—I could be happy with someone for the rest of my life.”

“I can hear the sadness in your voice—”

“Hey,” says Twyla, dropping the wadded Kleenex in the wastepaper basket and glancing at the ring on Dr Symons’ left hand. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“If you like.”

“How many times have you been married?”

“Twice.”

“And you kept your first husband’s name?”

“I did.”

“What does C A stand for?”

“Crystal-Ann.”

Twyla stares at the Persian carpet, as if searching for new patterns in its design. “I never knew what the initials stood for.”

“You can call me Chris if you want.”

“You said we could go by first names. On the first day. But I was too

shy.” Twyla takes a deep breath and looks up at Dr Symons. “Thank you, Chris, for listening to me. But here’s another question—”

“What’s that?”

“Am I crazy?”

“I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“Do you think I’m a horrible person?”

“That’s not what I think, Twyla.”

“What do you think?”

“Do you remember what you said when you first came here?”

“What’d I say?”

“You said you wanted to be in a happy relationship.”

“Oh, yeah. I said that.”

“That’s what I think. That’s why I think you’re here. And someone interested in that, I feel, is actually a good person.”

Twyla’s face twists with sudden sadness. “But I feel so shitty,” she says. “I think I’m going out of my mind. I don’t remember ever feeling this lost and insane before. And I don’t think I can continue to live like this. I worry so much. I worry so much. I have so many fear thoughts and I feel so helpless and out-of-control that I think I’m going to get some horrible—I don’t even want to *name* it because then I’ll get it—but like some disease or health problem because I’m so fucked up with panic and self-loathing and worry and anger.” Twyla stares at Dr Symons, warm tears spilling down her cheeks. “So you have to let me know, I’m fucking serious, is this going to be worth it?”

“Yes,” says Dr Symons firmly. “Or let me put that another way. Do you want it to be worth it?”

“Yes! Teach me how to do this. Show me how to live.”

“I’m not sure another person can show you how to live. But you can learn it for yourself. Because the way you’ve been here, letting me see who you are and sharing how you’re feeling, the fact that you can do this in here, it shows you can do the same thing—” Dr Symons points at the windows. “Out there. Do you want to do it?”

“Yes. For God’s sake, please. I do. I do. I do.” ✨