

## Chat

“I’m watching the sun set from the roof of my office building, trying to blind my mind from its thoughts.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Jumping off.”

Liz was trained for situations like this, but she was still scared to bits. 38% of all calls to this crisis centre were suicide calls; some were so unsettling that trainees would throw down their headphones and run to the washroom to puke. So, even the mandatory 200 hours of analyzing recordings, listening in to live calls, and participating in role plays could not prepare Liz for her first patron. She squinted as she looked out the window and saw the same golden sunset that the caller was referring to.

“Alright Taylor, just take a moment to think here...”

“I don’t want to *think!*”

*Shit!* Thought Liz, *I fucked up already.* You’re not supposed to tell the patron to do anything. You’re supposed to just let him talk and think problems through on his own. ‘Be supportive, not directive!’ Read the poster pinned to her cubicle.

“Then what would you like to talk about?” asked Liz as her software was beginning to triangulate Taylor’s cell location. This was necessary for all suicide calls. While the program ran, another program showed that Taylor was a first-time caller. This made it harder for Liz to judge his character, and more importantly, his potential risk to himself.

“Nothing. And everything...”

“Yeah, I know how you feel. The world can seem to be too much at times. Let’s take it in little chunks,” Liz said spiritedly. “How about we start with today – what happened today, Taylor?”

“You’re going to think this is so stupid...”

“I won’t.”

“I’m a grown man; I used to be... somebody.”

“It’s ok Taylor, we’re all human. What happened today?”

“So this morning, I... I saw... my neighbour’s... cat. And... you think this is ridiculous already don’t you? Nobody’s interested in my stories anymore... feel free to hang up...”

“I won’t hang up – go on Taylor.” Liz breathed a silent sigh – this won’t be too hard of a call after all if the issue was a cat.

“Ok... so this cat, its name is... Latté. It was the most pompous cat you’d ever seen. It never solicited attention – it expected it. Its turf was its world; everybody knew it and respected it. Latté even once stared down a dog whose tennis ball bounced into Latté’s territory. Without as much as a hiss the dog ran back to its owner.”

“Cute.”

“It’s *not!*”

*Again!* Liz cursed herself for assuming the caller’s sentiment towards something. She secretly hoped that her supervisor wouldn’t listen to this recording, even though the supervisor most certainly will, as it was Liz’s first live call. In the back of her mind, Liz recalled what her supervisor once said, “Nobody will blame you for what happens after the call – you blaming yourself will be enough.” *Whatever*, thought Liz, at least her first call was a crazy cat man, not an armed bank-robber or an abused child.

It took all of Liz’s strength to not say she was sorry – there was another poster for that too. “If it’s not cute, what do you think it is?”

“It’s naive. That cat thought it was untouchable and lately had become overconfident. It thought its glory would last forever. One week, I saw it expand its territory into another cat’s territory – a cat that was bigger than Latté. The next week, it claimed an entire tree as its own.”

“I see...” Liz responded, while typing all this into the computer. She had the smile of a mother listening to her child recount his latest dream. There was an unofficial statistic amongst the staff, which is that 50% of all callers are drunk, high, or crazy. Liz guessed she knew which half she got.

“Boy did Latté enjoy itself. It got to do as it pleased – sleep on the tree, chase birds across a wider turf... do you know what that’s like Ms...? What’s your name anyways?”

“My name is Sandy and I definitely hear ya – I have a cat of my own.”

Fake names were important, and they took getting used to. People around the crisis centre would only call each other by his or her work name, and even the computer login went by it. There was a little piggy bank that you had to donate a dollar into each time you called someone by their real name. As a die-hard Grease fan, Liz chose her pseudonym without a second thought.

“Sandy, what’s your cat like?”

“I’d really like to focus on your thoughts, Taylor. Maybe we can get to that later?” Liz was taught to flatly reject any questions about her personal life, even though she figured this guy meant no harm.

“Nice – delaying all personal topics. I get it... while I pour my heart out, you will just sit there, saying you understand what Latté went through without proving it! I’m sick of being patronized!”

“That’s simply not true Taylor – I empathize with your issue completely. I only want to give you your full opportunity to let out what’s on your mind.” Taylor was right, and Liz never completely agreed with that protocol. She believed the callers had a right to hear some personal stories.

“Well you’d better empathize, because the next day Latté decided it wanted to take over the turf across the street. It walked proudly across his own turf, jumped the fence with ease, and before you knew it, BAM! It got hit by a car. Just like that! The driver left the cat outside the local vet’s door and drove off. What a guy eh? After a few hours under OxyCodone and 22 stitches that looked like they could burst any minute, Latté was finally claimed by my neighbour and returned home.”

The software that Liz typed into was programmed to search for keywords and extract other files that might be similar. Earlier, there were hundreds of files that came up with the word “cat” or “jumping off”. But now, only a couple of files remained. One was from a drug addict who almost OD’d after downing a bottle of OxyCodone. The other was from a journalist that worked in Iraq in 2003.

“With one leg missing, it could no longer return to its glory days,” Taylor lamented. “For the next few months, Latté’s turfs were divided into small pieces, while it watched helplessly from inside.”

“Would you mind telling me why this bothers you Taylor? Were you really attached to this cat?”

“‘Attached’ would be an understatement,” Taylor said wryly.

Liz read up on the Iraqi journalist while Taylor went on about the different amazing things that Latté did before his accident. This was standard procedure to know more about callers. The file was from a few months ago and the journalist didn’t want to give his name because he was well-known. He was depressed because he was injured in a roadside bombing while travelling to interview a radical tribal chief, and was relieved from his job shortly after. Apparently, he was the only journalist willing to take such risks, and he was frequently lauded for it.

“Seeing Latté now just makes wonder why we even need a purpose in life. Everything can be taken away from you just like that, without you ever deserving it, and after all you’ve accomplished. That’s what bothers me.”

“You know Taylor, your life is different than Latté’s. Latté solely depended on its motor skills to do everything in its life. Once that was taken away, of course it will lead a purposeless life. But you – you have so much more than that. If that happened to you, your opportunities will still be wide open.”

*...the journalist was found by a passing Humvee unit on a mission, so instead of taking him to the nearest hospital, they simply patched him up and radioed for a helicopter unit to pick him up. They left him on the side of the road, with a blanket and a bottle of painkillers. The helicopter arrived a couple of hours late, and because of this, the caller lost his...*

“It’s not about other opportunities Sandy. It’s about losing the one thing you lived for. A variety of options is only comforting for those who have no direction in life. For those who do, life’s purpose is singular, and losing the ability to carry out that purpose makes one lose his willingness to live.”

Taylor’s lucid logic contradicted Liz’s perceptions of him being crazy. He sounded like a well-spoken philosopher, frustrated with the lack of higher intellect around him.

“The world is beautiful Taylor, nothing is worth more than that.”

“I know Sandy, I’m looking at it right now. But this is not the world I belong in. My world is now forever... inaccessible for me.”

“Many great people have overcome adversity. In fact, some even say it is adversity that has made great people.”

“I was great.”

“You still are.”

“If I end my life now, my greatness will remain eternal.”

“If you end your life now, suicide will overshadow your greatness.”

“Not all good stories have happy endings.”

“Not all sad endings make good stories.”

“Then let this be the beginning for you, but the end for me.” Taylor hung up.

The computer showed that Taylor was calling within a 50-metre radius at the corner of Simcoe and Hastings. Liz clicked on the 911 button that relayed the information directly to the dispatcher. She ran up to the roof of her building – she too worked at Simcoe and Hastings.

She saw nobody except a slender cat and a pair of crutches, silhouetted against the setting sun.