

## A Plan's a Plan

I supervised the first-shift team in the Children's Chat Department at SureYaMatter. Through our use of Ketch-All Real-Time Face-Swapping and Voice-Matching, the department specialized in comforting children who had busy/disinterested parents.

My team of eight older gals could hit their Positive/Very Positive Customer Satisfaction Numbers as well as they could match their turtlenecks to their socks or slug down Lean Cuisines. I approved their requested days off, never interfered with their work, and let them tease me a bit. For example, my name is Charlie, but they all called me Busty. I didn't know why. They wouldn't tell me.

Four of the gals were chatting with children in Ketch-All nooks, and the other four, in their shared work space, were researching past Children's Chat sessions/clients to ensure that the gals inside knew exactly what to say.

And while researching, the gals never stopped gossiping with one another. I almost never knew what they were talking about.

When I walked by, I heard one of the researching gals say to the group, "That waitress last night was a warm glob of mayonnaise. I bet she wipes back to front." And they squealed and giggled.

I peeked into Nook One. One of the most experienced gals faced a giant split-screen. On the left screen was the child's mom's face, a face programmed to mirror the movements of whoever was sitting in Nook One. On the right side of the screen was a child, maybe six years old, who needed to talk to his mom because of an incident at school.

But his mom had a job that required absolute focus. So it was up to us to comfort the child.

The boy said to the face he saw as his mom, "Mr. J was being mean to me because of Grammy."

The Nook One Researcher looked up ChildHistory to review relevant background information like who Grammy was and who Mr. J was. It would've been a shame, for example, if the Chatter asked him about gym class and gym class had been previously mentioned as a terribly sensitive subject that the real mom would avoid.

While the Nook One Researcher ran through ChildHistory, the Nook One Chatter vamped along to buy time.

“Aww, no, honey,” she said. “That’s not good.” And on the left side of the screen, the mother’s programmed face matched the frown and mouthed the words exactly. The voice-matching software modified the pitch and timbre of The Nook One Chatter’s voice so that the child heard and saw an exact replica of the voice/face he knew as his mom’s. “Sometimes people are mean, and it’s never a nice thing, is it?”

“No,” the child said to his mother’s face.

At the computer, The Researcher typed into the Chatter scroll—*Mr. J=trampoline park attendant. Grammy=dementia. Got naked at Costco. Rubbed against merchandise. Refused to leave.*

“What Grammy did at Costco was a mistake, and it’s OK to make mistakes sometimes.” *Teacher=Mrs. Shell* scrolled by. “Did you talk to Mrs. Shell about it?”

“Yeah,” the child said.

“Good. Good. What game should we play when I get home?” And the boy’s eyes were still glistening wet, but his mouth was starting to get less wrinkled and frowny.

Down the line, in Nook Four, I heard, “And how would you rate our conversation, as mother and daughter? Negative, Somewhat Negative, Somewhat Positive, Positive, or Very Positive?”

A little girl said, “Is there anything between Positive and Very Positive, Mom?”

I gave the gals a big thumbs-up.

After work, my girlfriend, Annie, and I were getting ready to grab dinner with Annie’s sister, Meg, and her husband, Derrick.

While Annie did her makeup in our bathroom mirror, I brushed my teeth behind her. I did my impression of Derrick over her shoulder.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” I said with my tongue hanging out a little bit. And then I gave her boobs a little squeeze from behind.

She let out the high-pitched shriek-laugh that I loved.

“You can’t do that while you’re making that face,” she said into the mirror.

And I stared at her reflection. Her smile settled down, and she got back to her mascara. I was so happy that I felt a little weepy. I wished we’d never have to leave the bathroom.

At the restaurant, Meg ordered a beer and made a big show of bringing it to her lips and pulling it away before taking a sip.

“What? Whoa, hold on. I can’t drink this!” she said. “I’m pregnant!” She flagged down the waitress and told her the mistake. She said that she’d like a caffeine-free ginger ale instead. I could tell that she planned and practiced the whole thing.

The waitress explained that she'd still have to pay for the beer. Meg called her outrageous and looked like she was about to cry until Derrick said that he'd be happy to drink it.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh," he said, smiling.

The waitress's face made it seem like maybe Meg wasn't the first newly pregnant woman to pull this move today.

They couldn't be slowed down, though. Meg and Derrick were beaming, and I made sure my face matched their beaming. And they checked Annie's face to make sure she was still beaming too.

I didn't look at Annie next to me, but I could feel her elbows and shoulders sink down.

"Should we get calamari for the table?" I said.

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Meg said, and she looked back to Annie. "So finding out was crazy. I never peed directly on anything in front of Derrick before."

My mind went to our apartment, inside my bedside table—where Annie made me keep the engagement ring that she wouldn't wear until we agreed on the future. And I was afraid of the inevitable conversation we'd have to have because Meg was pregnant. The conversation that was always left unresolved. Again/again/again.

I could feel her resistance to look back at me. We were going to have another Big Talk, and I started to feel stir crazy.

I excused myself to the bathroom and came back after not peeing.

Meg was saying, "And no matter how much soap I used, it still smelled."

And Annie still hadn't looked back at me.

But when we got home, the Big Questions never got asked. It felt like any other night. We just went to bed—calm and fine—not quite butt-to-butt and not quite all-wrapped-up either.

But I couldn't sleep. Meg and Derrick's news didn't force us into another talk about our conflicting baby ideas, but it should have. Annie's baby idea was all giggles and joy. Mine was some rare congenital disorder that required constant and expensive care. Stress that would drive me and Annie so far apart we'd resent each other, the baby, and our former selves for having changed our lives.

The initial relief I'd felt in the car ride home was replaced, in bed, with fear and paranoia and confusion.

The next day, in my office, I saw that Meg posted a GIF on her Pic-Tag-Toe account of her and Derrick at the Mystic Seaport Aquarium next to some seals. Derrick was clapping an impersonation of the seals as Meg cradled her stomach in the universal sign for *I'm Pregnant*.

The caption said, “Ten weeks along and feeling very ArvArvArv.”

It made me feel frustrated and second-hand embarrassed. I just wanted to live with Annie forever and not complicate anything.

Annie would see this GIF, and tonight it would all come out.

I rushed out of my office and into the shared work space.

“Her sister’s pregnant and feeling very ArvArvArv,” I said to the gals.

“Awww, Busty,” they said. “Shit.”

At the end of the day, the gals looked around at one another.

They said, “Listen, Busty. We think you should come with us to one of the SureYaMatter Frown-Turning Seminars.”

“What?” I said. I felt blindsided.

“It’s the stuff with Annie,” they said. “We had a feeling that something was wrong because you stormed out of your office today and told us exactly what was wrong.”

“Yes/OK/Fine,” I said. “Maybe I’m feeling a little upset. But just barely.”

“But Busty,” they said. “The Frown-Turning Seminars are so helpful when one of our husbands dies or when one of our adult children posts negative things about their upbringing on Pic-Tag-Toe. They can help you too!”

I said, “I’m sure it’s great. Just not this time. Please. Promise me you’ll keep my problems between us.”

I didn’t like the idea of there being a corporate record of my personal issues.

And they all said, “I promise.”

“It’s just that we care about you,” they said. “Your happiness, Busty. We feel like we’ve got to tell *someone* about how you’re doing.”

I blinked a few times and thought about my happiness and how I was doing, too.

They looked around at one another and said, “Have you ever even held a baby?”

At home, when I walked in the door, Annie didn’t bring up the GIF that Meg posted. She was on her phone, playing a game where she needed to kiss frogs to reveal if they were princes or just plain frogs. If she was wrong, she had to answer trivia questions based on her pre-selected interests in order to earn second or third chances at kissing the right frog. Each level rewarded her with a hotter and hotter prince.

“Hi,” she said, without looking up. “How was work?”

“Good,” I said, waiting for the bigger question/bomb to come out. She held her phone at me, and I saw that she’d unlocked a very hot and somewhat ethnically ambiguous prince. “Looks just like me,” I said.

“You’re better looking,” she said with her big cheesing smile—the one she used for

over-the-top compliments and favor-asking. The version of Annie that popped in my head most often had this big/pretend smile.

And at first, I almost wanted her to bring up the GIF/pregnancy. It wasn't like Annie to keep her thoughts/feelings from me, and it seemed like she was doing this.

But forty-five minutes of us quietly sitting and playing on our phones went by, and then Annie had to leave for the cooking class she took at the Y with her sister.

Which was fine. We didn't have to talk about it that second. I certainly wasn't going to bring it up.

With Annie out, I tried distracting myself by watching a basketball game, but I couldn't get into it. After a while, my phone vibrated. There was an alert telling me that Annie had been tagged in a photo on Pic-Tag-Toe.

It was a picture of her whole cooking class, and I spotted Annie right away. Her smile always jumped right out. And in between Annie and Meg, but closer to Annie, was a tall and handsome guy. He had blue eyes and not-quite-curly blond hair. He looked like someone who rock climbed.

And I got this sinking feeling in my stomach.

*He* was why Annie didn't need to have another talk about babies. It felt clear. Annie was moving on from me.

He wasn't tagged in the picture, and I dug and dug, but I couldn't find information about him anywhere. He was apparently too cool for a Pic-Tag-Toe account. He probably told people that he lived in the present.

I knew I was being paranoid. But knowing this didn't help me.

When Annie came home, she brought me some of the food she made—like always.

“Goat cheese and leek gnocchi,” she said. “You're gonna hate it,” and she headed straight for the bathroom to have some of her usual late-night loud diarrhea because of her irritable bowel syndrome.

When she eventually sat down on the couch next to me, I started to force down the pasta. And when she asked, I told her that I couldn't hear her in the bathroom.

And she slid back into kissing her screen, and I knew she was just playing her game. But I was afraid maybe she wasn't. Maybe she'd zoomed into the class photo and she was kissing his face.

And Chef Handsome was probably perfect for her and was a better long-term match. He probably wanted kids and knew CPR and actually preferred whole wheat pasta. And all I was good for was lying about how much diarrhea I could hear.

Her phone vibrated with a text. And then it vibrated with a call. She went out to the back porch to answer it. And I sat there, thinking about worst-case scenarios.

Annie eventually came back in and said, “Uh—that was the ladies you work with.”

“What?” I said. “How do they even know your number?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “I don’t know.”

“What did they want?”

“They just wanted to see how you were doing. They said you were upset at work.” I couldn’t decide if this was a sweet gesture from them or if this was some kind of betrayal. My stomach feeling said betrayal.

“I was upset at work?” I said. “I mean it was kind of a stressful day, but not really.” I shrugged. “Normal enough.”

“I don’t know,” Annie said. “I guess they were worried. But mostly they just chatted me up on speakerphone with all of them yelling. Asking stuff about me. Saying Busty tells us this. Busty tells us that. It was nice. They’re funny.”

“They’re something, all right.”

Annie said, “And at the end, they said, ‘Take care of that sweet round ass of his,’ and I said, ‘Ladies, I have no idea what to say to that.’ And they all lost it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They like catching people off guard.”

I loved Annie, and I loved the gals. But I loved them separately. And I was positive that I didn’t like them talking to each other.

But Annie seemed happy about it. So I pretended that it was wonderful.

The next morning, I didn’t tell the gals that I felt betrayed by them for spilling secrets to Annie.

Instead, I told them about the photo of Annie and Chef Handsome. Sure, it would have been nice to talk to someone who I knew would keep every secret. But I had no one else, and I had to talk it out. I didn’t have a choice.

“I bet his name is something hot, like Brad or something,” I said.

“Busty,” they said in their disappointed voice. “Brad isn’t even a hot name. It’s probably Drake or Noah or something truly hot.”

“What?!”

The gals said, “C’mon, Busty. This is Annie we’re talking about. She’s standing next to the guy. She’s not reaching for his shaft with both hands. There’s still time to fix what’s wrong.”

“That’s filthy,” I said, and the gals squealed and giggled.

It did sound crazy when they broke it down. I was just being paranoid. But I couldn’t shake the fact that it would make perfect sense for Annie to leave me. Actually—for Annie to get everything she wanted out of her life, she *needed* to leave me. We’d always been open with each other, but I felt like if we finally sat down and had the conversation that I was afraid was coming, it would end with her leaving me.

“But no,” they said. “You’re probably right. Chef Handsome probably has gold medals in every sex position.” And they squealed and giggled some more.

At 10:00 that morning, there was a live-stream concert of Bobjo Goose, the children’s singer/dancer/comedian. So, we all figured that 10:00–11:00 was going to be the easiest hour of our lives. Every kid in America would be glued. It was like the moon landing but for two- to five-year-olds.

At 10:06, though, while I was getting coffee, Bobjo Goose apparently finished his first song and looked at the camera. His eyes got wet, and he said, “This was the plan, and right now it feels bad and wrong, but a plan’s a plan.” And he took a pistol from his pocket and shot himself under his chin. The red was a different red than the bow tie he always wore.

The production team wasn’t fast enough, and every kid saw his head break open and his body crumple.

From the office kitchenette, I heard, “Busty! Busty! Jesus Christ!”

I looked out, and the gals had panicked looks on their faces, and they ran over to the Ketch-All nooks that were empty and inactive. Two of them weren’t even logged in. They started tapping on keyboards and putting headsets on, and so, of course, I ran out there too.

The queue was already unforgivably long and growing, so we scrambled. I grabbed one of the gals, and we got some of the older machines out of storage.

Instead of four Ketch-All nooks with four people outside Researching, we had eight Chatting stations and no one Researching. Some of the gals were on older units that didn’t offer especially realistic face-swapping. We tried splitting up one Ketch-All-nook into two units—one that had voice-matching, and one that had face-swapping.

The parent’s voice didn’t sound right for one. For the other, the voice was perfect, but the face wasn’t moving except for the mouth, and the mouth skin tone didn’t quite match the rest of the unmoving face. No one knew the backstory of any of the kids they were talking to. But the gals were pros, and they were doing their best.

The kids were as desperate as we were.

“Whaatttt?!” they screamed. Or, “I-was-watching-and-he-and-he-and-he-and-he!” They knew something was wrong, but they didn’t know how to articulate what was going on inside of them. And the queue of kids waiting for a connection wasn’t shrinking. And so I had no choice but to get involved. I was happily making coffee and then it was pure screaming/unthinking chaos.

The gals were talking as fast as they could. The soundproofing on most of the conversations was nonexistent.

I heard, “I know, honey. I know.”

I heard, “Yes, but listen.”

I heard, “That’s not what that means, sweetie.”

They were all scrambling at computers, trying to help kids and not slip up. There was nothing but noise and clacking and fear. And my body just started to move.

And then I was somehow sitting in the silence of one of the Ketch-All nooks, and it was so quiet that I probably could’ve heard my heartbeat if I tried. And I looked at a silent toddler on the other end of the connection.

He was a little boy, maybe two years old. I didn’t know if he could talk, and he was just staring ahead. He licked his lips and swallowed. My Ketch-All feed was taking forever to load. He wasn’t crying. He was just staring blank-faced at the screen, waiting. And then the face-swapping was complete, and his mother’s face appeared. His eyes lit up.

“Hi,” he said, and he kind of reached forward with a dimple-knuckled hand.

I didn’t know any of his information. But thankfully, I had all of the software features in this nook. And to be honest, he already seemed fine. I didn’t know why he was here.

“Hey, buddy,” I said. “Is everything OK?”

And he just kind of stared dead-eyed at the screen. Off to the side, there was a torso. The torso bent down, and there was a girl—maybe eighteen or nineteen years old—the babysitter/nanny, I guessed. “Hi, Mrs. Bottle,” the girl said. “He saw the stream, and I’m not sure what he understands or whatever, but here he is. You know about Bobjo, right?”

“Yes. Of course,” I said. And it seemed like this girl definitely had no idea that I wasn’t the boy’s actual mom. And she stood back up and was just a torso again. And the boy looked like he was expecting me to say something.

“So,” I said. “Handsome Harry.” It just came out. And I could hear my dad saying it from when I was little. “What game should we play when I come home?” It felt uncomfortable, but it helped that it wasn’t me that was saying it. It was the boy’s mother’s face that was.

“Bopping,” the boy said, without a smile or a raised eyebrow.

“Bopping is my favorite,” I said, and then I was out of ideas. I could see the pandemonium of flapping lips and thrashing outside, but here it was just two people quietly thinking of what to say next. We stared at each other for what seemed like four minutes, but it might have been six or seven seconds. “Welp,” I said. “I’ll see you soon, buddy. I’ll be home before you know it.”

“Hunt,” the boy said—or something that sounded like it.

And I heard, “Bye, Mrs. Bottle” from the torso. I didn’t bother with a Customer Satisfaction survey—though it would have been nice to get one of my own. I hit a button, and the screen went back to soft blue.

And it would be easier if I felt some big change—if that were the moment when I realized something profound. Years from now, when I was holding me and Annie’s fourth



baby, I could say, “I know when it all clicked for me.” But that wasn’t how I felt about it. It was just a baby who I pretended to care about. And then the baby was gone as soon as it felt cared for. I was just pretending so that someone else felt better. Like I was making my face look happy and interested while a waitress told me the specials.

But I was going to tell Annie about this, I decided. It was perfect. I’d tell her that she’d been right all along—that I could see myself, and her, with one of our own. That I had just been scared. But that now I was ready.

And it wouldn’t be a complete lie. If I had to choose between Annie with a baby or being alone, I would choose Annie with a baby every time.

That night, at home, I shared some things with Annie. The things were not true. But they were the things that she’d wanted to hear for a long time and the things that I now felt willing to lie about.

The gals had beaten me to it, and Annie knew about the toddler before I got home. She said she’d heard about the look on my face afterwards and what it must’ve meant. She hugged me hard when I said the right words.

The following Thursday after our shift ended, there was a Thank You Barbecue for all of us who’d worked during the incident when Bobjo Goose killed himself.

Significant others were invited, and the gals swarmed onto Annie. They touched her hair and her shoulders. When she showed them the engagement ring on her finger, they let out a collective squeal of pure delight.

And I knew that I’d have to keep any new baby feelings to myself. I couldn’t risk true feelings leaking back to Annie—not when we were safe and fine and moving forward.

Annie looked at me, and she beamed.

I could keep this going forever if it kept me with Annie.

And if this wasn’t fair to Annie, who only wanted the life that she wanted, I’d say—What about me? Why can’t it be unfair to her but still OK for me? Who made fairness in charge?

But then I’d also say, I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know.