

The Calling

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I'd just come home from school and I was sitting on my bed, and didn't know what to do.

I was still in my uniform, and wanted to take this off, but hadn't decided if I should stay in the house or not. Maybe I could message Layla or Marie and ask if they wanted to meet in the park or the mall. But what if they didn't wanna go? Did that mean they really really didn't wanna go, or they didn't wanna go with me? It's always hard to tell why people say no. I'm never sure if it's their problem or my problem. All I can be sure of is there is a problem somewhere.

In front of my bed was a desk and mirror. Photos of Layla, Marie, Debbie and Jed were stuck to the glass. These were pictures of us by the seaside, at a fun-fair and hiking on some mountains that weren't really mountains, just hills with snow. We were hugging, kissing and making stupid faces. I'd got rid of all the photos from over one year ago. I didn't like some of the people in those pictures. I didn't like me in those pictures. It made me think that in a year's time I would no longer like the me of now. Is this what's gonna happen? Will I always hate what I was?

I began to shout. It was a loud shout. A long shout. A single pitch. High. A new type of sound. A shout I'd never shouted before. Sort of similar to a violin playing one note without stopping. But it was rough. A little scratchy. Like the bow was pressed too close to the string.

But the shout wouldn't stop. After a few minutes, Mum knocked on the door, waited for two seconds and then walked inside. She always knocked and stormed in, without giving me time to say

whether I wanted her to enter or stay out. It was kinda annoying, but it was a Mum thing and I was stuck with Mum things as long as there was a Mum around to do the things that Mum did.

‘What are you up to *now*?’ she asked.

I kept on shouting.

‘Can you please keep it down?’

The volume didn’t change.

‘You’re gonna give me a headache.’

I shrugged.

Without moving from my bed, I didn’t stop for a further hour. A car pulled up in our drive. There was a bit of an argument downstairs, and the front door slammed. Half a minute later Dad walked into the room, still in his suit and tie from work. His face was mean. But Dad mean. Like he was angry and sad at the same time.

‘I can hear you all the way down the street,’ he said. ‘The whole neighbourhood can hear you.’

He stepped back a little.

‘Someone is bound to call the police,’ he said.

‘Don’t scare her,’ said Mum.

I kept the same pitch.

‘Have you nothing to say?’ he went on.

‘Try being nice to her,’ she said.

‘We’re always nice to her,’ said Dad, waving a finger at me, ‘and this is where nice gets us.’

A few minutes later Mum wheeled in a trolley with a television.

‘We thought you’d like to watch something,’ she said, ‘and a bit later dinner will be ready.’

Mum put on a programme that I’d told her I liked. But I’d told her I liked it three years ago. She left the room, but I knew she was standing outside. The opening credits started and I watched the show for about twenty minutes. It was the first episode of a drama, but there were some funny parts in it. I liked the characters, though the story wasn’t very new or anything. It was also hard to hear the words because I kept on shouting. The programme finished. I could’ve watched more episodes, but Mum came back into the room.

‘Why are you doing this?’ she asked.

I threw my arms in the air.

It was dinner time. Mum brought in a tray of sausages, peas and mashed potato and a glass of orange squash. She laid it down on my desk with a knife and a fork folded up in a serviette. I couldn't eat the meal or drink the squash because I kept on shouting. This worried me a bit because I didn't want to go hungry or thirsty, so I made a special effort. Putting the plate on my lap, I unwrapped the knife and fork, cut a slice of sausage and stuck this in my mouth. I found that the sound could be muffled by eating the food or swallowing the squash. But when I finished, the noise began again.

Mum came in and took the tray away.

'See,' she said. 'You can control it if you want.'

I shook my head.

'I think you're being very unreasonable,' she added.

A bit later Marie came around. She was my best friend since nursery school, and our parents knew each other. We sat together in Double History and Science. But lately she'd got very close to Ada and Lillian. I found Ada and Lillian a little stuck-up, so I didn't see so much of Marie any more, except when we went out with our parents. This wasn't very often, because we didn't wanna spend evenings and weekends with our parents. It was like going out with our past. I was closer to Layla. We sat together in English and French. But my parents didn't know Layla or Layla's parents.

'Alright Ellen?'

I didn't respond.

'What's with all the *raa raa*?'

I shrugged.

'Are you sick?'

I gave no reply.

'It's kinda odd.'

She looked at the photos on the mirror.

'Your hair was so different.'

After glancing over my books, she saw my cupboard was open. Flicking through the clothes hanging up, she pulled out a tight fitting T-shirt showing a cartoon skull of a kitten with a red bow.

'Oh, I totally adore this,' she said, holding it up against her chest.

'Can I steal it for a week?'

I nodded.

'Thanks a billion.'

Mum walked into the room.

'Can you make her stop?' she asked Marie.

'I can't do what I can't do, Mrs Johnson.'

'But you're her friend.'

'Friends aren't like amazing at everything.'

'Can't you play with her?'

Marie scowled.

'Play with her?'

'You know what I mean.'

'I dunno,' said Marie. 'I got a lot on right now, and this is a bit too much.'

Two hours later. Nine in the evening. The doctor was shining a metal instrument with a tiny light into my eyes. The noise continued.

'Did anything happen today?' he asked Mum.

'She got up. She had breakfast. I drove her to school. She went to school. I picked her up. I drove her back. I went out shopping. I returned and she was doing this.'

'She didn't mention anything?'

'No,' said Mum.

'Did she play sport?'

'Not on Tuesdays.'

'And she didn't engage in any physical activity?'

'Not that I know of.'

'No bruises in the last few days? No head injuries?'

'Nothing.'

The doctor put on a loud and patronising voice as he spoke to me.

'Open wide.'

Sticking a small piece of wood on my tongue, he looked inside my mouth. The sound changed to a lower pitch for a few seconds. He jammed the buds of a stethoscope into his ears, and listened to my back and chest.

'Your throat is fine,' he said. 'Your lungs are fine. Your heart is fine.'

The doctor packed away his instruments in a leather bag and sat next to me on the bed.

'Mrs Johnson, I will have to ask you to leave this room.'

'Why?'

‘I need to make a private consultation.’

Slowly, Mum closed the door behind her. The doctor stayed on the bed, but not too near to me.

‘Ellen,’ he said. ‘I want you to reply to my questions by either nodding or shaking your head.’

I nodded.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘You’re aware that I am a doctor. A doctor isn’t allowed to share people’s secrets with anyone else. If he or she did, then no one would trust that doctor anymore.’

I nodded.

‘When we are young, we get up to all kinds of things. Sometimes we don’t tell our parents about these things. Often this is not because there is anything wrong with them, but we think it is best for our parents not to know.’

He paused.

‘Have you been in any kind of accident in the last few days?’

I shook my head.

‘Did you take anything recently?’

I wasn’t sure what he meant.

‘A pill?’

I shook my head.

‘Some powder or dust?’

I shook my head again.

‘A puff of smoke?’

I’d had a few cigarettes with Layla on Wednesday after school at the back of the youth club. But they were only cigarettes. The ones that kill you. Not drugs. I shook my head.

‘Have you touched a boy?’

I shook my head.

‘Or parts of a boy?’

I shook my head a lot.

‘You can tell me, I’m a doctor.’

He looked at me for about ten seconds, like he was trying to read my face. But I knew me. There was nothing for him there.

The doctor shouted, but not too loud.

‘Mrs Johnson – you can come in now!’

A few seconds later, Mum returned. I knew she’d been listening at the door.

‘Why is she doing this?’ she asked.

‘There is no medical reason.’

‘But she won’t stop.’

‘Try talking to her.’

‘Talk? *Talk?*’ said Mum. ‘That’s *all* we do.’

It was nearly ten o’clock. I was getting tired. The big noise was wearing me down. Like a punch, punch, punch to my throat.

A quick knock, the door opened and Mum brought in a woman who was kinda old, but not dead-old. She had long curly white hair, heavy make-up and was dressed in a flowery skirt and a tired brown shirt with sequins. Mum said this was Cecilia.

The first thing Cecilia did was smile and tell me how much she was looking forward to getting to know me. I wasn’t sure why she was there and I didn’t have an opinion on whether I wanted to meet Cecilia or not, but I couldn’t say anything to her because I kept on shouting.

‘This is a very nice room,’ she said. ‘Very cosy.’

She looked around and at the mirror.

‘I see you have lots of friends. That’s nice. Maybe you can tell me about them some day.’

She pointed to a poster behind my bed. It was a night scene with a silhouette of some gravestones, a large moon and, in gothic letters, the name of a band I sort of thought were sort of okay.

‘Oh you like music,’ she said. ‘How lovely. I like music too. Maybe not the same things as you. But it’s something I’m passionate about... oh... what a lot of books... I see you’re a keen reader.’

The pitch remained the same. The volume still loud.

Gesturing to a small chair next to my computer, Cecilia asked if she could sit down. I nodded.

‘Your Mum and Dad seem nice.’

I shrugged.

‘But I know how parents can be. I’m a Mum. I know how I can be. I know my daughter doesn’t always like her Mum.’

I didn’t respond.

‘I talk to a lot of young people and they tell me it’s hard to find someone to listen to them. They often want to say something, but feel too embarrassed to have to say it out in the open.’

I let her speak. It seemed like she wanted to.

‘But I tell them there is nothing worth keeping inside. It doesn’t matter how horrible, how bad or how dirty that feeling is.’

From my desk, Cecilia picked up a ball-point pen and a piece of paper, and handed these over to me.

‘Maybe you would like to write down something. Anything you want. I won’t show it to your Mum. I won’t look while you write. I’ll only read it if you give me permission.’

I took the pen and paper and scribbled a few words. Cecilia turned away like she was playing some kinda stupid game.

A pause.

‘Am I allowed to see?’ she asked.

I kept on shouting.

I handed her the note.

It read:

‘There’s nothing I want to tell you.’

She gave the piece of paper back to me.

‘But you can. Anytime.’

I wrote down:

‘Yeah’

Below I added this:

‘!’

For emphasis.

It was past eleven o’clock. Mum brought me a mug of cocoa and two biscuits. I ate the biscuits and drank the cocoa. They helped muffle the sound for a few moments. Then I went to the bathroom. I shouted while I sat on the toilet. I shouted in the shower. I kinda shouted at the same time as cleaning my teeth, which was a bit more difficult, but wasn’t impossible. It was more of a low moan.

I went to bed and in less than a minute I was asleep. When I woke up, I started shouting again. Mum brought in a cup of tea and some bran flakes. I shouted into the tea and the cereal. I could just about eat them, although I spat out quite a lot of the milk on the floor.

I was bored in the house. I tried watching some TV, but the programmes on during the daytime were so old. They looked old, showed old stuff and they talked in that way we speak to old people. Slow and clear. Like the world was going deaf. I thought about

trying the streaming service, but there were too many things to watch, and I didn't really know what I was looking for.

Messing around on my computer, I flicked through a few websites and checked my email. But after about twenty minutes, there wasn't much else to do on the net. I messaged a few friends. I told them I couldn't come to school because I was making this big noise. But I had to wait till they were out of their lessons before they could get back to me. I tried reading a couple of books, but reading books on a weekday was like being at school.

It was around noon. Under the shouting, I heard the sound of voices from the front porch. Mum was answering the door.

'I wanna see how Ellen is.'

'And you are?'

'Layla.'

'I haven't heard about you.'

'Like Ellen tells you everything.'

'Shouldn't you be at class?'

'It's lunch. I told the teachers and stuff. They said it was okay if I came to see Ellen.'

'Well, can you make her stop what she's doing?'

'I dunno.'

A few seconds later Layla came into the room. I nodded to say hello and she nodded back.

'I spoke to Gary. He says that Friday is fifty to eighty per cent on. If you wanna go to his place. His parents are gonna be out all night. He has some stuff. So it might be okay. Gary's not so bad. But I don't like his mates. I know you also think they are kinda like fucking bullshit, so if you don't wanna go, it's fine. Maybe we can convince it to be just Gary and not his mates as well. Gary might like that. He might like to be like with only two girls and no mates. But if you're still screamy, then I guess we'll call it off. Maybe it'll happen another time. You don't have to answer absolutely yes right now.'

I didn't reply.

'Can I get you anything?'

I shook my head.

Layla looked at me without talking for a few seconds.

'It's cool. But it's also crazy. Not good crazy. Crazy crazy. Crazy like I don't know what the fuck.'

I shrugged.

'So I guess I'll see you around.'

I nodded. Layla got up and left the room. Mum was standing at my bedroom door.

'Can you make her stop?' she said.

'I told you earlier,' said Layla, 'I dunno.'

'Can't you try?'

Layla gave a big sigh.

'Why?' she said.

The next day I heard some strange sounds outside our house, so I went to the window. Parked in our driveway were white vans with satellite dishes and long cables. Large men in vests were walking around with big television cameras, pointing down the street and at my window. Some TV presenters in smart clothes were talking to our neighbours.

Mum came in with some cereal and tea.

'You see all that?'

I nodded.

'You have a very important guest coming around later,' she said.

'You have to be dressed up nicely.'

I shrugged.

While I ate breakfast, I surfed the net. There was a news report with a picture of my house. Further down was a really shitty photo of me, with long hair and a bad fringe. It was from two years ago, and I was in the uniform of lower school, so I looked like a tiny little kid.

The story said that there was this girl who couldn't stop shouting. The reporter talked to some doctor who said this was a mental case, and to a psychiatrist who called this a totally new 'malady'. At the end, the report said the authorities were now 'taking an interest'. I began to sweat. I felt dizzy in the stomach. Loads of other news repeated this stuff – and they all used the same lame picture from lower school. I was angry like majorly angry with the net. I wanted to argue with the story. Tell them how wrong they were.

I turned off my computer and watched TV, switching to some channel that had programmes about people cooking things or going

places. It was boring. But it was better than seeing that fuck-bad photo of me.

Four o'clock in the afternoon. More TV crews outside. The door opened. A tall man came into my room. It was someone I knew from the news. I think it was the mayor. Thinner in person, with more wrinkles on his face, he was wearing a clean and expensive suit, though it was a bit too shiny. Behind him were two tough-looking guys, also in posh suits. They stood a few steps in the rear, watching me and the window. Mum moved into the room. She brought in a bottle of water and four glasses and laid these down next to the mayor. He said thank you and Mum shuffled outside, closing the door behind her.

'Hello Ellen,' said the man. 'I'm not sure if you know who I am.'
I nodded.

'That's great. Your situation has become a matter of great importance. It's so big that even people who you don't know care about you. And all of them are wondering whether any of us can help.'

I didn't reply.

'We all want to bring you out of this situation.'

I said nothing.

'That's why we're here.'

The noise continued.

'In my job, I meet different kinds of people. Some are rich and some are poor, some are spoilt and some are vulnerable. Sometimes I can assist them and sometimes I can't. But at least they know that there is someone who can understand their problems. That's what I have come here to offer you today. Let me understand, and then I can help you.'

I leaned over and poured myself a glass of water. As I was knocking it back, the noise went away. I looked at the mayor. The corners of his mouth perked up. His eyes flashed. He looked left to one of the guys in a suit, as if responding to a signal.

I finished the water. My throat was clear. I put down the glass. I began to shout again.

Two days later, Mum led me down to the basement. It was warm and cosy, but the air was a little stifling and there was no daylight. In the last couple of years it had become a spare bedroom for anyone coming to visit who didn't care too much about where they slept.

But something had changed. The walls and the ceiling of the room were covered in grey foam with little peaks, like some weird carpet. Mum had also put a few framed photos of my friends on the bedside table.

‘Your Dad and I will bring the rest of your things,’ she said.

I nodded.

‘I’m sure it won’t be for long.’

I could’ve done with a cigarette. But my parents didn’t know I smoked. I couldn’t get Layla to smuggle one in because Mum and Dad would smell it and then they might not let Layla come back again. It was alright when Layla came around. She told me about stuff. She was going steady with Gary right now. She didn’t like him much. I wasn’t crazy keen on him. But she said it was better to go out with Gary than not to go out with Gary.

When the food came, for a few minutes there was not much noise. I didn’t eat a lot because Mum always gave me too much. When I finished, I felt sort of satisfied. Then Mum took away my plate and I started shouting again.

There was no interruption from outside. I could hear nothing else but me. It became so familiar. It was like listening to the lawn or the pavement. The sound of zero. I hadn’t minded it for days now. I knew I would never mind the cry.