

## Talk Therapy

“Let’s just do a quick headcount before it’s completely dark and then... feel free to go do whatever it is you need.”

“Yeah, totally,” Samuel muttered absent-mindedly, his eyes glued onto the two missed calls on his screen.

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,” Leo counted aloud. “Yup, that’s everyone.”

“Mhm great...” Samuel muttered yet again, but by the time the words came out of his mouth, he was already decidedly out of earshot, stumbling across the narrow mountaintop clearance.

With his eyes still firmly glued onto his screen, Samuel stretched out his right arm and raised it up above his head. In the dying light of the setting sun, the 4 empty bars abutting the words “No Service” almost seemed to glisten.

Casting a reproving glance at the departing figure, waving his outstretched arm around like a human tidal wave, Leo scoffed.

“Well c’mon,” he sighed, turning back to the group. “The camp isn’t going to set itself!”

“Hello? Hello?! Can you hea- oh for the love of God!” A muted crash sounded from the near distance as Samuel’s phone flew out of his grasp.

Pitching himself across the rocky terrain, his body got in the way of every serrated rock and low hanging branch, until something hit him prosperously between the legs. Samuel embraced the muddy ground—begrudgingly, of course—and coughed up crumbs of torn leaves with a muffled groan. The sky was now growing dark at an alarming pace. Samuel tried to open his eyes and failed before realizing they were already open.

Most night skies were of a dim blue, yet the one tonight was pure black. It was as if someone had come and shut off the moon and stars. In the darkness, he was a blind man in a dark room, searching for a black cat that wasn’t there. As his hands finally slowed in its frenzied plowing of the earth, a pinpoint of light came from ahead. He quickly scrambled up towards it and breathed out a sigh of relief as he finally found his hands wrapped around the familiar rounded edges.

Swiping to right, he hollered into the phone.

“Hello?! Can you hear me?”

“Y-ye-es, I ca-aan he-”

“Hello? Sorry, you cut out again, can you hear me?”

Nothing. Not a sound from the other line.

“Dammit!”

Samuel cursed as he gracelessly pushed himself up from an awkward half-squat, dusted off his nylon pants, then flung his head up towards the sky.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!”

Then, without another pause, he cleared his throat and trudged forward, somewhat limping but not too noticeably. Before long, he found himself out in the open, atop a narrow ledge—yet still without signal. Samuel sighed—a final sigh of defeat.

“Everything okay?” Came a voice from behind.

“Jesus Chri-” Samuel jolted forward, almost flinging himself off the edge. “Y-yeah man, everything’s great!”

“You sure? Because it really didn’t sound like- Oh, no no no don’t get me wrong, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop! It’s- it’s a quiet night so I just couldn’t help but overhear you...”

“Hey, it’s fine, don’t worry about it.” Samuel drank in the cool air, before slumping down against the rocks.

“No, it’s really not. It’s none of my business so I shouldn’t have asked...”

As the fog rolled through, a face flickered in and out of view.

“Eric, right?”

Silence.

“You’re Eric, right?”

Another pause. Then, at last, came a short “Hm.”

“Honestly, Eric, I’m glad you asked. I... I’ve been having some issues recently so I really can’t complain about having someone to talk to. I mean, have you ever heard of talk therapy? I’ve never tried it but my wife says... You know what, don’t worry about it.”

“What does your wife say?”

“It’s really nothing important, I don’t know why I brought it up.”

“No, please, I’d love to hear about it.”

“Well... well she... Look man, I like you, but let’s just talk about something else.”

“Oh. Of course.”

Silence and a faint buzz washed over the night.

“It’s complicated... you know? Relationships,” Samuel sighed. “I just- I don’t know how I feel anymore. I’ve been doubting everything these past couple of weeks—my wife, my job, my... my life! I just... don’t know what I want anymore...”

“Hey, I get it, it can-”

“I guess I just want someone I can have a conversation with.”

“Well, I’m always here if you want someone to tal-”

“And to stop feeling this way, you know?”

“R-right. Yeah.”

A disquieting intensity filled the air—one could almost feel the frustration seething in the dark figure.

“If you really want this to stop, you could always just throw yourself over the edge.”

At the sound of those words, Samuel’s gaze shifted towards the edge of the cliff.

“There’s always a way to end your suffering,” the voice continued. “There’s nothing that can’t be solved with a simple-”

“You know, you’re right. You’re right! There’s nothing that can’t be solved!”

“That’s not what I-”

“So I just need to talk to my wife, and maybe take a break from my job...” Samuel trailed off as he straightened up in excitement. “And things will all work out!”

“*Or*, you can take my advice and take two steps forward and-”

“Thanks, man, I’m really glad we had this talk,” Samuel grabbed the figure by its hand and shook it. “And you’ve got a great sense of humor, you know?”

With that, he was gone.

“Yeah... a *great* sense of humor.”

“Hey guys, so sorry about that!” Samuel materialized from the darkness and stepped into the warm glow of the newly lit campfire. “Eric and I were just- Eric?”

“Yes?” Eric looked up from the flame.

“How did you get back before me?”

“I- I never left...”

“What? What are you talking about? You were- We-”

“Eric was here the entire time, helping set up the fire,” Leo interrupted, a hint of irritation in his voice.

“Oh...” Samuel pulled back, confusion written all over his face. “Then it must have been someone else...”

“Samuel, we were all here. *Everyone* was extremely helpful with setting up camp.”

“But that can’t be!”

“I agree...” Leo mumbled under his breath.

“There was definitely someone else out there with me!”

“Look, Samuel, I’m not saying you’re wrong, but if you want, we could always just do another headcount.”

“You know what, that’s a great idea! Let’s see... One, two, three, four, five, six... seven. Seven...”