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The Crazies I've Called

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The Crazies I've Called

I have a reoccurring nightmare that one day Bryant Gumble and Willard Scott will actually duke it out on the *Today Show*. I don't think it'll actually happen, but sometimes when Bryant asks Willard for the weather report, he sort of rolls his eyes at Katie and acts all mighty and smart over Willard. My husband thinks I'm turning real freaky, and that I should go back to work at the gas station soon. It will be a while though, because my C-Section a month ago really put me under. The doctor in the delivery room decided to do surgery at the last moment, because Ralph Joseph Potter, Jr. wanted to come into this world feet first. I knew he'd be ornery, just like Ralph Wayne Potter, Sr. Since my husband's working two shifts at the factory most days, I just talk baby talk all day long, and clean and cook and sometimes watch the talk shows.

I think those shows get a lot of bad rap sometimes. *Sally Jessie Raphael* is not all about transvestites who are gay but want bisexual partners. My husband always used that one example - he hates Sally and her red glasses, but she really cares about her guests. One guy was reunited with his son yesterday after thirty years of being separated. I cried while I folded Joe's diapers. We call him that because one Ralph is enough, especially since it's Ralph, Sr. It's not that I don't love my husband, I do, it's just that he likes to boss me and control me like nothing else.

My sister lives in the same town as us in Beauford, Tennessee, twenty miles outside Nashville. She told me Ralph wasn't good enough for me, but the man works hard and doesn't drink. That's sure a good enough man for any woman. You won't see me on Sally or Phil, rattling on my husband because he doesn't kiss me and hug me enough. Those women are just crazy. But I like to watch them, because they do more than Joey, who just cries and wets his diapers. They keep me company during the day when Joey's napping and I'm dusting our tiny apartment. One woman was a little too nice though, on *Geraldo!*, because she gave her husband permission to have sex with her friends. Now, I know that Ralph's messed around before, but I really think that if I ever caught the girl, I'd shoot her dead. Of course, Ralph denies things always. Working two shifts three days a week gives him some time in between to do his dirty work. I'd have to be a real smart one to ever catch him.

Speaking of smarts, they had a baby on the *American Baby Show*, and that baby was pointing to colors at the age of one! The mother was one of those real ritzy moms you see that wears denim jumpers from L.L. Bean. I wear sweats, and Ralph always rags on me for that, saying that was sure a lot sexier when we met in Nashville with my leather mini-skirt. I always tell him that babies and leather just don't mix, but he says I'm a woman full of excuses. My sister Nancy says the same thing, but she's usually talking about me staying with Ralph.

Today Nancy is coming over with a friend. It's someone she wants me to meet that will "change things for you, Alena." I put Joey down, and for once, his crying stops after only a few minutes. I hear the knocker and run to the door. It's Nancy and an older woman, about my mamma's age. She is very tiny and short, with reddish hair. She smiles at me, and I let Nancy and this woman inside.

"This is Bevvie Lane, Alena. she's from Corporate Enterprises out of

Nashville," Nancy says. She picks a piece of invisible lint off her red blouse. Nancy is about four inches taller than me, and today, with her heels and jeans, she looks like a thin, beautiful Hollywood actress. God, I feel dumpy.

"Hi, Alena, your sister was talking to me the other day that you might like to work at home." Bevvie looks at me and smiles. The gold chain around her neck glistens with the pretend wealth of middle-class people.

"Yeah, Alena, I thought you might like to do some work calling people for Corporate. You know, keep your mind busy while you watch little Joe." Nancy looks at me, her face reddening. I know and she knows that she has always been trying to take charge of my life. She's a year younger than I am, but she always has the right answers, or so she thinks. She fought the hardest to keep me and Ralph from getting together. Even when we were in the church parlor, with pink taffeta and lace flying in the bustle of three bridesmaids and flower girls, she was telling me that this could still be stopped. I ignored her then. That was my plan now.

"Alena, basically we'd have you calling customers, taking surveys, etc. We're hired out by lots of different companies to do this kind of phoning to the public. There really isn't much training involved, and you'd make five fifty an hour." Bevvie smiles at me and smoothes her woolen suit.

I look at Nancy. I know Ralph will let me take the job, especially since we need the money, and he could make sure "I wasn't screwing with any man" if I was stuck at home, as he often tells me.

I realize we are still standing by the door. "Uh, do you guys want some coffee?" I ask. Without waiting for an answer, I move into our tiny kitchenette and pour three cups from the lukewarm pot. It's the breakfast coffee, but since this lady is coming to offer me a job, I don't bother to warm it up. I look out into our living room, where I can see Phil running up the aisle in his studio to talk to an audience member. Nancy and Bevvie sit on our country blue love seat, which doesn't match any of our other second-hand furniture. Behind Bevvie I notice a wrapped up plastic diaper that I was throwing away just when they came. I can't help laughing about what must be going through her mind right now.

Bevvie looks over at me, ignoring the stink coming from behind her. "You know, Alena, I was at our branch office in Beauford, and Nancy called me up and told me to ride on out with her to see you. I'm hoping you'll be interested. We could use some non-crazies working for the company."

I want to tell her that I am crazy, and that the killer-bee personality might take over now, but I decide to behave. Instead, I avoid her question and ask, "How did you two meet?"

"Over at Blackstone Community College," Nancy answers. She has a two-year degree at the school in business. Nancy is the motivated one. I never went anywhere after high school, but just worked as a cashier at my uncle's gas station and married Ralph.

I hand them their coffees, and then sit in the rocking chair across from them. We make small talk for a while, and then Bevvie stands up. "So, Alena, what do you think? Are you interested? I can get the training manual in the mail tonight."

"I'll think about it, Bevvie," I say. But I know that I want to take it.

Ralph gets home around eleven. He looks angry, but I'm used to that. I put a plate of spaghetti in front of him and sit at the table. "How was your day?" I ask.

"Crappy. We got five new shipments of light fixtures in, and Jackson didn't want us to get backlogged, so we had to work an hour overtime," he says, shoveling the spaghetti into his mouth.

I decide that this is the time to ask. He'll always be in a pissed-off mood, and I might as well do it while he's got a full stomach. I stand up and rub his shoulders. I can feel the tightness under the blue cotton shirt begin to loosen. He leans his head back and his thick black lashes fall over his eyes. This smooth, soft face belongs to the gentle Ralph I fell in love with. "Nancy stopped by," I say.

"God, what did she want?" His muscles instantly tighten.

"She brought a woman over from Corporate Enterprises. She offered me a job calling people for this company from right here," I say, walking to Joe's playpen where he's sleeping. I pick him up to take him into our bedroom. He wriggles slightly in his little yellow sleeper, and then lays quietly against my chest. I walk into our bedroom and put Joey in the crib. Ralph walks in with his napkin still tucked into his shirt.

"How much?" he asks. I tell him, and he walks back into the kitchen without a word. Any silence like this usually comes before a major explosion, and I frantically try to figure out what he could be mad about. Instead, I am surprised. In the kitchen, he wraps his arms around me and kisses my forehead. "Take it," he says.

Three days later I'm cradling Joey while he sleeps. Nancy has called me already this morning and asked me if I've gotten through the manual. For once, I'm a step ahead of her. I motivated myself to read the whole thing yesterday, and I just got back from a required test at the branch office. "Impressive, Alena. I'm proud you're doing this," Nancy said. I knew she was really thinking, *Now, if you'd just dump Ralph, I could really turn your life around!* A woman at the office handed me my first assignment this morning. I am to call up people and ask them information about their CD players. I put Joey into his crib, and then turn on the T.V. While Bob Barker turns people's lives around with his giant magical wheel, I start calling people to make their lives a little more hectic.

I have been warned that people will hang up on me most of the time. They do with my first ten calls. On the eleventh call, an older woman picks up the phone. I tell her I am doing a survey, and she asks me to repeat myself. I do, and she says, "Why, yes, I'll help you." I'm so relieved, I forget for a moment why I have called. I ask her if she has a CD player. It turns out that this questionnaire is going to be short and sweet, because the lady only owns an eight-track. "But honey, my daughter owns a CD player. Don't know why; she works all the time. Doesn't seem to have time to even call me, let alone listen to tunes." I thank the woman and hang up. I call a few more numbers and get either answering machines or slams. I suddenly feel very isolated. Me and that old

woman with her eight-track. Everyone else is busy.

I call Bevvie the next day. "Everyone hung up on me except three people, and none of them had CD players," I complain.

"Well first, you need to call people after dinner, which it says on page four of the manual. And secondly, you just have to make yourself heard," she says. "That's the secret of this business, Alena. You let them know you're not out to sell them stuff. You just want to help create an informed American public. Let them know that their opinion is important."

This is quite the motivational speech. Helping America stay informed. I look down at the bit spit-up stain on my t-shirt. I don't feel much like an important bearer of information. Oprah reaches all these people with her show, and I'm certainly not in the same category as her.

While Ralph sleeps on the couch with Joey, I start dialing for my next assignment. This time it is finding out people's restaurant habits, and what they expect from "the dining-out experience." Again, slams in my ear and stupid answering machines. Until I finally hear a man say, "Hello?" I catch my breath and then give him my spiel as fast as I can. He laughs and says, "Sure."

"How often a week do you eat out?" I ask.

"Hardly ever," he says. "I can't afford to. I'm in grad school."

"Well, I guess the next question will seem pretty stupid then," I say. "But do you enjoy lower priced fast-food or higher priced sit-down restaurants?"

He laughs again. "McDonald's."

"Okay, low-low priced," I say. "Do you generally eat out with someone, or alone?"

He hesitates. "Alone. Like I said, school and everything. I'm kept busy enough with that."

I ask a few more questions, and then thank him. As I start to hang up he asks me why I'm doing this.

"Just for a company that does surveys for other businesses. I have to take care of my baby at home."

"You have to?"

I start to feel angry. "Yeah, he's a month old. Who else is going to do it?" I say.

"Sorry. I just meant that when you said *I have to*, you didn't sound that excited," he says.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm just a little tired."

"Perfectly understandable," he replies. We say our good-byes and hang up. I sit for a minute in my chair. He is one of the few people I've called who actually seems like more than a voice. I wonder why he doesn't have somebody special. He seems like a really nice guy, and I don't buy that crap about being too busy for everything but school. I want to call him back, but I hesitate, and walk over to the living room. It's none of my business, and he could get me fired.

I sit in my rocking chair and turn on the tube. Regis and Kathie Lee are taping their show in sunny Arizona, with warm winds and happy people. I turn off the T.V. and stare at my family.

Four days later I'm giving Joey a bath in the bathroom sink. He lays here quietly, staring up at me. I rinse the soap off his tiny body, carefully cradling his head. When he's really quiet like this, I'm glad I'm his mom. I can't say that all the time though. I had wanted to wait, but Ralph was so persistent about getting a family started, even though we're always broke. When Joey was born, he was really glad it was a boy so that the oh-so-elegant Potter name could be carried down, I guess.

Joey looks up at me and starts to cry. I saw *Oprah* one time go to these people's house and baby-sit their kids for free. I wish Oprah would come over here once in a while.

I dry Joey off, and put him in diapers and a sleeper. I balance him on one arm with the bottle while I read over my next assignment. Windows. People will definitely think I'm trying to sell something.

Joey spits up, and then we go through the daily routine of changing his outfit. I put him down in his crib, and he points his tiny finger at me. I kiss it, wishing he could smile and laugh right now. He has less personality in this stage of life than Nancy's retriever. I'm a terrible mom for these thoughts.

I go back to the living room and start dialing. The usual, until the fifteenth call.

"You trying to sell something?" I hear a man's gruff voice say.

"No, sir, it's just a public opinion poll."

"Dammit, why should I give a shit what the public thinks? They never gave me nothing," he says.

"Thank-you anyway, sir," I say. I start to hang up; I'm not getting paid to listen to this kind of crap.

His voice suddenly softens. "Public opinion." He snorts. "Well, Miss, what exactly does the public need to know?"

I decide that this man is willing to talk, and I certainly need some data—we'll cooperate until he decides to scream again.

"Sir, we're collecting data on the type of windows you have in your home."

"I live in an apartment," he interrupts.

"Okay, are the windows there casement, crank-style, or wing-fanned," I ask.

"Ma'am," he says angrily, "I am a shut-in. Do you know what that is? A shut-in." He literally spells it for me. "That means I don't move out of this damn wheel chair all day. I have a nurse who bathes me, feeds me, and puts me to bed. Why should I give a crap about the damn window? Tell me that. I'm half blind, and I just..." Suddenly I hear muffled sounds and a loud yell.

A women's voice comes on the line. "Excuse me, this is Mr. Feinland's nurse. Can I help you?"

"Uh, no, that's okay." I hang up. My heart is racing. Hearing the phone slam is

one thing, but that was terrible. I feel so awful, like I should have done something, said something. I make a few more calls, and then go through my lists. Of the two-hundred numbers I've called in the last week, I've gotten only twenty-seven results.

I look at these names again. At least ten of these people actually told me something interesting about themselves, or asked me about myself. I wish I could talk to these people again and find out what some of them are really like. There is a lot of loneliness out there.

I give up calling for a while, and shakily pour myself some coffee. A woman is on *Maury Povitch* crying because her sister always comments on her weight. Get real, that's what sisters are for. A least mine is. But I sit down and watch the two anyway. I start to realize, that even though these people's ridiculous sob stories happen to everyone everyday, these talk-show guests at least have an audience to cry with them. Nobody gives a damn about public opinion on CD players or windows, but the few people who do take the time to answer my questions just want an audience. I think it's time that I talk to Ralph.

"Ralph, I need an audience," I say as he stuffs a hot dog with mustard and chili piled high into his mouth.

"I'm tired Alena," he says. "What do you want?"

I know this will be difficult. I look at the rooster clock over the stove. Almost midnight.

"I need an audience to listen to me. I'm not asking to be on a talk show or anything. I just want to invite a few people over for dinner. Have a conversation, 'cause you're usually tired and..."

He looks at me as if I'm crazy. "What the hell, Alena. I come home from working all day long, and *you* want an audience? Give me a break. Tell it to the weirdos you call everyday."

I stare at him. He has set himself up very nicely. "I do. Besides you do have an audience, Ralph, on your lunch breaks." The words pour out before I can stop them. "You think I don't know what goes on behind my back, Ralph? This is a small town," I say, walking to our bedroom.

He follows me with quick steps, but I pick up Joey, who is sleeping in the crib, and put my finger to my lips. I know Ralph is running one excuse or denial after another through his puny little mind. He's an easy person to figure out. Just an ordinary lady's man with a nice body.

He looks at my face for a minute. I'm thinking that he has probably decided on the truth-but-with-great-remorse approach. "Alena, I'm really..."

"Look, Ralph, this wasn't what I wanted to talk about tonight," I say. I can't go on with where this conversation is now headed without crying, and it surprises me that it hurts so much. "What I really want to do is ask some of the people..."

He interrupts me. "Alena, I don't sleep with her. We eat lunch together sometimes. That's all. Promise."

He's lying. But I don't tell him I know this. "Okay, Ralph, I just want to know

if I can call some people over for dinner sometime." This has turned into a power of will, because I only want one audience right now. I want Ralph. I don't really care if I ever see these people that I call — but I need Ralph to say yes, to win just once.

His face looks as though he will cry or scream. He wants me to weep for joy and tell him how glad I am that he isn't having an affair. I refuse to play his game.

"I don't sleep with her, Alena," he says again.

"Ralph, I can hear your shit some other time. I'm asking you something else now."

"What?" He sits on the bed. I put Joey back in the crib, who miraculously has stayed asleep the whole time. For once I seem to have Ralph's attention. But is this the kind of attention I'm looking for?

"I want to invite a few people over whose numbers I've gotten through this job. I know it sounds really corny, but I've talked to some really lonely people over the line, and I'd like to have a few come over for coffee or something."

He looks at me like I've gone over the edge. I wait impatiently. Just say yes, Ralph. Then it will be over, and we can move on.

"Invite a bunch of loonies over who have nothing else to do but talk to you on the phone?" He is amazed. "No way, Alena. That's stupid. Do you know how many crazies there are in this world? The hell they'll come near you and Joey." I've heard the word crazies before. Bevvie. It seems to be the word for both the strange and the lonely. Only the people who are busy and don't have time to think can use that word. Ralph's protectiveness, which is one of his few merits at times, now disgusts me.

"Just forget it, Alena. We're not going to talk about it." He takes off his work shirt and pants and walks towards the shower.

I follow him. "You can't stop me, Ralph."

"Bullshit, Alena. Just try it." He strides into the bathroom naked without looking back.

The next day I am feeding Joey, and then I begin the weekly ironing. First my blouse I wear to pick up my assignments at Corporate Enterprises, then Ralph's work shirts. When I'm finished, I put on some make-up and try as hard as I can to put my unruly hair back into a clip. I bundle up Joey and walk the seven blocks with him in his stroller over to Nancy's house. She greets me with rollers in her hair.

"Come on in, guys. Do you have extra diapers?" she asks.

I kiss Joey on the cheek and leave. I walk five blocks north and turn onto main street. I open the door into the cool darkness of Ferric's Bar, the only half-way successful pub in Beautford. I find a small booth in the back, and wait for Ralph to show up. It's as if I've got one of those hidden cameras they set up on *Hard Copy*. I'm not cool and distant like those interviewers, though. I get hurt, unfortunately. I don't know what I'm going to say to Ralph if he comes with his pretty lady. If he shows up with her at all.

I said I would shoot any woman dead that I ever caught with my husband. I know it won't happen. I'm not a killer, and I certainly don't care about Ralph that much

to land in jail for him. Something will happen, though. I order a coke and lean back in the dank, worn booth. The place is deserted at 11:30 in the morning.

The waitress sets down a glass, and I fiddle with the zipper on my purse, so that she won't recognize me. Inside my coat pocket, I'm carrying two hundred dollars and the phone numbers of Mr. Feinland and all of the other lonely people I've ever talked to on my job. I also have the phone number of the Nashville bus station. Today I don't think I'll need to call these people, though. My audience is here.

Julie Christine Johnston '96