

The Way It Is

By Boo Geisse

“It’s funny,” he said. “I could be in an underground bomb shelter, sitting around with nothing to do and no one I know, and I could still be happy.”

She shifted the phone from one ear to another.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “I mean, my life’s been out of control since I last saw you. Crazy things have happened to me, but I never feel bad.” He paused. “I have myself, you know? And I’m always right here.”

She imagined him moving his hands away from his body in a straight line, making an invisible path in front of him.

“That’s amazing,” she said. “Because I’m just the opposite.” She paused. “What has happened to you?”

His dad had tried to commit suicide while they were dating. It was Thanksgiving and all his relatives were in town-- they celebrated the beginning of the destruction of the Native Americans in the waiting room of a psych ward. She had driven by the mental hospital everyday during high school without realizing it. The place was big-- a white, colonial-looking building, centered in a few acres of grass. The driveway was long and winding and there were trees on either side of it. Easily the most beautiful place in town. But she hadn’t thought about it much, hadn’t thought about what went on inside those thick walls, or who went on inside of them, until that Thanksgiving, a couple years ago.

So it didn’t surprise her when he said, “Well, my dad’s not doing too well...” and she knew how to comfort him from the previous experience.

“But I’m still happy,” he insisted. “I’ve had some insane things happen to me down here, but no matter what, I still manage to be totally fine.”

She mumbled something about him being crazy for being so carefree. Happiness like he experienced it was something she couldn’t empathize with.

“It’s weird,” she said. “Because we think the same. But there could be nothing happening in my life, and I could still feel completely out of control. Like I have no bearings or base at all.”

He laughed. Not a cruel laugh, nor a mocking laugh, but a laugh that recognized the alienation she felt from years ago. It was a laugh that remembered.

“You have yourself,” she said, “And for you, that’s enough.”

She could hear his smile fade.

“And it’s not for you?”

“I don’t know,” she said. She inhaled deeply, held it in for a moment, and then let the air out suddenly. It made a whooshing noise into the receiver. “I just don’t know.”

The conversation turned more philosophical. He was tired of living by the standards of what he called boring, everyday life, but he said he knew that he could never escape it.

“I mean, wherever you go, whatever you do, you’re still going to wake up in a bed--” he sounded exasperated “—in a house or apartment or whatever. It’s all the same, always.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I know. It seems cruel. But some part of me loves that, the consistency of it all. You know?”

“I guess. But it makes no difference what you do or how or where you do it. Nothing’s going to change.” He grumbled for a few seconds more and she couldn’t exactly hear what he was saying.

“Some part of me finds that incredibly comforting,” she said, meaning to cut him off, “and another part of me wants to call it quits when I think about it like that.”

“I know,” he said.

The conversation rested for a minute, both of them aware of the other’s still presence on the opposite end of the phone line. They were in different states but could hear each other breathing.

She held the phone between her chin and shoulder so that she could type on her computer. In her online in-box, among the notifications, schedule changes and professors’ emails, was an invitation from a friend to sign a petition. Prevent the ‘Artistic’ Death of an Animal! it said.

She clicked on it. Then she gasped. Four pictures of an emaciated dog assaulted her computer screen. Blown up to fill the whole e-mail, they showed the poor animal chained to a wall-- lying down, standing, panting, surrounded by onlookers. His ribs stuck out so far that she thought they might leave the screen and penetrate her chest. She could see into the dog’s eyes. They were not vacant at all.

She read the letter and he said, "Are you okay?"

"There's an guy in Central America," she said, "who's starving a dog and calling it art."

SIGN THE PETITION, the email cried. SAVE THIS DOG AND OTHERS FROM THEIR FATE AT THE HANDS OF EVIL.

"What?" he said.

"Yeah. It says it's supposed to show that the dog is going to die from neglect whether or not he's chained to the wall," she said. She gave him the Internet link for the petition. They both signed it with their email addresses. They were numbers 94,809 and 94,810.

"Jesus. The world is mad," she said.

"It's a crazy place," he said.

On the website of the petition there was a list of other causes in need of signature support. She scrolled down. She didn't reach the end for thirty seconds. Genocide in Darfur, starving children in Ethiopia, Lolita the killer whale dying from being captured and placed in a small, cement tank.

"There's so many," she murmured.

Save the world with music! She clicked on the headline above a picture of four, well-dressed, healthy-looking musicians. They were standing under a dark, wet bridge.

10% of all proceeds go to AIDS research in Canada, the band's website told her. Then, on the side, Donate Now! flashed in purple and red.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"Ways that I can save the world," she joked. She needed to lighten the mood. "Which cause shall you choose? Starvation, AIDS, murder, or torture?"

He didn't respond, so she sobered up. "It's a list of different things that need signatures. To petition or raise money or whatever. You know."

"Yeah."

There was a tense silence between them for a moment.

"I mean, what can you do?" she asked, a bit defensively. "Sit here for a day and sign all these things?"

“Yeah...” He sounded far away. “I don’t know.”

She said that she didn’t know either.

“I guess I try not to think about it,” he said. “Everything’s crazy. And all you can do is deal with what you can. Things are absurd enough in my own life... and I can’t change the way it is.”

“But you’re okay.”

“Yeah.” He sounded hopeful again. “I’m fine.”

They were quiet for another moment, she still thinking about the artist’s dog, and he wondering what she thought of him.

“That’s good,” she finally said. “I’m glad that you’re happy. I’m glad that everything’s okay.”