

Quality Control
by Amy L. Cornell

He works the help line on Tuesday and Thursday night until 2:00am, so it's mostly on those nights she calls. Her soft breathless voice and sweet high pitched laugh always compel him to listen to her.

She calls with tiny unimportant questions about menus and hard drives and software, and whenever she gets him on the phone from wherever she lives, he leads her by the hand with his words. Some say he has a gift. He can explain how computers work in simple language. He spins a good metaphor. He teaches people who treat their machines as bundles of memory chips and circuits to appreciate their logic and design, to respect their intelligence and beauty. He tells stories about the inner workings of a cpu.

The first time she called they talked for 35 minutes as he worked his computer help line magic for her. She asked questions about computers, and he answered them and said nothing else because all calls are monitored for quality control. The voice on the line says so right after the Muzak comes on and plays a strings only rendition of "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band".

He really had no idea who she was or where she lived. The help line is in the middle of nowhere and she was—she could be anywhere. She could be right next door; she could be on another continent. He could have seen her picking out frozen peas in the supermarket last week. He wouldn't know because it was against the rules to ask anything personal. He can usually hear the quality control recorder come on the line which signals him to be extra polite and helpful: to not sigh with frustration or crack sarcastic jokes, or in this case ask a pretty voice where she lived on the off chance it was a very short drive. Does anyone listen to these recordings anyway?

After several weeks of placing little help calls and coincidentally getting him on the line almost every time, she asks him for his name. Because two technicians named Jeff work the line, they call him Jeff P. Jeffrey P.

At staff meetings, their boss always says, "Give it to Jeffrey P.," because the boss knows he'll get it done quickly and with the least customer complaints. He gets all the wild callers and the weird questions and the help line problem cases. His phone queue can sometimes be over an hour long.

So he says to the woman on the line. "I am umm...Jeffrey—Jeff. Umm...ask for Jeff P. That's me, Jeffrey P."

"Jeffrey P," she says, "Well, good to know you" And that's it. She hangs up. No name for her, no other questions.

Then she begins to call and ask for him by name. The line rings and someone three cubes down will yell, "Jeffrey P. you got a lady talking about her hard drive on line 3. Jeffrey P. I'll put her in your queue."

She will stay on hold for a long time waiting for him to finish up a call and click to her. He knows her now by her voice and the sing-songy way she says Jeffrey P and the curious fashion she has of asking questions. Like, "What's this whozamazigit for?" as if he stood right next to her and watched her point at her screen.

He begins to sense that she is lonely, and waits until he is on call to dial the help line. She shares only passing comments about her personal life like: the weather is lousy so I thought I would get some work done on my dissertation, or my advisor has been picking on me for not getting my chapter finished." He begins to daydream about her. He has no other context for her but her voice on the line so he imagines long conversations by phone where they talk of Proust, politics, and curiosities of their days. He can imagine no other romance past the ring of the phone.

One night, very late, he picks up his line to hear her sweet voice, frantic, breathless. "Jeffrey P, I am so glad you are working tonight its me, Val."

"Hi Val," he said, instantly recognizing her voice. He pictured her sitting at her computer with a cup of something hot. He saw a tea bag string coming over the side of the cup and her long hair all knotted up in a big jumbled mess on top of her head. She wore her college sweatshirt and a pair of jeans that were torn at the knee.

Please be aware that this call may be monitored for quality control.

"Jeffrey P," she sounds frantic, "my dissertation, it seems to be gone. Where did it go?"

He takes her by the hand with his voice. "Retrace your steps for me," he says. "What happened last?"

"I was having coffee and suddenly the electricity flashed and now there's a little bomb thingy in the middle of my screen. It's blinking. What should I do?"

Jeffery P, the master of the help line, has no words for her, at first. He leads her through a few perfunctory save techniques which everyone knows are meaningless, but helpliners do them anyway, and after performing this triage he says to her, "I think that's it. The bomb is just that. Your hard drive is...well it's crashed...it's blown up."

The line is quiet. The hum of the distance between them sounds loud. After a long minute she says, "But you are the master Jeffrey P. I tell everyone that you can save anything, fix anything, help anyone. I have a little alter to you here in my office. I light a candle to you every time I log on. You must have something to ask me. Some story to tell me. Some way to get my head into this machine and pull out an answer. You always

do. My dissertation is gone. 250 pages of ethnographic field notes are gone. My life's work."

He nods, and she can't hear him, so he says, "I'm sorry about that m'am. Did you make a back up?"

"No I did not make a back up? Do you make back ups? I was in the middle of my Zen, my creative process. One does not back up one's creative process."

He has nothing to say to her except: I'm Jeffrey P, I live in the middle of no where and answer a computer help line for a living and you could be anywhere and I would like to come right to your house and help you fix your computer. I'd find your life's work. I'd be your hero and then I would take you out for a drink or two. Afterwards we would go to your place and sit on the sofa and I would tell you witty stories about crazy people that call the help line and you would call me Jeffrey P in that special voice you have for me. But he can't say that because this call is being monitored for quality control, and what kind of an idiot does not back up their life's work, so instead he says, "I am sorry, I am so very sorry Val, but there is nothing I can do to help you. I hope you can recreate your life's work. It sounds like it might be important."

Val hangs up the phone to the helpline for the very last time. The dead line rings in his headpiece for several seconds. Even so, when he listens to the archived transcript of their final call together, he can tell he behaved perfectly.