



## Episode 38

### Tell Me On a Sunday, Please

On the face of it, it appears to be a harmless appliance. Better than harmless, actually: it can easily be perceived as beneficial, in the right circumstances.

Imagine the scene. Someone, let's say a debate coach, is driving his aging 1987 Plymouth home from a tournament in the wee hours of the morning. Suddenly a deer springs across the road, exploding into view in the coach's oncoming headlights. A stamp on the brake, a screech of rubber, a skid across the road -- and the valiant, veteran Plymouth thrashes down into the undergrowth at the edge of the woods.

The startled coach clutches his pounding chest as his vehicle comes to a halt. He can't breathe. ..his lungs...the air...the night...the pain. With what seems to be his last cogent thought, he reaches down for the cellular phone he always carries, and by reflex he punches in the emergency number, 911. As he barely manages to utter his last known location, he loses consciousness, his forehead cracking against the steering wheel.

Twenty-four hours later, our coach wakes up in a hospital bed, a few scratches sutured, his wind still restricted by the shock, but otherwise none the worse for the experience. If he been left alone, who knows what would have happened? Hypothermia? Aneurysm? Venereal Disease? Acne? Anomie? Indigence? But thanks to the miracle of the telephone, our coach will go on to torture his students yet another day.

The miracle of the telephone. One of the most beneficial instruments ever invented, a technology that still continues to expand and serve humanity. A. G. Bell should be awarded sainthood, and good old Watson Ineedyou along with him.

However, at the moment, Had Fleece perceives his telephone as anything but beneficial. And he'd be more than happy to see Bell and Watson Ineedyou rot in hell for all eternity, and Don Ameche and Henry Fonda along with them, for that matter.

The telephone. It sits there on the little table next to Had's bed. He is lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He takes a deep breath, sits up, reaches for the phone....

And sinks back again. Phoneless. He can't do it.

And this is Had Fleece we're talking about. Had Fleece with those classical good looks and that inevitable high honor roll average and that perfect 1600 SAT score achieved in his junior year. Had Fleece, Master of the Debate Universe, captain of the Toulouse-Lautrec team, inamorata of the dazzlingly beautiful and sophisticated Cartier Diamond. Yes, that Had Fleece is the person lying on his back like a discarded jellyfish, afraid to make a simple telephone call.

Why?

Because even Had Fleece gets that noxious rumbling in the intestines that comes with a duty that you don't want to perform, and the longer you put it off the worse it gets, but every time you reach for the telephone you pull back and sink even further into despair.

Some people have trouble making that first telephone call, the one where you've met the person and now you want to make contact, but you're not sure if they'll even remember you were born, much less want to talk to you, much less agree to go out with you.

Rejection; or more to the point, fear thereof. Is there anyone on the face of the earth who has not been driven from dialing a number by the fear that the dialee will say, "Who? You? You've got to be kidding?" and summarily hang up on them?

But that's not Had Fleece's problem now. He's not shying away from making that first phone call. No, his dilemma is exactly the opposite: he's shying away from making that last phone call.

I can't trust her, he thinks to himself. He tries to analyze the situation for the thousandth time. He envisions Jasmine Maru at the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial, how he seemed to notice her for the first time and wonder why he hadn't registered her existence earlier. And then he talks to her. And he comes to like her instantly. There is some sort of bond between them. He can't understand it or explain it, but it is there nonetheless. And he wants to see more of her. He wants to go to lunch with her, to talk more.

And then Cartier comes along. Cartier. Golden-haired, in her black suit and sunglasses and sports car -- what guy wouldn't be seduced by all that?

And she wants him. And makes no bones about it. And she tells him that Jasmine is taken anyhow, and isn't free, but she was, and he was.

He opens his eyes. The ceiling in his room is painted a soft cream, the paint thick and spackly. If he stares at it long enough, shapes begin to form. Trees, cats, faces, dragons, a Big Mac, a forest that beckons him into oblivion... He can stare at his ceiling for hours, daydreaming, solving his own problems and the problems of the world without moving a muscle.

But not this time. The more he stares at the ceiling, the worse it seems to get.

Cartier. The Messerschmitt. Friday night in her hotel room.

What kind of girl has her own hotel room? Who would ever expect such a thing?

How could he resist?

Could anyone resist Cartier Diamond?

And then Jasmine had told him the truth. The truth that Cartier couldn't tell. That Cartier made up the whole thing about Jasmine and that novice, that she hadn't played fair.

That is it, of course. Cartier hadn't played fair. Had can understand a lot of things, but not that. He is a sportsman, both in athletics and debate, and in life itself, when you come down to it. Sure, maybe life is a game, a struggle, a contest, but there are rules, and you play by the rules, because it is right, and winning isn't the only thing, it isn't even anything sometimes. Sometimes it is about honor and doing the right thing.

And, too, he is still attracted to Jasmine. Let's not forget that.

But that isn't why he is going to break up with Cartier. He is going to do the right thing, despite what had happened between them Friday night.

He sighs deeply, and this time without sitting up, he reaches for the phone. Holding the receiver in his hand above his head, he punches in the number.

The line is busy.

He cuts off the line.

All right. She's there. He'll talk to her. He's started now. He's on his way.

But there's another number too. He has it on a piece of paper in his jeans pocket, and he pulls that paper out and stares at it. He's going to compound the problem. An end call and a start call, one right after the other.

He punches in the number from his pocket.

"Hello?"

"Jasmine?"

"Yes?"

"It's Had. Had Fleece."

There is a pause on the line. Finally, "Hello, Had."

"I have to talk to you, Jasmine."

"Oh."

"It's about me and you. And Cartier."

Silence.

"I'm going to say this all at once, otherwise I never will. I like you, Jasmine. I liked you a lot when we talked last week. I think you're right. Cartier tricked me away from you. I'm going to break up with her, and I'd like you to go out with me." He breathes out. "There. I said it."

"You're 'going' to break up with her? You haven't broken up with her yet?"

"Her line is busy."

"Are you sure? Or are you just making sure you have me to fall back on first?"

"I wouldn't do that, Jasmine!"

"How do I know that, Had?"

"Because I wouldn't. You have to trust me."

"I have no reason to trust you. I saw you and Cartier together, hanging all over each other. I know the two of you were together doing God knows what Friday night. I'm not an idiot."

"It's over with Cartier. Trust me. I mean, it hardly ever even got started."

"Tell that to Cartier."

"I'm trying to."

"Then you can talk to me. Not until then. All right."

"Are you okay, Jasmine? You don't sound right."

"I'm okay."

"Are you crying?"

"I told you, I'm okay. Good-bye, Had."

"Jasmine..."

The line goes dead.

Damn it. He wasn't expecting that.

But what was he expecting? That Jasmine would just fall into his arms?

It's never that easy, is it?

He punches the other number. If he waits, it will make everything even worse. It's starting to get confusing. Maybe he shouldn't have called Jasmine. Maybe he should have called--

"Hello."

"Hi, Cartier."

"Hi, Had." That syrupy, low, seductive voice. It almost hurts to hear it.

"I've got to talk to you, Cartier."

"Talk away. But be quick. I've got to run to the mall with Daddy in about five minutes. What's the matter?"

He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes and dives in. "I don't think we should see each other anymore."

There is silence at the other end of the line.

"Cartier?"

"What did you say?"

"I said I don't think we should--"

"Are you dumping me, Had?"

"Well, I--"

"Are you dumping me over the telephone? I don't believe it."

"Cartier?"

"I've never been dumped in my life. And certainly not over the telephone. When there's dumping to be done, I'm the one who does it."

"It's not like I'm, like, dumping-dumping you. We can still be--"

"No we cannot! And no, you are not dumping me! We have a date Friday night, don't we? To go to the movies?"

"Yes," Had says hesitantly.

"Then be there!"

The noise of the phone banging down on the receiver crashes against his ear and the connection is cut off.

On the face of it, it appears to be a harmless appliance. Better than harmless, actually: it can easily be perceived as beneficial, in the right circumstances.

But the telephone has not been beneficial to Had Fleece on this particular Sunday afternoon.

He places the receiver back on the table next to him, and goes back to staring at the ceiling. If he looks long enough he can see palm trees and sandy beaches and the pounding surf.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

---

**Will Had show up for his date next Friday?**

**Are Had and Cartier kaput?**

**Will Jasmine be waiting on the rebound?**

**Does anybody care about the Republicans anymore?**

**Where did all the Calista Flockheart websites go?**

**Take a walk on the wild side next Wednesday when we ignore all of the above, but do answer the age-old question: "Cellulite: Cottage cheese for the thighs or a smaller portable telephone?"**