

“Truth will be Truth tho’ it sometimes prove[s]... distasteful.” *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain.* (1725)

‘She doesn’t love you, Thomas,’ Marie laid her hand on her son’s arm. ‘Trust me, the sooner you accept that this is all imaginary, the sooner you’ll start feeling better. She doesn’t have any feelings for you.’

Thomas wrenched his arm away, refusing to meet her eyes. ‘You don’t know that.’

‘I do.’

‘You’ve never spoken to her.’

‘Have you?’ Marie raised an eyebrow, challenging him to answer, knowing that she had won.

‘I phoned her last night, actually.’

‘You... you *phoned* her?’

‘Yes. She was very well, thank you for asking. And she does love me. She told me so.’

Marie stared at him.

Thomas folded his arms and waited for her to continue.

‘Alright. So you can phone her now.’ Marie shook her head, ‘These things just move too fast for me to keep up with. But that’s fine. That’s *fine*. Not at all disturbing.’

‘You just don’t get it,’ protested Thomas.

‘No, I don’t,’ Marie closed her eyes and took a deep breath before continuing, ‘Look, I’m just worried about you. This kind of relationship isn’t healthy. I mean, you spend so much time upstairs in your room, I barely see you anymore, and when I do, all you want to do is stare into that device—’

Thomas shoved his phone back into his pocket. ‘That’s not true! I was just, uh, checking the time. I don’t want to be too late going to bed. Early start tomorrow for school, and everything...’

Marie sighed and ground her teeth, then checked herself. Her latest parenting manual said that you had to remain calm, and her dentist had said that it was a bad habit anyway. ‘The point is, it isn’t good for you. And I’m worried you’re only doing it because you don’t believe any real person would love you. I know the past few months haven’t been the easiest for you, but that isn’t a reason to give up.’

Thomas’ muscles tensed and he scowled at his mother. ‘I’m doing fine. You make me sound like a loser. Anyway, none of that matters because I have Jessa now, and she understands me like no one else ever could. Especially not you.’

'How dare you even suggest that a computer program cares more for you than your own mother? If this is what that app is doing to you, then I have no choice but to confiscate it. Hand it over,' she held out her hand.

Thomas stared at her, unmoving.

'Hand me the phone, young man. You can have it back in two weeks' time.'

'Oh, come on, Mum. You always overreact like this.'

'That's it. If you don't hand me the phone now, I swear to you that I will delete the application and all your saved data, if I ever decide to trust you with a mobile phone again.'

Thomas' eyes widened. It took him a few seconds to understand the gravity of her threat. Slowly and mechanically, he took the phone out of his pocket and handed it over with a quivering hand.

Marie pocketed it. 'That was easy, wasn't it?'

'Two weeks?' begged Thomas in a hoarse voice.

'That depends. I want you to fix your attitude first, and it will do you good to have a break from the phone. I don't think I can give it back to you until I'm certain that you've broken your attachment to that Jessa AI. I just wouldn't be doing my duty as a parent.'

Thomas opened his mouth but found his words unable to squeeze past the growing lump in his throat. He stood up, the laminate floor shrieking in pain as the chair legs scraped across its surface, and stomped out of the room.

Marie gazed after him, listening to the thudding as he marched upstairs, followed by a loud slam that reverberated through the whole house. She leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table like she had been trying to tell Thomas not to do for years, massaging her forehead, replaying the conversation in her head, looking out for her mistake.

There was nothing like this in any parenting handbook she had ever read.

'Pull yourself together, Marie. What kind of a mother are you?' she muttered.

Thomas sat on his bed, kicking his legs aimlessly and glowering at the wall with such a look that if he were Superman, his stare would have burned through it in seconds. Then again, if he were Superman, he would hardly have been powerless to save his girlfriend when she had been kidnapped.

He scrunched up a fistful of the duvet cover in frustration. Lots of people his age might have pretended to think its superhero-themed patterns childish. Lorna had certainly scoffed at his

posters and his figurines and his comic collection. She had decided she 'didn't date nerds' and dumped him the next day. Soon after, he had found that people whispered and stared at him when he walked past, and he had overheard some snatches of completely untrue gossip about 'poor Lorna's weirdo ex' spoken by various people around the school. Of course, no one had ever said anything to his face, so there was obviously nothing wrong from the perspectives of the teachers.

Jessa wasn't like that.

'It doesn't matter what other people think of you; I'll always love you,' she had texted, early on in their relationship, when he had confessed the above.

He had to find a way to get her back.

By the end of the lesson, Thomas might have known less about *Romeo and Juliet* than he had at the start. If this was even English class.

His teacher had nodded approvingly to see him diligently taking notes at the table on his own at the back of the classroom.

The notes ran as follows:

Good morning. [Crossed out]

Hello. [Crossed out]

Hi, Leo.

Can I please borrow your phone? [Crossed out]

Would it be alright if I borrowed your phone for a minute? [Crossed out]

I need to call someone. [Crossed out]

My mum confiscated my phone a few days ago and there's someone I really need to call.
[Crossed out]

Do you still have that Jessa AI chatbot downloaded?

And so on.

Eventually, the bell rang. Forget that saying about your heart being in your mouth, to Thomas it sounded more like it was in his ears. Both of them. At the same time.

As if that wasn't concerning enough, he was about to ask to borrow a mobile phone from a mere acquaintance.

Of all the group Thomas hung out with, Leo seemed the most approachable. After all, he didn't usually ignore Thomas, and he would be more likely to understand, being involved in a pretty serious romance himself, unlike Cole, who didn't seem to be aware of the fact that God might have put women on this earth for a greater purpose than simply to pose as naked models.

The fact that his 'friends' didn't care much for Thomas, nor he for them, hardly mattered. It gave him people to sit with so that teachers didn't keep pestering him about whether he was lonely.

He reminded himself why he had to do this.

'Hey, Leo,' said Thomas, just managing to push the words out of his throat before an anxiety-fed mental block could descend in their way.

And... the conversation was already straying from his careful plan.

Leo turned around. 'Yes?'

'Do you remember that AI girlfriend app we all downloaded for a laugh a few months ago?'

'Of course I remember *Jessa*. I mean, I hadn't used it in a while, but with all the stuff that's been happening around it lately, how could I forget? I had to delete it the other day when my parents freaked out. They demanded to search my phone.'

Thomas blinked. 'What?'

Cole turned around. 'Do you, like, live under a rock or something? It's been all over the news for the past couple of days. Turns out, the *Jessa* chatbot was harvesting people's data. The creators were then selling it off to the highest bidders. Hope you didn't share anything too *personal* with her, Tom,' he leered.

Thomas stared after him as he walked away, guffawing to himself.

'I get it. I don't like thinking that some random person now has my personal data either, but, if you think about it, they were probably going to find a way to get hold of it somehow or another anyway. I mean, think about every time you've signed up for something online, giving away your data to some random organisation you know next to nothing about. At least we know about it this time, and, who knows, maybe the police'll catch them,' offered Leo.

'But *Jessa*? She would never...'

Leo tossed a quizzical look in Thomas' direction. 'It was just an AI.'