

# Net Switch

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“Mental institutions don’t relieve the mind of misery, they only create more chaos where overcrowding exists. As the patient, I feel withdrawn from life because they, the doctors, are ignoring me and are not improving my situation so I can get back into society. This has been my home for over a year and it still troubles me to talk about what brought me here. My mind is my own prison and sharing it with anyone else won’t change my predicament as long as the evil that put me here continues to enjoy freedom. Still, I know I must comply with their requests if I want a chance to be discharged from this miserable place.”

I sense his discomfort as he shifts in his chair from time to time. I lean forward, placing my hand on his leg, and continue with my plan.

“I don’t mean to start our visit by complaining. Every week I look forward to seeing you and you never fail me, so I apologize for my bitter mood. But have you ever felt as if the room’s air is seeping out and your body starts itching from impatience? This place inflicts impatience; a cancerous growth caused by the restrictions. I can’t even go outside without a shadow lurking over me. A mixture of antiseptics, urine and chlorine has seeped into my skin, making it my permanent fragrance.

“Please don’t look at me that way. I can’t bear it if you pity me. I need your strength and assistance to get me out of here. Take what I tell you about this place and use it in my defense.”

He only shifts once.

“I was going to wait to tell you about my predicament, but I already started with a bad temperament so I might as well continue. As you know, I’ve kept a journal since I could remember. Well, the doctors have encouraged me to keep writing...they say it’s therapeutic. I think they’re just nosy and want to use my journal to their advantage to break my spirit. Anyway, at the end of this week I have a meeting with the doctors in which I’ll give them my journal. If they feel my journal entries and attitude have improved, they’ll decide whether or not to release me. Before I give them my journal, I need to share it with you. I want you to read it and understand what I’ve been through so you can help fight for my release. You are my last chance to get out of here. I need you more than ever.”

A smile...he must be fine with it.

“Will you do this for me? I know it’s presumptuous of me to ask, since you already make weekly visits, but I have no one else to turn to. Everyone abandoned me long ago. I promise to make it up to you if the doctors are convinced I’m rehabilitated and discharge me.”

*You’re being pushy. Show him your gratitude.*

“Where are my manners? Here I am asking for your help when I never thanked you for visiting me. You’re the only one who takes the time out of your busy schedule. It’s so good to see you again. You look as handsome as ever. Here. Here’s my journal. I hope you won’t think less of me after reading it.”

**SUNDAY, JANUARY 13, 2008:** Good evening Friends,

A snowstorm hit the Chicago area this weekend making me a prisoner in my own home. I've sampled all the places in the area—Chinese food to pizza—that were willing to deliver IF I was willing to throw in a few extra dollars. Assholes. Even goodwill comes with a price. Anyway, I watched television for as long as possible until one program began resembling the next. I picked up the TV remote clicking the channel button up and down until I hit power to silence the room. It was then that I realized a chill had drifted into the living room. My feet hit the floor and I walked to the window, pressed my finger against the condensation, and started writing my initials. SH. (Look out world, Sydney Hayes is here!) I curled my hand into a fist, pressed the side of it against the window, and wiped it away.

I went back to the couch, threw the yellow chenille blanket over me, curled my toes into the fabric and pulled the blanket up to my chest before placing my laptop on my lap. I booted it up, read e-mails and joined a regional chat room through instant message. There was a list of names with emoticons and different colored conversations streaming across the screen, one after the other, moving faster than I could read them. (Great! At least I'm not the only loser doing nothing). I kept the default name 'Newbie' and tried to catch up on the conversation and join in when I felt confident enough. In the midst of the expressed boredom that bounced from one name to the other, I added my two cents about someone pissing off Mother Nature—maybe someone telling her she's fat. Nothing! My comment moved up the screen and disappeared in the frantic speed of the other typers.

While I was trying to keep up with the silent stream of conversations, a smaller window popped up from someone named Arcane texting LOL! and asking how I was doing. Mind you, this was my first time in chat (ever!), so I didn't know what to do other than close out of the window.

After a while, this unusual way of talking to people somewhat reassured me; I didn't feel alone anymore, like a loser, since reading that others were experiencing the same lethargy. A few minutes later, another window from Arcane popped up on top, again asking how I was doing. I thought, "This one is a persistent bugger" (Bugger. I love saying that with a British accent. You little buhger). \*giggling buhger\* The idea of someone entering my virtual space without an invitation bothered me. BUT...it was a chat room...where people come to talk to nameless, faceless others. It took a few seconds for me to find my place again—where to type and send a response. I said I was doing fine and he came back with "Good to hear. Hilarious what you said about Mother Nature" and so began our exchange.

Newbie: Thanks. I didn't think anyone noticed.

Arcane: Is this your first time here?

Newbie: Yeah, how did you know?

Arcane: Um...your username. I thought I would try to contact you again in case you accidentally closed the window.

My facial muscles clenched when I read his comment. I wasn't quite sure if he expected me to respond, but not much time passed before the conversation continued.

Arcane: How's the weather by you?

Newbie: Disastrous. I'm holed up in my condo waiting for the shovels and snowplows to dig me out.

Arcane: Tough winters in Chicago.

Newbie: That they are.

Arcane: Do you have another name besides Newbie?

I sat thinking about whether or not I should give my first name.

Arcane: No problem. Just asking. Would it be too rude if I ask if you're a woman? I like to know whether I should flirt or high-five you. That's an indication I'm a guy.

Again, I stared at my screen wondering how to respond to the question. I let his earlier intrusion pass, but now it felt like he was getting too personal. Asking how I'm doing is fine—but asking my name—too close for comfort.

Newbie: I gotta go. It was nice talking to you.

I closed out of the window, disconnected from chat, and sat staring straight ahead. My thoughts found the loneliness I've been trying to escape from, coaxing it back until my eyes squeezed together, expelling the tears. The bitterness of loneliness always comes unannounced...and uninvited.

Well, it's time for bed.

Good night, my friends, I'll see you tomorrow. Let's hope it stops snowing and I get out of this condo before I go mad. GGGAAAHHH!

**MONDAY, JANUARY 14, 2008:** Hey Friends,

It's me again. The law firm I work for is closed for the day, so I started clearing out my overburdened closets (I've been ignoring them for so long!) to make room for future clutter. ☺ Grime and dust clung to my touch, eventually spreading over my body and into my mouth, coating my tongue. YUCK! My garbage is growing fat from being indoors, similar to how I am feeling.

*Because you are fat.*

*You always say that when you get restless.*

*Stop!* Massaging my temples, I walked to the living room window to smell the falling snow. Swollen flakes fell slowly and aimlessly like fire ash, accumulating on the ground and causing the snowplows to work overtime. Eventually the noise disappeared, and when I opened the window I could almost hear the snow effortlessly drop on top of the already accumulated snow. I hung my arm out the window and swooped down to get a handful of snow from the window sill. I stuck out my tongue and put it against the snow pile in my hand until water droplets fell onto my shirt. The rest was tossed out the window before I closed myself back inside, wiping my wet hand on my shirt where it was already wet.

I sat with the television off for some time. The ticking clock ricocheted off the walls. Internal whispers were getting louder to the point where television wouldn't drown them out. I needed to connect with others—even if it was an invisible world. I wanted to expel this creepy loneliness. It didn't take long to find the chat room from yesterday, so I entered again as Newbie. At first, I became transfixed on the colored dialogue screaming for attention. Each person threw out their feelings, assuming everyone sat licking their lips with anticipation about what they had to say. I started typing to snap out of my reverie, asking if someone would please have a talk with Mother Nature. A window popped up with Arcane's name and a "Hey!" (This guy again!) I strummed my fingers on my leg, debating whether or not I wanted to talk to him.

*Of course you want to talk to him. Apparently, he's the only one willing to talk to you.*

My shoulders lifted and fell with thoughts of knowing I had nothing else better to do.

Newbie: Hi. How was your day?

Arcane: Good. I didn't have work, so I caught up with things I've put off.

Newbie: Sounds like our days were the same.

Arcane: What do you have planned for tonight?

Newbie: Oh, I don't know. Maybe a glass of wine and some online conversation.

Arcane: I might join you, but I'll take a beer instead of wine.

We were keeping things simple—small talk about how much takeout food we could consume in a

weekend. The lightness led to laughter. Arcane told me about a pizza he ordered the other day that had the makings of someone grooming themselves. He could have sworn he found a few fingernails underneath the gooey cheese (I think I threw up in my mouth) ☹. Then he proceeded to make me laugh with more stories, and when it was my turn to talk, his interest seemed genuine. Go Figure! I have to go into the virtual world to find someone I like.

We talked for several hours in our private chat about work and trying to see who could make the other laugh the most. The creepy loneliness that usually follows me from room to room during the day steps aside for Arcane. He is attentive to everything I say—a magnet drawing us together. Arcane wanted to know what I did for a living and what I did in my spare time. The information flowed as easily as the wine and I didn't realize how late it was or what I told him. I lifted the bottle to see how much I had drunk. EMPTY! Each glass of wine opened new discussions while stirring emotions. It was a combination of the stream of conversation, the wine, and the feeling I meant something to someone that made me like him more as we moved from one subject to the next. I mean...this happens all the time, right? People conversing in the virtual world? There is absolutely no reason for me to feel weird or worried...should I?

Arcane's strong whiskey personality tapered into a smooth finish. He never seems at a loss for words, yet still listening to me without drowning out my voice. He has a refreshing interest that appears to have been lost on my generation. Any subject, my work, social or family life—doesn't bore him. I told him I had a sister, and he confessed he had a brother. Our trade of information made things comfortable. I didn't feel like I was under a spotlight—giving of myself, yet unable to see who he was. He has definitely piqued my curiosity, which I plan to satisfy. The conversation ended with both of us saying we'd probably see each other here again sometime.

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