

Chris
Higgins

Telling
You
Straight

WOULD YOU
RATHER?



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Amy and I have been messing about in my room all afternoon. We've gone through our favourite playlist, prancing along in front of the full-length mirror, me singing into my hairbrush, Amy wailing into the hair straighteners. We've run through our old dance routines and tried out some new ones and now we've moved on to practising our flirting technique.

Actually, Amy is practising *her* flirting technique. She's keen on a boy at school who's a bit slow on the uptake. Me, I'm not too sure if I want to flirt at all. I don't think I'm ready to be *in lurve*, not since I've seen what it's done to Ezzie. Like Mum says, it's a messy business, romance, because it involves men.

Even flirting is complicated. Amy is explaining to me how she thinks Mitch likes her but he won't make the first move.

'You do it then.'

‘What? Like me put my arm round him?’

‘Yeah.’

‘No way!’

‘OK, be a bit more subtle. Say something to make him put his arm round you.’

‘Right. Good idea.’ She thinks for a minute then her face lights up. ‘OK, I’m ready, let’s give it a go.’

‘What?’

‘You be Mitch and I’ll be me.’

‘I’m not putting my arm around you!’

‘I’m not asking you to! Well, I am, but as Mitch, not you. Come on, Flick, it’s known as acting! Improvisation! You’re good at that.’

‘All right.’ Amy always knows how to get around me. Flattery works every time. She beams at me, then strikes a pose, body hunched, shivering, arms wrapped around herself. Oh dear. She’s such a ham actor.

‘I’m freezing . . .’ she whimpers.

‘Put a jumper on then.’

‘You’re not supposed to say that!’ she barks, falling immediately out of role.

‘Why not? That’s what Mitch would say!’

‘No he wouldn’t!’ She thinks about it for a second and then says, honestly, ‘Well, even if he would, you’re not supposed to! You’re supposed to be helping!’

‘I am helping! Stay in role.’

She groans and collapses on to my bed, throwing her arm over her face, the picture of despair. ‘There’s no point,’ she wails. ‘It’s not going to work. He doesn’t even know I exist.’

‘I thought you said he was just too shy to make the first move?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Men!’ She sighs deeply then rolls over and props herself up on her elbows. Her face breaks into a grin.

‘Daddy or chips?’

‘Chips!’ This is the signal to play our favourite game. It came from a TV advert for oven chips. There was this really cute little kid with an older sister and an annoying dad. The dad kept pinching the cute kid’s chips so the older sister says to her, ‘Daddy or chips?’ meaning, which one do you like best, and the cute kid thinks about it and answers truthfully, ‘Chips.’ Ezzie and I used to love this advert, because the dad in it was just like our dad and he used to pinch our chips too.

So we started up this game that is all about choices. They can be serious choices or silly ones, but the rule is, you have to think about them carefully, even if they’re so ridiculous they make you roll about on the floor, shrieking with laughter.

But Ezzie hasn’t felt like shrieking with laughter for a while so I’ve started playing it with Amy instead.

I have to admit, she's pretty good at it. Better than at acting, anyway.

'I've got a good one!' Amy sits upright. 'Ready?'

'Ready.'

'Would you rather . . . have one huge eye in the middle of your forehead or three small eyes?'

'Nice one!' I consider it carefully. 'Can I have two eyes at the front and one at the back?'

'No, they're all at the front.'

'Pity. Not so useful.' I think about it for a while, weighing up all the implications. 'I'd still be able to see more though. And I could rest one if it was tired.'

'You'd need a massive pair of sunglasses though.'

'A massive trio of glasses, you mean. That would be cool!'

'Hmm.' Amy's not convinced. 'Don't know if Specsavers do them. And anyway, what would you do if one of your eyes needed glasses and the others didn't?'

'Easy, I'd wear a contact lens. Or a monocle.'

Amy giggles. 'A monocle! That's funny. But think about it, you'd take forever getting ready to go out. You'd have three eyes to make up . . . eyeshadow, highlighter, liner, mascara . . . that's expensive too.' She thinks for a moment then says, 'No, I'm going for one. It's easier and cheaper.'

‘I’m going for three. Then if anything happened to the other two I’d still have one left. And it would be useful for driving.’

‘You can’t drive.’

‘I know, but I will one day. Ezzie’s learning.’

‘Is she? Is your dad teaching her?’

‘No, he thinks she should have proper lessons to get her started. He and Mum booked her ten lessons for her seventeenth birthday. She’s having one right now.’

‘Lucky thing. I can’t wait to learn to drive.’

Amy can’t wait for anything. She lives life in the fast lane and she’s always miles in front of me. Music, hair, fashion, gossip, she’s up there in the know because she spends her life reading all the mags, watching TV and checking out the net. It’s like she’s programmed to Fast Forward and I’m programmed to Play.

Oh no, I sound really boring! I’m not, honest! I love doing stuff. I’m really good at acting and improvisation – everyone says so – and I love writing stories. One day I’m going to be a journalist or work in television, like Auntie Libby. But Amy will be the celeb and I’ll be the one interviewing her.

I read my stories to Grandma Liz. She’s my biggest fan. I’ve got two grannies, Grandma Liz and Grandma Fizz. Ezzie was named Elizabeth after Grandma Liz who’s Dad’s mother and I was named Felicity after Grandma

Fizz who's Mum's mother. We don't see much of Grandma Fizz because she lives in Scotland but Grandma Liz and Grandpa Bert live nearby so we see a lot of them.

We don't see anything of Aunty Libby though. She's my dad's older sister. She went off to university when my dad was little and never came back. I don't think I've ever met her and Dad can hardly remember her himself. She's really big in television now, though she's not a face you'd recognize. You see her name on the credits, she's a director. It must be so interesting, though personally I'd rather be in front of the camera. She worked her way up, Grandma says, and now she's really important.

It's a shame we don't see her. 'She's too busy,' Grandpa says and looks a bit sad. I don't think I'd ever be too busy to see my own mum and dad. Or my annoying little brother and his wife and their two amazing daughters. But then I'm not famous.

Yet.

We do get some seriously expensive birthday and Christmas presents though from Aunty Libby and Uncle Jay (he's American) and their kids, Sam and Ellie. Mum always feels she has to match them. I heard her moaning about it last Christmas as she wrapped up presents.

'Forking out for kids I've never even met,' she complained.

‘Don’t do it then,’ said Dad, matter-of-fact as ever.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ she muttered, tearing off Sellotape with her teeth. ‘She’s your sister!’

‘She doesn’t mean anything to me,’ he said, shrugging his shoulders. ‘I wouldn’t know her if I bumped into her in Tesco’s.’

‘That’s not the point,’ said Mum crossly. ‘Anyway, I bet she wouldn’t be seen dead in Tesco’s. She’s more of a Selfridges person.’

‘Is she?’ I asked with interest.

‘I don’t know,’ she shrugged. ‘I’ve never met her.’

I’d love to meet her, my famous Aunty Libby.

I’d love to be on the telly too.

Fat chance.

‘Your turn.’ Amy prompts me back to the present. ‘Daddy or chips?’

‘OK.’ I wander over to the window for inspiration and look down into the street. A car pulls up outside, with a Driving School sign on the roof. I watch as Ezzie gets out awkwardly and stands upright, rubbing her back.

‘Would you rather . . . have a baby in your teens or a baby in your forties?’

‘I’d rather not have one at all,’ says Amy. ‘I hate babies.’

‘You’ve got to choose,’ I say. ‘It’s the game.’

‘I know that. When I’m in my forties. Definitely.’

There's no way I'd want one now. I can't think of anything worse.'

Me neither.

'Yeah, forties,' I say emphatically. 'No contest. Come on, let's go downstairs. Ezzie's back.'

In the kitchen Mum and Grandma Liz are sitting at the table, drinking tea and flicking through a pile of holiday brochures showing pictures of wide stretches of white sand dotted with stripy parasols and impossibly blue seas. Mum's always doing this, it's a hobby of hers.

'Don't know why you bother,' I say, sitting down beside them. 'We never go anywhere.'

Mum looks up. 'I can live in hope. It's not for lack of trying. It's your dad's fault.'

'He never wants to go on holiday,' I explain to Amy. 'He says he does, but then he always makes excuses. Like he's got too much on at work. Or, when Buster was alive, he wouldn't put him into kennels.'

'Well,' Mum consoles, 'at least he hasn't got that excuse any more.'

After a moment's silence for Buster, our recently departed and deeply missed mongrel, I resume the attack. 'No, but now he says we can't afford it. Didn't stop him getting himself a season ticket for the footie though.'

'Martin's a home bird,' says Grandma fondly. 'Always has been.'

‘It’s not fair. I’m the only person in my class who’s never been abroad,’ I grumble. OK, I don’t actually know if this is true or not. But most people do seem to go on foreign holidays and I’ve never even been to London!

‘Never mind, Flick. When we leave school we can do a gap year together before uni. Go round the world,’ says Amy.

‘Yeah! We can backpack round Australia!’

‘Go to America and swim with the dolphins!’

‘Go to Peru and follow the Inca trail!’

‘Can I come with you?’ asks Mum.

‘Whatever next!’ laughs Grandma.

‘We can be beach bums in Thailand!’ I shriek, getting carried away.

‘Or in the Caribbean! I’ve always wanted to go to the Caribbean.’

‘We can visit Cambodia!’

‘Where’s Cambodia?’

‘Next to Vietnam,’ a voice says quietly. Ezzie has slipped in beside me like a wraith in a fog. Too late I realize it was her dreams I’d been shouting out. Silence falls across the table.

‘Any tea left?’ she asks and stretches forward to pick up the pot, her T-shirt riding up to display her back, still tanned from last summer’s sun, and the elegant, tightly knotted line of her spine.

From behind you can't see the round, swelling mound of her stomach.

'I'll make some fresh,' says Grandma and takes the teapot gently from Ezzie's hand with a small, painful smile.



It's Ezzie's fault that I'm known as Flick. She couldn't manage Felicity when I was born. Well, it is a bit of a mouthful, isn't it? Felicity Pottery! Actually, I think she did me a favour, I'm more of a Flick than a Felicity, which means happiness, joy or rapture. That's a lot to live up to.

My sister is gorgeous. She reminds me of a graceful, startled gazelle, because she's slightly built, with impossibly long and slender legs and clear creamy skin, and she has wide brown eyes with sweeping, dark lashes. Gazelles are delicate and beautiful and spend their time in large herds.

Me, I'm more of a meerkat. They're those funny little creatures with long necks and little upturned noses that sit up on their haunches to see what's going on. They like living in large extended family groups and they're very inquisitive, constantly turning their heads

from side to side so they don't miss a thing. That's me, that's what I do!

Though hair-wise, I'm different. I'm more like the grey crowned crane we saw in Edinburgh Zoo last year when we were on holiday. At least, that's what Dad said. He had a point. It had a crown of stiff golden feathers, not grey at all, which stood up round its head, just like mine. Lucky old me, I got to inherit Dad's frizz. His is dark and he keeps it cropped short, but mine is blonde and hovers around my head in a mad cloud. From the back I look like a dandelion clock.

Ezzie, I forgot to say, has straight fair hair that she got from Mum which she wears trailing sleekly down her back. Normally you would expect the ugly sister to hate the beautiful Cinderella but I don't. No one could hate Ezzie, she's lovely. She's so nice and kind, people gravitate around her, like bees to a honeypot. She sees the best in everyone and she's one of those people who picks up waifs and strays and I'm not just talking cats and dogs here, even though she was the one who brought Buster home all those years ago when he was a starved, shivering, cowering mutt and coaxed him back to exuberant life.

Maybe that's why she took up with Spud in the first place.

Poor Spud. She met him at college. He wasn't a

student, he was working in the kitchens. Trust Ezzie to start talking to him even though most people didn't even notice him in his white overalls with his dreadlocks hidden under a hairnet, swishing his damp cloth over the tables, clearing up everyone's mess.

She was going places, our Ezzie. She's a bit like Amy, on the go all the time, full of ideas, can't wait to get on with the next part of her life. But, unlike Amy, she's a planner. She had it all mapped out. A levels, university, career in some branch of medicine. Saving lives or saving souls, that's our Ezzie. But before that, as soon as her A levels were over, she would be off on her promised gap year with her mates as a reward for all her hard work. Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam, Cambodia and finally South America, to work with street kids because she'd watched a documentary on the telly and wanted to go and help.

At first Spud was just another one in a long line of blokes Ezzie brought through the door. He was different from the usual fit, loudly confident students Ezzie normally brought home though. Different enough to make Dad's eyes widen with shock. 'Who the hell's that?' he asked as Spud, after a strangled 'All right?' disappeared upstairs behind Ezzie, long and stringy in his scruffy jeans and studded leather jacket, a row of rings through his left eyebrow, hair tied back into thick, matted coils.

‘Spud,’ I said. ‘He’s a mate of Ezzie’s. From college.’

‘Spud?’ he said, shaking his head. ‘What sort of name is that?’ He turned to Mum and added, ‘Not exactly a King Edward, is he?’ For some reason they both considered this to be highly amusing.

‘No,’ I said. ‘He works in the kitchens.’

Dad’s eyebrows nearly shot through the top of his skull but Mum shook her head warningly: ‘Cool it, Marty. It’s just a phase.’

I don’t know how long phases are supposed to last but I’ve got a feeling Mum thought it would be a matter of weeks and Dad hoped it would be a matter of minutes. Neither of them were right. Gradually Spud seemed to become a permanent fixture around the place, loping along behind Ezzie like a devoted greyhound. He was no trouble, as Mum pointed out. He never said much, though when he was in Ezzie’s room with her you could hear them chatting and laughing together. We were all a bit surprised; he didn’t seem Ezzie’s type.

‘He’s not stopping her from getting on with her studies, is he?’ asked Grandma who was round one night when Spud was leaving. Ezzie had gone outside with him to say goodnight. That’s a euphemism for having a snog on the doorstep. I know because I’ve watched them out of my bedroom window.

‘Don’t think so,’ said Mum. ‘She stays in more

nowadays than she ever did. I don't think he can afford to take her out. He's not got much of a job.'

Grandma sniffed. 'She could do better than him,' she said.

'Liz!' warned Grandpa. 'It's nothing to do with you.'

'I'm just saying, that's all!'

'She's not going to marry him!' laughed Mum. 'You know Ezzie, she's got her future mapped out. It's different nowadays, they don't settle down like we did.'

'No, you know what girls are like,' said Dad, playing up to Grandpa. 'It's like shopping, see, Bert. See something, take it home, try it on, change your mind, take it back the next day. Our Ezzie'll get fed up with old Maris Piper soon and take him back to Tesco's. Swap him for a better class of spud.'

Grandpa chuckled. Dad took a big swig of beer and smacked his lips, looking pleased with himself as if he'd said something profound. Mum rolled her eyes at me then leaned over to pat Grandma on the arm.

'Don't you worry, Liz,' she said. 'It's not serious. She's off on her travels before long. It'll soon run its course.'

Grandma didn't look convinced. I remember when Ezzie came back in a couple of minutes later. Her face was flushed and she looked as if she was glowing inside. I'd never seen her look so happy.

She doesn't look happy now.

'How did the driving lesson go?' asks Mum.

'All right.' Ezzie studies her nails intently while a pulse beats visibly in her throat. She's trying not to cry, I can tell. A tear spills over and rolls treacherously down her cheek. She scrubs it away angrily.

'What's up?' asks Mum gently.

'Nothing!' she says, then, wildly, 'Everything!' Her face is wet now as the tears fall, fast and furious. Mum gets up and puts her arms round her and Ezzie turns into her, weeping.

'It's not fair!' she wails.

'No, it's not,' agrees Mum, patting her back. Grandma sits down with a fresh pot of tea. She looks as if she's going to cry too.

Poor Ezzie. Her life's on hold.

She'll do her A levels, all being well, but everything else has come to a halt. Gap year, travelling, university, medical career. Girly nights in, crazy nights out, skimpy tops, micro skirts. Gigs, pop festivals, beach parties, clubbing. Illicit cocktails, spicy curries, her favourite prawns, even an innocent cup of coffee. All gone.

She's going to have a baby. By Spud. Lanky, uncoordinated, inarticulate Spud with his scruffy studded leather jacket, strangled words and dreadlocks.

She didn't plan that one.

‘What happened then?’ asks Mum quietly, smoothing back Ezzie’s hair from her tear-stained face.

She shrugs. ‘Nothing really. John said I’d be better off putting in for my test after the baby’s born. I know it makes sense. There’s a big waiting list and it’s already getting a tight squeeze behind the wheel. It’s just one more thing . . .’ Her voice trails away miserably.

‘I know,’ murmurs Mum. We all do. It’s like Ezzie’s life has come to a full stop, for the time being at least. The driving lessons were something for her to look forward to. She hardly goes out of the house any more, just to college, that’s all. She still sees Spud occasionally, but not very often. That’s another thing that’s on hold. He’s not really welcome at the house, Dad’s livid with him.

‘It takes two you know!’ said Ezzie, defending him, like she would. And in case you’re wondering why she didn’t get rid of it, well, you’d have to know my sister to understand that she could never do that. It just wasn’t an option.

So now she’s saddled with an unwanted pregnancy.

It’s put me off ever getting involved with anyone, I can tell you. I’m going to remain celibate, for ever.

I glance at Amy. She looks really upset seeing Ez in tears. Maybe she’ll have second thoughts now about getting off with Mitch. Just as well, I wouldn’t trust him.

Though it's not as if Spud has left Ezzie in the lurch, had his wicked way and abandoned her, like some evil villain in an old black and white film. It's not like that at all.

It's more like nobody knows quite what to do next.