

Yes

For most of her life, Audrey agreed with anything people told her. She didn't always mean it, but she inevitably said yes. She couldn't say anything else.

Audrey was on her way back to her apartment, stepping quietly through the city streets. At twenty-three, she'd been living alone sooner than everyone thought she would, but wasn't something she was happy about. She walked alone, a blonde braid draped down her right shoulder. Her dark blue coat fluttered behind as her shoes clicked in a steady rhythm with her gait. Audrey pulled the coat tighter around her as the February cold tried to sneak in. She looked up at the moon through grey-blue eyes and the pale light reflected in her watery eyes. Audrey's thoughts were racing. She had just lost her boyfriend because of her condition. She shook her head and sighed. It wasn't a condition. It was a curse.

The clot had formed in her heart and stopped the blood from getting up into her brain when she was only three years old. After an operation that lasted most of the night, Audrey had survived the ordeal resulting in some complications. The event was somewhere between a fluke and a not uncommon disease. The stroke had given her a condition called "Broca's aphasia", meaning the part of her brain that could generate speech was badly damaged.

Always *yes*. She could write anything she wanted to, but her mouth couldn't form any word other than the one-syllable affirmation. Her parents considered her lucky, in a way. She could have been stuck with *yellow* or *octopus* as the limit of her vocabulary. The family joke to get through the disaster had been that if she was going to say one

word, at least it was agreeable. After about a year, Audrey had stopped thinking the joke was so funny.

Audrey wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and looked to her left. A small, 24-hour diner was still open. The red vinyl chairs and laminated counter tops looked like they were in good condition, but the flickering 'R' on the glowing neon sign gave the diner a sense of neglect. The restaurant was balanced somewhere between a family diner and a dive bar. Inside, there was only an old couple in a booth and the server at the counter, a bit older than Audrey, reading the newspaper. Audrey thought she could use a cup of coffee to collect her thoughts and they knew about her in the diner. She walked in and sat at the counter.

The server at the other end looked up and approached Audrey. He had dark brown hair and square features. Audrey's mother would say he was too skinny, but Audrey thought it suited him. When he got closer, Audrey saw some casual stubble around his face. Audrey expected him to be tired, but his eyes were bright and awake.

"What can I get for you?" The man behind the counter asked. Audrey draped her coat over the chair and reached into her purse. She took out a small notebook and turned to a fresh page.

"*Coffee,*" Audrey wrote. She turned the notebook upside down to present the words appear right side up to the server. The server read it and nodded with a smile. It wasn't the fake, pity smile that Audrey was used to. It was actually pretty sincere. Quickly, the server came back carrying a cup of coffee in his hand. Audrey held out a few dollar bills for the server.

“No charge,” he said. Audrey rolled her eyes and practically forced the money into his hand. She was tired of handouts.

“I didn’t mean to offend you or anything,” the server said. “You just looked like you’ve had a bit of a rough day.”

Audrey took her page back and scrawled another note: *“Rough month, really.”*

“You want to talk?”

*“I’m just here for coffee.”* Audrey wrote.

“Sure,” the server said. “The name’s Richard. If you need anything just—”

Richard stopped his sentence. The expression on his face told Audrey what the last word in his sentence was going to be.

*“Just yell?”* Audrey guessed.

“No!” Richard said, “No, no, no. Oh God, I must sound like a total jackass...”

Audrey smiled and laughed quietly. She wrote a message and turned the page to Richard. *“Yes, you do. But it’s OK, I’m used to it.”*

“You shouldn’t have to be. I’m sorry...I see you in here all the time and I should have known better.”

*“It’s fine. I needed the laugh anyways.”*

“It’s Audrey, right?” Richard asked.

“Yes,” Audrey said. She chuckled a little when she saw Richard’s eyes light up a little. This wasn’t the first time she’d been the most interesting condition in the room.

“Alright,” Richard said. “Just let me know if you need anything else.” He smiled slightly and walked away. Audrey looked into her coffee, watching the dark liquid ripple

as she poured sugar packets into her cup. Audrey sipped her drink quietly, just listening to the sounds of the diner patrons.

Something was crackling on the grill and Audrey could just barely see the cook waddling around in the kitchen, his shirt was stained with grease and the fatty jowls around his mouth shook as he quietly sung along to the words coming through the radio. Richard was wandering around the dining floor collecting silverware and wiping off the tables just to keep busy in the restaurant. The old couple was talking about someone close to both of them moving very far away. The woman was very concerned, but the old man was trying to convince her that everything would be fine for the other person.

The man finally got up and tapped Audrey's shoulder. "Let me ask you something, young lady," He said, "Would you think that sending someone out to another country is a good thing? Not in the sense that they'd be exiled, but just to let them develop a sense of independence and discover something about themselves?"

"Yes," Audrey said. She didn't consider the question very long. She didn't want to explain her condition to too many people, so shorter conversations were best.

"But he's only sixteen!" The old woman said. "Isn't that too young to be going somewhere on his own?"

Audrey didn't say anything. The problem with not paying attention to someone was that it often backed her into a lot of awkward situations, like this one.

"If I can interject?" Richard said, wiping off the old couple's table and collecting their check. "I think he'll do fine on his own. He's going over in a big group, so he won't be on his own. Besides, it's three months in England. It's not like he's off to war. Don't you agree, Audrey?"

“Yes,” Audrey said. She smiled, thankful for the save.

“You see?” The old man said. “Thank you, young lady. See you, Rick. Back next Monday.”

“Looking forward to it, Bob,” Richard said. The old couple collected their coats and walked out the door, the bell ringing as they walked passed the sensors. Audrey grabbed her notebook and quickly wrote a message.

*“Thank you,”* She wrote, showing the page to Richard.

“Don’t worry about it,” Richard said. “I saw the brief moment of panic on your face and thought I’d jump in.”

Audrey turned back to her notebook and started writing a message. Richard walked around to the far end of the counter and brought the old couple’s check to the cash register near where Audrey was sitting. Audrey pushed the notebook over to Richard. The server came back and read the message.

*“People just don’t always understand,”* the note read, *“Sometimes I forget and back myself into corners like that. It’s easier just to agree sometimes and get people out of my face.”*

“Alexis, the waitress here,” Richard began, “She pointed you out to me one time with a group of your friends. I didn’t believe her until you passed me the first note.”

Audrey sipped her coffee again. She thought back to earlier in the evening and frowned.

“Still stuck on whatever brought you in here?”

“Yes,” Audrey said, coldly. She wasn’t in the mood for this right now.

“Alright,” Richard said, throwing his dishtowel under the counter. “You sure you don’t want to talk about whatever it is that’s got you down? Just give me one cup of coffee, what do you say?”

*“I thought only bartenders gave advice,”* Audrey wrote in her notebook.

“I’m working my way through the course,” Richard said, leaning on the counter. “Three more classes and I’ll have completed the second half of my license.”

Audrey laughed slightly and looked down into her coffee cup. There were only about two thirds left in the cup. Audrey took her notebook and wrote her response. *“Do your best...”*

“Alright, let’s see...you were crying about something before you came in. Problems with your family?”

Audrey shook her head. Richard scratched his chin and thought. “Problem with work?”

Audrey shook her head a second time.

“Boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Bad breakup?”

“Yes,” Audrey said. She looked down into her coffee and sighed.

“Recent?”

“Yes...”

“Yeah, that should have been my first guess. Did he happen to mention why?”

*“Kind of obvious, isn’t it?”*

“Because you can’t—” Richard stopped himself again.

*“Speak the same as everyone else? Yeah.”*

“Again, I’m a jackass...”

Audrey smiled. *“At least you acknowledged it.”*

“Unlike your boyfriend?”

Audrey picked up her coffee cup and brought the mug to her lips. When she finished her sip, she took the pad and wrote down a quick message.

*“He yelled a lot. Called me ‘Freak.’”*

“You’re not a freak. Stick around until you get people coming in here at five in the morning. Those guys are freaks. One was wearing a big, rubber boot on his hand the other day. The guy didn’t even bat an eyelash when he couldn’t pick up his fork. Just used his other hand.”

Audrey laughed and wrote in the notebook. *“You still served him?”*

“Hey,” Richard said, “he can wear an angry cat on his head for all I care. As long as he isn’t hurting anyone.”

Audrey smiled and shook her head. *“You don’t think I’m a freak?”*

“No, you’re just...different,” Richard said. “And that’s not bad.”

Audrey watched the ripples in her cup again. She’d been called a lot of things because of her condition, but ‘unique’ was a first. At least, the first time someone called her unique in a good way.

“So, I’m curious...” Richard asked. “Do you know...what happened, exactly?”

Audrey sighed and flipped to the second page at the beginning of the notebook.

*“Blood clot caused a stroke when I was younger,”* the page read, *“It damaged the part of my brain the generates speech. Sometimes strokes affect the brain like that.”*

“Except for ‘Yes?’”

“Yes.” Audrey noticed how Richard’s eyes suddenly lit up. She knew at that moment that he suddenly understood.

“What’s it like? I mean is it just frustrating or...?”

Audrey didn’t answer. She brought her cup up to her lips and started drinking the coffee.

“OK, OK...I get it, you don’t want to talk about it.”

Audrey brought the cup down from her lips. Only an inch or so of the coffee remained now, but she’d managed to get her point across.

“You’re not a freak. No matter what that jackass said.”

*“Well, takes a jackass to know one...”*

“Oh, OK...you got jokes now, too?”

“Yes.”

“So how did you get through high school and stuff?”

*“Homeschooled.”*

“College?”

*“Online.”*

“What about dating?” Richard asked. Audrey laughed loudly and shook her head.

*“It’s embarrassing, but I did a speed dating thing with a friend.”*

“That’s not so bad.”

*“When the guy had to sit there for five minutes between each of his questions, it wasn’t the fastest ‘speed dating’ that’s available.”*



Richard smiled. He picked up the rag under the counter again and started cleaning off a spot on the counter. Audrey sipped her coffee quietly. She wrote a quick note and passed it over to Richard.

“How long have I been working here?” Richard read aloud. “About four months, now. I’ve seen you a few times.”

*“And never said hello?”*

“Well, you’re the kind of girl who makes a guy nervous.”

Audrey rolled her eyes a second time and shook her head. *“Please tell me that wasn’t your attempt at a line.”*

“Oh, I’m just awful when it comes to one-liners,” Richard said, smiling.

Audrey chuckled and raised her cup to her lips again. There wasn’t a whole lot left for her to drink. She set the cup down and let the last few dregs settle at the bottom of the mug.

“Listen,” Richard said. “I get off at six tomorrow. Do you want to go get some food or something?”

Audrey took her notebook and opened to the first page of her notebook. On the page, written in bold letters, was Audrey’s response. *“No.”*

“Pretty straight forward, huh?” Richard asked, disappointed, “Any reason why?” He actually sounded surprised. Audrey flipped open to a fresh page. She paused for a minute and carefully considered what she was going to say.

*“I’m just not prepared to move on so quickly. I might go out with you at some point, but I don’t really feel like jumping into another relationship after being pushed out of this one. You understand right?”*

Finally, she showed the notebook to Richard. She held her breath while she waited for him to finish. She was proud for standing up for herself, but she didn't want to force Richard away too harshly. Pushing people away always led to Audrey being alone.

"Yeah," Richard said, smiling. "I get it, no problem." Richard straightened up and brought over a coffee pot.

"Refill?"

*"That's against the rules..."* Audrey wrote. She looked up at Richard with a sly look and the slightest smile.

"What rules? I said: you give me a cup of coffee to talk and your first cup is still, technically, there. You failed to report whether refills counted. So how about it?"

Audrey sighed and shook her head. *"Fill me up."*

Richard smiled and filled her mug. Audrey nodded in thanks and poured her sugar into the drink. He walked up and down the counter, wiping off the surface as he reached one end. Audrey sat quietly and drank her coffee as she waited.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel pressured or anything," Richard said after a while. "I just don't really know how to talk to you, you know? I mean; it's not like having a typical conversation. You have all this time to think your thoughts through and I have to keep watching myself to avoid rambling or saying something stupid— kind of like I am now. Sorry about that."

Audrey didn't say anything. She only smiled slightly and nodded. She understood. She took her notebook and wrote a quick message. *"It takes a lot of concentration to not say anything stupid. Even if you do have to think it through."*

Richard looked at the notebook and nodded. Audrey drank her coffee and watched the waiter pour a cup of coffee and hand it to the cook in the back. The two exchanged words about ‘things just getting started’ and went about their individual duties.

“All done for the night?”

“Yes,” Audrey said. She took her notebook and struggled writing in the crook of her arm, *“For the refill...keep the change.”*

She handed Richard a few loose singles. She wrote something quickly and tore a corner out of the notebook. She held out the scrap of paper to Richard and waited. Richard took the paper and read the note she had given him.

“What’s this? No phone, huh? Personal email?”

“Yes.” Audrey pushed her arms through her coat.

“So you’re going to give me a second shot?” Richard smiled. Audrey took another page out of her notebook.

*“I thought I’d give you another chance at getting your words in order.”* Audrey wrote, *“Don’t screw it up by rambling this time.”*

Richard laughed. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Audrey pulled her bag over her shoulder and started walking toward the door.

“So I’ll send you an email then, huh?”

“Yes,” Audrey said, hesitating slightly by the door.

“Until later then, Audrey.” Richard smiled and waved. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, OK? You deserve to have as good a life as anyone else, alright?”

“Yes.”

While she didn't always think it, she always said it. This was one of the few times that she actually meant what she was saying. She pushed the door open and walked back out into the cold.