

CHAPTER

1

There were three rapid knocks, then the door opened and a girl stumbled in, out of breath.

“Sorry. Sorry I’m late. I had to talk to my English teacher about my term paper and he wasn’t in his office and . . .”

Jeff jiggled his head like *no problem*.

“ . . . by the time he got there I’d missed my bus and I had to go downtown for—”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. You filled out the form?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry.” She looked around the room for a place to put the live tropical fish she was carrying in a small bag full of water.

“Here.” He patted the corner of his desk.

“Thanks.” She put it down. “Yikes. Wet. Apologies.” She picked up the bag, wiped it on the sleeve of her big gray vintage overcoat, then put it back down. “This stupid fish. Only one place to get it and my brother—Gabe. He’s twelve. He has a . . . sorry. You don’t want to know. You want the form.” She began rifling through the large leather book bag slung across her chest. A battered copy of *Brideshead Revisited* fell onto the floor.

“Why don’t you sit down?” He pointed at a plastic chair in front of his desk. “Might be easier.”

She sat, retrieved her book, and began rifling again. "I'm not usually this disorganized. Really. It's just. What a day. I mean, *week*."

"It's blue," he said. "Eight and a half by eleven . . . There it is. Next to the, uh, change purse."

"Oh. Right." She rolled her eyes at herself and handed him the form. "I also brought my résumé."

"No need." He smoothed the paper she'd given him and did a quick scan.

"Are you sure? Because I added a short paragraph about possibly pursuing psychology as a minor, especially as it relates to—"

"Really. No qualifications necessary."

While he read her form, she looked around his office. "You like toys," she said.

He didn't look up. "Action figures," he corrected her. They were arranged on his bookshelves according to genre, rarity, age, and a hard-to-quantify X factor: the little buzz he got from the really cool ones. These were not toys.

He made some notes, then said, "So . . . Hilda Sangster . . . Citadel High—"

She groaned.

Now he looked up. "Is there a problem?"

"Sorry. The Hilda thing. I should have explained."

He checked the form.

"I know I wrote Hilda but that's because it said 'First Name, Last Name,' not 'Name Used,' and I figured you needed it for official purposes so I just, well, *did as instructed* despite the fact that I can't stand the name. It's so, like, Teutonic or something. Nobody ever calls me Hilda."

"So what should I call you then?"

"Hildy."

"Hil-dee, not Hil-da."

“Doesn’t sound like much but, honestly? To me? Huge. I’ll change it someday—I mean, legally and everything—but my grandmother’s still alive and, well, feelings to consider, family legacy, etc., etc.”

She must have realized she was talking too much. She gave an awkward smile and sat up straight.

“Hildy it is then. I see here you’re a senior. You’re single?”

She laughed in a way that could only mean yes.

“And you’re . . . what? Eighteen? Good. Because you’ll need to sign a consent form.”

“Sure. No problem but . . . Um. Maybe I should find out what this is about first? I mean, there is a limit to what I’ll do in the name of science.” She laughed again, but she wasn’t fooling either of them.

“Absolutely. Okay. My name’s Jeff. I’m a PhD student here at the university. I recently got a grant to look at—well, the easiest way to describe it is ‘relationship building.’ Basically, I’m interested in finding out if we can influence subjects such as yourself to develop a close interpersonal bond with another participant, which might then develop into—”

“Sorry. Um. Am I understanding this right?” She put her arms around her book bag as if it were a toddler in need of comfort. “You’re trying to find out if you can make people like each other?”

One side of his mouth smiled. “Not *make*.” He’d be a billionaire if he could do that. “We’re not interested in brainwashing anyone. We’re just looking to see if it’s possible to—let’s say—*facilitate* a personal closeness, which could result in a relationship.”

“You mean, like a friendship?”

“Yes. Or, more significantly, a romantic relationship. I’m looking at how people initiate intimate bonds and if that process can be nudged forward in some way.”

Hildy went, “Love?” like it was an accusation. “That’s what

you're talking about?"

He made a note. "Yes, potentially love although—"

"Did Max give you my name?" She sounded annoyed.

"Max? No. Max who?"

"Xiu?"

"What? I don't even know what that is."

"Xiu Fraser?"

"No. No one gave me your name. *You* contacted me. Remember? This is just a psychological study to see if love—"

"Love!" she said again, and jumped up.

He didn't know how she managed to knock his bookshelf off the wall—she wasn't that tall—but suddenly Disney-themed action figures were torpedoing down around them as if there'd been an explosion in an animated film.

She went, "Oh. God. No. Sorry," and turned around to see what she'd done. Her book bag swung behind her and hit a lamp, which slammed against another shelf and sent supervillains flying, too.

She put her hand over her mouth and made the type of whining noise dogs make when they need to go outside.

She crouched down and began picking up action figures and piling them by the handful onto his desk.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have come. I shouldn't have left my room. Seriously. This is what happens when I—"

"It's just an accident."

"No. No, no, no, no." She waved her hand around at the room. "All these little bodies everywhere? All the mess? Perfect metaphor for my life. This is. Exactly. What I do."

She had a 1930s Prince Charming by the feet and was batting the air with it for emphasis. It was one of Jeff's favorites. He worried the head was going to come off.

"That's okay." He tried to sound relaxed. "No big deal. I can put them away. Really. There's a system. Please. Stop."

He had to say it a few times before she nodded, apologized again, and stood up, or at least tried. She stepped on the bottom of her coat and slammed her forehead into the edge of his desk. It must have hurt, but by now she'd regained a weird sort of calm. She took a loud breath in through her nose, lifted the hem of her coat like it was Cinderella's ball gown, and got to her feet.

"Um. Sorry for that little outburst . . . And for the mess . . . And, like, wasting your time and everything, too. I didn't understand what the study was about. I shouldn't have signed up." She arranged her mouth into something like a smile and walked out the door.

Jeff looked at the action figures scattered over the floor. He was too busy to put them back in the correct order. He scooped them all up and put them in a box under his desk where he wouldn't be able to hear their tiny screams.

He thought about Hildy.

What the hell was that all about? Fight or flight? Conflict avoidance? Some weird religious thing?

He sat down at his desk and checked his notes. Had he foreseen this at all? Had he inadvertently triggered something?

As part of the study, he had a little side bet going with himself. He wasn't 100 percent sure how ethical it was, but it kept things interesting. He took notes on participants, gave them each a numerical score, and then tried to predict whether sparks would fly when he put them in a room together.

In the course of their conversation, he'd scribbled some notations next to Hildy's name. He'd done it quickly—he always did—because he figured if participants had to rely on first impressions, he should, too.

WG-PP
HIQ/HM
DC
FLT

By which he meant:

White Girl—Professional Parents
High IQ/High Maintenance
Drama Geek
French Language Tattoo

He pictured an obscure quote from some eighteenth-century philosopher or postwar film director, written in cursive on the arch of her foot.

(In that, at least, he was wrong. An obscure quote might have appealed to her, but Hildy would never get a tattoo. She was afraid of needles and, more importantly, permanence. She liked to think she was still at the pupa stage of existence.)

Coming up with a number was the part Jeff always had the most qualms about. It was, of course, out of ten and it was, of course, based on physical attractiveness. But it wasn't sexist. He rated the male participants and the transgender ones, too.

He was also, he told himself, only being realistic. Looks counted, although he honestly didn't know which ones or why. He'd have thought smoldering eyes and impressive breasts or shoulders would win every time but that didn't seem to be the case. There were a lot of wild cards in the human sexuality deck.

He struggled with a score. Hildy was no beauty—eyes too small, mouth too big—but he knew for a subset of guys that wouldn't matter. She'd get extra points for *interesting*. The giant winter coat she was wearing meant he couldn't tell much about her build. Average, he would guess. Maybe small to average.

Top marks for hair, though. Hers was long and shiny and must have been blond when she was little. Most straight guys are suckers for hair, especially those wispy bits that fall out of braids and make throaty suggestions about *having just crawled out of bed*.

He gave her a 7.5. Too bad, he thought, she wouldn't be in the study. She'd have made an interesting addition.

There was a knock at his door. He checked the time. A little early for the next participant.

“Yes,” he said.

Hildy stepped in. She was holding Prince Charming.

“I took this by mistake.” She grimaced apologetically and put it on his desk. “I didn’t realize I had it until I was downstairs.”

“You took Prince Charming by mistake.” Jeff raised his eyebrows. “Wonder what Dr. Freud would’ve had to say about that.”

He meant it as a joke, but Hildy said, “I know. That’s why I came back. I mean, I had to return the action figure and I forgot the fish, too, so it wasn’t the *only* reason but—” She stopped herself. “Look. I’m not superstitious or anything, but I had a moment to think down there and, um, it just seems like when the universe goes to that much trouble to give you a sign, you should probably take it.” She sat down. “So I’m going to do the study after all. I mean, if that’s okay with you.”

“You’re sure?” he said.

“Yes. Well, as much as I’m ever sure about anything.” She smiled and he scribbled *CC* for Camp Counselor. He could picture her talking to little kids about trying their hardest and always being good sports.

“So. Mind telling me about the experiment again? I promise not to flip out this time.”

He forced himself not to glance at the undisturbed shelves on the other side of the room. “Great. Well. We’re basing our work on a study called ‘The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness.’ It was developed in the nineties by a psychologist named Dr. Arthur Aron. His results weren’t conclusive at the time, but this is a different world. We’re wondering how the digital age may—or may not—have changed the way intimacy is experienced. Basically, we want to see how young people who’ve grown up with twelve hundred online ‘friends’ might respond to intense

face-to-face emotional sharing. Sound like something you might be interested in?”

“What do I have to do?” That wasn’t quite a yes.

“Not much. We pair you with a random stranger—male or female depending on your sexual orientation—and give you thirty-six questions to ask each other. There’s no right or wrong answer, no good or bad. Our only request is that you respond as honestly as possible.”

“Um. ‘Random’?”

“What?”

“Did you say ‘random stranger’?”

“Yes.”

“So it could be anyone?”

He was worried about another outburst. “Well, *could be*, I guess, but realistically it’s more likely to be another student than, say, Drake or one of the Olsen twins . . .”

“Or a serial killer?” Sort of a joke but not really.

“Highly improbable. And anyway, the study is conducted here at the university. We’ll have all the pertinent data about participants but you won’t know each other’s real names or contact information.”

“Well. I guess that should be okay.”

Should be okay.

He let that go and looked at her form again.

“You self-identified as hetero. So you’ll be paired with a male more or less your age. To each other, you’ll just be Bob and Betty. Those are the names we ask male and female participants to use. We’ve taken every precaution to ensure your privacy and physical safety.”

She nodded but her eyes had gone too blinky to ignore.

“You’re not convinced,” he said.

“No, I am. Well. At least about *physical* safety.”

“But not about? . . .”

Fluttery hands. Shrug. Sigh. “This probably sounds stupid.”

He waited.

“. . . but what about, like, *emotional* safety?”

“Meaning?”

She let out a puff of air. “I don’t know. Anything! Rejection. Disappointment. Crushing heartache. Haha. You know. The usual.”

“I’d say that’s just life.” And one of the reasons he’d always preferred action figures.

“Fine. I know but. I mean, I could get in there with a total stranger and do the thirty-six questions and next thing you know I’m hopelessly smitten with some kind of, like, troll or something.”

“To the best of my knowledge, no trolls have applied.”

“Dumb question.”

He hadn’t said that. She fiddled with the buttons on her overcoat, then sort of laughed.

“Who am I kidding? The *real* problem would be if the troll didn’t love me back. But, again, as you say, that’s just life. Or at least *my* life.” She shook it out of her head. “Sorry. Babbling. I get this way when I’m stressed. Just a lot of stuff happening in my life right now. My own fault, of course. Big mouth. Tunnel vision. Faulty social radar. That kind of thing. My friends are always telling me I should—Oops. See? Babbling again. Sorry. Ignore me.”

“No pressure,” he said, and left it at that.

She pulled down her sleeves and scrunched the cuffs into her fists. She stared at Prince Charming for a few seconds, then looked back at Jeff. “Okay. I’ll do it. I should do it.”

“There’s no ‘should’ here. Really. I don’t want you participating just because the universe said you had to.”

That made her laugh for real. “Don’t worry. I won’t let some mean old universe push me around. I want to do it. Seriously.

At some very deep level I think I actually do. ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained,’ right?”

“Awesome.” He took one final look at her registration. “Everything’s in order here, so unless you have any more questions I’ll just get you to sign the consent form.”

He gave her a moment to look it over. She ran her finger along every line as she read, then scribbled her name at the bottom.

“Okay. My heart’s in your hands!” Hildy smiled and her eyes disappeared into thick tangles of lashes. Her teeth were large and straight and white. Her skin was perfect.

He amended her score to 7.75 and took her form.

“All right then. I’ll get you to go to room 417, just down the hall to the left. Help yourself to coffee. On the table, there’ll be a deck of index cards with the questions, but please don’t turn them over until the session begins. We’ll have a subject partner for you shortly. I’ll do my best to weed out the trolls.”

She pulled the collar of her coat over her mouth and laughed again. She might even be an 8.

“And don’t forget your fish. He’s going to start to take it personally.”

CHAPTER

2

The guy walked in without knocking.

Jeff looked up from his laptop. “And you are?”

“Paul Bergin.” No smile. Little eye contact. Voice not much more than mumble.

“You’re here about the interpersonal closeness study?”

“I’m here about the study that pays forty bucks. That the one?”

“Could be. That’s what we pay.”

“Then that’s the one I’m here for.” He took a neatly folded square of pale blue paper out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Jeff. His hands were red with cold. “How long’s this going to take?”

Jeff motioned for him to sit down but he already had. “Depends. Probably an hour or two, but we don’t impose any time limits, so it could take a bit longer. Up to you.”

“If it takes longer, is there overtime?” Paul flashed a smile now, maybe figuring a little charm might pay off in extra cash.

“Sorry. Flat rate. Still interested?”

Paul looked around as if he was sizing up the street value of the various action figures lining the metal bookshelves on the far

side of the room. "May as well. When do I start?"

"I'll just give you some background information on the study and then we can get going."

"What do I need background info for?" He rolled a small gray raisin of Juicy Fruit between his front teeth.

"Thought you might be interested."

"Not really. Ad said I just had to answer some questions."

"Yes. Well, you and your partner have to ask each other thirty-six questions."

"I don't have a partner."

"We choose a partner for you."

"I have to make up the questions?"

"No, they're already written. You'll each get a set of cards with the questions written on them. You just have to do your best to answer them."

"That's all I have to do?"

"Sign a consent form now and fill out a short report when you're done." Jeff checked Paul's registration form. "You a student?"

"I have to be?"

"No."

"Then I'm unemployed."

"You're eighteen?"

"Almost nineteen."

"Hetero?"

"What?"

"Straight."

"Yeah. I put that down."

"Single?"

"As much as possible."

"Okay. Then sign this and go to"—he checked his notes—"room 417. Your subject partner should be there."

Paul didn't bother reading the form. He wrote his name neatly at the bottom, stood up, and was gone.

Jeff waited until the door shut, then he wrote B.R.O. But he meant "bro" as in "dude" (as in "asshole"). Then he wrote:

BC (for "blue collar")

COS (for "chip on shoulder," by which he also meant "asshole")

SS (for "street-smart," although it pained him to admit Paul may be smart at all. Nothing he hated more than a guy with a swagger.)

Then Jeff wrote 9.

Which was childish. If he knew anything about heterosexual females, he knew that Paul would be a solid 9.5 if not a full 10 for most of them, despite the fact his nose had obviously been broken at some point. Or maybe because of the fact. Nothing like a little DANGER: KEEP OUT sign to get some girls scaling the walls.

Paul also had a tiny teardrop tattoo just below his right eye. In Jeff's opinion, that was a little bad boy overkill, although, obviously, it wasn't his opinion that counted.

It was Hildy's.

That almost made Jeff laugh.

Hildy and Paul.

This should be interesting.

QUESTION 1

PAUL: Hey.

PAUL: Hello.

PAUL: Hel-lo?

HILDY: Oh. Um.

PAUL: You okay?

HILDY: Ah, yeah. Yeah. Sorry.

PAUL: You look like you saw a ghost or something.

HILDY: No, no. I, um, was just reading and lost track of time and you sort of surprised me that's all. So, like, ah, hi.

PAUL: Yeah. Hi. I'm Paul.

HILDY: You mean Bob.

PAUL: No. I mean Paul.

HILDY: (Laughs) I didn't hear that.

PAUL: I said Paul.

HILDY: Um. We're not supposed to know each other's names.

PAUL: No one told me that.

HILDY: Really? I was told we're supposed to call each other Bob and Betty. You know for, like, privacy and everything.

PAUL: Fine. So who gets to be Betty?

HILDY: Ha! Good point. How very, like, *cisgendered* of them to—

PAUL: What the hell's the matter with this chair?

HILDY: Want to switch? I don't mind. I'll—

PAUL: And have you land on your ass instead? No. I'll take my chances.

HILDY: Sure? I bet we could get a—

PAUL: You planning on staying or what?

HILDY: Ah. Yes. Why?

PAUL: You gotta be hot in that thing.

HILDY: Oh. Right. My coat. One of my little weirdnesses. I like being really warm. Drives my friends crazy. They always say they get sweaty just looking at me. Not going to bother you, is it? Because I could—

PAUL: Just don't go passing out on me.

HILDY: Don't worry. I'll do my best not to, you know, *swoon* . . .

PAUL: Thanks. Great. Can we get started?

HILDY: Sure. How should we do this? Maybe one of us reads the question out loud and the other answers?

PAUL: Fine.

HILDY: Then we could alternate?

PAUL: Fine.

HILDY: You start or me?

PAUL: Whatever.

HILDY: Or, hey. Why don't we flip a coin?

PAUL: I don't really care that much. You go first.

HILDY: Sure?

PAUL: Yeah. Look. Can we just get started?

HILDY: Right. Sorry. I'm nervous. Are you nervous?

PAUL: Why would I be nervous?

HILDY: (Laughs) Things like this make me anxious, although Jeff did say there are—

PAUL: Jeff?

HILDY: The psychologist. He said—What are you laughing at?

PAUL: *Psychologist*. The guy's, like, some dweeb college student with his little forms and his joking-but-not-really hard-on for Happy Meal toys.

HILDY: He's a PhD student.

PAUL: Yeah. That's what I said.

HILDY: Well, not quite . . .

PAUL: Close enough.

HILDY: In any event . . . He says there are no right or wrong answers but still. A lot riding on this. Which is why, I guess, I'm a tad, you know, *wound up*.

PAUL: Really? Hadn't noticed. How about you pour yourself a couple of Jäger shots when you get home? In the meantime, I'll start. Question 1: *Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?*

HILDY: Only one? That's all I get to pick?

PAUL: Yeah.

HILDY: It says that?

PAUL: It says "Whom—Christ, I can't believe it—*whom* would you want as a dinner guest." That means one.

HILDY: Hmm. That's hard. I want to say someone like Jane Austen or D. H. Lawrence or Barack Obama but honestly? I'd be so awed in the presence of all that brilliance I probably wouldn't enjoy it. Then again, I don't want to waste my one and only invitation on some, like, joe-on-the-street . . .

PAUL: So who's it going to be then?

PAUL: It's just dinner.

PAUL: We're not talking about sleeping with anyone here.

HILDY: Sorry. Am I taking too long?

PAUL: Gee. What makes you think that?

HILDY: Oh. Hey. I know. (Laughs) Taylor Swift!

PAUL: Done. Taylor Swift.

HILDY: No! I'm joking. Sort of. She's my guilty pleasure and I honestly don't think she gets the credit she deserves but if I can only ask one person, I'm not sure she'd be the person I'd pick . . . You better go first. I need some time to think about this one.

PAUL: Fine. I'd ask someone who could cook.

HILDY: (Laughs)

PAUL: Question 2.

HILDY: No. Seriously. Who would you ask?

PAUL: Someone who could cook. If they're coming for dinner at my place, they better be able to cook because I sure as hell can't.

HILDY: That's actually not a bad answer. I didn't even think of going for—

PAUL: Question 2. *Would you—*

HILDY: Hold on. I haven't answered Question 1.

PAUL: Well, mind answering it then? There are thirty-five more questions. Not worth the money at this rate.

HILDY: What money?

PAUL: The forty bucks.

HILDY: What forty bucks?

PAUL: The forty bucks you get for doing the study.

HILDY: We get paid?

PAUL: Yeah. Why else would you be doing it?

HILDY: I don't know. I like psychology and the thought of being part of an experiment interested me and . . .

PAUL: (Laughs) Talk about starved for entertainment.

HILDY: You know, I hate to bring this up but there's a tone you're using that I don't appreciate.

PAUL: Sorry, Ma.

HILDY: Gee. And there it is again.

PAUL: Can we just get on with this?

HILDY: Yes. If you change your tone.

PAUL: You're kidding.

PAUL: You're not serious.

PAUL: Fine . . . How's this? Better?

HILDY: And your facial expression.

PAUL: Who made you boss?

HILDY: Nobody. But I am your equal and I don't feel obliged to participate with someone who refuses to show me the respect I deserve.

PAUL: Unbelievable.

HILDY: Not really. When you think about it, totally reasonable. Respect is the hallmark of a civilized society. I'd appreciate it if you watch the swearing, too.

PAUL: I didn't swear.

HILDY: Out loud.

PAUL: What? You read lips now, too?

HILDY: Right. Like I have to be a trained lip-reader to figure out what you just said.

PAUL: You never heard it before or something?

HILDY: I've heard it plenty. I just don't think I should have it, like, flung at me.

PAUL: Can we just get back to the stupid question?

HILDY: Yes. Sure. If you answer respectfully.

PAUL: Okay. Here's my voice . . . Here's my face.

HILDY: Beautiful. Thank you. And given that you're concerned about time, I'll hurry things along and just say that I'd invite my grandfather for dinner. I never had the opportunity to meet him and I think if I had, I'd better understand the man my own father is today. Hopefully, that would help us resolve some of our current, you know, issues.

QUESTION 2

PAUL: I'm going to keep asking the questions.

HILDY: Probably not a bad idea. I tend to go off on tangents. Time management, as you probably guessed, is not one of my strong points.

PAUL: And it's not the answer to any of the questions, either.

HILDY: There's that tone thing again.

PAUL: Nothing the matter with my tone.

HILDY: Sorry. You're right. It was the actual content of what you said this time.

PAUL: Oh, you got a problem with the truth now?

HILDY: Popular misconception. So-called honesty is not always the best policy, especially if you're just using it as an excuse to be nasty. There's no reason to voice your—

PAUL: And that's not an answer to any question, either! So, Question 2: *Would you like to be famous? If so, in what way?*

HILDY: I'm only responding because I signed up to do the study so I feel, I guess, honor bound to do so.

PAUL: And I'm only *responding* for the money. Whatever. Just answer the question.

HILDY: I want to do something important with my life, and since fame can be a useful soapbox, yes, I would like to be famous. In fact, this might sound crazy and wildly ambitious and everything, but I'd love to someday be remembered as the next—I don't

know—Nelson Mandela or . . . What’s so funny?

PAUL: You’re a five-foot-two white chick carrying your books around in a six-hundred-dollar Coach satchel. You’re not going to be remembered as the next Nelson Mandela.

HILDY: I’m five foot four and the “satchel” was a birthday present.

PAUL: What? From your cellmate?

HILDY: No, my parents.

PAUL: My point exactly. You are not going to be the next Nelson Mandela. And you’re still white. Like *really* white. Or am I wrong about that, too? You got that Michael Jackson thing or something? And P.S. You’re not five foot four.

HILDY: Yes, I am. And please stop clicking your gum.

PAUL: In those boots maybe. Barefoot, no way you even come up to my armpit.

HILDY: Yeah, but what are you? Six foot two?

PAUL: Whoa. What are you on?

HILDY: What does that mean?

PAUL: I’m six foot if I’m trying to impress someone. Five eleven if I’m being honest.

HILDY: Guess I don’t have to ask which it is today. And, to get back to the topic at hand, the question is not “Are you going to be famous?” It’s “Would you *like* to be famous and in what way?” and guess what? That’s how I choose to answer the question. Your turn.

PAUL: Okay. A) Yes and B) Extremely.

HILDY: You’re not taking the questions seriously.

PAUL: I wasn’t asked to take them seriously. I was asked to answer them. So, yes, I would like to be famous. And in what way? Extremely, because that’s where the money is. Those are my answers. You’re not the boss of me.

HILDY: So childish.

PAUL: Whoa. Who's got the tone issue now? And also, just so's you know, people who walk around with a fish in a bag trying to look all rom-com cute have no business calling anyone childish.

HILDY: You know nothing about this fish or why I have it or why it's important to me.

PAUL: And, strangely, nor do I give a shit.

HILDY: I just wish you'd be half as honest answering your questions as you are in your comments to me.

PAUL: Who was it who once said, "Guess what? That's how I choose to answer the question"?

HILDY: Fair enough. You do it your way. I'll do it mine. So much for "relationship building."

PAUL: What?

HILDY: Nothing.

PAUL: Next question.

QUESTION 3

PAUL: *Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? If so, why?*

HILDY: Of course.

PAUL: Of *course*? Seriously? "Whazzup? . . . Yeah . . . Okay . . . Bye." What's there to rehearse?

HILDY: Believe it or not, some people use the phone to do more than order pizza or arrange drug deals. Some people have actual conversations.

PAUL: For which they practice. Is it just me or is that pathetic?

PAUL: Oh. So you're not talking to me now.

PAUL: So much for being "honor bound" to respond.

PAUL: Fine. I'll just do the remaining thirty-three questions on my own, get my forty bucks, and catch the next bus out of here.

HILDY: So you're telling me that you *never* rehearsed before you called a girl to ask her out on a date.

PAUL: Yeah. That's what I'm saying.

HILDY: Never?

PAUL: Okay. Maybe not never.

HILDY: I knew it.

PAUL: Maybe when I was twelve I did.

HILDY: You started asking girls out when you were twelve.

PAUL: Yeah.

HILDY: Twelve?

PAUL: Okay. Eleven then. . . . What? . . . Like, when did *you* start dating?

HILDY: Is that one of the questions?

PAUL: Oooh. Too-shay.

HILDY: Can we just get this stupid thing over with?

PAUL: Thank you, Jay-sus! Thought you'd never ask.