**Intelligent, Me?**

E. F. S. Byrne

Her lips cracked with diffused anger, the salt of a tear hanging out to dry, the stale drip of lipstick that would never shine.

Her bedroom swirled and threw a left hook that flung her on the bed. She punched back, jammed her boots to the floor and pushed herself to the open window. Clothes everywhere, schoolbooks crawling from under the sheets, a can of energy drink spilling over her pillow, gum smiling from the mirror, her room was a disaster waiting for an earthquake. She was grounded, again. Too old for this.

On Netflix, girls in dresses and torn jeans scrambled down drainpipes or convenient branches to wrestle away from hovering parents. Her father had changed the Wi-Fi code. She stared down ten floors. No way was she skimming down the concrete skyline to limp away in crippled freedom. She was trapped.

She gazed at her phone. It glared silently. She connected to the neighbour’s internet, and it pounced to life. She jabbed at images while sounding out friends with her predicaments. Messages snapped, loaded with vengeance and teasing taunts. “Poor you.” “Sod them.” “You have a key.” “Punished means nothing these days.” “There are many ways of jumping out a window!”

Her brother swung his grin around the door. “Grounded again?” He was distantly jealous, his smile sadly threatening. He had never liked her boy. Neither did she now. A mistake but her mind was too fragmented to care.

She bit her lip. It hurt. She pinched her knee. It jerked. Her phone beeped. She threw it onto the bed. She watched it jerk and buzz in a slow circle, like a lost police car tracing hazy pink shadows on the sheet. She gave in. The boy had blocked her. He didn’t want to know. Older, pouty, charmingly enticing, deceivingly meaningful. She slid the screen alive, slipped away the skin and watched it snake to life. “Here’s your solution,” somebody messaged, “PopyourPops.”

Sounded rude. Illegal even. She flicked the message awake. “Sort out your parents. Quick start. Get back on the streets.” That was a start. She ignored the advertisements, the warnings, clicked to accept unread conditions and jammed the app onto her screen.

*Apologize Reluctantly* seemed appropriate. She selected *Parents and Partners* from the *Choose Your Adult* menu. She browsed over the reasons. *General Rudeness* filtered with *Poor Grades* and *Occasional Swear Words*. She hesitated. *Frequent* was better. She scanned the *Immediate Goals* options. *Reconciliation*: too religious. *Forgiveness*: even worse. *Get Away with Blue Murder*: they would never go for that. *Short-Term Softening Up*: safer, just what she needed. She selected *Minimum, Random Typos* and then opted for *Immediate Release*. Her finger slid defiantly over *Accept*. Bubbles bloated then burst, psychic indications the machine was thinking, sucking, draining solutions from reservoirs of past failures, fountains of hope.

The message generated itself as she watched. Her eyes stared as letters formed then jolted together into words. It looked good. Unbelievable, really. Or maybe it was. Time to try it on for size.

She copied and pasted.

Her mother replied immediately, just a thumbs up but better than a poke in the eye. Her father took longer but he eventually sent a smiling face with a love heart. It worked.

She needed a follow up. The options provided one. She chose the pace, the tone, the required objective, the advised waiting period.

“That’s sweet of you dear. Ok then. All forgiven this time.”

Yes! The ground had been shaken. Earthquakes do happen. She threw her brother a generous smile, deliciously evil on her way out the door.

“You’re grounded!” he shouted.

“Not anymore.” She waved her phone and enjoyed his flush of frustration. She knew he wanted to follow but she had other problems to solve.

The program was so intuitive. It soon understood her better than she wanted to know herself. She jabbed in the problem, and her favourite options flashed up immediately, prompting, guiding, hinting, teasingly encouraging. She was a new person. “So mature. You really are growing up.” Absolutely. She was receiving a gush of accolades from her parents that she barely understood and would never learn how to spell. When their paths crossed briefly in the kitchen they almost smiled. Adults were finally being fed what they wanted to hear.

Intelligent, me? You bet!

Even better, her brother’s growing annoyance was joyfully rewarding. “How do you do it?” She knew that was the question he couldn’t demean himself to pose. The night he was grounded she giggled noisily outside his door. He slammed it to her face, but she knew he was leaning against it just in case.

“You need help?”

He didn’t reply.

She could tell him all about the app. She let him sweat. She wasn’t feeling generous.

“Enjoying yourself?” he texted later.

“Yes.” She threw him a finger. She wasn’t. She desperately needed an App to sort out absent lovers. She waved an arm from her neck and slugged tequila.

“You shouldn’t be,” her brother texted. Then he sent the photos.

Her hair tongs fuming, steaming, still plugged in on the edge of her dressing table, her homework about to go up in flames.

“Sure you want to be out all night?” Her screen flashed.

“Leave me home alone?”

A fresh set of images ballooned to life.

Her pregnancy test, just where she had left it, beside her pillow, belching and fuming, bright stripes of destiny shimmering in the glare.

There was no filter to disguise her anger, temper her fate. There was nothing artificial about her brother’s intelligence. She grasped desperately in search of an option, outcomes, excuses that might still give her a chance, but the site baulked in the face of pain and turned to rubber in the hands of pummeling fear. She prayed there was an App for parents. They would soon need intelligent answers to questions they had never asked.