

A Night at The Café ©

By JK Savoy

Adapted from my WIP novel, “As Told By Time”

Like ants to a sugar pile or bees to a blossom, The Last Wish Cafe’s crowd swells as it pauses amidst its entry passage’s multiple sensors. Simultaneously, all members of its Friday night’s audience entertainment accounts are debited while E-Z Pass scanners enrich The Regime’s coffers. From within his yawn, Jared asks, “Why are they still using antiquated twenty-first century transponder crap when pulse-technology crowd debiting is used everywhere else? And what’s the sense of encoding a confidentiality agreement when this same old, same old Friday night self-termination venue is all everyone’s gonna be talking about at the Starbucks coffee spout, come Monday morning? We are still human, right?”

“Jared, to some of us, Aloha Oe Night is the biggest thing that happens in Falwell Township at the end of every work cycle,” says Ella. “We the living get to speak freely once a week, unmonitored and kick back while we watch a few poor ‘soon to be stiffs’ exercise the ultimate act of freedom of choice...” She grasps his hand while asking softly “... or, is playing The Cafe actually a choice? There are those rumors!” as they swipe their approval rings to the AGREED sensor.

“Shh!” Jared says, “Of course, it’s a choice we all knew of, even as kids...”

“Yeah Jared, how can I forget: ‘*Conform, go to The Darkness or play The Café*’! But somehow, that doesn’t ring of choice, in the true sense of the word.”

“The walls do have ears, really! I mean, one can only be sure that our Sentinel implants are in the un-monitored mode,

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only when our asses actually hit the stools. That's when its connection becomes completely deactivated."

"Okay, Jared, you're the I.T. guy. Who am I to argue?"

"Anyway Ella, whether it's sayonara, Aloha Oe or plain old kiss your ass goodbye: In any language, rolled back eyeballs glaring at a ceiling always triggers some jackass in the audience to holler *next act*, and then the next sucker steps up. It's like actually having the right to vote: The fact that we've all been swiped in voluntarily means we've agreed that public self-termination is acceptable as adult entertainment. That said, audience or performer, it still goes to freedom of choice."

"Yeah, as if someone's going to wait in line for an hour or more only to get turned around after swiping, NON-COMPLIANT. That'll be the day!" laughs Ella as she, Jared and their prayer and cuddle threesome-mate, Grace, scurry to their table. As if filling the empty note in a game of musical chairs, their butts slam onto their waiting stools as Ella says, "It's so refreshing to finally feel the Sentinel disengage! It's like your constipated brain finally takes a soothing, long anticipated dump! Speaking of shit, here comes Bishop Bartholomew."

Like an over the hill, red-robed rooster; Ardon Bartholomew wades his way through a sea of pea green, jumpsuited Functionalist hens and capons as he struts toward Ella's table. Casting a downward gaze, the class conscious Fundamentalist bishop stands over the three Functionalists with a look of the odd man out.

Ella says, "Oh Bishop Bartholomew, if only you were five minutes earlier, we wouldn't have had to yield that table for four over there to those people."

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As he weighs the possibility of demanding that one of Ella's friends leave the table, against the reality of alienating her, a voice cries out, "Bartholomew, you bald-headed fart! Get over here with your own people and sit your fat ass down!"

Ardon's head immediately snaps toward the direction of the Spiritual Director's box as his attention is caught by the summoning finger of High Bishop Benedict. He turns and says, "Excuse me, Ella my dear, but duty does call."

As he leaves the table's vicinity, Grace says, "If I passed a roll of toilet paper around the table right now, it would be down to the cardboard tube by the time it got back to me! Praise the Lord, what's with that condescending creep?" Grace casually leans back on her stool and answers her own question by saying, "I know. The boss man wants to get his ding dong hard for the working stiff. Maybe he wants to play Arduous Ardon and be that special fella for our poor little Ella."

"That's amazing, Grace! Now cut that shit out. I came here for a little distraction. Enough I have to see that piece of shit at work in The Abbey and going in and out of our apartment building; don't put your sicko images into my head."

Jared interjects, "With a get-up like he's wearing, you'd think he'd be hitting on me. Shit, I think I saw High Bishop Benedict's wife's foot stroke Ardon's leg!"

As all eyes dart to the High Bishop's box seats, Jared says, "Just kidding, Ella! You don't think Nature would allow those relics to procreate. Talk around The Regime Abbey is, there isn't a woman alive that has gotten a rise out of Bartholomew in decades. Way back, three different white robed un-pairbonded ladies opted out from test-cuddling with him by demanding a No Progeny Clause."

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“Jared you idiot, shut up! Be careful or you’ll be signing on as The Café’s opening act next week,” cupping her mouth, she whispers, “And cool it with that *nature* word. Keep in mind, there are those rumors that Café acts aren’t voluntary!”

“Now you cool it, Ella!” commands Jared, “Even thoughts like that can trigger mood sensors, or who knows what some techs beyond my pay grade have.”

“Listen here Jared, I’m not going to live my free time by paranoid thinking that I’m being scanned at The Café! So let’s live a little ‘til we finally get to the day when this place isn’t the people’s freedom forum the clerics claim it to be.”

Grace says, “Don’t look now, but there’s something different this month about Benedict’s old lady.”

“What? She looks the same as always to me: A shit-load of jewelry, reeking of authentic perfume and those curlicue fingernails, ugh!” answers Ella.

“No, not that. Praise the Lord, she got herself another boob-job!”

“Oh my Lord, Grace! I don’t think she can stand and see her feet. Definitely has implants. Oh my, wouldn’t it be something if inflatables were an option?”

“Hah! Maybe if she could sleep on her tummy, she’d finally get a good night’s rest and wouldn’t be such a crabby self-righteous, pompous bitch! Hold on, Ella! Look at those make-up smudges just west of her armpit. They have to be there to hide skin shade changes. This proves what I heard at the coffee spout.”

“Heard what, Grace?”

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“Praise the Lord! Full breast transplants! Talk around Falwell Township is, all the Bishops’ power-witch wives are getting them.”

“Grace, how can they get them? Who the hell would give theirs up? Oh my God, that would be organ harvesting gone wild! How can any woman scan okay for total boob removal and look at a mirror, mutilated like that?”

“Praise the Lord, these are tough times for some un-pairbonded mothers. No credit allotment if there’s no valid faith-based pair bond. Baby needs milk, so mommy sells the cows.”

Jared chimes in, “Enough girly gossip! Get this. Last month, someone sitting by the clocktower was talking to Bartholomew and called him aloof. Guess what that old Fundamentalist, asshole Ardon answered.”

Ella asks, “Okay, What?”

“Ardon says to the guy, *‘I’m not aloof. The reason you perceive me as being aloof is that you must feel so very humbled in my presence.’* Then he walks away.”

The house lights dim as Ella says, “Folks, shut the hell up. It’s showtime!”

As spotlights replace the stage’s houselights, a voice is heard saying, “Remember, we shut your Sentinels down in order to present our evening’s performances and allow all to have the uninterrupted pure joy of being entertained, having worked so hard for our blessed Regime this past week. So, this will be your last chance to place drink orders before the show begins. Please swipe your table’s refreshment menu sensor and keep the center of the table clear so your drinks may surface. Remember, those of you who dropped a Cloudniner or two, stretch out your drinks or a stretcher may await you or, worse yet, you might be joining

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tonight's lineup. So, Fundamentalists and Functionalists alike, welcome to The Last Wish Cafe, where we bring one and all to witness our Divinely-Sanctioned Regime's ultimate act of public assistance!"

"Jared, who's the opening act? I didn't even have time to check before my Sentinel went down," asks Grace.

"I always love it when a know it all has to ask me for something. It finally gives me a chance to be as gracious as one of my cuddle partners pretends to be."

"Jared, cut the shit and answer my question. Who's on first?"

Jared answers, "That woman in the wings is the opening act, Grace: The one leaning on her crutches. Hey Ella, can you see her name from where you're sitting? She sure does look familiar."

"I can see only her last name. That damn column is blocking the left side of the sign, so I can't make out the first. It looks like her last name is ... Della-Bella?"

"Not Stella Della-Bella!" shouts Grace, "Praise the Lord; I went to school with her grandkids."

Jared asks, "Isn't her daughter Carmella? She works in an office near mine."

The tips of the centenarian-plus woman's crutches emerge from behind the column, followed by a bandaged foot while an antique full body prosthetic can be seen supporting the rest of her. Her crutches drop to the floor as she lands upon a waiting flowered print loveseat and groans, "Finally! This is the end of the fucking line for me and especially, those miserable so called life enhancing devices!"

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Georgie Malenkov, the emcee, sits beside her, embraces her and says softly, “Stella my dear, welcome to The Last Wish Cafe. So, how are you tonight?”

Stella’s head slowly turns toward Georgie. She places her arm on a swing away injection cradle and says, “How am I? Are you, thoroughly stupid or what, Georgie? I came here to die you goddamn fool, and you ask how I am?” Georgie gestures with his hands in an uplifting manner as APPLAUSE signs flash on and off. The audience claps wildly, then settles back to their drinks and chips.

Slowly, Stella gazes across the breadth of the crowd and says, “Okay, I’ll answer Georgie and all of you, if you can give an old-fashioned academic a minute amidst your mindless chatter. I’m happy to be here tonight and know that the last thing that I’ll see will be your off-line faces showing some goddamn evidence of actual life, even if it is the Regime’s mandatory polite cringing from seeing my sorry ass drop dead!” She raises her fist toward the High Bishop’s box and shouts, “Screw your fucking pseudo-religious regime! Screw you, Benedict and you too, Bartholomew! So, tonight I’m finally off to a far, far better place than this hypocritical, holier than thou living Hell! Even my years of existence out there in The Darkness have been more spiritually enlightening than the nightmare of endless counterfeit faith based propaganda coming from mandatory Sentinel implants. Mandatory faith? Now ain’t that something to truly believe in! The lot of you bishops hide inside of gaudy ecclesiastical dress-up, like an executioner wearing a black hood as you watch yet another batch of fools exit your dead end of existence. So let’s get on with the show and take my sorry ass

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Anita, the smiling attendant, in an excessively large white nurse cap with a large red cross, readies a hypodermic. Stella swipes her ring across the AGREED sensor. Georgie announces, "Folks, sorry, it'll be nothing too special since Stella has chosen the old-fashioned drip-cocktail from back in the day. Since this means of exit does take quite a while, Café orderlies will be relocating Stella to the side of the stage, once lovely Anita helps

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her start the bye-bye juice flowing. Don't worry, Stella Della-Bella will be within view at all times, so you'll surely get your debits-worth of living theater. Now, as we bring on our next act, let's hear an inspirational halleluiah send off for Stella!"

APPLAUSE signs flash. Dutifully, the crowd hoots, hollers, claps and shouts, "Halleluiah, and Amen to all that! Next act!"

Jared and Grace turn to Ella to see her in the act of swinging back her entire Long Island iced-tea in one gulp. As the emptied glass finds the table, Ella asks, "Why does it always bother the two of you more if it seems like you may know the person? Come on. Everyone kind of knows everyone else, in a weird way. What's the difference? She's the grandmother of someone you went to school with, or her daughter works down the hall. Big fuckin' deal, everyone croaks; some sooner, some later. Don't personalize this! Just shut up and enjoy the show."

Grace waves her hand in front of Ella and says, "Don't personalize this? Hey! I get it, Ella, which rhymes with Stella. Ha! Have another drink, my dear."

As Stella's head falls back upon a sofa pillow, Georgie signals the band to begin the muffled drum-roll. Then he slaps his temple to clear the feed-back from his tooth-mike and says, "We put a sign in the window a week ago, just trying to be funny and, *guessss* what? We actually have a taker! Mister Claudius Tompaigne wants to take a Hemlock Holiday: A one-way cruise to your fondest of dreams, following your worst nightmare of stomach cramps and full physical distress! Don't worry folks, after Claudius has his one and only for the road, our headliner, Shane Adverson, will take on Ted Graves. Hey Ted, you know what they say... " While Georgie holds his open hand

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to his ear, from the audience he hears, “Quick draw against Shane is self-extermination, and that’s why in Hell we’re here!”

Grace and Jared chant, “It’s always the way, when you play The Cafe!”

Pensively, Ella twists her fresh drink between her fingers. Grace says, “Ella honey, don’t let that old broad bum you out. Keep in mind, The Cafe is about free will and absolute free choice. Because she made her choice, doesn’t mean that you have to live with it in your mind. Take it for what it is: The show must go on and so should you. If you feel you owe her, give her one hell of a send-off prayer!”

Grace reaches into her shirt pocket for a Cloudniner, washes it down with her sloe-gin fizz then says, “Or in her memory, give yourself a sendoff rush...”

Ella clasps her hands above her drink, nods her head and says, “Amen to the prayer, Grace. But think about what Georgie said about mixing ‘Niners and booze or the show may become about you too. C’mon, no more ‘niners for tonight. Let’s sit back and check out the next act, then it’s time for Shane’s Friday Night Duel.”

Jared says, “We all know how the duel’s going to go. Since he’s unbeatable, Shane may as well walk over to the guy and shoot him in the head: it’s the same old, same old. What I gotta see is this next act with the dude and the hemlock. Hey, didn’t some ancient Greek guy named Plato check out by drinking hemlock?”

Following a long sip of her fresh drink, Ella says, “Thanks Grace. I’m a little better now. By the way Jared, what’s the matter with you? It was Socrates who drank hemlock. The Athenians were very civil regarding their executions. Instead of

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tying the prisoner down and shoving the drink down his throat, they allowed Socrates to pour it and then drink it on his own. Then he was allowed to blast the shit out of the government and everyone else under the sun with his last words.”

Ella’s drink jumps from her fingers as Grace slams her hand on the table and says, “Well excuse me Professor Ella! Praise the Lord, where the hell did you hear about that stuff?”

“Years ago, didn’t you have Google or a few of those History sites stuck away in your old Companion?” asks Ella, “It was that implant with a constant echo sound. I think it was two or so generations before Duplex came out. God, it was so long ago! It was great, I would log on and explore old-time ideas and historical events when I was walking or just hanging out by the clocktower. I really miss it.”

Jared interjects, “That’s probably the system that drove Floyd Bloiben nuts with all the noise. He had to have an extraction and be permanently confined to his residence. Shit, Ella! You really must have been a kid back then. That series was really popular back in those Googling days.”

“I know. I think it was a lot of bullshit when they omitted those prehistoric information sites claiming, lack of available memory,” laments Ella.

Jared says, “Long before The Regime shipped him out to Heaven’s Gate, my dad wondered, *‘How can there be a memory shortage a week after they released The Infinity Drive.’* Since he was on its development team, he did know his shit.”

“Someone’s pushing their recollection overload! As soon as The Sentinel re-actuates after the show, there’s gonna be a *see-me* message from his prayer and cuddle counselor. So cool it with all those personal details, Jared: You too, Ella. We’re out

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for a jolly good time, right?” announces Grace as the house lights dim.

While Stella’s body recoils for the last time, the orderlies push the loveseat off to the wings. Georgie pats her head and says, “Thanks for that, Stella Della-Bella! Let’s hear it for the professor, folks!” A polite round of applause and an obligatory, “Good show, Stella,” follows as Georgie holds his hands up and asks, “Guess who just came through the backstage door?”

The audience jumps to its feet, chanting, “Shane-Shane! You are our main-MAN!” repeatedly, until Georgie clicks his molars abruptly at his tooth-mike then says, “Be patient. There’s still A Toast To Eternity, with Claudius Tompagne! So ladies and Gentlemen, heeere’s Claudius!” Bounding from the wings; a calm, gray haired aquiline nosed man in his seventies holds his arms outstretched and says, “Welcome to my final living moments, albeit antipasto for the main course of that quick draw act to follow. I do hope I prove to be worthy of your indulgence of my parting words.”

Like a hydrant to a lamppost, Georgie looks up to the towering Claudius and says, “Good evening Mister Tompagne. Welcome to The Last Wish Cafe. Let me ask you the question that must be on everyone’s mind tonight: Why did you choose such a wild ride like the Hemlock Holiday?”

Paternally, Claudius places his hand upon Georgie’s shoulder and answers his question with another, “I do get to make my Socratic Statement to those holy Regime hacks out there the instant I gulp the shit down, right? It’s in the contract!”

Georgie searches the audience for reactions. When he’s sure that they’ve settled down from the Shane announcement, he

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says, “Yes, but remember, you’re the one who’s gonna have to live with whatever you say!”

Following the flashing of the LAUGH sign and its predictable audience response, Claudius replies, “As will all of you!”

The ever-smiling Anita walks to center stage, holding a serving tray with a compliance scanner, a pitcher and a small clay goblet. Claudius smiles back sardonically, swipes his ring and says, “Okay woman, pour me my nightcap. Hey, may I run me a fucking tab?” the audience laughs.

Confused by Claudius’ jibe, a corner of Anita’s mouth trembles briefly, then she complies and fills the cup. Claudius gestures with the goblet toward High Bishop Benedict, then drinks it all in one gulp. After dropping the goblet, he takes a small pair of pliers from his pocket, rips out his molar and his imbedded vintage Companion chip, He throws it at the High Bishop’s box and shouts, “Now shove this goddamn thing up your goddamn duplicitous, pompous ass! Then you and your ass-kissing son of a bitch suck up, Bartholomew, can have a little drink with me and bid this goddamn treacherous Holy Regime of yours adieu!” Claudius grimaces, grabs at his stomach and says to the audience, “It won’t surprise me if those red cloaked hypocrites have your Sentinels switched back on halfway through my farewell speech, so the bishops can feed you more lies about people like me. Nothing in this living hell of a techno-theocracy surprises me. So, before the implant noise begins, you might be wondering why I returned from my self-imposed, life in The Darkness to talk myself to death. Ow! That fuckin’ hurts!”

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“He actually lived in The Darkness?” asks Grace, “How did he get out?”

Jared replies, “There’s a one way loophole: He committed to play The Café. Then he goes down, out and poof ... and then we get to see Shane!”

Claudius rights himself, points to the flowered loveseat as it and its rider disappear behind the curtain and says, “To most of you, they just pushed another pain-ridden old lady off the stage, who probably couldn’t face another day of cat food pension-patties and longevity credit reductions. To me, the last true hero in the fight for the liberty of Humankind has just slipped away. I have chosen my moments of dying as an opportunity to cast the light of her life on some, or perhaps just one of you ‘in-line’ androids. I offer to you the challenge that Professor Della Bella passed on to me, *‘Dare to dream, and dream to dare!’*”

“As one of her former students, let me tell you what I saw when I looked at Professor Della Bella for the last time. I saw the young firebrand who once uplifted my soul. Remember souls? Her words made me envision the promise of times that are always within the grasp of those who have the courage to dream. I saw a spirit, unbroken, that never lost sight of her vision. As her doctoral student, I heard that fearless woman coin The Resistance’s mantra, *‘One Nation Under Assimilation’*.”

As Ella’s glass falls to the floor, Grace asks, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Shut up and listen to him. He’s talking some really great shit!”

Sweating profusely, Claudius points at Benedict and Bartholomew saying, “You fucking pompous puppet masters! After what I tell this audience no one will ever be able to label

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me as anything but patriotic to our real America and not this sanctimonious, hypocritical farce; no matter how hard you try to discredit me.”

Lifting a medal from the lapel on his jacket he says, “Way back in the day, when Saudi terror squads overran your oil fields, I was the young artillery officer who, with a click of a mouse, exploded two thousand heads with one ping of a sonic-disruptor! But that was when we had the freedom and responsibility to fight for our rights. We had some say in things. We had basic implants but we had still had actual rights! We didn’t scramble and shoot at ghosts in the shadows, guided by a spectrum of amber to red terrorist warning lights! We fought and died for a red, white and blue banner of liberty! Yes, we had rights. Imagine, we actually had the right to actually vote!” He snickers, adding, “Or, at least we were taught to believe we did. Today, instead of having rights, we are given choices. Bullshit! Truth is, we are given our choice of the only choices The Sentinel or The Café gives us!” Looking down at the shattered goblet, he adds, “Much like the one I made tonight. But, what the hell, sooner to the end of this hell on Earth or stinking like shit from a longer lifetime of wallowing in it!”

A voice rings out from the audience, “You’ll always be in our thoughts and prayers, Claudius Tompaigne. So praise the Lord, and let’s bring on Shane!”

Claudius’ mouth quivers, and then breaks into a smile. Slowly, he shuffles toward the voice in the dark void of the crowd and asks, “Praise the Lord? The Lord? What Lord? Do you mean those fuckin’ lords sitting with that perfumed, painted surgically enhanced bitch in the Bishop’s box, or the other manufactured garbage that his book on Faith-Based Initiatives

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mandates that you worship under penalty of being ostracized to the enlightenment of The Darkness? What a laugh, Freedom of Religion, replaced by the choice of any one of the only one allowed. Hah! Enjoy your lives of choices while I exercise my Plan C.” He points toward Benedict asking, “Plan C is what you geniuses call the Cafe option, isn’t it? Back to someone who was worthy of life. Professor Della Bella once told me, *‘No one can truly understand what a shadow government is until, like the pups that were nurtured by Napoleon Pig, the dogs emerge from the shadows, kick down the barn door and take over the farm’*. She also said, *‘Never allow the cyber-absolutists to define you, or your life will become even more pathetic than theirs’*. Speaking of doors, ain’t no mother ship gonna be opening its doors for me, but I sure as all hell feel like a door’s about to slam on my dead ass. Sorry folks, I can’t truly tell you that I see any bright light to walk off to, just the end of this nightmare and the hope for my dream to dare to dream!”

Claudius doubles over, drops to his knees and gasps, “In parting, may I add, no matter what The Regime or its tyrannical pig leadership tells you, they need you more than you need them. The absolute truth is: This Fundamentalist, theocratic cyber-technocracy is nothing but one blown fuse from extinction! Each and every one of you sitting here is one dream away from the courage to pull the switch on these Godforsaken bastards. “So either rise up, live the dream and take back what our true God had in mind for you, or drop some more of your precious ‘niners and live another delusional day in these devil’s nightmare. Then, The Regime and The Café will continue to be you’re only realities, you goddamned suckers!” The moment Claudius falls to the stage floor, sporadic clapping pierces the

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silence. In his Socratic Statement's parting gesture to The High Bishop's box, Claudius Tompaigne aims his butt at it while his trousers darken with his final excrement. The audience breaks out in a rousing cheer, followed by a standing ovation.

Bartholomew and Benedict exchange heated whispers as Georgie Malenkov nods to them. Georgie then says to the crowd, "Ladies and gentlemen, soon, your Sentinels will return to the standard mode. Meanwhile, I have some very bad news: While Shane was loading his prized Aaron Burr commemorative dueling pistol in his dressing trailer, it accidentally fired. His condition is good, but tonight's duel must be postponed." Suddenly, everyone in The Cafe presses their fingers against their temples as Georgie announces, "We will return you to regular Sentinel programming in five minutes."

Jared shouts, "Regular programming? Claudius may have been right, we're all being fuckin' programmed, just like those Napoleon Pig's dogs he mentioned!"

Grace kicks Jared in the shin and says, "Shut the hell up you asshole! Don't make people look at us. Sweetie, if you're into stepping off the edge of a plank, and falling into The Darkness, don't think for a minute that this cuddle-mate of yours will be holding your hand." She places her finger on her cheek. As if ignited by a spark of divine revelation, she turns to Ella and exclaims, "Oh no! I hope and pray that this damn pimple isn't developing a pus ball! Ella be a dear and check it when the lights come back up, won't you?"

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