

APPEASING MR. CONNELLY

GLENN DIAZ

When Alvin found himself on the receiving end of the Guttural Lecture, he thought about Empathy. Not the emotional capacity per se, the symbolic pressing of palm against chest, the semi-sincere curling of lips to mouth a word of comfort, but the recommended script under "Empathy" from page 5 of the ring-bound *Manual for UTelCo Customer Care Associates*: "I understand."

And so he said so: "I understand, sir."

But contrary to what the manual suggested, he didn't "tailor-fit the script ... to suit the customer's concern," didn't rephrase his sentence to "capture the need." What he did do, which wasn't in the manual, was inject an unmistakably servile tone of apology in his voice; uttering a slow, dejected drawl that unwittingly communicated the abject, fictitious heartbreak he felt when this old geezer didn't receive his bill for September and was, as a result, charged the \$14.95 late fee.

"This is just inexcusable, you know?" said Mr. Connelly. "I'm a hardworking man. I work very hard for every dollar I bring in to this house. Sure, I can just pay the 15 bucks. What's the big deal, right? Who has the time these days? What do I care? But you know what, it's the principle of the thing. It's not the money. It's the *prin-ci-ple*. This great country is built on principle. Remember that."

"I understand, sir."

This exchange, made possible by three-inch-thick undersea fiber optic cables, was taking place between the 32nd floor of a skyscraper in Makati in the Philippines and the kitchen of a two-bedroom brownstone in Elkhart, Indiana. The building had emerald green windows that glistened with a bronze-like patina when hit by moonlight. The kitchen was yellow-lit out of four pewter wall sconces that Mrs. Connelly had insisted on installing despite their uselessness in food preparation.

“I grew up on those values, you know? I work at Thor Motor six days a week, ten hours a day, just so me and my wife can retire in peace,” *here* Mr. Connelly wheezed, which told Alvin his caller used to smoke and may have stopped some years ago in accordance to a pulmonologist’s orders, “I saw my phone bill and I thought, ‘Wait a second, why don’t I take a look at what these people are charging me for a change?’”

Alvin cleared his throat.

“It’s a good thing I did, too. You know why? I’ll tell you why. ‘Cause all these charges, they really add up. Let’s see here.” And *here*, the rustling of paper zoomed at 2.88 terabit per second from Indiana to southern California, then across the half-lit Pacific Ocean to Taipei, then toward the South China Sea then a landing post in rural Nasugbu town in Batangas, before reaching Makati.

“I understand your frustration, sir.”

“Do you?”

The conversation harked back to an ancient relationship, and intuitively, perhaps as a second, dormant nature, both players knew their roles. One heaved and the other appeased; one raised his voice and the other mumbled a scripted apology. English was, for Mr. Connelly, a language learned in coos from

the cradle; for Alvin, through borrowed nursery rhymes and unnatural cursing.

In another era, there must have been that moment when blue eyes met brown eyes for the first time, too. From the sea, moments after weather-beaten sails were taken down from the main mast and the ships docked to a standstill, the pink-skinned occupants waded through turquoise water, their exposed legs submerged in foreign salinity, their lances and crossbows glinting under the morning sun, their feet weighed down by a gravity that wouldn't let them go for the next three centuries. And from land, brown feet must have strode along the sandy shore, fire-hardened bamboo stakes clutched in fists and poisoned arrows loaded and ready, carefully regarding the giant triangular outlines bobbing in the horizon, in their chest a profound, ominous suspicion that nothing, nothing, would ever be the same again.

Then: contact.

Alvin listened intently to the rustling of paper.

“Let me see here,” said Mr. Connelly.

Philip, Alvin's seatmate, opened a big bag of Lay's. The sound of rustling foil sliced the 12-degree air with a sea-saltiness that registered audibly. Heads turned; eating was forbidden in stations, and Alvin smiled at his friend's little trespass. Philip reclined on his posture chair, which noisily released air, burdened by the extra weight. He tapped the rim of the contraband pack against Alvin's backrest: “You want some?” The universal smell of junk food wafted in the air.

Alvin shook his head no and closed his eyes. The light was too bright, too adamant for two o'clock in the morning. He would've put on his sunglasses if they weren't banned on the floor. Too

many agents now went on autopilot; half-asleep, they sat up straight, one hand on the mouse, absently clicking.

Mr. Connelly continued. “OK. Carrier Line Charge, Universal Connectivity Charge, Interstate Access Charge, 911 Service Fee. I don’t understand any of those. No, sir, I don’t. But when I got to the last line right here,” and *here*, more rustling, “A-ha! What do we have here? A late charge? That, I understand. But why? So I did a little backpedalling, you know? Did a little mental review. Was I amiss with my bills last month? Did I miss anything? I couldn’t even remember so I picked up the phone, got through the run-around with all the buttons you press, then finally got to talk to a live person—a very nice one, by the way, where are you from? It’s hard to pin down your accent—and then I finally remembered. Wait a minute. I don’t think I got my bill last month! That’s right. Elaine, my eldest daughter, she works for Oprah, yes. She was in town from Chicago—” *here*, he hummed, “around two, three weeks ago? And I was very busy. I didn’t have time to check my bills, but I should’ve seen it if it came in the mail. Janice couldn’t have taken it. She can’t even remember to—”

Alvin swivelled back and forth in his chair, making dizzy half-circles. From one end of the pendulum, he could see Philip’s 260-pound body spilling from the chair’s rubber armrests, hunched primate-like in front of the computer, fingers digging inside the yellow bag of Lay’s on his lap. From the other, his supervisor Eric sat at the very end of the blue spine, also hunched, his bald head lined with a silver headset that, against the darkness of the Plexiglas window, looked like a halo. Across him, Karen was, like always, checking her makeup on a compact mirror while arguing in the sweet voice she only used when talking to male customers or grandmothers.

In between, a haze made hazier by Mr. Connelly’s droning grandpa voice, the lecture now on its 35th minute.

“You. You’re quite young. How old are you, 24, 25? When I was your age, a gallon of gas was 80 cents, Rick Mears still raced in the Indianapolis 500, and Brenda Ann Spencer shot those elementary school kids from her window in San Diego. Remember that? Your folks will probably do.”

37 minutes now.

“It was quite sick, what happened. I remember because it was Elaine’s second birthday. You know how old that Brenda Ann Spencer was at that time? Sixteen. *Six-teen!* She had been looking out when she saw the school kids in front of the school gate. Then she got a handgun and started shooting at ‘em. Like ducks on Lake Michigan,” and *here* he laughed, almost amiably, “oh Lake Mich.” He coughed. “You see I’d gone hunting during my day, and I understand how things can get attractive from afar. I do. Golden eyes, buffleheads, mallards. Oh boy. Just imagine. A big moose in the middle of that crosshair and you can do something to it from half a mile. Now *that’s* my definition of power.”

40 minutes.

“Anyway, when the cops questioned her, know what she said? You remember? ‘I don’t like Mondays. I wanted to liven things up.’ Isn’t that just the craziest thing you’ve ever heard? Really, you just never know what goes on in people’s minds nowadays, do you? You really don’t. Oscar, amazing fella’, can change a flat in less than 90 seconds, he got married last week, then went off to Oahu for the honeymoon. Not supposed to be back until two weeks from Monday, OK? But there he was at the garage earlier. Unbelievable. You know what happened? You know? He found out his wife’s no longer a virgin.”

Here, Alvin pounced. “I understand how you feel, Mr. Connelly. Once again, I’m sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused you.”

Page 9 under “Apology.”

“I will be taking note of everything so that it doesn’t happen again.”

Page 10 under “Assurance.”

“Now since you claim that you failed to receive a copy of your bill last month, I will give you a one-time credit of \$14.95, which you will see on your next billing statement.”

“I appreciate that. I am *sure* I didn’t get a bill last—”

“Please stay on the line so I can give you a confirmation number as proof of this transaction.”

“That would be—”

“Thank you. Please hold.”

“—great.”

Relieved, Alvin quickly hit Hold Music onscreen. He stood up, and, careful not to mess the black cord that connected his head to the phone on his desk, walked a couple of steps toward Philip’s seat. Alvin reached for the bag of chips, except there was only warm air inside and bone-white powdery bits that clung to the bag’s silver corners. He gave Philip a look of dire, dire accusation: “You ate everything?” Philip, who was in a call, looked up at Alvin, shook his head, and mouthed “Wala na, wala na, sorry.” Alvin took the bag and threw it in the small trash bin between their stations. He started throwing light karate punches on Philip’s broad left arm.

In sunny Elkhart, Indiana, Mr. Connelly was growing impatient. It was daytime in that part of the world, and the sun did not

have to be conjured by the thousand fluorescent lamps that now lit the antiseptic call center floor.

Philip paid his reckless friend no heed. His forehead was wrinkled, his face crestfallen, staring at his screen as if the customer could see his face. “Needless to say, Miss Anderson,” he said, “we’re doing everything we can—” he stopped and sighed; he’d been cut off.

Alvin continued the playful fisticuff, aiming to distract Philip from what looked to be a difficult call. Just then, the operations manager, a burly Texan named Brock, happened to pass by the carpeted walkway. He stopped in his tracks and started coming toward Alvin’s station. Seeing the American’s aggressive gait, Alvin felt terror detonate in his chest and he quickly returned to his seat. Once seated, somehow he knew that his boss was standing right behind him. When the hefty American cleared his throat, it sent a firm chill that entered Alvin’s covered ears and terminated in his gut, then beset by rioting butterflies.

It was a loud reprimand, and Brock had not even opened his mouth. In between the plastic spines and the miles of invisible cable, everything, to Alvin, became deafeningly quiet, when in truth the sonata of the call center floor continued: the halves of simultaneous conversations, the clattering of keyboards, the polyphony of ringing of phones.

And *here*, in the rare contact between front-liner and executive, foot soldier and commander, the floor’s uncaring drone became, for Alvin, even more callous. When Brock walked away, it was only then when Alvin resumed breathing.

He had barely recovered when he realized Mr. Connelly had hung up. According to his onscreen phone, the call had been over for nearly seven minutes, far, far longer than the 30 seconds agents were given to type some notes on the caller’s records.

Page 21 under “Call documentation.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Shit, shit, shit, shit.”

Panicking, Alvin hit “Avail” onscreen, and at once he heard a short beep. The last fuck and shit had barely escaped his lips when he recited, in an anxious rapid fire, a quick introduction of himself and a hopefully ardent-sounding desire to help this stranger on the other end of the line. “Thank you for calling UTelCo Consumer Services. My name is Alvin. How can I help you today?”

“What?” barked a tired-sounding voice.

Alvin cleared his throat, wet his lips. “This is UTelCo, sir. How can I help you?”

“I don’t, I can’t, I mean, I cannot understand you.”

“Can I have your phone number starting with area code please?”

“What? Is this, is this UTelCo?”

“Yes, it is.”

The infirmed faintness of the voice, the sharp breaths that divided the words told Alvin that it was another old man; this one without the grandpa warmth of Mr. Connelly, without the tenderness and the patience that the decades normally painted over erstwhile ragged spirits.

Here, Mr. Livingston snapped, “Where am I calling? Is this India?”

“No, sir.”

“What?”

“This is not India, sir.”

“Where is this?”

“UTelCo offices are located in Naperville, Illinois.”

Page 18 under “Disclosure of location.”

Alvin had always uttered this sentence with machine-like automation, that when he now paused and thought about the lie that it stoically offered, his true surroundings clarified itself to him, like a splash of vivid watercolor. He was suddenly aware of his tar-black headset, the citrusy smell of Karen’s perfume, this two o’clock silence. In an aging bungalow in San Juan, on the same street where the first shot of the Filipino-American War rang a hundred years ago, his mother was sleeping beside Sophia. Two short jeepney rides away was a brick medium-rise, on the third floor of which he used to report to every week, writing for a fledgling *Village Voice*-type broadsheet. After his shift, he would try to fit inside an already crowded elevator, exit through the skyscraper’s petite metal doors, and, once outside, take off his Nike windbreaker. The sun would be prickly on his arms and neck, his bald head; the asphalt on EDSA, where he would take a bus home, would swelter like a desert.

“Naperville, eh?” old Mr. Livingston said, taunting. “How’s the weather there?”

“Appeasing Mr. Connelly” (2012) was published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*.