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Oops

You are six and in the car. On your lap is a sleeping white puppy, newly purchased in upstate New York. He is a West Highland White Terrier, which sounds pretentious even to your inexpert ears. The family who sold the puppy to your family explained that dogs belonging to the breed are commonly known as Westies, which sounds a bit better.

"Well?" asks your father from the driver's seat. "What do you want to name him?"

The correct answer: "I will name him Disappointment," you announce. "Because he will prove to be very mean and yappy, and will never want to play with me."

The real answer: "I will name him Westie," you announce. "Because he is a Westie."

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Congratulations. You are on a coffee date. She is very pretty and articulate, and things are going well. You talk about all kinds of subjects, but she eventually steers the conversation towards religion. You admit you are not particularly religious, and she lets it drop.

Later, as the coffee shop is starting to close, you bring up the notion of wanting to do another coffee date again soon, but stop as she slowly shakes her head at you. Surprised, you ask her why not.

She smiles at you sweetly. "Because," she says. "You're going to Hell."

What you should have done: Let it go and just drive her home. Do. Not. Engage.
What you did instead: Blink and ask her if she really thinks that. The ride home will now be filled with a wide variety of socio-religious commentary, ranging from the menace of the homosexual agenda to the sinful, idolatrous culture of Apple products. Enjoy.

Bad news: Your grandfather is dying. He has had what you believe is known in the medical community as "a really fucking big stroke" and things do not, you are told, look good. But one day, he is apparently well enough to take visitors, and so you go down to the hospital and sit by his bedside in the hospice ward. He is awake and, you find, able to hold a conversation.

What would've been nice: You muster up all your courage. "Tell me something about your life. You've been through war and heartbreak and fatherhood," you say, sweeping your arm in a dramatic arc, "there must be something you need me to know about you, something you want me to know about how to live my life."

Your grandfather, empowered by your words, leaps out of bed—stroke be damned—and teaches you not only about the valuable life lessons he learned, but also how he overcame his most deep-seated doubts and fears, and how you can, too. You grow much closer to him and, now cured by the power of human and familial warmth, he leaves the hospice to go do further bonding activities with you.

What actually happened: You make small talk with him for roughly an hour. Getting up from the bedside chair, you tell him he looks good and promise to visit again. A week and a half later, your grandfather is dead.
Hot date. Don't mess this up. You come back from dinner and she invites you into her apartment. Everything's coming up You. Once in her apartment, you two proceed to make a number of increasingly flirtatious moves until, finally, she looks at you and asks if you'd like to watch a movie.

This is not exactly what you had in mind, but sure, you say, that sounds good. She pulls out her laptop, and you think things are fine until it becomes clear that by 'movie' she means 'porn."

This is not necessarily a problem, per se, but the thing that makes you pause is how intently she is watching the porn. She is now lying on her stomach on the couch, resting her head on her hands, and looking unblinkingly at the computer screen now practically filled with genitalia. You feel slightly out of the picture, but then she reaches behind the bed and pulls out a bag of Frito's and starts eating them, never diverting her attention from the screen. Now you know you are out of the picture.

What you should have done, and what could've happened: "Hey, you," you say. "Are we having sex or no?"

Pulled from her explicit reverie, she looks at you, then back to her screen, then back to you. "Of course," she says, throwing the bag of Frito's aside. "Snack foods are very different from sexual activity, and maybe I shouldn't try combining the two to create an almost Freudian and neonatal feeling of satisfaction and security by having all my primal desires met at once."

Then you have sex, sex goes extremely well, and you can continue to feel confident about your signal-reading abilities.

What you did instead, and what actually happened: You are flustered, very confused, and look from her to her computer screen, then back to her, the silence broken only by the
crunching of Frito's and the tinny sound of exaggerated coitus coming through laptop speakers. This goes on for roughly 10 minutes, and by then is so stiffingly awkward that you need to escape. You get up, and announce your intention to leave. Still staring at the computer screen, she mumbles a goodbye around a mouthful of half-chewed corn chips. You leave, feeling both let down but also strangely touched, as though you had just witnessed something sublime.

Your best friend drops out of college. He had previously dropped out of high school, but by some miracle, had gotten into a good college, and has now just thrown that chance away. You are driving through the snow with him during winter break, just after he has come home with all his luggage. You have asked him what he plans to do now, and he admits that he doesn't know.

"Aren't you worried about future plans? How are you going to get a job?" you ask.

He shrugs. "I don't know," he says. "But I didn't know what I was doing with myself there, and leaving was kind of the first decision I made that I was really satisfied with."

"Hmm..." You make a doubtful sound.

He looks over at you from the driver's seat. "Don't tell me you've never made a mistake and haven't tried to make it better. Do you really just resign yourself to whatever happens when you don't know how to fix it?"

**What you want to be able to say:** "Of course not," you tell him. "Giving up and then moping about it later sounds depressing, and kind of self-indulgent. Who would do such a thing?"

**The only thing you can really say:** "Yes," you tell him. "And I don't know how to fix that, either."