

Channel 144, Part 1

AGENT:

To whom it may concern—thank you kindly for your faith in my abilities--

[The agent is typing a message frantically, then backspaces it.]

No no no, that's not right. Too formal.

[More typing, speaking]

Hello! Thank you SO, SO much for believing in me. I really want to create real change here at OPS—

Eh, I don't like that either. Too... damsel-y.

[More typing]

Okay, listen up motherfucker—

Blech. Sorry, I'm trying to compose some sort of reply to the person who sent me that e-mail from the last recording I put online. Remember that? They were all like "I want to help you." That's awesome, I guess. I don't really fully know what they're capable of, though, so I don't even know where to start! For one thing, I was thinking about *why* I'm making these recordings. Gotta make SOME sort of impact—escaping isn't my only goal.

...uhhhh, but the call of my own personal freedom isn't something I can really ignore, is it? I want to go outside again. I don't remember when I last had fresh air, to be honest. Remember grass? Trees? Other people? I miss those. It doesn't really hurt to dream, I suppose.

But, realistically, I guess it's all a question of what I can actually do here in the PSST office. Like, realistic goals. And I checked things out physically around here and looked for an exit, and that didn't do me much good, so I guess I ought to focus digitally. Do computer stuff. And I'm not a Cool Movie hacker, so let's go with relying on whoever's been listening to me. And for that, I need... to type up a response.

Maybe I just have to keep it simple.

"I'll take your help. What do you have for me?"

And... sent. Okay. That should be vague enough. Ooof. Shake it out, girl. Ooof! Listener—yes, in this case, you specific listener who sent this to me—I get why you can't tell me who you are. I really do. I can fly under the radar, 'cause I'm just an agent. But, clearly, you know who I am, right? How else would you be able to send this to me? My name's in my e-mail address. So clearly, you've got some amount of power. Say, how do you even know—

[E-mail ding]

Woah, that was a fast response. Let's see...

"Get a wireless headset so you can leave your desk during a call."

Okay. Well that's... not possible. Not a bad idea, but not possible. We have a technology deployment office, but they're so hard to get anything from. And I think Raun prefers me to work from my desk.

It's... weird, because I've never seen Raun do any work from *their* desk, at least. They just kind of sit, staring forward. I can actually just barely see them from my desk. [sounds of stretching] EEP! They looked right back at me. Just wave all natural-like, like... hey Raun... yes, I see you. Hi Raun, that's a cool trick you can do with your neck, just twist it all the way like that. Mhm, very... cool.

You might be asking yourself, "hey agent, Raun's kinda spooky, but they must mean well. Can you just like, ask them for a headset?" Well, first of all, absolutely not. For one thing, Raun is actually terrifying. 8 feet tall, inhumanly strong, and a poor sense of spacial awareness is a particularly nightmarish combination. They're moody and pretty unpredictable, occasionally violent, and I'll admit—I did get literally thrown across the office one time when I asked for replacement tape for the dispenser. Was sore for a while after that. I can't say Raun intends to hurt me, but... it happens.

But, yeah. I gotta be careful when I interact with Raun. They're dangerous. I'm used to it, but, I wish I wasn't. I might send them an email later with some reasons that I need the tech—easier to wear or something... Only thing is, I think the sound of them receiving e-mails hurts their ears. Like, enough to make them screech in pain. And they're probably the slowest typer I've ever seen. And the emails themselves—well, let me just read one for you.

"reports graph graph line reports graph reports done, then there's an egg emoji, three stop signs, the word ALTOGETHER with seven R's, and then a lovely formatted signature line with Raun's full name & pronouns and a quote from Amelia Earhart: "The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity."

They... probably had some help writing that.

Anyways, a wireless headset would be worthwhile, at least. It'd increase the range at which I could both record and take calls, which would be SUPER convenient for making these recordings. Plus, it's less likely that I'd miss a call if I had to step away, so it'd be good for work too. And I could stop accidentally winding my cable around my chair. That's a real hassle. Guess I'll shoot Raun a message—

[After a beat, the phone starts ringing.]

Oh, here we go. A call! Let's go.

Thank you for calling the PSST hotline! This is Felicia [awkward pause, she's not happy about the name.] speaking, and I'll be your Agent today. Your call may be tracked and recorded—

[Enter RUBY. They're being deeply inconvenienced having to make a support call at all, but they have the need to talk to a Real Person. Some jumbled television noises play softly from the other side of the room. An audible thunderstorm can be heard, too.]

RUBY: I don't consent.

AGENT: E-excuse me?

RUBY: I don't consent. Can you hear me?

AGENT: Oh. Um, Okay. You won't be recorded... for training or emergency purposes.

RUBY: Can you hear me?

AGENT: Yes, I can hear you!

RUBY: Well, I can barely hear you. Could you speak up?

AGENT: [really projecting her voice] IS THIS GOOD?

RUBY: Better.

AGENT: OKAY. YOU ARE NOT BEING RECORDED FOR, UM, TRAINING PURPOSES, AND WE WILL NOT TRACK THIS CALL. [continue this tone through the rest of the call.]

RUBY: [silence]

AGENT: Um, what can... Who may I ask is calling?

RUBY: Well ma'am, my name is Ruby and my tv doesn't work.

AGENT: Okay, your television set is malfunctioning, okay. Are you in any immediate—

RUBY: The channels are working.

AGENT: So you're not in danger.

RUBY: Why would I be in danger?

AGENT: I just want to confirm that you're sure you're in a place where you can speak out loud.

RUBY: [silence]

AGENT: So, um, RUBY, What seems to be the issue with your television?

RUBY: Channel 144 isn't working.

AGENT: Is it the reception? I hear a bit of static—

RUBY: No.

AGENT: The reception is fine, but this one channel isn't coming through?

RUBY: No, it's not *working*.

AGENT: The channel isn't working, but you can see it.

RUBY: [frustrated]. Yes.

AGENT: Okay... When did... this particular channel stop working?

RUBY: I noticed it today during lunch. I watch tv when I eat. This evening it wasn't working either.

AGENT: Did you try anything different? Different channels? Did you try different buttons, dials or—

RUBY: No.

AGENT: Okay. Did you call your television company?

RUBY: Yes.

AGENT: And...? What did they say?

RUBY: They gave me your number.

AGENT: Okay... fair enough. [AWKWARD SILENCE. Perhaps slightly too long.] So um, what do you see on your screen right now?

RUBY: Channel one forty four. The Willy Karne show.

AGENT: Oh, and Willy is... what, exactly? [The script dings.] A talk show?

RUBY: Willy tells the news. ...don't you work for the tv?

AGENT: The station? Oh, no, I'm a paranatural specialist.

RUBY: A what?

AGENT: I help with um, ghosts. Spirits. Monsters.

RUBY: [insulted] ...ghosts?

AGENT: Sometimes, yes.

RUBY: [under their breath] Fucking christ.

AGENT: [audible smile being forced.]

RUBY: So there's a ghost in my tv. Alright.

AGENT: Well, maybe! I'm actually not sure yet. What's... Willy talking about today? If it's coming through right now—

RUBY: [derisively] You aren't sure yet. [a huff.] Well, let's see... Willy's talking about the news... they're live on the street... Right now... looks like a backhoe. Construction work. power is being restored to Oak Street after the gas leak explosion took out the—

AGENT: You live on Oak Street, right, RUBY?

RUBY: That's right. [Slowly, as they appear on the screen] That's the Bowers' house there, and the Worths' home. The trailer with the asshole's right there. Can't see my house, though. Now they're talking about... no, joking about the heat wave, and the sun beating down.

AGENT: But you have power. I can hear your television set playing.

RUBY: Mmm.

AGENT: And the weather doesn't... [thunder rumbles] There's thunder outside! [awkward silence]

RUBY? Are you still there?

RUBY: Yep.

AGENT: Your channel 144 is... broadcasting the wrong day?

RUBY: That's what I said. The channel isn't working. It's playing next week.

AGENT: [deadpan] What.

RUBY: So what do I do?

AGENT: Well... what have you done already?

RUBY: I called the cable. And they gave me this number to call.

AGENT: Okay. You said it's a week away, but what precise day does the broadcast show?

RUBY: June 19th. So that's in seven days.

AGENT: ...is it? It is. Right. So your television channel is a week ahead of schedule, and showing you a live feed of the future. Okay. Definitely strange.

RUBY: Well? Can you fix it?

AGENT: I'm not sure, but I think I can guide *you* to fix it. [meaning we help YOU fix YOUR problems, we can't always fix them for you!]

RUBY: You can't fix it from there? No box or something that makes it show the right news?

AGENT: No, RUBY, it doesn't work like that. This isn't a technical issue, this is a—

RUBY: Why would I call you if I have to do the work? Can't you send someone over? Can I talk to your manager?

AGENT: You... um, my manager is... busy. I think they're... counting something. And our squad is more of an "imminent danger" sort of troubleshooting team.. I'm sure if I guide you through the steps, we can troubleshoot what you have.

RUBY: Then use the box!

AGENT: The box?

RUBY: My nephew James works at Western Illinois Communication and he says he has a box with switches on it that lets him turn on and off the channels on everyone's cable.

AGENT: I... I don't think that's a real thing.

RUBY: [almost friendly] Well, you'll get that box soon, when they think you've earned it.

AGENT: ???????? With all due respect—

RUBY: Okay so Felicia, what should I do?

AGENT: I, uh, um, uh, what

RUBY: I've got the remote in my hand, i'm right by the tv. They're on sports now, and I swear to god I just want to see today's Cubs scores.

AGENT: Well, let's see, uh, well, first let's see if there's a problem with the TV itself. Could you try turning it off, and then turning it back on?

[sound fx]

AGENT: Anything different?

RUBY: Nope.

AGENT: Try unplugging the back, where the cable box goes in, and reconnect it.

RUBY: [struggling sounds of moving a television set, the TV sfx go off into static and then back on.]
Nothing.

AGENT: Well, I don't know what's going on exactly, Ruby, but I guess the next step is to check a neighbor's TV and see if they're having the same issue. Why don't you do that and give me a call back when you do?

RUBY: Okay, bye, Felicia.

AGENT: Bye— [hangs up]

[The agent stares in disbelief. She's glad it's over..]

AGENT: Did... did I just get meme'd on by the script?

I'm not sure if I explained this to you, listener, but the PSST hotline isn't normally something you can dial. Our number doesn't have an area code—it's not toll-free or toll-based. It's just... a nonsense number. And it changes. You can't access it unless you need it. I... I think it's to make sure people who don't know about paranatural stuff don't wind up learning about something that would break their brains. Or maybe it's so we don't have to deal with random people clogging up the ticket queues with mundane issues like... forgetting their e-mail passwords and thinking a werewolf stole them. My point though, is that if someone calls, they *need* to call us. They're dealing with something outside of the norm. And if the caller doesn't want to believe that they're dealing with the paranatural, why should they believe anything that I say?

And that's what's frustrating about Ruby. I went into this knowing they were dealing with something potentially strange or dangerous, and had to *convince* them they were dealing with the abnormal when it was RIGHT THERE, IN FRONT OF THEM. It's absolutely maddening! I mean, I guess they caught me off-guard. And maybe that made me sound less confident. And that feeling kinda snowballs, right? You mess up that first interaction and it's hard to win back that trust and sound like you know what you're doing. But if you can't expect them to adhere to the same social rules as you... well, then, you're just stuck trying to be the better person in a weird contest you can't win even when you're the only person who's even competing! And Raun'd have my head as a watering can if they knew I was giving a customer a hard time.

Not to mention their attitude... god I hope this is one of those problems that just resolve themselves. I may not have the time or energy to deal with this case. At least everything seems to be okay on his end. In the meantime, I guess I should focus on getting that headset.

[Pause]

I suppose I'll start with an e-mail to Raun. I don't really see what else to do.

[typing, a beat, a distant ping, and an animal's screech]

Message received. Fantastic. I gotta get out of here. I'm sick of dealing with callers with issues like... having a futurevision television. You'd think they'd just keep their mouth shut and like, just grab winning lottery numbers, but instead they just want to sit there and watch the news and weather and the cubs and complain about construction for some kinda gas leak. Talk about a lack of imagination.

I think I need a tea break. See next time, listener. [footsteps away, quick footsteps back] FUCK FUCK
RUBY IS IN DANGER FUCK