

CAN'T TALK RIGHT NOW

by

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CHARACTERS

Amanda - a radio show host

Natalie - a barkeeper

Jean - a marketing coordinator

Beth - a housewife

Eve - a college student

And miscellaneous female & male voices.

Note - the play is designed so that Beth & Eve can be played by the same person. The script also assumes that Beth will be performed live as an off stage voice. Other voices can all be pre-recorded.

In blackout, a bit of music fades out, leading into a station break.

MALE ANNOUNCER

(voiceover)

You're listening to 90.9 FM, KUNI, owned and operated by the University of Northern Iowa - a proud member of the Iowa Public Radio network. The time is twelve midnight.

We hear an elegantly constructed audio collage that serves as the introduction to Amanda's radio show, snippets of voices recorded down through time, "number station" recordings, satellite transponder signals, old time radio commercials, political speeches, scratchy 78 rpm records, culminating in Amanda, introducing her show.

AMANDA

(voiceover)

I'm Amanda Bixby, and this is Signal Loss. Tonight's episode is called "Can't Talk Right Now."

When the show's introduction ends, we hear a beep, then a voice from an answering machine.

NATALIE

(voiceover)

Uhhh... Hi, this is... uh, hi, I'm conducting a survey about... household grocery shopping habits, and I'd love to - I'll just, I'll call back.

"Click" of Natalie hanging up. "Beep" - another message.

NATALIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

Hello, I'm just, I'm calling because I'm conducting a survey and would, would *love* to offer you a special coupon package if you could just spare a few minutes of your time. I'll try calling back another time, hopefully when you're, available, to chat.

"Click" - "beep".

NATALIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

Hi, just checking in, because - our coupon package is a limited time offer, so, just, hoping you might want to take advantage of our offer, so... Our number here is 1-800-555-8665.

"Click" - "beep".

NATALIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

Oh, uh - remember to ask for extension 92. Okay, thanks.

"Click" - "beep".

NATALIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

Hey Beth, it's - it's Natalie, I just want to know - just, any time you want to...

"Click" - "beep".

NATALIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

Beth - hey, I'm not - it's gonna be someone else at my extension now because - I'm not working there any more, so - yeah. I guess you - I mean, I don't know, which is - just, frustrating, but. Anyway, if you ever feel like - just, it's -

"Click" - "beep".

NATALIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

My number is 319-555-3829. That's my personal - if you ever want to talk, to me, again. About whatever, you know, I don't... I hope you're okay, Beth. I mean, I'm sure you are. Anyway, I won't call again.

"Click." Lights up on AMANDA in her DJ booth, studio headphones on, speaking into a nice microphone. As a radio host, she has no specific dress code when she's working. In these studio moments, she is reading from a prepared script, confident and well-rehearsed, hints of strategically deployed emotion underneath the polish.

AMANDA

I discovered these messages on an old answering machine I picked up recently on my weekly trip to the Salvation Army Thrift Store. The device in question was cutting edge once, as you can tell from this commercial that aired during the Christmas season in 1994.

MALE COMMERCIAL ANNOUNCER

(voiceover)

The incredible dependable AT&T Digital Answering System 1710 from Kmart has no tapes to break, many easy to use features, and is just \$69.97.

AMANDA

These devices are sturdy, and you can often pick one up on the secondary market for as low as \$30. The Salvation Army sold me this one for \$10 because the power cable was missing. But it also takes four AA batteries, so I took a risk, and took the machine home.

(pause)

I was immediately captivated by Natalie's voice, and the secret narrative implied by her increasingly anxious messages. Each time Natalie called hoping to speak to Beth, she instead heard-

MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Hello. We're not available now. Please leave your name and phone number after the beep, and we will return your call.

AMANDA

-which was the cheerful lying voice of a default greeting that no one ever bothered to change. True to her word, Natalie left no further messages. But her final message-

NATALIE

(voiceover)

I hope you're okay, Beth. I mean, I'm sure you are.

AMANDA

-left too many unanswered
questions for me to sleep that
night.

Amanda removes her headphones, stands & directly addresses
the audience as lights fade behind her on the booth.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Now if you call 1-800-555-8665
today, you'll hear-

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Thank you for calling the Midwest
Vending Supply Company. To request
new service at your location,
press one. To report mechanical
issues, press two.

AMANDA

Not too surprising - 800 numbers
are recycled all the time. But if
you call 319-555-3829 and ask for
Natalie, you'll learn-

MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Nah, there's no Natalie here, I
think you've got the wrong number.

AMANDA

-which isn't true, of course, I'm
just calling it from the wrong
year.

MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Well I don't know what *that*
means, but we've had this number
since we moved here, which had to
be -

AMANDA

2002, is that right?

MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Sounds right, yeah. Lucky guess.

AMANDA

I'm not guessing. I just did a
reverse lookup of your phone
number on the internet.

(MORE)

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Are you Calvin Meyer on Home Park
Boulevard?

MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Uh - who is this?

AMANDA

Calvin could acquire Natalie's
number because local number
portability wasn't enforced in the
319 area code until 2003. But you
can search the white pages online
all the way back to 1994. Seven
different people were assigned
this number prior to Calvin, none
of them named Natalie. Any one of
them could be Natalie's old house
mate. A woman named Kelly Harris
had the number in 1994 and 1995,
and when you look Kelly up on
Facebook today, sure enough she's
friends with a woman named Natalie
Kinmark, who first appears in the
white pages with her own 319 phone
number in 1996 - a number she's
had ever since. I decided to call
that number.

Lights up on NATALIE answering her land line. When we meet
her, she's in her late 40s or early 50s, wearing torn jeans
and a concert T-shirt from a classic rock band.

NATALIE

Hello?

AMANDA

Hi, is this Natalie?

NATALIE

Yeah.

AMANDA

Hi, my name's Amanda Bixby. I host
a radio program for KUNI called
Signal Loss.

NATALIE

Hi.

AMANDA

Hi! Is this a good time?

NATALIE

Uh - maybe, good time for what?
Are we on the radio?

AMANDA

No, no. I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions, if you've got time to chat.

NATALIE

I've got a few minutes before I leave for work. What's this about?

AMANDA

It's about - I wanted to ask you - what do you remember about a woman named Beth?

(pause)

Still there?

NATALIE

How do you know Beth?

AMANDA

I don't actually know her.

NATALIE

How do you know *about* her?

AMANDA

It's kind of a long story. Maybe I can come by your bar tonight and tell you in person?

NATALIE

You know where I work?

AMANDA

Uh... yes? Because - I've been looking for you, because - you left several messages on Beth's answering machine, and I wanted to know - more about her story. And yours, if you're...

(pause)

Still there?

NATALIE

Be there at closing.

Natalie hangs up. Lights crossfade to the bar where she works; she and Amanda enter the scene from opposite sides of the stage, sit at bar stools together in front of the bar, drinking whiskey together after the bar is closed.

NATALIE (CONT'D)
So you're friends with Kelly on
Facebook?

AMANDA
Nope.

NATALIE
Oh. But you could see all her
friends?

AMANDA
I could.

NATALIE
Including where they all work?

AMANDA
Well usually, if they list where
they work on their profiles, yeah.

NATALIE
I thought my profile was private.

AMANDA
A lot of people think that.

NATALIE
But I didn't put my phone number
on my Facebook profile.

AMANDA
It's in the phone book.

NATALIE
You got me.

Amanda pulls a small digital recorder out of her purse or
pocket.

NATALIE (CONT'D)
You going to record me?

AMANDA
No, I'm going to play a recording
for you. I recently found an old
answering machine at a thrift
store, and I transferred the
messages from it onto this device.
Is this your voice?

Amanda plays a snippet of Natalie's messages. Natalie
freezes as she hears her voice, then quietly sips her
whiskey.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Did she, eventually, call you back?

NATALIE

No she did not.

(pause)

Sorry, I haven't thought about her in a long time.

AMANDA

It's okay. I mean, I know this is weird.

NATALIE

Why did you buy an old answering machine in the first place?

AMANDA

I'm kind of a "dead media" collector. I find old film strips, reel-to-reel tapes, video cassettes... weird old commercials and radio shows... home movies, audio tapes from recitals or lectures or that kind of thing... and I use that stuff to make stories for my radio show.

NATALIE

For KUNI?

AMANDA

Yeah.

NATALIE

I went to UNI.

AMANDA

So did I.

NATALIE

Did you come back from somewhere, or are you still there?

AMANDA

I was an intern at KUNI while I was getting my communications degree. They were really short-handed the year I was graduating, so they offered me my own show if I'd stay in Cedar Falls and go full time. Been there ever since.

(MORE)

AMANDA (CONT'D)

(pause)

Are you... back from somewhere?

NATALIE

I surely the fuck am not.

(pause)

So you want to know about me and Beth for your radio show?

AMANDA

I want to know about you and Beth because I'm a very inquisitive person. But I do think it could make a good story for my radio show.

NATALIE

I don't know. It doesn't have much of an ending.

AMANDA

Well, not yet.

NATALIE

Are you going to record me?

AMANDA

Not tonight. I just want to chat tonight. If that's still cool.

NATALIE

Sure. I might switch to coffee at some point.

AMANDA

That sounds good actually.

NATALIE

I mean, not yet.

AMANDA

In your messages, you start off saying you're doing a shopping survey, like you don't know who she is.

NATALIE

Yeah.

AMANDA

But you did know her?

NATALIE

Not really, no. I thought I knew her, a little, at the time. But I think I probably didn't.

AMANDA

You knew her name though.

NATALIE

Sure, I got her name off a call list.

As Natalie continues her story, we crossfade into Natalie's cubicle, where she sits in a rolling office chair at a small desk and puts on a bulky old telephone headset, connected to a giant old desk phone. She might also throw on a professional blouse or tie up her hair to signify that we're going back in time to Natalie's junior year of college. On her desk: several pages of names & phone numbers; and surveys on a clip board that she fills out as she takes each call. Amanda recedes into darkness.

NATALIE (CONT'D)

I had this job while I was in college, doing surveys for a telemarketing company. Big clients would hire us to conduct market research surveys. They'd send over these call lists of people who'd ever subscribed to a magazine or entered a sweepstakes or whatever. Sometimes they were pre-screened and sometimes they just seemed like big random lists.

OLDER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Hello?

NATALIE

Hi, could I speak to Mr. Carl Nelson please?

OLDER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

That's me.

NATALIE

Mr. Nelson, my name is Natalie, and I'm not selling anything. I'm just calling to ask you a few questions about your cigarette smoking preferences.

(MORE)

NATALIE (CONT'D)

We'll be happy to send you a packet of coupons from leading cigarette brands for your time. How does that sound?

OLDER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Fine, I guess.

NATALIE

Excellent! First question: when you purchase cigarettes, what's more important to you - brand or price?

OLDER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Uh... is "generic" a brand?

A bell rings. JEAN enters, pulling a white board on wheels behind her; she's a college senior, very crisply attired as supervisor. The white board shows a grid of names, including Natalie's, with hourly numbers next to each, ranging from 4 up to 28 for Natalie. Only a few are in the 20s; most are in the teens; only a couple are below 10.

NATALIE

We had to hit hourly quotas of completed surveys, even though we didn't get commission like the sales guys.

JEAN

Eyes on the board, people. Natalie's got the lead this hour with twenty-eight, Marcus is right behind her with twenty-six. Very nice work, you two, love seeing you trade the lead like that. Look at all these sixteens and seventeens, that's promising you guys, keep it going. Let's be ambitious, the goal is eighteen this hour.

NATALIE

I mean, they still tried to "incentivize" us.

JEAN

Remember, top three callers this week get those free passes to the Cattle Congress.

NATALIE

But the only real incentive was,
you got fired pretty quick if you
missed quota too many times.

JEAN

Heath and Liz - could I see you in
my office immediately? Please
bring your headsets.

Jean exits with the white board.

NATALIE

I was good at it but I didn't like
it.

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

I guess brand is most important.
You gotta look cool or there's no
point smoking, right?

NATALIE

Do you participate in any loyalty
or reward programs for your
favorite brands?

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

I could get rewards for smoking?

NATALIE

You could get points toward
rewards, yes.

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

What kind of rewards could I get?

NATALIE

Typically you can choose from an
entire catalog of items. What kind
of rewards would convince you to
sign up for a loyalty program?

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Could I get *you* as a reward,
Natalie?

NATALIE

I'm sorry?

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

How about your phone number -
could I get your phone number,
Natalie? I mean, it's only fair,
you've got *my* phone number,
right?

NATALIE

I'm not allowed to give out
personal information, sir.

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

That's a stupid rule. How about
you call me when you get off work?

NATALIE

I'm not allowed to remove our call
lists from the call center. If you
could just answer the question-

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

No, *you* answer a question, why
are you such an uptight bitch?

NATALIE

I take it you would *not* consider
joining a loyalty program?

YOUNGER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

No, and fuck you, Natalie. If you
were here right now, I'd have you
begging for it.

NATALIE

(overlapping previous)

Thank you for your time, you
should receive your coupons in two
weeks or less, have a good day!

She swiftly rips off her headset. After a beat, Jean
enters.

JEAN

He answered the last question.
Technically that counts.

NATALIE

Oh my god, you heard that?

JEAN

Quality control spares no one, even my top callers. Yes, I was listening to that call. You did good. You stayed professional and calm...

NATALIE

I don't *feel* calm.

JEAN

I know. That's why you're a rock star.

(pause)

I think it might be time for you to graduate out of the survey department, wouldn't you agree?

NATALIE

You mean sales? You think I'm good enough for sales?

JEAN

Of course you're good enough for sales, but sales is a cesspool, Natalie.

NATALIE

But they get commission.

JEAN

And they hate their lives and have 100% turnover every eight weeks. I've been *sparing* you from sales to keep you with the company.

NATALIE

What else is there?

JEAN

I'd like to recruit you for something new I'm developing for the company. No sales, no surveys, no quotas even.

NATALIE

What would I be doing?

JEAN

Just talking to people.

NATALIE

People like that last guy?

JEAN

No. This is a very different list.

Jean hands Natalie a single sheet of paper that is 2/3 full of names & phone numbers. Natalie studies it for a moment, then looks up at Jean, surprised and suspicious.

NATALIE

Who's the client?

JEAN

There's no client. We're experimenting with a new product. We're calling it Lonely Souls Confidential - for now anyway. That's our pilot call list.

NATALIE

So it's like a "secret confession" hot line?

JEAN

No, we're just offering friendly, discreet conversation. Doesn't have to be a confession. It's for people who just - need someone to talk to. Who might not have someone they trust nearby. Sometimes - I just think a friendly voice can make a difference sometimes. You can pull that off, don't you think?

(pause)

I know it sounds a little unusual. Look, you're way ahead this hour. Take fifteen. On me. Go up to the roof, get some air, and think about it.

NATALIE

This list is all women. That's on purpose?

JEAN

That's definitely on purpose.

NATALIE

I'm in.

Jean exits. Lights up on Amanda, now back in her DJ booth with headphones on. Natalie puts her headset back on.

AMANDA

Here's how it worked. Jean placed ads in the personals section of the local daily newspaper. They were tasteful, almost bashful compared to how 900 numbers were marketed at the time. But Jean wasn't marketing a 900 number. You signed up with Lonely Souls Confidential by sending cash or check via the Postal Service. You provided the preferred number to reach you, and the days and times you'd be available. And once a week, you'd get a ten-minute call from Natalie.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Hello?

NATALIE

Hi, is this Kate?

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Yeah.

NATALIE

Hi, it's Natalie.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Oh, hi Natalie! Hi.

NATALIE

Is this still a good time?

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Yeah, I've just been, waiting...

NATALIE

How are things?

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Oh it's just, I'm not even sure, where to start.

NATALIE

Let's just start simple. Did you get hit by that big snow storm you were worried about?

AMANDA

Instead of quotas, Natalie had a schedule to keep, but there were still guidelines to follow. If anyone answered other than the person on the list, hang up and call back next week. If the answering machine picked up, hang up before the beep and call back next week. And the old guidelines still applied as well.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

You know you sound just like my daughter, did I tell you that?

NATALIE

You mentioned that last week, yeah.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Not like she would ever call me. Anyway I wanted to send you a Christmas card, and maybe find out if you were close, maybe if you're free...

NATALIE

Oh, I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to reveal any personal information.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Oh. Really?

NATALIE

Yeah. I'm sorry, I thought we talked about that last week.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

I don't remember that.

NATALIE

But that's sweet, thank you.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

At this rate, I don't have *any* presents to buy.

AMANDA

When you ask Natalie about those days, she freely admits she can't remember all the details. But she definitely remembers her first conversation with Beth.

Lights fade on Amanda. For once, we hear the sound of the phone ringing (the sound Natalie hears in her headset, not the sound of a physical phone ring) as Natalie waits patiently. Finally Beth picks up. Her voice has a world-weariness to it in contrast to Natalie's youthful tone.

BETH

Hello?

NATALIE

Hello, may I speak to Beth please?

BETH

I'm Beth.

NATALIE

Hi, Beth, I'm Natalie. I'm calling from Lonely Souls Confidential. Is this a good time to talk?

A long pause follows.

BETH

Yeah.

NATALIE

Great.

(pause)

Well, let me just give you a little background about how this usually goes, to get started. I have a little questionnaire here which I can use to get to know you a little bit, or we can skip that and just dive in, if you've got something in particular you want to just, get off your chest, or bounce off someone else, you know, to get a little advice.

BETH

You're qualified to give people advice?

NATALIE

Uh, well I can give you an outside perspective, that sort of thing.

BETH
How old are you?

NATALIE
Oh, uh...

BETH
Sorry, that was rude.

NATALIE
It's fine. Just kind of a little
ground rule here, we've only got
ten minutes, we're not supposed to
talk about me really.

(pause)
Do you want to maybe start with
the questionnaire?

BETH
Sure.

NATALIE
Great! Okay, first question - are
you married, Beth?

BETH
(pause)
Really? That's your first
question?

NATALIE
Um-

BETH
That's the most important thing
about me, am I married?

NATALIE
I didn't - I mean, not if - sorry,
I didn't actually, write this
myself, we can skip that question,
if you want?

BETH
Yeah, I'm married.

NATALIE
Okay, there's actually, a whole
little set of questions here
about, if someone's married, just
to help me understand, what
married life is like for you.

BETH
So you're like a marriage
counselor?

NATALIE
Oh no, I'm not an accredited
counselor, at all.

BETH
Is that what you're in school for?

NATALIE
No, I'm a lit major.

Natalie winces, realizing her mistake. An awkward pause
follows.

BETH
So what else?

NATALIE
Oh, uh... how long have you been
married?

BETH
Four years.

NATALIE
Do you have children?

BETH
A daughter.

NATALIE
Do you work, Beth, or do you stay
home with your daughter?

BETH
Raising my daughter *is* work,
Natalie.

NATALIE
I just meant-

BETH
I know what you meant, I'm just
giving you shit.

NATALIE
No, it's good feedback, we could
definitely, take a look at the
wording here, on this whole thing
really... You know what, I'm just
going to put this questionnaire
aside and we can just-

BETH

You don't have to do that.

NATALIE

We can always come back to it after we come up with a second draft. Why don't we just - why did you reach out to Lonely Souls Confidential?

(pause)

Or we can save that topic for next week.

BETH

I just don't really talk to my old friends any more.

NATALIE

Yeah? Did you just - drift apart?

BETH

No, I got married.

NATALIE

Ah. I've heard married couples mostly tend to hang out with other married couples.

BETH

My friends are married. They just don't like Greg.

NATALIE

And you don't want to spend time with your friends when Greg's not around?

BETH

Sure I want to. Greg doesn't like it though.

NATALIE

Maybe you could work it out so he spends time with his friends while you spend time with yours?

BETH

He doesn't have any friends. Turns out people don't like Greg.

NATALIE

So you don't see your friends because - Greg doesn't like it?

BETH
Because Greg doesn't *allow* it.
(pause)
I should go.

NATALIE
Oh. Well, it was great to meet
you, Beth.

BETH
You're going to call next week?

NATALIE
I am.

BETH
Okay.

"Click" - Beth hangs up. Lights up on Amanda in her DJ booth.

AMANDA
Over the course of several weeks,
Natalie pieced together a picture
of Beth's situation. She was
allowed to leave her house twice a
week, once to shop for groceries
with the small allowance that Greg
gave her, and once to go to church
as a family, where they smiled
politely and made small talk with
the strangers they saw each week.
He left her home alone when he
went to his job at the local
branch office of a trucking
company. But her friends wouldn't
visit her. Apparently Greg had
said a few things to their
husbands. She stopped phoning them
eventually because she could tell
they were uncomfortable with the
polite, helpless subtext of her
calls.

(pause)
She didn't need subtext with
Natalie.

Lights fade on Amanda.

NATALIE
Why don't you just leave?

BETH
You mean leave my husband?

NATALIE
Maybe. No, I mean leave your
house. You're home alone right
now, aren't you?

BETH
Where am I supposed to go?

NATALIE
Go to the movies.

BETH
I don't have any money.

NATALIE
Go to the library.

BETH
It's across town.

NATALIE
Take the bus.

BETH
I don't have any money.

NATALIE
Go to the park.

BETH
What park? What are you even
talking about?

NATALIE
Don't you want to get out of the
house more?

BETH
The house is not the problem. I
like the house when he's not
home.

NATALIE
Do you ever see your parents?

BETH
Not really.

NATALIE
Do you talk to them?

BETH
Sometimes.

NATALIE

Do they know - how unhappy you are?

BETH

Who cares? They've been married a lot longer than me, you think they're happy about it?

NATALIE

When was the last time you saw them?

BETH

When our daughter was born. They came for a few weeks.

NATALIE

Didn't they - I mean, didn't they notice anything was wrong, between you and Greg?

BETH

No... he's always been very charming to my family.

NATALIE

Really?

BETH

Sure. I mean, he was charming to me too when I met him. He didn't kidnap me, you know, I married him on purpose.

(pause)

When we had a baby, there was a minute there when I thought he was really going to change. Like he knew he had to be a better man to be a good father, but... it's kind of worse now, because he's got more to lose, so he's more...

NATALIE

Threatening?

BETH

Controlling. He doesn't threaten me.

NATALIE

But then how does he control you? I don't understand.

(pause)

(MORE)

NATALIE (CONT'D)

I mean, are you safe with him? Do you feel safe?

(pause)

Beth, why don't you leave him?

BETH

And do what? Move back in with my parents?

NATALIE

Why not?

BETH

Because then what?

NATALIE

I don't know - what did you do before you met him?

BETH

I worked in a grocery store. For six years I worked in a grocery store. Yes, I could go back to work at the grocery store, collect child support, get a shitty apartment because I'm not moving back in with my fucking parents, eat government cheese, try to never get sick, keep getting married until one of them sticks, and hope my daughter qualifies for enough grant money to get an education someday, unlike her mother, who worked at a grocery store her whole life and never even made assistant manager.

(pause)

Or, I could talk to you once a week, and just *deal*.

Jean enters, signalling to Natalie that she should wrap up the call.

NATALIE

Beth, we're at time.

BETH

Are you mad at me?

NATALIE

No, of course not, we're just, we're over time actually.

BETH

Okay.

NATALIE

I'll call you next week, okay?

BETH

Okay.

"Click" - Beth has hung up. Natalie removes her headset.

JEAN

That was epic.

NATALIE

Were you listening to that one?

JEAN

The end of it. Natalie, you talked to her for twenty-two minutes! I went on break, I came back, you were still talking to her!

NATALIE

I'm sorry, I just lost track of time.

JEAN

Yes, you lost track of time because you were busy convincing her to get a divorce! Do you have any idea how inappropriate that is?

NATALIE

No.

JEAN

You made her very upset, Natalie! You're not here to provoke our customers.

NATALIE

I was just showing her she had options.

JEAN

You were **selling** her on a specific option, and that's not what you're here for.

NATALIE

Really?

JEAN

Yes, really. You're not a therapist. You're here to listen to these people and be friendly, that's it.

NATALIE

I was trying to be friendly!

JEAN

No, you were trying to be her *friend*, and you're *not*.

NATALIE

How do you know? I mean, what else is she paying for? She knows I'm not a therapist - she could never afford one - I mean, she can't even afford bus fare but she's spending money to talk to me once a week-

JEAN

She's not actually spending money to talk to you.

NATALIE

What?

JEAN

Her checks are bouncing. I should have cut her off weeks ago.

NATALIE

Are you kidding me?

JEAN

No. Look, Natalie - I'm sorry, this isn't, I'm not trying to punish you here, but you need to know, we're done with Beth.

NATALIE

I'll settle her account. I can pay.

JEAN

No you can't.

NATALIE

I've got savings!

JEAN

No, I mean, you literally can't, I won't let you.

NATALIE

Why?

JEAN

Because it's stupid, Natalie.
Jesus.

NATALIE

Why? I mean, if this is just about money, I will send you a pile of money in the mail and say it's from her.

JEAN

Will you listen to yourself? Did you slave for six months on the floor so you could blow all your savings on a stranger?

NATALIE

She's not a stranger - don't you get it? I know you listen half the time - are you even hearing us? Every ten minutes I spend talking to her, I'm thinking, I should make these minutes actually count for something, like something real, in her life. Isn't that what you really wanted to happen when you started this? Or didn't you even bother to think it through?

JEAN

That's **enough**. Give me that call list.

Natalie instinctively looks down at the call list.

JEAN (CONT'D)

Now.

Natalie hands Jean the call list.

JEAN (CONT'D)

Take fifteen. And when you get back, you're on surveys for the rest of your shift.

Jean exits. Lights up on Amanda on her bar stool. Natalie leaves her office and resumes her place in the present day on the bar stool next to Amanda.

AMANDA

Harsh.

NATALIE

I don't know. I was kind of being a punk.

AMANDA

That's a pretty punitive management style.

NATALIE

It's not like she was some highly experienced executive. She was maybe a year older than me. She was still in school. I would see her at parties.

AMANDA

Did she keep you on surveys?

NATALIE

No. She didn't trust anyone but me to run the Confidential, so I was back on it the next day. But I definitely got the message.

AMANDA

What was the message?

NATALIE

I don't know, don't argue with Jean I guess. A week later, she gives me the daily call list, and Beth's not on it. And she doesn't say anything to me about it, she just hands it to me and says "good morning" and disappears onto the floor. Normally I call Beth in the afternoon. So all morning long, I'm talking to people, and I take lunch, and I come back, and it's time to call Beth, and I know she's just sitting there, waiting for me to call her.

AMANDA

You had her number memorized.

NATALIE

Yeah.

AMANDA

So - is that when you left her those messages?

NATALIE

Yeah.

AMANDA

Which you weren't supposed to do.

NATALIE

Right. I mean, it was very weird to me that she didn't answer in the first place. So I was kind of freaking out just about that, and I just - I didn't leave a message the first couple times I called. But then eventually - I couldn't stand it, and I just - babbled and hung up.

AMANDA

More than once.

NATALIE

Yeah. I had this window of time where Jean was usually covering shift change on the floor and I just - was wrong, actually, because she was in her office, and she heard me leaving messages, and she fired me on the spot.

(pause)

At that point, I was like, what do I have to lose, I'll just, leave my own number on Beth's machine, and it was just... so, so stupid, to do that. So selfish.

(pause)

She never called me.

AMANDA

What'd you do after you got fired?

NATALIE

Graduated. Got married, got divorced. Got married again, got divorced again, this time got enough of a settlement to buy this place.

AMANDA

This is your bar?

NATALIE

Sure is. Home of the most popular karaoke night in Cedar Falls.

(MORE)

NATALIE (CONT'D)

Once a week, hundreds of innocent college kids swagger through here, still on top of their very tiny worlds, and I serve 'em PBRs and microwaved nachos.

(pause)

Told you - not much of an ending.

AMANDA

Do you want to know what happened? Why Beth didn't answer when you called that day?

NATALIE

Of course.

AMANDA

Really?

NATALIE

(pause)

Yes, really. Why?

AMANDA

Do you still remember her phone number?

NATALIE

I wish. I don't even remember her last name.

AMANDA

Do you remember the name of the company you were working for?

NATALIE

I don't.

AMANDA

Did you ever look for it?

NATALIE

Yeah actually. Before my last divorce I tried to find it. We were desperate for cash and I was hoping they might hire me again. But I couldn't find a single telemarketing company left in Cedar Falls. Probably went out of business. Who does phone surveys anymore, you know?

AMANDA

It might have changed hands or
changed names, or someone might
have bought it...

NATALIE

So what? It's not like they're
going to have twenty-year-old call
lists in a filing cabinet
somewhere.

AMANDA

You'd be surprised what people
hold onto.

NATALIE

It's not like they'd just hand it
over to you.

AMANDA

I realize that. Look, I'm not
making any promises. But I'm not
out of ideas yet either.

NATALIE

How about I pour you another shot
of whiskey and you tell me these
ideas?

AMANDA

Not sure if they're worth sharing
just yet.

NATALIE

Well, whiskey regardless.

AMANDA

Fair enough.

Lights fade on the bar and Natalie exits, as Amanda steps
out to face the audience.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

In the days before craigslist,
college kids in Cedar Falls found
part time jobs a few ways: walking
up and down Main Street looking
for help wanted signs, scouring
fliers on bulletin boards in the
dorms, or checking want ads in the
campus paper, the Northern Iowan,
which came out Tuesdays and
Fridays. No one ever bothered to
digitize those old papers.

(MORE)

AMANDA (CONT'D)

But the university library keeps a print archive going back to the 70s. You go into this secret room where the precious artifacts of campus history are faithfully preserved, and the librarian hands you these magnificent over-sized scrapbooks, and then you're flipping through every paper published by the journalism department while Natalie was enrolled. This takes less time than you might imagine. The paper was twelve pages long back then, only one page for classified ads, and I quickly spotted my prey. The ad said, "Looking for cheerful voices to help conduct surveys," with a local number to call. Turns out, the number still works.

FEMALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Thank you for calling Smith Creative Services. To leave a message for Richard, press one. To leave a message for Tony, press two. To leave a message for Jason, press three. To leave a message for Robert, press four. To leave a message for Jean, press five.

AMANDA

That's how I found Jean Willits. She agreed to meet me at a coffee shop to chat.

Lights up on Jean at a table in a coffee shop - older now, in her late 40s or early 50s, conservatively dressed, with a giant purse next to her chair. Amanda joins her as she starts speaking.

JEAN

You may not believe this, but I've actually listened to your program once or twice.

AMANDA

People do that sometimes.

JEAN

It just comes on so late at night.

AMANDA

You can stream it any time from
our web site.

JEAN

Well isn't that something.

AMANDA

Sure is.

JEAN

So. You have questions about
Lonely Souls Confidential.

AMANDA

I do, yeah.

JEAN

How did you even learn about it?
It's been gone for so long.

AMANDA

Do you remember Natalie Kinmark?

JEAN

Oh my god, of course. Natalie! My
rock star. How is Natalie?

AMANDA

She's good. She lives like ten
blocks from here.

JEAN

You are *kidding* me. She's still
here? I can't believe it.

AMANDA

Why? I mean, you're still here,
I'm still here...

JEAN

Oh don't get me wrong, I just -
Natalie always seemed like she had
real escape velocity, you know
what I mean?

AMANDA

She was a lit major.

JEAN

Well - I see your point.

AMANDA

Anyway she doesn't remember very much about the origins of Lonely Souls Confidential. I was hoping you could fill me in.

JEAN

Are you going to record me?

AMANDA

Not today.

JEAN

I mean, ever?

AMANDA

Not if you don't want me to.

JEAN

I just - I still work there, you know. With some of the same people. Not that any of those jackasses would listen to public radio.

AMANDA

This can be totally off the record.

JEAN

That sounds good.

AMANDA

Is your company still doing phone surveys?

JEAN

Oh no, we shut that business down ages ago, everybody just runs surveys on the internet. Now we do search engine marketing, funnel optimization, affiliate programs, A/B testing, all that crap. But back then, it was all phone sales and surveys.

AMANDA

Even back then, I imagine Lonely Souls was a pretty unique product.

JEAN

For sure.

AMANDA

What gave you the idea?

JEAN

I remember reading this article, this big exposé about 900 numbers, which were huge then, you know - psychic hot lines, sexy singles, horoscopes, romance advice - there was even one where you just listened to people's sob stories about how depressing their lives were - and I just thought, what if there was a real, sincere line where you could just chat with a real human being and like, not have a creepy experience, you know? So - I convinced my supervisor Jason to let me set up a pilot program, to test the business model.

AMANDA

Why wasn't it a 900 number?

JEAN

Too sleazy.

AMANDA

So they had to send you money in the mail.

JEAN

Right, enough to cover our long distance charges for calling them plus a little extra. Which, I mean, we had discounted rates as a call center versus consumer rates. But still, the margins were very tight.

AMANDA

Pretty weird business model for a telemarketing company.

JEAN

Yeah, for sure. Jason got nervous almost immediately. He listened to some of the calls, and he was just - really put off. He was like, "What if some lady's irate husband tracks us down through some canceled check and sues us for counseling divorce?"

AMANDA

So he was listening to Natalie's calls in particular.

JEAN

Natalie was the only person who ever made calls for Lonely Souls. And she was good, you know, we had good repeat business. But word of mouth was non-existent obviously, so I said to Jason, "Look, Natalie's only working Lonely Souls half time right now, let's expand our marketing radius to Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, we can add a bigger long distance surcharge to boost margins, and see if we can make this thing take off." Instead - they shut it down after a single quarter.

AMANDA

Who's "they"?

JEAN

The owners. Richard and Tony. They said it was "off brand" for Smith Creative.

AMANDA

I thought the brand was Lonely Souls, not Smith Creative.

JEAN

The brand was Richard and Tony. Over half their annual revenue for years came from running demographic surveys for Philip Morris. A chat line for bored women was not what they wanted their line managers to focus on. Lonely Souls made a little money, sure, but not nearly enough money to justify taking billable hours away from Philip Morris. Although, pretty hilarious - Jason turned around and convinced Richard and Tony to let him start up a hot line for sports scores. He actually used my business model to make his case.

AMANDA

You're kidding.

JEAN

Lasted literally a month and a half.

(MORE)

JEAN (CONT'D)

Turns out guys preferred getting real time scores on this new thing called cable TV. Didn't really matter to Richard and Tony, though. Jason's a vice president now, I'm still a "marketing coordinator." Twenty years there and I never even made assistant manager.

(pause)

You know what, fuck those guys, I do want this on the record.

AMANDA

Why don't you take some time to think about that decision.

JEAN

Yeah, I know, I know.

AMANDA

Jean - did you really expect Jason and Richard and Tony to understand what you were doing?

JEAN

What do you mean?

AMANDA

Seems very clear to me that you never intended Lonely Souls to be just a chat line for bored women. You must have known when you pitched it to Jason in the first place that women were going to use it to talk about sensitive topics. I mean, all the rules, like - call at a very specific time, hang up if anyone else answers, don't leave messages - and you calling them, instead of them calling you, meant they didn't have to worry about their husbands seeing mysterious long distance charges on their phone bills.

(pause)

You knew what you were doing.

JEAN

You know that phenomenon where some entrepreneur has a brilliant idea but for whatever reason, their timing is wrong or the market isn't ready - and then someone else comes along with the same idea only now the market's ready and it's a huge thing?

(pause)

I looked this up once. The first domestic abuse hotline in the United States launched in 1996. Two years after Lonely Souls. I mean, let's be clear, Lonely Souls wasn't social work. I was a business student, not a social worker. It didn't dawn on me at the time how presumptuous the whole thing was.

AMANDA

Doesn't sound presumptuous to me. Everyone got what they paid for, didn't they?

JEAN

Did they? I mean, what do you think they were really paying for? Do you think they all really got - friendship, or help - from an untrained stranger calling once a week?

AMANDA

I don't know. I haven't heard the calls. But you were there, listening in real time. You said Natalie was your rock star. Do you think she made a difference?

JEAN

That's what kills me to this day. I think for a few of those women, she absolutely made a difference. And when she suddenly stopped calling - I think we probably made it worse.

(pause)

Anyway - maybe you can judge for yourself.

Jean reaches into her purse, pulls out a small flat cardboard box, and hands it to Amanda, who studies the

hand-written label on the box. Then she carefully opens the box, revealing a reel-to-reel tape inside.

AMANDA

You recorded the calls?

JEAN

For training, sure. Not all of them, but - you'd record your top performers, and then cut reels together to train new hires. That reel is all Natalie. Mostly surveys, but there might be a Lonely Souls call or two at the end. I would have saved those for sentimental reasons. Can't say for sure though. The company sold all the old reel-to-reel machines. I haven't seen one in ages.

AMANDA

This is the only copy?

JEAN

That's the only copy.

AMANDA

I'll put it on a flash drive for you.

JEAN

I heard flash drives are full of viruses.

AMANDA

I know where to buy the ones without viruses.

JEAN

Say, maybe you could give Natalie my number? I'd love to catch up with her sometime.

AMANDA

You know, she's on Facebook.

Lights fade on the coffee shop, and Jean exits. Amanda turns to the audience, narrating as she transitions back to her DJ booth.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

In the days before satellite networks, NPR distributed programming by shipping out reels like this to all its member stations. KUNI still has a working reel-to-reel deck here in Studio C - the engineers, like me, can't bear the idea we'll never need it again. But analog tape is fragile. It deteriorates over time to the point where if you play an old reel, the tape heads of the machine can actually scrape the iron oxide layer right off the acetate. The recording literally crumbles to dust.

(pause)

Fortunately Jean had taken extremely good care of Natalie's reel.

Amanda puts her headphones back on. We hear the sounds of touch-tone dialing, then we hear Natalie's voice beginning a survey.

OLDER MALE VOICE

(voiceover)

Hello?

NATALIE

(voiceover)

Hi, could I speak to Mr. Carl Nelson please?

AMANDA

The tape included sixteen surveys, followed by thirty-one Lonely Souls calls, which gives you a pretty clear picture of Jean's priorities. And sure enough...

Touch-tone dialing, then we hear...

BETH

(voiceover)

Hello?

NATALIE

(voiceover)

Hello, may I speak to Beth please?

BETH

(voiceover)

I'm Beth.

The recording stops.

AMANDA

Thanks to the touch tones on that recording, I now had Beth's phone number from 1994. Assigned to Greg Liston in 1992. I found five Greg Listons on Facebook, three Beth Listons, three Elizabeth Listons - none of them from Iowa. On a hunch, I searched the local obituaries, and found that Greg Liston of Cedar Falls, Iowa, had passed away in his home almost two weeks ago at the age of 59. Survived by his daughter Eve. No mention of his loving wife Beth.

(pause)

Eve Liston was very easy to find. She takes classes here in Cedar Falls, at the University of Northern Iowa - the same campus where this radio station is located.

EVE, a college senior, enters the DJ booth; she's dressed like she's going to a job interview, which is how she approaches going to classes. Amanda removes her headphones to greet Eve.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Thank you for coming to see me.

EVE

Did I interrupt you? I didn't see a red light outside.

AMANDA

No, you're fine, I was expecting you.

EVE

You're not - on the air?

AMANDA

No, the on-air booths are down the hall. This is just a production studio. For pre-recording shows, sponsor announcements, that kind of thing.

EVE

Are you going to record me?

AMANDA

Not right now. Not ever, unless
you want me to. You want to sit?

Eve nods, sits in a nearby folding chair.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

Did you get a chance to listen to
my show?

EVE

I streamed a few episodes after
you called me.

AMANDA

What'd you think?

EVE

Pretty weird.

AMANDA

Yeah.

EVE

Good though.

AMANDA

Cool.

(pause)

So, should we just - do you want
to hear the recording?

EVE

Sure.

Amanda motions to start playback. We hear the recording of
Natalie's first phone call with Beth. Very quickly we
realize that not only does Eve recognize the recording, but
she begins lip syncing both sides of the conversation. Half
way through the recording, Amanda stops it, and Eve
continues for a few lines further before halting
sheepishly.

AMANDA

So... that was interesting. I
thought I had the only copy of
that recording.

EVE

So did I. How did you get that?

AMANDA

Well - first I got in touch with
Natalie.

EVE

What?

AMANDA

Yeah she lives here.

EVE

Are you fucking with me?

AMANDA

No, I'm not.

EVE

Do you have any idea how long I've wished I could track her down?

AMANDA

Actually - I don't.

EVE

How did you find her?

AMANDA

It's kind of a long story.

EVE

How did you find *me*?

AMANDA

I learned from Facebook that you're a student here.

EVE

I thought my profile was private.

AMANDA

A lot of people think that. So then I looked you up in the university phone and email directory, where I learned your phone number, email address, campus address, home address, and that you're a senior majoring in elementary education.

EVE

That's all online?

AMANDA

The site says "individuals have the choice to withhold directory information." Did you ever choose to do that?

EVE

I guess I didn't choose to do that.

AMANDA

I'm sorry - does it feel like I'm stalking you?

EVE

It feels a little like you're stalking me.

AMANDA

Don't sweat it. I'm kind of a journalist, right?

EVE

Really? Because based on the shows I heard - I would have said no.

AMANDA

Anyway - Natalie's boss recorded some of her calls with Beth, for training purposes.

EVE

And you're going to put those calls on your radio show?

AMANDA

I don't currently have a good enough story to do that.

EVE

What's that supposed to mean?

AMANDA

I use my show to tell stories, Eve, and right now, I only know Natalie's side of the story. I was hoping to learn Beth's side, but - I haven't found Beth yet. I found you. You're not friends with her on Facebook, and your father just passed away, so... the story's entirely in your hands at this point. But even if we never tell this story on the radio... Natalie's been waiting twenty years to find out what happened.

EVE

I see.

(pause)

When can I meet her?

AMANDA
You understand-

EVE
She's going to want to know how
Mom died. Yeah, I know.

Crossfade to Natalie's bar - Eve and Amanda enter and take
a look around.

EVE (CONT'D)
No way.

AMANDA
What?

Natalie enters, freezes when she sees Amanda and Eve.

AMANDA (CONT'D)
Natalie, this is Eve Liston.
Beth's daughter.

NATALIE
No way.

EVE
Yeah.

NATALIE
Katy Perry, right?

EVE
That's me.
(to Amanda)
I sing karaoke here every week.

AMANDA
Small world.

NATALIE
Well I do have a monopoly on
karaoke in this town.

An awkward silence follows.

AMANDA
So... whiskey?

NATALIE
Great idea.

EVE
(overlapping)
Yes please.

Natalie slowly pours three shots.

NATALIE

I guess Amanda told you how I knew your mother.

EVE

Yeah. I've actually heard your calls with her.

NATALIE

What do you mean?

AMANDA

Sounds like Beth also recorded those calls?

EVE

No. She had no fucking idea she was being recorded.

(pause)

Dad recorded those calls. Dad recorded probably every call she made for like two years. It was one of the ways he kept her in a psychological cage, convincing her he always knew what she was thinking. He installed this evil little voice-activated recorder under the floor and wired it up to the phone line. I guess any idiot can actually do this.

AMANDA

Not legally.

EVE

Yeah, I don't think Dad was super concerned about wiretapping laws. But so - Mom and I come home from the grocery store one day, Dad's still at work, and - we hear these voices blaring through the house, and it's - Dad's recorder had malfunctioned, and it was playing instead of recording, playing super loud, Mom's phone calls, her most recent calls - with you.

NATALIE

Where I suggested she should leave her husband.

EVE

Yeah. And she didn't - know if he had already heard these calls, or what he would do when he did hear them, or how she could erase them without him knowing, or why she'd want to pretend she didn't know, or what he'd do if she confronted him about it - like, this enormous decision tree must have unfolded in her mind right then and there, because we packed for like five minutes, and we got back in the car with the groceries, and we fucking split town.

(pause)

And I don't know if she would have had the guts to do that if she hadn't talked to you.

Natalie instinctively takes Eve's hand for a moment - then lets go.

NATALIE

Where did you go?

EVE

Hawaii, eventually.

NATALIE

That's a big jump from the Midwest.

EVE

Well, Dad was a logistics manager for a trucking company. So anytime a truck went by the house, Mom was paranoid, like maybe Dad was routing trucks past the house so his buddies could spy on her for him.

NATALIE

Maybe she was right.

EVE

Exactly, how would she ever fucking know? But you definitely can't dispatch an eighteen wheeler to swing by an island in the Pacific.

NATALIE

Never been to Hawaii. Never seen the ocean.

EVE

Natalie...

NATALIE

I know. I mean, if she was sitting on the beach, waiting for me to call, that's the first thing you would have said.

EVE

I'm sorry.

NATALIE

For what?

EVE

For not finding you sooner, I guess. I mean, I didn't hear those calls until after she died. I don't know if she ever even looked for you, or what she would have said if she found you. I'm sorry I don't know that.

NATALIE

Eve - please.

(pause)

I spent half my life wondering what happened to Beth. Over half, really. Not every waking moment or whatever. But long enough to agonize, over and over, about what else I should have said. Long enough to imagine every horrible outcome you could think of - for Beth, and for Beth's little girl.

(pause)

You have no idea how happy I am to meet you, Eve.

Lights fade on the bar as Amanda steps forward to narrate.

AMANDA

Usually making this program is a solitary endeavor. Listening to ghosts on fading tapes or scratched up records, sifting tattered photographs and microfilm for clues... locking myself up in Studio C for hours, painting audio impressions of scenes lost to history. But this episode had the quality of a reunion... even though the person we'd been seeking couldn't be with us.

Lights up on a small, conference-style table, with a desk microphone stationed in the center of it. Sitting around the table are Eve, Natalie, and Jean. Amanda joins them as the scene opens, taking her headphones with her and putting them back on for the following scene.

EVE

She was forgiving near the end. She was like, "You can go live with your grandparents, who are too old for that shit, or your aunt who is a nutcase... or you could live with your father for a couple years and then make him pay for college."

AMANDA

What was he like?

EVE

You know - he was very lonely. I think he went to his grave still thinking Natalie and Mom were secret lovers. He still had all those recordings and he gave them to me, like to prove something to me. But all it proved was - she did the right thing.

JEAN

So he never admitted or accepted what he had done to Beth?

EVE

He must have admitted something to somebody because Mom got full custody and major alimony.

JEAN

But he wasn't prosecuted?

EVE

She didn't have the tapes. And I don't think she wanted them to wind up in her public divorce record either. She didn't want to admit to anyone how she got herself into that situation in the first place.

NATALIE

But she must have admitted it to *you*, before she sent you off to live with him. And you still felt comfortable going?

EVE

Yeah. I was like, Dad needs to learn what it's like living with a woman he can't boss around.

NATALIE

You were sixteen!

EVE

Sure, but I could take care of myself. I mean, I took care of Mom for two years as she got worse and worse, figured I could handle living with Dad. Then I came back to Cedar Falls, and wound up taking care of Dad as *he* got worse and worse.

(pause)

That's what happens sometimes.

AMANDA

Natalie - you were pretty young yourself when you were calling Beth. At that age, what impression did you take away from those conversations?

NATALIE

At first, it was - don't get married, don't trust men. But - that wasn't really tenable for me. So then it was - be really careful about getting married, figure out which men you can trust. And then it was - how can you be careful about falling in love, the whole experience of falling in love is you throw careful out the window! And then it was - wait a second, is it too late to be careful about this?

AMANDA

Jean, when you and I first met, we discussed the question of whether Lonely Souls truly made a difference in the lives of the women who called. But what impact did it have on you?

JEAN

For me - the value of talking to women, honestly and openly - I didn't make any of those calls myself, but even just listening to them - to Natalie and Beth especially - it broke me out of this sorority mindset that we were all supposed to be superficially friendly to each other, but down deep we were actually just vicious competitors in some predatory dating pool.

AMANDA

Eve, is dating like that for you today? Are you and your classmates competing for men?

EVE

They're boys, I mean, let's be real. But I'm in school to learn. Not that you guys weren't, but I'm here on a full ride scholarship on grades. So I don't let myself get distracted.

AMANDA

One last question. Eve, when you were dropping off your father's belongings at the Salvation Army thrift store, did you know Natalie's messages were still on that answering machine?

EVE

Yeah. I tried calling her number, but this guy Calvin answered, so I just - gave up. Clearly I had no idea.

Amanda nods (as though to the engineer in the control room), then removes her headphones.

AMANDA

Thank you all so much.

An awkward pause follows - no one is sure what to do next. Eve reaches into her purse and pulls out a videotape.

EVE

So - I found something else in Dad's attic. An old home video.

She hands it to Amanda.

EVE (CONT'D)

But I couldn't find a VCR that can play it.

Lights fade as Amanda steps forward one last time.

AMANDA

I invited them to my place, where I hooked up my vintage Betamax deck to my giant old tube television, and we watched Eve's home movie together.

Audio from the home movie comes up in the background. We hear Beth chatting with her young daughter Eve. Innocuous, fun, just the two of them playing together in the backyard somewhere.

AMANDA (CONT'D)

The time stamp on the video dated it to July 12, 1996. Why did Greg Liston have this tape?

BETH

(voiceover)

Do you want to say hi to your Daddy? Eve, do you want to say hi to your Daddy?

EVE (CHILD)

(voiceover)

No.

BETH

Say hi to your Daddy. You talk to him on the phone, don't you? This way he can see you.

EVE (CHILD)

(pause)

Hi, Daddy.

AMANDA

He had the tape because Beth sent it to him. And in a twist of fate, we never see Beth's face in that video, because she's always the one holding the camera.

(pause)

I'm Amanda Bixby. You've been listening to Signal Loss. This episode was called "Can't Talk Right Now."

END