

To Lois ~ thank you for your support, love, prayers, and friendship.

Untakenable

My sister. Leave it to her to pull something like this at the last minute. I know she means well, but must she always put me in an awkward position? She may be years older than I, but she needs to stop bossing me around and constantly pushing my buttons. What am I to do with this? I am an adult in my fifties and have been around the block long enough to know what I want or need. Thanks for the gift, but why would I want to read this book? And what kind of word is that? *Untakenable*?

~ Amy ~

Hi, welcome to my world.

Guess you are here, in my mind, in my life, and hopefully not in my way. I did not ask you to be with me, reading this; you have come here on your free will, by your choice. I certainly did not twist your arm; remember that you can leave whenever you want.

Please do not misunderstand me or take it as if I do not want you here. You are in my head, in my thoughts, watching every move I make, observing everything I see through my eyes, considering my perspective. I didn't plan it that way; it is what it is. Like I always am telling my husband, Denny, we need to work together and figure this out, to be a team. You are here to help me, right?

Since you entered my life this second, you know virtually nothing about me. You will learn soon enough my personality, attitude, beliefs, et cetera. Don't judge me as I have no way of reciprocating – I cannot know you; I have no way of being your friend. There may be a chance I may be a Type A person and you a Type B – one of us in control, always in the know, and the other more relaxed and easy going. That is fine, but understand we are different individuals with different memories and experiences. You

may relate and get me, or you may think I am self-absorbed, nit-picky, and unemotional. Fine. I could say good or bad things about you too if I were in your head.

I could correlate our situation of you being my golf caddy to “show up, keep up, and shut up.” Well, that does seem a bit harsh, especially when you get to know me, but time will tell.

So please hang in there, and things will make sense to you soon, even if you think you are more confused than I am.

Now, I’ll get back to the ranting I was doing before you arrived, but since you are here now, will rhetorically ask your advice, “What would you do?”

Let me explain it simply: I hate her; I hate her. Hear me. I. Hate. Her. And I know you would too.

The audacity of that woman butting in my life, into our lives. How dare she. Who does she think she is, and can’t she realize that I am not her and never want to be? I bet you wouldn’t want to be her either. Ugh, I hate her. She doesn’t get it. Leave me alone, leave us alone!

I push my straight, long, naturally blonde hair out of my face and tuck a section of it behind my ear, wondering if I should cut it short again. Denny likes it cropped above the shoulders, neat, and trim, but I prefer it more carefree, wild, and blowing in the wind when I drive around in my bright yellow VW convertible, top down in the Southern California sun.

Having already changed from my work clothes when I got home, I roll up the sleeves of my long sleeve shirt and stand barefoot on the mat in front of our townhouse’s kitchen stainless steel sink after dinner.

Picking up the burnt lasagna pan, I put it in the hot sudsy water. It is a little awkward for me knowing you are here, so I try focusing on the tan granite with black specks on the counter, but I am too steamed over her words.

Forcing my brain to ignore what has been bothering me constantly all day, I redirect my thoughts to something positive. I love our townhouse. We bought the eighteen-hundred-square-foot two-story last year while the prices were starting to go up in Granada Hills, a suburb of the Los Angeles area, known to most of us natives as “the Valley.” I am happy here. Yes, we have traffic, crime, gangs, and every ethnic restaurant possible within walking distance from each other, but this is where I was raised and grew up. This is my town, my city. I am a true Valley girl and proud of it.

Do you love or enjoy where you are in life? Most of the time I am pretty contented. Just not today.

The minute Dennis and I saw the complex’s floorplan with a great room layout and three bedrooms and two full baths upstairs, we knew the corner unit with only one joining wall would be perfect for us. Granted it was over-priced, but isn’t any property in a prime area of California these days?

Back to my tirade which I am sure you want to know more; I won’t leave you hanging. I will scrub the death out of this pan if I get all huffy over someone like her. It isn’t right.

Ah, my husband’s aunt. The ever-present, ever-nagging, ever-everything you would expect in the nosy, busy-body, pushy never-married aunt, Ms. Amy Colton.

I felt it the day I met her. Denny warned me. Yes, he warned me in his gentle, loving way. His aunt has been and will always be a control freak and has to have everything her way. He told me stories of how she would base every decision on right or

wrong, good versus evil, or punishment instead of reward. Always repercussions and consequences. No fun, no silliness, no joking around, no nothing. Boring lives, dull upbringing, and always “following the letter of the law” attitudes and outcomes. You know that kind of person? I don’t know you that well, but I am sure you have one in your life too. Everybody does.

Tragically when Denny was ten years old, his parents died in the car accident on curvy Mulholland Drive, and Amy had to deal with raising two of her brother’s sons. Single with no parental experience, she took it to task to make sure the two were “raised right” in every possible way. Truthfully, I would not want to have been in her shoes; it would be hard to raise two boys at any age. I have to give her kudos for trying, even if she botched it in several aspects.

Denny’s dad should not have been on one of his drinking binges on Christmas Eve when he drove home from that party in Malibu, killing both parents instantaneously. Instead of helping the boys with the loss, the goodie-two-shoes Aunt Amy hindered them with her incessant nagging, prodding, negativity, and demoralizing. How she treated them, I thought, was over the top and brutal.

Although to this day, Denny says he loves his aunt dearly for raising him and his brother; he does agree she favored Hal, who is two years younger. In my book, the self-righteous Amy tended to put the screws to my husband. As per Denny, she grated and chastised him regularly, telling him to clean his room, practice his music lessons, dress or look perfect at all times, or act a certain way.

Not dear Hal. He was her golden boy the minute the court gave her guardianship of them.

Why couldn't she give them any slack? They no longer had a drunken father who drove himself into a tree in the middle of the night, unfortunately killing their mother in the process.

From the stories I have heard, I could see why the ol' bat never married – like anyone would fall in love or want to live with her. I know what you are thinking: it is mean of me to think that of her, but it shows how much I cannot stand the woman. I am honest here. If I like it or not, you see my every thought: the good, bad, and downright ugly.

Isn't life about having a good time, knowing what you want, and accomplishing something positive? Do things for you, for your satisfaction, not to please everyone else all the time. Be in control. At least that is my take on life.

Couldn't she stoop low enough to let those boys enjoy something?

I met her for the first time at the restaurant on the golf course on Victory Boulevard, about four months after Denny and I started dating. I never want to step foot in Copperfield's again. Denny was worried she would not like me. Up to that point, it was like I was in a shoe box, set apart from everyone else in his life, only to open when she wasn't around. No wonder both he and I were so tense when we finally met the woman. And get this: right there, while we are sitting by the window that looks over the eighteenth's green, she stops to pray for her food. How embarrassing! Everyone must have been staring at us, at me. I smiled and looked down as I had no clue what else to do. Next, she was preaching, ranting and going on and on about stuff I have never heard of or care about – you should do this, don't do this, you need to do that, blah, blah, blah. Bunk, I say, total bunk.

As she continued her proselytizing, I smiled and nodded as I ate my club sandwich with no mayo and a side of fries, knowing that Denny had told me to shut up, agree with her, and keep showing my pearly whites. He pegged that one right.

What a way to ruin lunch.

Do you get the picture I am painting of her? Sound familiar to anyone you know? How did you handle the person? Those are a piece of work, huh?

In a twenty-minute period that seemed like four hours of getting a root canal at the dentist, she was on her religious pulpit declaring how poorly the world runs. If it wasn't about how morals are worse than when she was a child, it was how God is in control of her, her dear Hal, Dennis, her son's new girlfriend (ala me), and the silly salad she was feebly picking. Everything, good or bad, has a purpose, has a reason. Yep, I have a minor in psychology, and she is telling me she knows all about how people are, the meaning of life, and if such exists, the hereafter. I say all religion or afterlife beliefs are a bunch of hocus-pocus that people grasp as a crutch because they are so insecure and inadequate to believe in themselves.

Sure. Whatever, woman.

You agree with me, don't you? Tell me you don't believe in all that God stuff.

I admit I was angry then, but I also was afraid – she made me nervous and does to this day, four years later. Forever walking on eggshells, I cannot please her. I cannot win with her. I have to put my guard up continually. Do I want to?

Would you? Should I try to play her game?

Nope, not me. And neither should Denny.

Denny once told me he married me because I was like his mother and aunt. I am fine being like his mom; she apparently was thoughtful, loving, and had a sharp mind.

But me being like Amy? Oh no! Please, no! He is right that we are both independent thinkers and doers, but that is where the similarity stops. I do not want to be opinionated or domineering like her, although she may think I am. At this point, you may even believe that.

Okay, I am not perfect, but I am a good person. I do not intentionally break the law or hate people so much I want to kill them. Yes, I usually get my way because, I admit, I sometimes have to manipulate others to prove a point or accomplish my goal. I do it for a good reason.

I am a twenty-eight-year-old, college-educated woman with a Masters in Journalism, working as a photojournalist for the *Valley News* in Los Angeles. I am successful because I have put effort, sweat, and knowledge into my vocation, years of well-planned and positioned work. I did it myself and am accomplished. I have arrived, and I do not like nor appreciate anyone stepping in my way or on my toes.

You know my type – I know what I am doing, am confident, learn things only I am interested in, and do not need anyone telling me anything. If I want to learn something, I will find it out for myself and not told what is what. I have to have order and know everything pertinent that is going on around me. Honestly, I must be in control at all times, and I must get my way in situations and circumstances. I may do things differently than you, but usually, I win. Like it or not, I am not changing for anyone, anywhere, or anyway, especially for that bat! I am not like her! And no, I will not change for you either. Sorry, you heard it from me directly, and I am pretty blunt about my viewpoint.

Using the side of a sharp knife, I carefully chip away at the burnt cheese on the edges of the lasagna pan, determined to let my anger subside toward her and my

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unobservant husband. How dare he take her side! Especially if I guess what could be happening to me is true. He has no clue, and I prefer to keep it that way.

~ Beliefs ~

I let the pan soak in the sink, grab a dish towel to wipe down the kitchen bar's countertop, and restack the clay coasters from Pebble Beach we had used at dinnertime. I return to the sink and rinse off a crystal wine glass I used and set it upside down on a spread-out dish towel.

Looking around the kitchen, I peek around the corner the great room to the stairs that lead to the bedrooms and Denny's office, checking if the door is still closed. As I expected, it is.

Being upset with Amy is not the crux of my problem. It is multi-faceted, and I will tell you why.

After I had got home from work and before dinner tonight, Amy stopped by for a few minutes. Only a few minutes, thank goodness. Amazing how fast she can ruin a day.

She wanted to give Denny a copy of her will she had her lawyer draw up again. She was barely inside the house before she started in on her monolog.

The main thing she preached was that I have no morals, which none of us do, so that includes you. Before coming to that point, it was all about Heaven, Hell, salvation, forgiveness of sins – you know, the explosive topics Denny and I avoid discussing. She

said I am sinful and need to repent, but there was nothing she could do about it – something about “love the sinner but hate the sin.” Back on her religious gig.

Knowing my father hammered into me to always stand up for my beliefs as they are the most important thing a person has, I told her flatly to get off her soapbox and stop evangelizing all the time.

Well, that was where the problem started. I told Amy she should bend her pious, stupid rules, and this is who I am, and she had better accept me as I am because I am not changing for her or her God or anyone. And, for your information, my morals are perfectly fine. Like you, I am a good person on the whole.

My words did not go over too well, as next she turned to my husband and said, “Dennis, you still believe in God, don’t you? You know He is alive and in your heart?”

Denny muttered with that deer-in-the-headlights look, “Yeah, Aunt Amy, and I know He will never leave me nor forsake me.”

I will tell you and only you that Denny is such a patsy. He has never said something so blatant like that before in my presence. It was always a “to each his own, religion is a private thing,” and I have let it go at that. But to say he believes in God, and God will always be with him? Excuse me, that is not my Denny. It was as if he had changed, which I have noticed a different attitude in him the last several days. His words came out of nowhere. Who did I marry? Why does his aunt have this grasp on him that he cowers to every time? What’s with him? Do you have any idea?

When Amy abruptly left, her last words were that she would pray for us. Okay, lady, do whatever you want, including praying, but please don’t get me personally involved.

Since only I had wine tonight, I carry the now washed and dried glass to the curio cabinet and open the top hutch, being careful not to clink it against my grandmother's antique tea set. I offer another glance up the staircase to the closed door. Nothing moves.

As I said before, I am as good as the next person; I mess up here and there, but I am a decent human being. It is not like I have broken the Ten Commandments – “thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal” – I am so tired of it. I am tired of her interrupting our lives.

At this point, for some odd reason I am on the verge of crying, mainly out of frustration and exhaustion, so don't you be surprised if I do.

Afterward, Denny and I had a fight during dinner. He and I said some hurtful words to each other. I won't go into the details as I do not think it is appropriate for me to rehash them, especially to you, someone I don't know. I am confused, hurt, and upset. I don't know anymore.

My eyes tear up as I try to remain resolute and composed; I twist the hand towel around in my hand and start unraveling it, repeating the process more than twice.

Meticulously folding the hand towel, I put it back on its holder by the side-by-side stainless steel refrigerator.

Do you think I over-reacted to Amy's self-righteous sermon? Should I go upstairs and apologize to Denny? Maybe I am stressed out.

What do you think? It will be alright, won't it? Denny and I will patch things up, right?

Amy praying or not, my marriage will stay intact. Especially now.

~ Denny ~

I rationalize. Hear me out on this.

I shouldn't be mad at Amy. It should be Denny.

Opening the dishwasher, I put a serving spoon in its appropriate slot. I hate when anyone puts plates in backward in a machine. Especially if it is my machine. Silverware is another big issue. It must be pointed down in the trays, not up, to get a proper cleaning. You would stab yourself if you did it the other way. Don't people think?

I rinse a small dish towel out and start wiping down the range for the third time. I am fanatical about it looking clean and having no caked or baked-on food on its grates. Tell me I have issues with OCD, tell me to chill and relax. Remember, this is me; this is how I am.

When I met Denny as a sophomore at UCLA and he had almost completed his degree in marketing, I was taking photos of the intramural basketball team he was on for the college paper. At first, my friend, Rachel, did the writing, and I did the picture-taking. Thanks to Rachel falling in love and quitting school, I took over and did it all, cementing my love for photojournalism. Because Denny played so many different intramural sports and my job was to capture fun, adventurous college experiences, we

knew each other two years before the hot, steamy romance kicked in after one of the baseball games.

Denny isn't stellar at confrontation or debating; I think it is due to living with Aunt Amy during his teen years. I am the one that is competitive.

During our fight about twenty minutes ago, he ticked me off when he said blatantly that I am mean and calculated, especially to his aunt. Well, that was a brutal comment. What is with him these days? So he doesn't debate or confront his aunt and keeps his trap shut, yet he confirms his aunt's words that I am heartless, cruel to others, a sinner? Excuse me? I correct myself – no, he had added, "All of us, including you, Sarah, are not perfect, and we are born with a sinful nature." He must have borrowed Amy's soapbox for that remark.

By the end of the argument, at least he admitted he had his faults when I called him on the carpet about his confronting issues.

Okay, I guess I do have a few issues, I agree. I am not perfect all the time. Are you? Doubt it. You can admit it to me that you mess up from time to time. We both may be good people, and that is a part of life.

Not perfect? Denny kept saying "inside, inside our hearts, our minds." Secrets we keep, deep down inside us. Bad thoughts, bad ideas, bad schemes.

Got plenty of those inside me, especially this minute. Don't you? Doesn't everyone? Be honest with me here. You get upset when the driver in the car behind you flips you off when you cut in front of him, and you have visions of slamming your brakes so you can say, "Why, officer, he rear-ended me." Or how about pocketing pens from work that are not yours? Bet you do that occasionally too, thinking you deserve them. Come on, admit it.

I know. You and I are the same. We are not perfect. Guess no one is.

See, if you are honest about it, you'll agree with me.

I look up and stare outside the kitchen window above the sink, pondering. Two little girls are playing in the blissful California evening. The sun is almost over the San Fernando Valley hills to the west, and the air is calm and pleasant. The ideal time of day, the perfect time to take a walk. The cute girls are swinging back and forth on the playground swing set, not a care in the world, giggling away. Maybe they are fantasizing they have wings as I used to do as they act as pendulums on the swings.

A flicker of sadness overwhelms me.

Something is wrong.

Something is not right.

Something needs to be resolved.

It's time to face the music, girl.

Oh, please help me get through what I am about to do next. Please, I need your help.

~ Secret ~

I've put it off as long as I must. It's inevitable. Time to prove what I think I know.

You are still here, so come with me. I prefer not to share this with you, but it looks like I have no other choice.

Walking over to my oversized camera bag on the floor by the wood table next to our front door, I pass by the stairs and look upward. I wonder if Denny is still mad or merely working away on commission spreadsheets.

Pulling my bag open, I quietly retrieve the small oblong box and palm it in my hand and head to our downstairs half-bath tucked behind the staircase. Slipping inside the all-white room except for the same dark wood flooring that is everywhere but the two upstairs bathrooms, I turn on the fan and light switches, knowing the fan's sound produces an ongoing, high-pitched metal-to-metal consistent screech. We need to get it fixed; it drives everyone crazy that enters the room. Knowing the noise will be loud, maybe it will mask my evasive secret.

Behind me, I lock the bathroom door, a rarity in my routine. After lifting up my shirt, unbuttoning my jeans, and pulling down my underwear, I sit down on the opened toilet seat, staring at the chipped dark purple nail polish on my toes. The small box gets

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