

The Best Version of Myself

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A half hour radioplay for  
The Grayscale

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## OPENING

### THEME

*The sound of a peculiar instrument, not something you'd find in an everyday orchestra.*

*It slides up and down the scale, and back again.*

*Finally, a deep smoky voice...*

### THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD

In life, there are things that you know to be true. You see them, you hear them. There is also imagination, those things that can only exist in the recess of the mind. But what about times when a moment flashes before you?

*Overtop of the music, the sound of water dripping creeps in.*

### THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD

Are you absolutely sure that noise is the leaky faucet you've been meaning to fix, or is it the footsteps of a stranger approaching?

*The dripping starts to sound more like footsteps, then disappears.*

### THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD

Perhaps it's one or the other, but all the more likely, it falls somewhere in between, on the middle of the Grayscale.

*The music crescendos.*

### THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD

Let's begin, shall we?

*The music ends with a blip.*

CUT TO

**TEASER**

*A gas stove being lit. One of those stoves that takes a few times to get going.*

ELGIN

Come on.

*It finally lights.*

ELGIN

Success!

*A pan is placed on top of the stove, and two pieces of bread follow, plopping in. All the while, ELGIN sings easily to himself.*

**THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD**

That's not a songbird you hear. That's Elgin Lumpkin, an every-man at best, currently amidst his morning routine, making toast the old fashioned way.

*A phone call. We hear ELGIN struggle to pick up the phone and deal with the toast simultaneously.*

ELGIN

Here..we..go..ah...Aha! Hello? Cindy, baby, how you doin'? It's Friday... What do you mean? Did I forget what? Our Anniversary! Eight months already? No, I didn't forget, I was just, marveling at the accomplishment. Ooh-ow- No, no, just a burn from the stove, what were you going on about? Our big day. Of course I've got something planned, a fancy dinner, just you and me, tomorrow night... No, tonight I have to work... I've already used all my sick days, my impetigo outbreak, you remember? What's wrong with celebrating tomorrow?...I don't think it loses any significance, it's just celebrating eight months and a day!... I know it's important to you, but I've been under the microscope at the factory. If I play hookey again for something trivial, they might fire me... Whoa, whoa, trivial doesn't mean bad. Plenty of great things are trivial. You love Trivial Pursuit!... You are important to me dear, I want to spoil you, but I can't do that from the unemployment line. I absolutely want to celebrate us! Eight months, that's... that's something. That's twice as long as my relationship with my ex-wife!...No, no I wasn't comparing you- I know we're not married yet- NO, I wasn't implying that we should-

*The sound of fire from the stove.*

Oh, crap.

ELGIN

*Sprinklers go off. The fire alarm sounds. ELGIN coughs from the smoke around him.*

ELGIN

Honey, I have to put out a fire- What?- No, I was multitasking again, just- No, you are important. I'll be right back, just don't hang up!

*ELGIN sprays an extinguisher and the fracas ceases.*

ELGIN

Phew.

*ELGIN returns to the phone.*

ELGIN

As I was saying- Cindy?- Hello? I tell her not to hang up and what does she do, she hangs up!

*ELGIN sighs. ELGIN picks up the phone and dials CINDY.*

ELGIN

It's me...Elgin... Maybe you ran out the door, or maybe you just don't want to pick up. Good news. My apartment didn't burn down, so, I've still got that. I don't have a lot though. Sorry, that's me whining. I don't need much. All I need is a roof over my head, a job that pays, a woman like you, and toast that isn't burnt. It should be easy! But sometimes I just feel like I can't have any of that... I'm rambling again. I know you don't like it, but we're just going to have to celebrate tomorrow. I wish it weren't so, but I can't be in two places at once-

*The sound of time and space ripping wide open. Gizmos, and destruction, and things from other worlds.*

ELGIN

Um, Cindy, I'm going to have to call you back. There's a- wormhole opening in my living room. Love ya.

*ELGIN hangs up.*

*The wormhole seems to come to a close, and we hear a body fall out of it.*

ELLE

That landing is always rough!

ELGIN

Are, are you?

ELLE

Elgin Lumpkin, yes.

ELGIN

You're just like me.

ELLE

No, I'm nothing like you!

#### THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD

Elgin Lumpkin and Elgin Lumpkin. One a perennial loser, the other, yet to be classified. A literal tableaux of taking a good look at yourself in the mirror. A study in the reaction to self-evaluation, to be conducted on the Grayscale.

#### ACT ONE

*A coffee pot finishes brewing.*

ELGIN

Here you go.

ELLE

Thanks.

*ELLE takes a sip.*

ELLE

Hmm. This is what coffee tastes like in your dimension?

ELGIN

Not all coffee. This is instant coffee.

ELLE

But it took time to make?

Yes.

ELGIN

So it wasn't instant?

ELLE

No, I guess not.

ELGIN

Your dimension is very funny.

ELLE

So, you're from the future?

ELGIN

No, I'm from the right now, just, not "here."

ELLE

And you're me?

ELGIN

I'm not you. I'm me!

ELLE

Can we start from the beginning again?

ELGIN

It's really quite simple. But I suppose I can dumb it down for you.

ELLE

I'd appreciate it.

ELGIN

There are thousands of Elgin Lumpkins all living their own lives simultaneously over the vastness of every dimension of time. We all started with the same DNA, and have shaped our own lives accordingly.

ELLE

Oh. This is all kind of bonkers, right? I'd happy you decided to visit though. It's very exciting!

ELGIN

ELLE

I didn't decide to visit. It was decided upon. The League of Lumpkins felt it necessary for me to intervene. Just look at your welcome. This "instant coffee," this apartment, the state of affairs is truly alarming.

ELGIN

The giant hole in the wall doesn't help. If I knew you were coming, I could've prepared.

ELLE

You didn't know? We sent you many messages. Have you been checking your intra-dimensional e-mail account?

ELGIN

I, uh, I don't even have a computer.

ELLE

Oh my. This really is a test.

ELGIN

Would you like something to eat with your coffee? I can put some toast on the stove.

ELLE

In my dimension they have a box that does it for you.

ELGIN

A toaster? Yeah, we've got those too.

ELLE

Back home, I'm president of a toaster company.

ELGIN

You're the president! Wow, I just work on the floor.

ELLE

Don't worry. We'll change that. Will you toast me some toast, and we will go over the plan?

ELGIN

I don't have a toaster.

ELLE

But you work at a toaster factory.

ELGIN

Yes.

ELLE

You don't see the tragedy in that?

ELGIN

It's just an appliance.

ELLE

If I heard one of my floor workers say that I would fire them on the spot! This is your problem, Elgin. You have to take charge of your life. You have to attack your life demanding excellence from the people around you! You're a Lumpkin for God's sake!

ELGIN

I don't know how to be anyone else.

ELLE

Elgin. I'm going to be frank with you. Of all of the Lumpkins across all the dimensions, you are, by far, the worst off. We are a collection of highly regarded citizens, except for you. You are the one blemish to a truly refined legacy. We are sick and tired of that. You are the worst.

ELGIN

That's tough. I- I don't feel like the worst. I just try to do my best, you know?

ELLE

There is no time for wallowing. We must start improving your life.

ELGIN

Why, will something bad happen?

ELLE

Yes! Those damn Gundersons will keep denying us entry to the intra-dimensional cigar club. That CANNOT happen anymore.

ELGIN

Sounds fancy.

ELLE

It is. So let's start rebuilding. Introduce yourself to me.

ELGIN

Nice to meet you, I'm Elgin Lumpkin!

ELLE

NO. All wrong. Elgin Lumpkin is your father's name. You have to distinguish yourself. Add mystique. I just go by Elle. Try again.



ELGIN

How you doing, I'm Elle Lumpkin.

ELLE

NO. Elle is *my* thing. Be original!

ELGIN

I'm sorry, I'm very overwhelmed. I have a lot going on.

ELLE

Like what?

ELGIN

It's my eighth month anniversary with my girl Cindy, and she's really upset because I have to work.

ELLE

Ah Cindy! She's already returned from her Rhodes scholarship?

ELGIN

No, no, she lives here. She waits tables. I think your Cindy might be a little more gifted.

ELLE

I see... well we will improve her too. First, you are going to march into work and demand the day off and a promotion!

ELGIN

Are you crazy? They'll can me!

ELLE

No they won't, because you are going to win them over with your booming presence!

ELGIN

I think they've had enough of my presence. I just try to stay out of the way.

ELLE

Not anymore! Now you are *the way*. Now about Cindy-

*A banging at the door. We hear CINDY outside.*

CINDY (O.S.)

Elgin Lumpkin, open the door! Don't make me wait out here.

ELGIN

I better talk her down. That's her angry knock.

ELLE

Let me handle her. I have a way with women.

ELGIN

What should I do?

ELLE

Hide in the next room. Go!

*ELLE opens the door. CINDY bursts in.*

ELLE

Well look here-

CINDY

Well look here yourself! You try to brush me off with some heartfelt mumbo jumbo and just when you're running out of the words, you try to weasel your way out by saying there's a wormhole you have to attend to? How stupid do you think I-

*CINDY see's the hole in the wall.*

CINDY

What the hell happened to your wall?

ELLE

Just some remodeling. I'm adding another room.

CINDY

You can't afford to take me out, but you're adding another room?

ELLE

Quite the contrary. I'm adding the other room because we'll be needing the extra space when you move in.

CINDY

What?

ELGIN (O.S.)

What!?

CINDY

Who's that?

ELGIN

Just an architect . Don't mind him. I didn't know you were coming over. I thought you would be preparing for our date.

CINDY

You told me you have to work.

ELGIN

Yes. I was just playing a little joke. I got the night off so that I could dedicate my attention on you and only you.

CINDY

That doesn't sound like you at all, Elgin.

ELLE

Call me Eli.

CINDY

But your name is Elgin.

ELLE

I'm Eli now.

CINDY

Are you sick? Is it the impetigo? Did it go to your brain?

ELLE

Ha-ha. No, how could impetigo- Forget it. I'm fully well my dear. The only thing that makes me sick is that you caught me red handed. I wanted to surprise you with the news tonight.

CINDY

This doesn't feel right.

ELLE

You don't want to move in?

CINDY

Of course I want to move in! I've been dropping hints for months, but you've never wanted to even talk about it, and now, all the sudden you're building new rooms for me. It just doesn't fit. My mother passed down some rotten traits, but I've got her spot on intuition, and it's telling me this stinks.

ELLE

That's just the smell of the burnt toast. I'm offering you everything you've ever wanted. You can have money, intimacy, someone who you can be proud to call your partner.

CINDY

Partner?

ELLE

That's what you want, isn't it?

CINDY

Elgin, this is-

ELLE

Eli.

CINDY

I'm not calling you Eli.

ELLE

You'll get used to it. Just taste it on your tongue. Eeeeellliiii.

CINDY

Did you just ask me to taste a word?

ELLE

Yes, and you will taste so much more tonight. You will taste the fruits of Eden, the taste of all your wants at your fingertips, and you'll taste the delicacy of the chef special from the finest table at Maison De La Lune.

*CINDY bursts out laughing.*

ELLE

Why do you laugh?

CINDY

Because this is ridiculous. They wouldn't let people like us into a place like that.

ELLE

We are exactly the kind of people that places like that exist for.

CINDY

You're not taking me to Maison De La Lune, right?

ELLE

Should I call and cancel our booking?

CINDY

This is for real?

ELLE

As real as me standing before you.

CINDY

I...I can't wait.

ELLE

Why should you? Go wait by the car, we'll go now!

CINDY

But, I can't wear this!

ELLE

I know. I will buy you new clothes on the way! Give me a moment to ready myself and I'll meet you downstairs.

CINDY

Arrh-Vawr! Is that how they say it in France?

ELLE

Not quite! See you in five.

*ELLE shuts the door behind CINDY.*

ELLE

That wasn't so hard, now was it?

ELGIN

She's moving in!?

ELLE

It's part of the plan.

ELGIN

I'd like to see this plan!

ELLE

You love her right?

ELGIN

Well, I, I feel strongly about her yes.

ELLE

Then she's moving in. Behind every great man is a great woman. You'll wed, have kids, and die happy. It's settled.

ELGIN

I think I need to sit down.

ELLE

No time, you have to go to work.

ELGIN

I feel sick. Like I have a rash. What if the impetigo did go to my brain? Maybe I'm having a stroke or something!

ELLE

One, that smell is just the toast, you're too young to have a stroke. Two, impetigo can't "go to the brain." Three, you are just nervous, but you better get over that shit RIGHT NOW because you have a tough task ahead of you. I'll take care of Cindy, but you have to go improve your career by yourself. Just remember to be forceful.

ELGIN

I, I don't know how to do that. I don't know what to say!

ELLE

Here, I'll write the words for you. You just have to say them. Quick, say "I'm Eli Lumpkin, and I'm mad as hell!"

ELGIN

I'm Eli Lumpkin, and I'm mad as hell!

ELLE

Practice on the way there. Try to sound like less of a pushover.

*ELGIN practices the opening line, as we fade out into the next scene.*

## ACT TWO

*The sound of a hand slowly dipping into a bucket full of ice. ELGIN lets out little cries of pain.*

*Just then, ELLE bursts through the door.*

ELLE

What a night!

ELGIN

Where's Cindy? Should I hide?

ELLE

She's having a smoke. We've got a few minutes. How did the meeting go?

ELGIN

I'm not sure.

ELLE

What's wrong with your hand? And your face! Did you get into fisticuffs?

ELGIN

Well, I was practicing the speech the whole way there. I was very focused. So I walked right into the bossman's office. He was in the middle of a meeting with the Union reps. I don't think he was happy to see me. But I was there, and I was ready to say the speech, but... well, someone had spilled coffee on the floor and forgot to clean it up, I suppose, so, I, I slipped.

ELLE

Jesus.

ELGIN

And I had planned to start out by pounding my fist on the table to really prove my point, but I had so much momentum. I broke my hand on the table and then went face first on the way down.

ELLE

So you didn't do the speech?

ELGIN

I got out "I'm Eli Lumpkin and I'm mad as hell." Then I blacked out. Woke up in a hospital. They drove me home for free though, so that was nice. How did the date go?

ELLE

I think this dimension might be cursed.

ELGIN

What? But, but you're the best!

ELLE

I'm aware. I thought this would be easy. They did not prepare me for this.

ELGIN

What happened?

ELLE

Cindy is simply boorish. The mouth on her! It was like she was taking advantage so she could say "Pardon my French," as much as possible. Like it was some joke. Is that funny?

ELGIN

It's a little funny. Did she laugh afterwards?

ELLE

Yes! A terrible cackle. She disturbed other patrons!

ELGIN

When she laughs like that she gets so into it that her eyes roll back in her head. I think it's cute.

ELLE

I think it's gruesome. Her behavior. She pinched the waiter's butt!

ELGIN

... Was he better looking than us?

ELLE

They kicked us out you know. She should've known better. I thought you said she was a waitress?

ELGIN

She is, but at her joint they encourage you to insult the patrons. It's kind of their schtick.

ELLE

This world makes no sense.

ELGIN

It doesn't sound like it was that bad. I thought you were going to say that she wants to leave me.

ELLE

I think that would be the best thing for you. You can do so much better.

ELGIN

But, I like Cindy.



ELLE

And your instincts are atrocious.

*CINDY is banging at the door again.*

CINDY (O.S.)

Why did you lock the door?

ELLE

I'll fix this. Hide!

ELGIN

Where?

ELLE

Behind the couch!

*ELLE let's CINDY in.*

CINDY

I know you don't like me smoking, but that food made my stomach uneasy. I'll tell you what, I've had dirty water dogs that go down easier than that expensive crapola.

ELLE

Cindy.

CINDY

What?

ELLE

You are a disgusting pig.

CINDY

You're not so easy on the eyes yourself, mister.

ELLE

I hope you enjoyed walking into the apartment just now, because it is the last time you will ever do so. Please turn around and walk out of my life forever!

CINDY

What is this? No, go back to the "I love you darling, please move in with me," strategy. I'm not about this new attitude.

ELLE

You should leave.

ELGIN

No, don't go!

CINDY

Elgin, I think there is someone behind your couch!

ELGIN

It's me! Don't leave, please.

*CINDY screams.*

CINDY

Someone better tell me what's going on right now!

ELLE

Oh... Oh, what's this? It's- It's my evil twin!

ELGIN

Stop it! Stop lying. We have to tell Cindy the truth.

CINDY

Yes, please do.

ELGIN

The truth is, this is a version of me from another dimension who has been sent over space and time to help turn me into a better person.

*Pause.*

CINDY

My mother was right. I do need to see a shrink.

ELGIN

It's the truth, honest. Tell her Elle?

ELLE

What's the point? I can't figure this out. I've got this sudden feeling in the pit of my stomach, an emptiness. What is this?

ELGIN

Disappointment?

ELLE

Why would your world have such a thing? I've had enough of you people.

CINDY

The feeling is mutual!

ELGIN

Cindy, you might want to cover your ears!

CINDY

Why-

*The wormhole opens back up.*

ELLE

Au Revoir losers. THAT'S how they say it in France!

*ELLE is gone and the wormhole has evaporated.*

ELGIN

I'm sorry you had to spend the day with him. He's a bit of a jerk.

CINDY

You're the jerk!

ELGIN

I'm sorry dear, I just wanted to make you happy.

CINDY

It's all fake. You didn't care about our anniversary. You didn't want to spoil me. You don't want me to move in at all!

ELGIN

Well that's just not true. Well, at least the last two parts. I don't think eight months calls for celebration.

CINDY

Aha, so you admit it!

ELGIN

Hold on a second. I do want to spoil you, and I think I really do want you to move in.

CINDY

They why do you never want to talk about that?

ELGIN

Because I didn't want you to move in, not til today. There are some things that are wrong with me. I want to be more, but I can't. Not right now. I just don't have the tools. And with my ex-wife... I'm working on it, but I didn't want you to move in because I can't bring myself to let someone else get that close. But for you, I'd be willing to try. I want to be that close. I was working on getting a better job for you, but I shot that all to hell.

CINDY

You're rambling.

ELGIN

I'm working on that too. I want to be the guy you want me to be.

CINDY

Elgin-

ELGIN

No, really listen to me! I'm pretty sure I don't have a job anymore. There is a gaping hole in my wall that I can't afford to fix. I work in a toaster factory and I don't even have a toaster! I see the tragedy in that now! I'm a failure.

CINDY

Don't say you're a failure.

ELGIN

But it's true! I have nothing in my life, nothing, but somehow, someway, I have you. I couldn't bear to lose you, but I know I probably will. Tell me how to fix myself. Please. I'll do whatever. I'm willing. I punched a table today, broke my hand, all for you!

CINDY

Elgin, I've never had a problem with who you are. I love who you are.

ELGIN

You 're not embarrassed to be seen with me?

CINDY

No...I wasn't. But now I am. All that stuff you're working on, you said you were doing it for me, and, I'd much rather you be doing it for you.

ELGIN

That's all I have to do?

CINDY

Goodbye Elgin. Call me when you get that wall fixed.

*CINDY exits.*

ELGIN

What a day.

*A Knock at the door. ELGIN rushes to open it.*

ELGIN

Cindy!

DELIVERY GUY

Delivery for Elgin Lumpkin, please sign.

ELGIN

Oh.

DELIVERY GUY

Thank you.

*The GUY leaves, with ELGIN shutting the door behind him. He has a large box. He opens it. There is a note.*

ELGIN

“Dear Mr. Lumpkin, we apologize for the accident today as a result of unsafe work environments. We will work tirelessly to improve the conditions for our loyal employees. Please take as much time as you need to heal, and we will gladly cover all medical costs, and increase your yearly salary to alleviate any damage this incident might have caused you. We would like to avoid litigation, and are prepared to do whatever it takes to prevent it. Enjoy this token of our apology. Management.”

*ELGIN takes a toaster out of the box.*

ELGIN

A toaster. I've always wanted one of these.

THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD

Elgin Lumpkin, a man who survived living with himself. Though he may have lost things along the way,... Love, income, a wall... What he decides to replace them with is completely up to him. The result of our experiment stands before us. A man with a shiny new toaster, who can go by whatever name he wants.

