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Burning Bridges As We Go

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### **The Rosewoods Visit the Dead Pay Phone**

“Marriages don’t last,” Barry and Nancy Rosewood’s marriage counselor advised, “unless both partners understand how pride conflicts with vulnerability and prevents us from engaging in equitable behaviors. Which should never be confused with equality. Or the expectation one should fulfil the other’s happiness quota. Don’t you agree?”

Neither Nancy nor Barry Rosewood agreed, but did decide Sundays would be set aside to balance their differing marital polarities -- Nancy’s dramatically extraverted sensibilities against Barry’s rigidly stoic introversion – which tended to clash and become a true wrecking force if something wasn’t done to bring balance. Peace agreed upon if, and only if, one day out of the week was set aside to honor the other. Pay attention. Love and reassure each other of their mutual commitment by spending focused time together.

“Barry?” Nancy asked.

“Hmmm?” Barry replied.

It hadn’t always been this way. Early on in their marriage, passion drove intimacy which in turn kept the peace. But *The Accident*, as both came to think of it, changed all

that. Disrupted their union along with their hope for starting a family. Which made Sundays all the more important because each did truly love the other and wanted to be together. To make things work.

"Barry," Nancy continued. "Would you believe you can talk to dead people from a pay phone on Seventh Avenue in downtown East Oakland?"

"Ungh-huh. Oh yeah?"

"Barry, listen," Nancy continued, rustling her section of the paper and stretching her toe across the couch to nudge him, "I said you can talk to dead people from a pay phone on Seventh Avenue in Oakland. Doesn't that sound fascinating?"

"Sure."

"This article says the pay phone is a conduit to the other side. Here, listen to this."

Nancy began to read, *"In this east Oakland strip mall, there is a donut shop where they sell burgers, a check cashing store for the working class, and a tiny market that calls the dead from a payphone out front."*

"Wow."

"I know that place. My friend from college took us there a few times. It's called Won Kee Kim's Supermarket and I remember thinking how strange it was that they had a glass phone booth right out front. Like the kind Superman changed in from the old comic strip. I didn't know the payphone called dead people though."

"That's interesting," Barry said distracted. He was reading an article on The Turn of the Screw and how Henry James, the author, felt it to be his most compromised work -- something Barry was familiar with in his own writing.

"Barry, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, of course. Are you reading the tabloids or something?"

"No, the lifestyle section. What else. It sounds legit though."

Sundays sitting on the back porch looking across the redwoods to the ocean, drinking coffee, nibbling on crisp bacon, and quietly reading the New York Times together usually soothed both. But apparently not today. Nancy had something on her mind.

"I think we should check it out."

"Check out what? The dead pay phone thing?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, why not? Aren't you a little curious? Plus, it could make for an interesting story to write about. Maybe even publish. You're always saying how difficult it is to find new material you can get excited about."

"I have plenty of material to write about."

"Sure, I know you do, dear. But those are assignments your editor picks for you. This would be different. This would be for you. What do you think? We can drive up there and check it out. I was thinking if we called someone we once knew it could be enlightening. Like maybe your father. You've mentioned a time or two lately how difficult it was the way he left things after the accident. And how you still don't understand what motivated him. Here's your chance."

"To call my father? On a dead pay phone? Are you serious?"

"Yes, so you can talk to him."

"My father's been gone for some time. And since when did you start believing in the paranormal?"

“Oh, I don’t know. There might be a little something to it. You never know. Maybe this payphone thing is the real deal.”

“And you want us to drive up there to speak to my father.”

“Yes, that’s the point. We can call and talk to him.”

Barry finally put his section of the paper down and looked across the couch at the woman he’d married more than twenty years ago. A still beautiful woman with a real need to express herself through dramatic gesture. And that was before *The Accident* -- the one that nearly killed him. The one she warned him about. The one his father caused. But this payphone thing was going a bit far, even for her.

“Why?” Barry asked, “Why would I even consider calling my father? You know what he did.”

*The Accident* turned Barry into an iceberg – not that he’d been an open book before, but at least he’d been present and tuned into her. Willing to love, communicate, and share. They were connected. But after, something broke and he disappeared for a time. Deep into his internal reserves till Nancy became frustrated beyond frustration. She wanted to leave, hurt that he’d emotionally abandoned her, but she stayed regardless. Someone needed to champion him and who better than the love of his life. So Nancy stayed and helped where she could. And Barry healed, returning to her and their life together. But *the Accident* paralyzed more than just his legs. It had bitten off a portion of his spirit which, over time, demanded significant adjustments to connect and make their marriage work again.

“That’s why we should go,” Nancy added, “This is what I’m saying! This gives you a chance to work things out. Find closure. That kind of thing.”

Nancy did her part after *The Accident*. She got Barry healthy and writing again. Which made him more functionally content. And present. Except around November tenth every year as the anniversary of *The Accident* approached. Then Barry started sinking, though Nancy never knew if he realized he was doing this. She let him to some degree, it was his life and she hoped he might find insight. But he never did. Still, she never let him get too deep into depression before she intervened.

“Look,” Barry said, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t like what you’re implying. What my father did, he did. And whatever apology he might have offered he took to his grave. I’ve made my peace with it so you don’t need to bring him up as fodder for your one of your dramatic schemes to entertain yourself. Maybe you’re the one who needs closure.”

Barry hated when Nancy “stirred the pot.” From his perspective, she always needed a little drama to reassure herself things weren’t too sedate. Too passive or too boring. The great push and pull of their marriage – her desiring validation and reassurance every day opposed to his need for the safety of detached stoicism. He never suspected he needed her pushes to break him out of his loneliness though. Or that it was not so easy for Nancy to orchestrate these moments in a way that his isolation and her insecurities didn’t drown out their love for each other and turn meddling into resentment.

“Easy, tiger. I wasn’t trying to entertain anything. I was just thinking about who we could talk to from the other side and your father came to mind. Sorry I brought it up.”

“Well, you should be. I’m not cool with it.” Barry felt himself working up a nice head of steam to blow but tamped it down because he didn’t want to ruin their Sunday. *Still*, he thought, *she would like it if I played the angry tiger to her wounded princess. Then I’d have to be remonstrative later and re-right the balance between us. Be contrite and let her vent her*

*emotions till she felt heard and understood again. A wanted and valued partner. That certainly would satisfy her itch to scratch a dramatic moment.*

But Nancy zagged with a new thought. "Ohh, I know!" Nancy exclaimed, "How about Miriam, our old neighbor? She liked us. And she certainly doted on you! Didn't she have a standing order that you could join her for afternoon tea any time you liked? And used to say all the time how you reminded her of her late father reincarnated. Remember? She was from Ireland if I recall, so she probably would be open to the whole ghost thing. She passed away, what, three or four years ago? We went to her wake."

"It was three."

"You see? It's fortuitous. That settles it. We'll call Miriam. Maybe she's still hanging around hoping to have more tea and biscuits with you. Ohh! And maybe she can tell us what it's like on the other side? If Elvis is really dead or what heaven looks like. That sort of thing."

"You're serious? You want to drive all the way to Oakland to casually call a dead woman on a pay phone like we're having afternoon tea? No, that doesn't sound crazy at all."

"It's not crazy and neither am I. Don't say that! You're just being defensive because I touched a nerve with your father. Oh, come on Barry. Let's try it. It's not even a two hour drive. And we can get some spareribs at Won Kee Kim's. You love Korean barbeque. Think of it as a nice little day excursion. A fun way to break up the monotony of our routine. You're always after me to take day trips with you around the Bay Area. Visit bookstores and what not. Why don't we try this? Or are you too chicken?"

Barry laughed letting the tension go. Nancy knew his buttons as equally as he did hers.

"I'm not chicken. It just sounds a little unusual. And East Oakland isn't exactly the suburbs you know. There are dangerous characters lurking about."

"Dangerous characters lurking? Who are you, Mickey Spillane? You sound awfully bawk-bawk to me."

"Oh, I do, do I? Well, we can't have that. When do you want to go?"

"On Halloween of course. Friday. I'll make all the plans."

"Naturally."

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On Halloween, Barry settled himself into the plush passenger seat of Nancy's deluxe Mercedes-Benz Sprinter while she loaded his chair in the back -- the Medline M10 all-terrain sport wheelchair he preferred when out and about because it was light weight and maneuvered well.

"Need any help?" he called back.

"No, I got it," she replied. "Just have to move a few arrangements out of the way."

Nancy's van was normally used to deliver flower arrangements for her business, but Barry liked to take it on road trips because it was roomier and had a better radio system than his Chevy Traverse 3LT. Currently, the back of Nancy's van was stockpiled with bunches of holly, evergreen switches, and aromatic sage to make wreaths for the upcoming holiday season. They smelled fairly pleasant too.

Barry took out his cellphone and queued up the Spotify playlist he'd prepared for the trip. Selections from Sting's solo career along with picks from his earlier albums

fronting The Police including Synchronicity and Ghost in the Machine. For some reason, that sounded right.

“And away we go like a herd of buffalo,” Nancy chimed climbing into the driver’s seat and backing the van out of the driveway. “I decided to take the Pacific Coast highway north. It shouldn’t take long and we can stop by the Pie Ranch at Ano Nuevo for a short coffee break like we used to. Then catch the 280 over to Daly City and across the Bay Bridge. That sound good to you? We should be in Oakland in about two hours.”

Sting, as Barry had arranged, sent them on their way singing, *“We are spirits in the material world, are spirits in the material world.”*

“Nice,” Nancy laughed caressing the back of Barry’s head and patting his leg before returning her hand to the wheel, “Glad to see you’re getting into the spirit of the adventure. No pun intended.”

These moments were the ones Barry learned to cherish after his car accident. When Nancy’s little spontaneous affections, like caressing his head or patting his leg, caught him by surprise. Moments when she seemed to forget he no longer had use of his two dead, tree stump legs despite the rehab efforts. Modifications had allowed him to still live a fairly active life, but he’d always require the permanent use of a wheelchair. Which, for Nancy, was a constant reminder not only of *The Accident*, but how he wasn’t the tall, virile husband she once gloated to her friends about – the man who boxed and ran marathons and raced sprint cars at Laguna Seca on weekends. Carried her up to the stairs to their bedroom and threw her down on the bed when he felt the desire. And was the man who made her feel most safe -- protected from the dangers of the world out there. She wouldn’t say it, but she had less reason to gloat now. It was in her eyes.



"Oh look, Swanton farm still has pumpkins out in their pumpkin patch," Nancy noticed. "Maybe we should stop and buy a few? I bet they're super cheap being it's the last day of the season."

"No. We'd only just throw them away. Or some kids would come along and smash them leaving me to clean up the mess. Let's just make it to your phone booth so we can get some barbeque and leave before nightfall. The sun sets at 6:11pm tonight and I don't want to be out on the street in Oakland after dark all by our lonesome. I don't think that would be good."

"We have plenty of time, don't worry."

Sting took this moment to sing, *"Under the ruins of a walled city, crumbling towers in beams of yellow light. No flags of truce, no cries of pity. The siege guns have been pounding through the night..."*

Barry loved Sting. Since *Dream of the Blue Turtles* when, as a teenager, he was completely mesmerized by the deeply felt lyrics of Sting's poetry. But *"Fortress around Your Heart"* was one of those prescient songs that cut directly to the heart of his post-accident guilt over Nancy and what happened. She warned him his father's risky behavior would one day land on him if he didn't take the blinders off. But those warnings only prompted bitterly contested fights between the two about what exactly constituted family.

"I love you Barry. I truly do," Nancy challenged, "And I only want what's best for you. I don't see why you can't see that. Or that I'm telling you the truth about your father and how dangerous he is."

Barry would throw his arms up in frustration, "Because he's my father, Nancy. Not some character in one of your soap operas. You don't just throw family away."

"I never said throw him away."

"Didn't you? My father may not be perfect. I know that. But he is my father."

“Barry, it goes deeper than that! I hate to be the one to tell you, but he doesn’t care about you. I’m not trying to hurt you, but he doesn’t. Look how he treats you. No calls, no letters. Disappears for months, sometimes years. And never shows even an ounce of interest in YOUR life. Only talks about himself and all those horrible women he sleeps with. Haven’t you noticed he only comes around when he needs money? Then takes off the minute you give it to him?”

“What am I supposed to do? Say no?”

“Yes! Or, if you can’t say no, then just give him the money up front and stop letting him drive you off in whatever hot rod he’s wasted your money on from the last time he came around. I also don’t like how he takes you to bars like you’re his buddy. He knows you don’t drink. Plus, he’s never quite sober himself, now is he. If he wants to drink whiskey, why can’t he just do it here and cut out the middleman? I’ll buy the damn bottle myself.”

“I would never let him drive drunk, Nancy. I hope you know that.”

“I want to believe you, but, honestly, he has a way of convincing you to do things. Like last time. Didn’t he pull in here at three in the morning and convince you to take a drive with him even though you had an important meeting with your publisher at nine? But away you went anyway and didn’t return till, what, one in the afternoon? Him drunk and you too tired to even call your publisher?”

“He was having troubles and needed my help.”

“You mean he was in debt from gambling and needed your money.”

“I can handle him, Nancy. Please. I know he’s a troubled man, but he has good reason.”

The reason, Nancy knew, was exactly why Barry could never say no to his father.

When Barry was nine, his mother killed herself in front of his father. Walked into the living room after an argument and put a bullet into the wall above his father's head from the Colt .45 pistol his grandfather had brought back from the war. Just to get his "attention" apparently. Then she put the barrel of the gun in her mouth -- which must've been hot and burned her lips -- before pulling the trigger sending a second round through her own brain. At least, that's what Barry's father reported it to the police after cleaning up the mess with his own hands, unloading and cleaning up the gun, and having his mother's body taken away. Who knows what really happened because Barry only knew his father's version. Which the police corroborated.

*"Your mother killed herself, son," Barry's father told him that day when Barry returned home from school that day. "She died from unnatural causes and won't be here anymore. Her body will be cremated and her ashes sent back to Georgia where her people came from. There will be no funeral. And no further fuss will be made about it. Men don't cry, you understand? If you have to cry, then go in your bedroom. I don't want to see it. But if you like, you can draw her a goodbye picture to include in the urn."*

"What about dinner?" Barry asked. He liked when he and his mother were alone in the kitchen cooking dinner at night. She smiled a lot at him during those times -- they talked about his day and places they were going to visit and the fun they were going to have.

*"Did you not hear me!? Your mother won't be coming home to make you dinner! Now or ever again. So just make your peace with it because that's the way things are. I won't hear anything more spoken about it."*

Nancy knew the suicide definitely fractured his father's psyche and created an inverse dynamic between father and son. You didn't need psychology classes to understand that little fucked up paradigm. And definitely, at least as far as Nancy was concerned,

brought out a guilt laden death wish in the father that she knew would one day land upon the son.

"A good son," Barry argued with her, "doesn't throw his father away just because that father isn't Atticus Finch!"

In their early days of marriage, Nancy could've murdered Barry just as easily over his stubbornness as much as Barry's father over his bullshit selfishness.

"By the way," Barry asked Nancy bringing her back to the present, "did you ever figure out how the whole dead phone thing works?"

"Yes. I got a response from the newspaper a couple of days ago while I was at the shop. The editor, Martha, said when you want to call a deceased person, you pick up the receiver at exactly eleven minutes past the top of the hour and drop a dime in the slot. Not a quarter mind you, but a dime. She was very specific. Then you dial the person's fully given birth name, with each letter representing each number dialed. If the deceased person hears the ringing, they'll generally answer within a few rings. If not, then you can assume they've moved on and you try someone else."

"Well that has to be the strangest thing I ever heard. Did this Martha say how she came to learn this?"

"No. But she claimed to have independent sources of unimpeachable integrity that her paper verified. From them, she learned the phone only calls the other side on certain days during the year. Halloween being one of them."

"Naturally," Barry smirked.

"There's also the day of the winter solstice, the summer solstice, and Groundhog Day if you can believe that. And it wasn't in the article, but she told me she personally tried

the phone and confirmed it wasn't a hoax. You *can* talk to the dead. She called her sister who passed away from cancer and said she spoke with her for almost 45 minutes."

"Really? Cause it certainly sounds like a hoax. Or an elaborate prank."

"Oh I don't think so. I think it could be quite the experience. Maybe even change our lives."

"Change our lives? That sounds portentous. I mean, Miriam was sweet, but I doubt she could say anything that would change matters for us one way or the other."

"You just have to be open minded is all," Nancy replied getting that look on her face.

"Well, you have me curious enough to try. The bottom line being the spareribs better be worth it or I'm calling foul and you owe me. You got that, my little flowerpot?"

She laughed letting the tension go. "I quite understand, dear. I don't think you'll be disappointed. At least with the barbeque. I can't say anything about the pay phone yet. We just have to believe in the possibilities."

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Seventh Street in East Oakland looked exactly like you'd expect if cliché was your only reference point; run down and seedy. Iron bars on all the shop windows and doors, bullet holes piercing the walls, graffiti sprayed across every surface in red or blue, intimidating young men standing in front of the liquor store on the corner drinking from brown paper bags, and homeless people pushing shopping carts full of their belongings up and down the street. Or squatting and blocking the entryways.

What stood out, what was very visibly out of place, was the genteel older couple dressed in tweed and fur standing outside the glass phone booth in front of Won Kee

Kim's Supermarket waiting for their turn. Currently, a very large Samoan man was fantastically packed inside the phone booth talking while simultaneously wiping away the tears pouring down his cheeks.

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"Our son, Jameson," the wife of the genteel couple offered, "would've been forty-two this year. His wife, Julie, thirty-nine. And our grandsons, Bradley and Dylan, would've been ten and twelve. A horrid car accident two years ago took their innocent young lives when they were simply returning from a ski vacation up at Lake Tahoe. One of those big ugly trucks lost control killing my Jimmy and his lovely family. It still hurts to think about, but having the opportunity to talk has eased our pain some. Given us a chance at closure."

"You've talked to your deceased son on the dead pay phone then?" Barry asked.

"No, not yet. We call and he answers. But Jameson has not spoken yet. We keep hoping. And keep trying, of course."

"You don't think it's a hoax then? Sorry if that sounds indelicate."

"Oh, no dear. It's very real. As real as you or I standing here. Blessedly so. I don't know what we would've done if it had not been so."

"Excuse me, but the booth just became available," the genteel husband interrupted, "It's almost eleven past. Excuse us, but we have a call to make."

"Of course," Barry apologized, "please don't let me hold you up."

The genteel couple stepped into the booth.

"What about you?" Barry asked the large Samoan gentleman who'd just exited. "Can you explain this phone booth to us?"

“Naw, can’t be explaining nuthin’. Just works is all. Been talking to my dead ma’ like she still be with us even though she died some ten year ago.”

“But, it works?”

“Yeah, it do. Here I be talkin’ to my dead ma’ and it ‘bout gave me a heart attack too cause she be gone ten year now. But I be talkin’ to her like no time gone by. She weren’t too happy either. She still angry ‘bout me not goin’ to see her in the hospital when she were sick and gone and died before I could get there. I told her it was cause my boss wouldn’t let me off early, even though I tell him she sick, and then there was bad traffic to the hospital, but she still not happy ‘bout it. I tried to tell her. And thought she woulda kinda forgiven me ‘bout that by now, but guess not. Ya’ excuse me, please, I needs to sit a spell. I don’t feel so good.”

“Certainly,” Barry said pulling back his chair, letting him go. “Well, if this isn’t the damndest thing I’ve ever come across.”

Barry looked over at Nancy, but she’d gone white as a ghost. She was staring at the genteel couple, blatantly listening to them cry into the phone receiver calling out, “Hello Jimmy? It’s us. Your Mother and Father. We’re here, sweetheart. Please talk to us. We’re very sorry for what happened. We’re so sorry if we upset you. We shouldn’t have said those horrible things about you selfishly going on your ski vacation instead of visiting us first. Oh, please won’t you say hello?”

“Son, I hear you breathing. I really do. Please talk to us. We’re very sorry, your mother and I.”

“Barry,” whispered Nancy, “Let’s go. I changed my mind. I don’t like this. It’s not right. I was wrong about the whole thing. No one should talk to the dead after they’ve died.”

“What?! This whole thing was your idea and we came all this way. I think it will be alright, Nancy. I don’t think it’s real. It seems convincing sure, but this is all really just circumstantial. The phone booth is probably wired to one phone nearby no matter what is dialed and someone answers when a person calls from the phone booth. For all we know, the whole production is some person’s strange way for helping people deal with their grief after a loved one has passed. Or some twisted, cruel joke.”

“I never thought it was real, Barry,” Nancy croaked losing her nerve. “I just thought maybe the whole experience could be cathartic for you. You still have this overwhelming fear of your father abandoning you. Even after *The Accident* despite the fact that he’s dead. Ohh, that fucking accident! How long will it dictate our lives? How long till you admit your father was an A-class selfish bastard, son of a bitch for doing what he did to you!? I was just hoping this thing,” Nancy gestured wildly toward the phone booth, “could somehow release you. Give you permission to move on. Get closure! But, I never thought it was real!

“Oh, Nancy. I didn’t know.”

“Barry, there’s something wrong here. And I don’t like it! Look at their faces! They look....tortured!”

Barry looked over at the older, genteel couple standing together in the phone booth. It was late in the afternoon sure, and the hour of the gloaming was fast approaching, but that didn’t explain the surreal light disfiguring their faces. They looked positively tormented. Almost damned. Barry thought they reminded him of an old black and white movie his father had taken him to see at the Bijou a few months after his mother killed herself. The movie, *Mephistopheles*, based on a 1946 play written by Klaus Mann, told the story of a genteel couple sentenced to the Arena of Tainted Souls where they were locked in perpetual combat trying to regain their souls -- which they’d previously sold to the devil.



The movie frightened Barry because the couple couldn't escape. They had to return, over and over, to the arena to fight. Young Barry was scared his mother might be in similar trouble and in hell fighting for her life because he had heard from the local catholic priest that suicide was a sin that condemned a person to hell.

And here Barry was watching a genteel couple standing in a phone booth outside a Korean market in East Oakland, on Halloween, fighting over who held the receiver to speak with their deceased son. Pushing and shoving with fixed smiles on their faces that looked like grimaces. Both frustrated and very scared.

*What exactly was going on with this phone?* Barry wondered.

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The genteel couple exited the booth without a further word and walked off looking stunned. Which only served to pique Barry's interest all the more. He was currently having the most familiar sense of déjà vu like he had whenever his father rolled into town looking for Barry to join him on one of his "adventures." And Barry, despite his nauseous mixture of guilt, need, dread, and anger, always felt compelled to go. Which he knew Nancy resented heavily over the hold Barry's father had on Barry when her love for him should've been the more powerful antidote. Barry didn't have the answer to why, but he knew deep in himself Nancy was right. Had always been right.

Barry knew this, but it never stopped him from leaving with his father. "I love you too," is all he would say to Nancy before leaving, "but, he's my Dad." A look of misplaced hope on his face because he wanted his father's love so greatly -- which always broke Nancy's heart. Especially when, time after time, Barry returned a little more broken without it. "He just wanted a loan" was a common refrain. "I'm sure it was for something important."

So why did this weird phone booth feel similar?

“Well, Nancy, it’s our turn? Do you want to give it a try?”

“No, I don’t. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t....I....I no longer have a good feeling about this. Let’s just get out of here. Get some barbeque and leave. Please, Barry. Ohh, I know! How about this? We head over to San Francisco and stay the night at the Hotel Zephyr like we used to! Turn this ship around into a romantic evening rather than a Halloween adventure. What do you say?”

“We’re here. And I admit, I’m still curious. I think I want to try it.”

Nancy sighed. “Well, dear, if you have to then go ahead. But not with me. I’m going to walk over to the market and shop. You can meet me at the van once you’re done.”

“Okay, Nancy. It’s most likely a big hoax and won’t take long. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Nancy started to walk away but stopped short, turned around, and walked the few short feet back. She leaned down, took Barry’s face in her hands, and kissed him full on the mouth with a great deal of their old passion. Barry was surprised. And pleased. And surprisingly very aroused.

Nancy could tell. “Hurry up, tiger,” she purred, “We have a new adventure waiting for us in San Francisco that will be far more satisfying than this phone booth. I promise you that! I love you more than anything!”

Barry rolled into the phone booth at ten past holding his dime at the ready. He’d already realized he didn’t know Miriam’s full name. Nor did he have time to ask Nancy before she took off for the market. Instead, he took a moment to work out his father’s full name and transpose the letters to numbers. John Everett McGill, #5646-3837388-624455.

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As Barry squared up to the phone, the sinister look he'd seen on the genteel couple's faces flashed through his thoughts. What if calling on the phone was equivalent to selling his soul and sentencing himself to the arena of tainted souls? His father had tinkered with that kind of occult stuff, even before his mother died, and look what it got him. A world full of trouble leading to his own troubled death. Which had nearly taken Barry's life as well. Which, more and more recently, Barry suspected, had been his father's intention.

*The Accident.* Oh, *The Accident.* Barry's father had arrived one day driving a brand new Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat claiming to have had an epiphany and wanted Barry to take a ride to talk about it all. Something that would correct the past and repair the future. Barry wanted to say no, but realized his father was actually sober for the first time in a long time and might actually be willing to talk. So he got into the car and let his father drive them off from Nancy and his home.

What happened next Barry couldn't remember and had to rely on reports to explain. His father had been speeding recklessly down the Pacific Coast highway south of Monterey, based on the dozen reports of a racing Dodge Charger slaloming back and forth around cars on the road. And as the Dodge was seen approaching Bixby Bridge just south of Big Sur at what had to be in excess of one hundred miles per hour, it crossed over the oncoming lane and jumped the cliff. The car flew off before plummeting over one hundred and fifty feet down into the Pacific Ocean below like a missile heading straight to hell. And the only reason Barry survived *The Accident*, as he learned from Nancy a week later, was because a tourist bus full of tourists witnessed the accident and called 911 while a Coast Guard Cutter Search & Rescue team just happened to be training a mile away.

Barry lived, his father died. That was twenty three years ago November fifth.

*“What if,” Barry thought, “I actually died on that day years ago and this has all been my experience trying to reclaim my soul while fighting in the arena of tainted souls? Or what if Nancy comes back to find me staring at nothing like a drooling zombie because Mephisto has been torturing me for so long?”*

“Barry, get a grip,” Barry counseled himself, “It’s just a pay phone hoax.” But Barry, in that moment, had also realized something. An unexpected epiphany where he knew what to do. Funny how such realizations occur instantaneously after so many years trying to contend with the very same problem without relief.

At eleven past, Barry picked up the receiver, dropped the dime, and, while controlling his breathing in and out slowly, dialed the number that correlated to his father’s name. He would do what needed to be done.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

“Hello?” the voice answered, “Hello? Are you there? Hello?”

“I’m here,” Barry answered.

“Good. I don’t have much time. I need your help! There’s something you need to do for me right away. I should’ve told you this before I died, but that can’t be helped right now. What’s important is what you do for me next. So listen up.”

“No,” Barry interrupted. “I don’t care if this is fake. Whether you’re pretending to be my father or really are my father answering from the other side. I just wanted to tell you I forgive you. I may still not understand what compelled you to do all the things you did, nor if you ever really cared about me from the first. But I do know, what I wanted to tell you is, I refuse to feel burdened with guilt over you any longer. Or take responsibility for your selfish and self-serving ways. I’ve decided to forgive you for everything and move past it all. Unburden myself and live MY life free of YOUR guilt.

For right or wrong, I love you. But I'm not going to let you have any more control. Whoever you are, wherever you are, I hope you find peace because I'm going to find mine and live life now. While there's still time. For Nancy and me. So goodbye, Dad. I wish you the best wherever you are."

Barry hung up and backed out of the phone booth feeling lighter and freer than he had for a long time. Somehow, with this last gesture, he felt released from the burdens his father imposed upon him. The guilt of it all. He no longer had to make all the adjustments, be the faithful one, or carry all the responsibility for his father's mistakes or his mother's suicide. He was free to honor the people he loved in his own life and the life he wanted to live.

Barry turned and rolled into the parking lot toward the van just in time to see Nancy leaving the store carrying a bag of groceries. She was on a similar trajectory when she spotted him, worried over how it went. But Roger kept his face neutral till they got into the van. Once both were sitting back in the van together, Barry turned, reached over and turned off the ignition. Then he took Nancy's hands in his, looked deep into her eyes, and said, "Thank you. And yes, I do love you more than anything I've ever known. Thank you for the being the best wife and friend a man could ever ask for. And loving me through it all. You've made all the difference between joy and sadness. And I vow to commit myself fully to living the best life I can with you from this day forward. If you'll still have me. If it's not too late."

Nancy had tears in her eyes and a big smile on her face when she pulled the van back onto the highway and immediately took the exit for San Francisco. They were going to enjoy a different kind of drama tonight – she was going to make sure of that! And they were going to continue living a life worth living -- because one good man loved one good woman.

The End.