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Burning Bridges As We Go

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### The Rosewoods Visit the Dead Pay Phone

“Marriages last longest,” Barry and Nancy Rosewood’s marriage counselor advised, “when both partners understand how pride conflicts with vulnerability and prevents us from engaging in equitable behaviors. Which should never be confused with equality. Don’t you agree?”

Neither Nancy nor Barry Rosewood agreed, but did decide Sundays would be the day they set aside to balance their differing marital polarities. Nancy’s dramatically extraverted sensibilities against Barry’s rigidly stoic introversion. Together their individual determinations 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 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? Yeah?”

“Barry, listen,” Nancy continued, rustling her 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 about The Turn of the Screw and how Henry James, the author, felt it was 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 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 would happen. The one that took the use of his legs away from him. 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 – with a few emotions still visible on the surface, but most of him hidden beneath. Still Nancy stayed, determined to preserve their marriage. And she helped where she could. Barry healed physically, but *the Accident* somehow froze him psychologically. Robbed him of himself and refused to give back. Which, over time, demanded significant adjustments to 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. She got Barry healthy and writing again. Which made him more functionally content. And present. Except around Halloween every year when 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. And 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 desire for 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 our old neighbor, Miriam? She liked us. And she certainly doted on you! Used to say all the time how you reminded her of her late father reincarnated. Remember? She was,

what, from Kenmare over in Ireland if I recall, so she would be open to the whole ghost thing, I imagine.”

“Of course I remember Miriam. She was a nice woman. A retired English teacher who liked that I was a writer like her father. She had me over for afternoon tea most days so we could talk books and authors. And was very supportive when I finished my last novel, despite how bad it sucked. Did you know she even bought a hundred copies just to drive up sales and get my publisher to print more? It didn’t work of course, but it was very sweet of her.”

“You see? It’s fortuitous. That settles it. We’ll call Miriam. She passed away, what three years ago? 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? Are you channeling 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. Next Sunday. I’ll make all the plans.”

“Naturally.”

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On Halloween Sunday, 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’ 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 much longer 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 triathlons and raced sprint cars 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 start singing, *"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 fall onto his shoulders if he didn't take the blinders off. But those warnings usually 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. So I don't see why you can't see that. Or that I'm telling you the truth about your father."

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."

"Look, my father may not be perfect. I know that. But he is my father."

"Barry, 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 haven't you noticed he only comes around when he needs money? Then takes off the minute you give it to him?"

“He’s not perfect, I know that. But he’s my father, Nancy. What am I supposed to do? Say no?”

“Well, at least 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 that 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 with you so much, why can’t he just do it here and cut out the middleman? I’ll buy the damn bottle myself.”

“I never drink more than one glass. And I would never let him drive drunk, Nancy. I hope you know that.”

“I want to believe that, but, honestly, he has a way of convincing you to do things you don’t want to. 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? Plus, he’s not even that good of a driver. You’ve said so yourself. Yet there he is insisting on driving and always trying to impress you with how fast he can.”

“I can handle him, Nancy. So please quit your nagging. I know he’s a troubled man, but he has good reason.”

Nancy knew Barry couldn’t say no to his father. Nor explain why, but Nancy knew it stemmed from Barry’s mother committing suicide in front of his father when Barry was still a little boy. His father cleaned up the mess with his own hands -- and called the Coroner to take the body away before Barry came home from school -- before explaining to Barry about his Mom dying. Which Barry never quite understood, or received closure over. But the suicide definitely fractured his father’s psyche and

created an inverse dynamic between father and son. And definitely, at least as far as Nancy was concerned, brought out a 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 those days, Nancy could’ve easily murdered Barry over his stubborn devotion to his father.

“By the way,” Barry asked bringing Nancy 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 two 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 winter and summer solstice, and Groundhog Day being the other three 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 – the youngest who passed away from cancer -- and 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 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 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, Jimmy," the wife of the genteel couple, Diane, 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 car accident off I-80 in Colfax two years ago took their lives while they were returning from a ski vacation up at Lake Tahoe. One of those big ugly trucks coming down the mountain blew a tire and lost control killing my Jimmy. Only the truck driver lived. It still hurts to think about, but having the opportunity to talk with Julie and the boys 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 talked with Julie and the boys. Oh, yes. Four times last year and two this year. But Jimmy refuses to speak with us. We keep hoping. And we keep trying."

"It's not 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."

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

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

Jack and Diane 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. Ms. Diane there was the one to help me. Been doin’ their landscapin’ for years, but don’t know nuthin’ ‘bout the whole phone thing tills she mentioned it.”

“But, it works?”

“Yeah, it do. Here I be talkin’ to my dead ma.’ ‘Bout gave me a heart attack too cause she gone and brought up some old memories. Mistakes I made like not goin’ to see her in the hospital ‘fore she died. Thought she woulda forgiven me but guess not. Ya’ excuse me, please, I need 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 Jack and Diane, 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 try to 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. For all we know, the whole production is some person’s way of trying to help 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 restraint. “I just thought maybe the whole experience could be cathartic. But you still have this overwhelming fear of your father abandoning you. Even before *The Accident*. Ohh, that fucking accident! How long will that control our lives? Or take for you to admit your son of a bitch father did that to you!? I was just hoping this thing,” Nancy gestured toward the phone booth, “could somehow release you. Give you permission to move on. Closure! But, I never thought it was real!

“Oh, Nancy. I didn’t know.”

“Well, it sure seems real now, Barry. Look at their faces! They look....tortured!”

Barry looked over at Diane and Jack 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 Jack and Diane’s faces. They looked tormented. Almost damned. Barry thought they looked exactly like a couple from an old black and white movie his father had taken him to see a few months after his mother killed herself, though he never knew why. The movie frightened him because the old couple in the movie had been tricked into selling their souls to the devil. Young Barry was scared his mother might’ve been tricked too and was in hell for taking her life. Which was a sin according to the priest who performed her eulogy at the funeral.

The movie, *Mephistopheles*, based on a 1946 play written by Klaus Mann, depicted the Arena of Tainted Souls where humans were locked in perpetual combat after selling

their souls to the devil. Worse, Jack and Diane looked similarly tortured while they tried to talk with their deceased son, fighting over who held the receiver. Not relieved at all. Pushing and shoving with fixed smiles on their faces that looked like grimaces. Both were frustrated and very scared.

*What exactly was going on with this phone?* Barry wondered, ignoring Nancy for a moment.

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Jack and Diane exited the booth in shock and walked off without a word. Without a glance in anyone's direction – looking ready to leave dodge. So much so that it only piqued Barry's interest all the more. He was having that same sensation he got when his father rolled into town looking for Barry to join him on one of his "adventures." And Barry, despite his mixture of compulsive need, dread, and anger, always did. Which he knew Nancy resented heavily, because the hold Barry's father held over Barry shouldn't have been as strong as his love for her. His father only served himself. Nancy cared for Barry.

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 Jack and Diane’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 with him, as his father, Barry suspected, had intended. No reason given, no note of explanation, or warning. Just BOOM! Barry's dad showed up, picked him up, and then drove his new Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat Redeye right off Bixby Bridge just south of Big Sur on the Pacific Coast Highway with Barry riding shotgun.

The only reason Barry survived *The Accident*, as he learned from Nancy a week later, was because dozens of tourists witnessed the crash and a Coast Guard Cutter Search & Rescue team just happened to be training in the area. Barry lived, his father died. That was thirteen years ago this fall.

What if Barry experienced damnation when he made this phone call? Or Nancy came back to find him staring at nothing like a drooling zombie? Was Mephisto going to torture him for all eternity for this?

"Barry, get a grip," he counseled himself, "It's just a pay phone hoax."

At eleven past, Barry picked up the receiver, dropped the dime, and, while controlling his breathing in and out slowly, dialed the number. He'd realized something at the last minute. Come to an epiphany in the span of a second's time that was deeper than the ocean. Barry finally knew what he had to do. Funny how such realizations occur instantaneously after so many years trying to contend with the very same problem without relief.

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. For right or wrong, I love you. But I’m not going to let you have any more control over my life. Whoever you are, wherever you are, I hope you find peace because I’m going to find mine and live life without you. 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 very long time. Even before *The Accident*. 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.