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Burning Bridges As We Go

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The Rosewoods Visit the Dead Pay Phone

"Barry?" Nancy chuckled dropping her section of the newspaper and gently nudging his leg with her toe. "Would you believe you can talk to dead people from a pay phone on Sixth Ave in downtown East Oakland?"

"Hmmm?" Barry mumbled.

"Barry, listen." Nancy could tell he wasn't. "I said you can talk to dead people from a pay phone on Sixth Ave in Oakland. Doesn't that sound interesting?"

"Mm-hmm."

"This article says there's a pay phone there that's a spiritual conduit to the other side. Here, listen to this." Nancy picked her section of the paper back up and read, *"In this east Oakland strip mall, there's a donut shop where they sell burgers and fries, a check cashing store for the working class, and a tiny market that calls the dead from a payphone out front."*

"Ohh?"

"I know that place. I went there once with a girlfriend I had in college! It was called Won Kee Kim's Supermarket and I remember it had this old timey glass phone booth right out front, just like they said. The real old kind like Superman used to change in

from the comic strip. Remember? My friend and I went there for Korean barbeque, which was really good by the way. But I didn't know the phone called dead people though."

"Sure, that's interesting," Barry replied, but he wasn't. He was caught up in an article detailing how The Turn of the Screw author, Henry James, claimed to dislike his own book despite the money and fame it provided. Barry could see the problem.

"Barry, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, dear. Of course, I'm listening. Are you reading the tabloids?" Like Henry James, Barry also wrote his own ghost story, which he had some misgivings over -- a fictionalized version of a near life-ending car crash he was involved in some years earlier. The novel, simply titled Dark Drive, had become wildly popular -- going so far as to be published in fourteen languages across twenty-seven countries. Which made Barry a fortune and ensured he would never have to write again if he didn't wish to. He did. He wanted to. But he couldn't think of anything to follow up with that wasn't Dark Drive.

Nancy gently tapped Barry's leg again. "I'm reading the lifestyle section. And this story sounds legit."

"What does?"

"The pay phone thing. Pay attention, please. It's Sunday."

Sundays sitting on their outdoor patio, shaded by the portico, looking out through the redwoods to the ocean below, had become their special time -- a time to drink coffee together, nibble on crisp bacon, and quietly discuss the week's events. This Sunday though, Nancy had something else in 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? It could make for an interesting story to write about. Maybe even publish. You're always saying how your publishers have been after you to write a follow up to your ghost story."

"I'm not a horror fiction writer, Nancy. Never was. You know that. That book was a one-off."

"Sure, I know, dear. But this would be different. This would be for you. What do you think? We can drive up to Oakland and check it out. Maybe call someone we knew. We can call your father, maybe. You've mentioned a time or two how difficult it was the way he left things after *The Accident*. And how you still don't understand what motivated him. So this could be 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 dead and 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 to Oakland to speak to my dead father?"

"Yes, that would be the point. We can call him and you can talk to him."

Barry looked across the couch at the woman he'd been married to for more than thirty years. 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 hurt Barry -- physically shattered vertebrae and paralyzed his legs. Mentally, it broke something deeper -- crushing his spirit so harshly, he disappeared into his own internal reserves for the longest time. Till Nancy intervened. Nancy was the person who nursed Barry back to health, physically and mentally. Who got him to commit to rehab. And to pick up paper and pen to write again. Who saved their marriage with love, care and determination -- patiently waiting for Barry to return to the land of the living and the man he once had been.

“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 knew, as the anniversary of *The Accident* approached, Barry would start sinking again. It was all rolled together in his mind -- his mother’s death, the car accident, his father’s death, their lives, his writing. Barry struggled to accept the deeper truth and it limited him -- especially when the anniversary of *The Accident* rolled around. He’d drop back into his shell for a while and emerge less and less happy each time -- without insight or answers.

“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 that 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. Or the toll it took on Nancy to orchestrate these moments in a way that his isolation and her insecurities didn’t drown out their love for each other. 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.”

“Oh, I know!” Nancy exclaimed, “How about our old neighbor Miriam? You remember Miriam Casterelli? She was nice. And she certainly was quite fond of you! Didn’t she invite you to tea every week? And to those seances she used to host each year on the autumnal equinox?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you see? It’s fortuitous. I even imagine she might be open to the whole ghost thing too. She was really superstitious and believed in all that stuff. She passed away, what, two or three years ago?”

“No, more like five now.”

“Perfect! That settles it. We’ll call Miriam. Maybe she’s still hanging around and can tell us what it’s like on the other side? Or if Elvis is really dead or what heaven looks like. That sort of thing.”

“You’re serious? You want to drive all the way up to Oakland to call poor Miriam 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? 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. That's next week if you didn't know. I'll make all the plans."

"Naturally."

On Halloween day, after lunch, Barry settled into the plush captain's chair of Nancy's deluxe Mercedes-Benz Sprinter while she loaded his wheelchair in back -- the Medline M10 sport wheelchair he preferred when out and about. "Need any help?" he called back.

"No, I got it," Nancy replied. "Just moving a few arrangements out of the way."

Nancy's van was normally used to deliver flowers for her business, but Barry liked to take it on road trips since it was more comfortable and had a better radio system than his own Chevy Traverse. Currently, the back of her van was stockpiled with bunches of

holly, evergreen switches, and aromatic sage to make wreaths for the upcoming holidays – which made the van smell fairly pleasant.

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 – which sounded just right for the occasion.

"And away we go like a herd of buffalo," Nancy chimed climbing in, starting the van and backing out of the driveway. "I decided to take the Pacific Coast highway. 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 *The Accident*. When Nancy's 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 live a fairly active life, but he would 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 hiked the PCT on weekends. Carried her up the stairs to their bedroom and threw her down on the bed whenever 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," Nancy noticed. "Maybe we should stop and buy a few? I bet they're super cheap being 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. 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. Ever since *Dream of the Blue Turtles* when, as a teenager, he deeply felt the lyrics of Sting's poetry. But *"Fortress around Your Heart"* was one of those prescient songs that cut directly to his post-accident guilt over Nancy and what happened. Early on in their marriage, she'd warned him about his father's drinking – and his risky behaviors dabbling with the occult – which she premonitioned would one day land on him if he didn't take the blinders off. But those warnings only prompted bitter fights about what exactly constituted family.

"I love you Barry. I truly do," Nancy challenged after one of those early fights, "And I really do want what's best for you. But the truth is your father is dangerous. He's into some really bad stuff. I don't see why you can't see that?"

Barry could only throw up 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," Nancy pleaded after another fight, "It goes deeper than that! Your father doesn't care about you. Honestly, I don't think he ever has. I'm not trying to hurt you, but he doesn't. Look how he treats you. Like his servant. Like an addendum. He never shows any interest in YOUR life! Just in all those horrible women he sleeps with and his strange pagan affectations. He disappears for weeks and months on end, doing heaven knows what, then returns when he needs money. Which the minute you give it to him, he uses to get drunk and bed another horrible woman."

"What am I supposed to do? Say no? Refuse to see him?"

"Yes! Say no! Say you're busy with your own career and your own marriage. With YOUR own life. Or, if you can't, then just give him the money up front and stop going out with him to those dive bars he likes to frequent. If he needs to drink whiskey with you so bad, why can't you just have him do it here and cut out the driving? 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 you don't always want to. Like last time. You and he drove away and didn't come back till three in the morning. With him still drunk and behind the wheel and you passed out looking like you'd been to a brothel? You slept almost two days to recover."

"He was having trouble and needed my help."

"You mean he was in debt from whatever and needed your money."

"Don't be cynical. 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 twelve, his mother committed suicide -- or so his father claimed. Barry was at school and no one else home to dispute the account. But, according to Barry's father, his mother walked into the den that morning saying she'd had enough, put the barrel of his Colt .45 into her own mouth and pulled the trigger. All because she was "depressed" and "paranoid" about his father having an affair. Which Barry's father claimed was not true. But he'd also cleaned the gun after the suicide, called the police, and requested they take his mother's body away before Barry returned home from school.

"Your mother killed herself, son," was all Barry's father told him that afternoon when Barry returned home. "She's dead and won't be here anymore. I've arranged for her body to be cremated and her ashes sent back to Georgia where her people are 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, go to your bedroom. I don't want to see it. Or if you like, you can draw her a goodbye picture and I'll send it along with the urn."

"What about dinner?" Barry asked. He loved his mother. But he was really too young to understand how permanent death was. "Will Mom be coming home to cook dinner?"

"Dinner?" his father spat. "Who the hell cares about dinner?! Did you not hear me, boy!? Your mother's dead! She won't be coming home to make you dinner! Not now or ever again. So just make your peace with it because that's the way things are. I won't hear anything more about it."

Nancy knew the suicide fractured Barry's psyche and created an inverse dynamic between father and son. You didn't need psychology classes to understand that little fucked up paradigm. But still she had trouble convincing Barry of that.

"A good son," Barry argued, "doesn't throw his father away just because that father hasn't turned out to be Atticus Finch!"

In the early days of their marriage, Nancy raged against Barry's blind devotion. But now, on their way up to Oakland, after twenty years' experience, she knew subtlety worked better to re-focus and re-direct him.

"By the way," Barry asked, "did you ever figure out how the whole dead phone thing works?"

"Sort of. I called the newspaper and spoke to the editor, Martha. She said when you want to call the dead, 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, and 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 try someone else at the next hour."

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

"From her writer who claimed to have independent sources of unimpeachable integrity. Martha said the paper verified. And from them, learned the phone only reaches the other side on certain days during the year. Halloween being one of them."

"Naturally," Barry smirked.

"There's also the winter solstice, the summer solstice, and Groundhog Day if you can believe that. And it wasn't in the article, but Martha 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 spoke to 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 in her own way, but I doubt anything she says one way or another would change matters for us."

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

"Well, my dear, 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?"

Nancy 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."

Sixth Ave in East Oakland looked exactly like you'd expect it too if cliché was your only reference point -- run down and seedy. Iron bars on all the shop windows, bullet holes piercing the walls, graffiti sprayed across every surface -- not to mention intimidating men, young and old, standing in front of the corner liquor store drinking from brown paper bags. Not to mention, all the homeless people pushing shopping carts up and down the street. Or squatting in entryways looking stoned out of their minds.

What stood out, what was very visibly out of place, was the genteel older couple dressed in tweed and fur standing next to the glass phone booth in front of Won Kee Kim's Supermarket. They were waiting for a very large Samoan man, who was

fantastically packed inside the booth, animatedly talking on the phone while simultaneously wiping away big buckets of tears pouring down his cheeks.

"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 while they were 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 with him has eased our pain some. Given us a chance at closure."

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

"No, not yet. We call and he answers, sure, but Jameson has yet to speak with us. We believe he may be blocked in some way. Or, heaven forbid, has a damaged larynx from the accident and is having difficulty speaking audibly. We 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 had it not been so. It's become our life mission in a way."

"Excuse me, but the booth just became available," the genteel husband interrupted, "and it's almost eleven past. Excuse us, but we have an important call to make. You certainly understand."

"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 explainin' nuthin'. Just works is all. Been talking to my dead ma' like she still be with us."

"She spoke to you? So, 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 awhile. But I be talkin' to her like no time gone by. She weren't too happy neither. Still angry 'bout me not visitin' 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 be this bad traffic to the hospital. But she still not happy 'bout it. I try to tell her. And thought she woulda forgiven me by now, but guess not. Ya' excuse me, please, I needs to sit a spell. I don't feel so good."

"Certainly," Barry said rolling back his chair, letting the man go past. "Well, if this isn't the damndest thing I've ever come across."

Barry looked at Nancy, but she'd gone white as a ghost. She was staring at the genteel couple in the booth, blatantly mortified listening to them talk into the phone receiver. Crying, "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 for upsetting you. We shouldn't have said those horrible things when you went on your ski vacation instead of visiting us. You weren't being selfish, really dear. Oh, please won't you say hello?"

"Son," the genteel man said, "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. It's okay, 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 another phone nearby. Some old rotary where no matter what number is dialed, the call goes directly to some singular person. For all we know, this whole production is some kind of experiment in psychology. Or someone's twisted joke. Or both."

"I never thought it was real, Barry," Nancy croaked losing her nerve. "I just thought maybe the whole experience could be cathartic for you. Because your father is still haunting you. Even after *The Accident* and despite him being dead. Ohh, that fucking accident! How long will it ruin our lives? How long till you admit your father was a son of a bitch and an A-class selfish bastard for doing what he did? To your mother and to you your whole life?! I wish you could just see that and tell him to fuck off! And I thought maybe this *THING*," Nancy spat gesturing 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."

"Barry, there's something wrong here. I don't like it! Look at their faces! They look....tortured!"

Barry looked over at the genteel couple standing together in the phone booth. It was late afternoon now, sure, and the hour of the gloaming was fast approaching, but that didn't explain the surreal light disfiguring their faces. They looked tormented. Almost damned. Which reminded Barry of an old black and white movie his father had taken him to see at the Bijou after his mother passed. The movie, *Mephistopheles*, based on a

1946 play written by Klaus Mann, told the story of a married couple sentenced to the Arena of Tainted Souls -- where souls were locked in perpetual combat trying to win the life back 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. Always losing, always tortured. They never won. Young Barry was scared his mother might be in a similar circumstance. She might be in hell right that very moment fighting for her very soul.

And here Barry was watching this genteel couple fighting over who held the receiver to speak with their silent, deceased son. All while standing in a phone booth outside a Korean market in the slums of East Oakland on Halloween. It wasn't hell, but it certainly felt neighborhood adjacent.

What exactly is going on here? Barry wondered.

The older, genteel couple finally exited the booth without a word and walked off in a daze. Which only served to pique Barry's curiosity all the more. He was currently having the most odd sense of déjà vu – like he knew he should listen to Nancy, but felt the pull of compulsion overriding his brain. Like when his father would show up.

"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."

"We're here. And I admit, I'm 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 after a thought occurred to her. She then turned around, walked the few short feet back, leaned down and took Barry's face in her hands -- then kissed him full on the mouth with a great deal of their old passion. Barry was surprised. And pleased. And surprisingly very aroused. "Hurry up, tiger," she purred, "I have a few thoughts of my own you might be curious about when we get home tonight."

Barry smiled watching her walk away. She'd been a good wife and didn't deserve all of this. Maybe he did need to deal with his guilt over his father and move on like she said. It had been awhile.

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. So, 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.

As Barry squared up to the phone, the sinister look he'd seen on the genteel couple's faces flashed across his mind. What if calling on the phone *was* the equivalent to selling one's soul to the arena of tainted souls? His father had tinkered with the occult most his life, even before his mother died, and look what that got him. A world full of trouble leading to his own troubled death. Which had nearly taken Barry's life as well.

The Accident. Oh, that fucking *accident!* Barry cursed. He remembered clearly his father showing up one afternoon, driving a brand new all black Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat. And insisting Barry join him because he'd had an epiphany and figured everything out. He wanted to share it with his son and clear everything up. About his mother. About what had happened that day. Which Barry didn't believe, but the look in his father's eyes gave him hope against his own, and Nancy's, better judgment. So Barry got into

the car that fateful day and let his father drive them off -- away from Nancy and the safety of his home.

What happened next Barry didn't remember. Nancy had to explain after he woke up from his coma. But the gist of it was this: according to the police report, including dozens of witnesses, his father had been speeding down highway one south of Monterey, slaloming in and out of traffic, when he took a too narrow corner, crashed into the guard rails, broke through, and jumped the car off the cliff crashing into the ocean below. Barry's father died on impact. Barry didn't. A Search & Rescue Coast Guard team was training not even a quarter mile away and witnessed the whole thing. And were close enough to initiate a live rescue, which ironically completed their training.

That was twenty years ago, Barry realized. What if I actually died on that day and have been trying to reclaim my soul from the arena of tainted souls ever since? Or what if Nancy comes back to find me staring at nothing like a drooling zombie because Mephisto is torturing me?

"Barry, get a grip," he counseled himself, "It's just a pay phone hoax." But in that moment, Barry realized something. An unexpected epiphany of his own which opened a world of understanding before him. His father didn't love him. Had never loved him. Because his father was a tortured soul himself. But his mother loved him. He should've been holding on to her. And Nancy loved him. Nancy still loved him despite everything. So why was he spending precious time chasing after some futile hope for a father's non-existent love when he should've been embracing the love he did have? Funny how such realizations occur in a single moment, after decades of searching.

At eleven past, Barry picked up the receiver, dropped the dime, and, while controlling his breathing in and out, dialed the number correlating to his father's name. He knew what needed to be done.

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

"Hello?" the voice answered, "Hello? Whose this?"

"Barry," Barry answered.

"Good. I've been waiting. Took you long enough. I don't have much time left and I need your help! There's something you need to know. I should've told you this before I died, but it couldn't be helped. What's important is you finally reached out and called. So listen up."

"No," Barry interrupted. "YOU listen! I don't care if this is fake. Or whether you're pretending to be my dead father or really are my father answering from the other side. I just wanted to tell you I forgive you. I may not understand what compelled you to do the things you did. To my mother or me. I don't care if you ever really even loved me. But I do know I refuse to feel burdened with guilt and will no longer carry your rejections any further. I've decided to forgive you and move past it all. Unburden myself and live MY life free from YOUR guilt. I love you I suppose, in a way, but I'm not going to let you interfere with my life any longer. Whoever you are, wherever you are, I hope you find peace because I'm going to find mine now and live life free of you! While there's still time left. For Nancy and me. So goodbye, Dad. I wish you the best wherever you are."

"Well, boy-yo, that's all well and good -- and it sure was a pretty speech -- but I have a different intent in mind and an entirely different purpose for you. Or at least for your body."

The way the voice spoke, the inflections, along with the graveled timbre, made Barry violently shiver -- if that wasn't his father then whoever it was had perfected a spot on impersonation. And it was scaring the hell out of Barry. He was having the strangest sense of déjà vu -- like the time his father told him to get into the car and drove them away in his black Dodge Charger. Barry all of a sudden remembered, he could see it clearly in his mind -- just before the accident, his father turned to him and smiled. "It's time, son." Then cranked the wheel hard right sending them both flying off the cliff into the darkness below.

"Son, its time. *Mutatio immutatio demuto mutare.*" his father spoke over the phone.

Barry didn't listen. He slammed the phone down hard on the receiver hard and backed out of the booth -- nearly tipping his chair over backwards in the process. He spun and pushed, rolling for all he was worth across the parking lot toward the van. He had to make it! He had to before it was too late! Reach Nancy and safety and his peace of mind. "God help me," Barry prayed, sweating and pushing hard on the wheels. But the van kept slipping away. Nancy slipped away. Everything was slipping away.

Nancy yelped when the passenger door suddenly swung open and Barry climbed in.

"Whoa tiger! You scared the crap out of me just then," she laughed. But then Nancy realized something was different. She couldn't name it yet, but something was out of place. "Barry, are you okay?" she asked. "How did the call with Miriam go?"

"I didn't call Miriam. I dialed my father."

"You did? Did he answer?"

"He did."

"Your father answered? Really and truly he did? It wasn't a hoax?"

Barry just calmly looked at her and smiled. "It wasn't a hoax. Far from it in fact."

"Barry?"

"Yes?"

"Did you just get in the van on your own?"

"Yes."

"You stood up and got in the van on your own. How did you....? You just used your legs without your chair."

"I did."

"But how?"

"All I can tell you, my dear, is I'm a changed man. Really and truly changed. Reborn you might say. And I'm going to take advantage of my time now that I'm back."

Barry smiled at Nancy in the strangest way causing Nancy to flash heavily on an image of his father. It was the way his father smiled whenever he came around. Not Barry's smile, his father's. And it unnerved her.

"Are you....? Is it possible....?" Nancy asked, but couldn't finish. Barry always looked a little like his father, sure, but their smiles never matched. They were different men so naturally their smiles were different in sentiment and care. But this Barry sitting next to her, looking at her, smiling his father's smile at her was....he wasn't Barry....he looked like, but...if he wasn't Barry then....how could he be....if the phone wasn't a hoax, then.....Nancy's hands flew to her mouth and she stifled a scream.

"Are you okay, dear? You seem a bit unsettled," Barry's father smiled. He quite liked being back from the dead -- a gift from his last girlfriend, an occult priestess who had

taught him a few things and promised a second go at life -- if he was willing to make a small blood sacrifice. A relational sacrifice. Barry's father knew just the person.

"If you like, my dear," Barry's father smiled at Nancy, "I know someone we can call over at the phonebooth who can help you if you're feeling uneasy. You know, reach closure. Here, I'll write her number down for you. I'm more than sure she'll answer your call right away." Barry's father laughed as he reached for the keys to the van. "I see it's almost eleven past the hour. Why don't we walk back now and make that call."

The End.