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Burning Bridges As We Go

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6,717 Words

Author's Note: I wanted to write a horror story. And, while casting about for ideas, happened to come across an article talking about a payphone in a Kansas City diner that, for a time, allowed patrons to speak with deceased loved ones. It turned out to be a hoax perpetrated by a couple of high school boys (though the article never specified whether those boys were trying to be helpful or cruel). But the central idea stuck with me – what would happen if you could call a dead loved one from an old payphone?

The Rosewoods Visit the Dead Pay Phone

“Let me tell you, boy-yo,” Barry’s father slurred from his barstool not even a minute after Barry arrived, “Your mother was no picnic. But since this is the anniversary of her death, I think we should raise a glass and make a toast...” Only Barry’s father was too drunk to stand and fell from his stool.

“That’s okay, Pop. That’s enough.” Barry replied. “Nancy and I will drive you home now.”

“This,” Nancy whispered, “from the most difficult man any unlucky woman ever had the misfortune to stumble across. No offense to your mother intended.”

“None taken.” Barry replied. He’d spent years dealing with his father, coming to terms with how challenging the man could truly be, so he understood Nancy’s exasperation.

"Barry?" Nancy asked lowering her section of the paper and gently nudging him with her toe. They were seated on the back deck, reading the paper and enjoying a quiet Sunday together.

"Hmmm?" Barry replied.

"Would you believe you can talk to dead people from a pay phone on South Sixth Street in downtown East Oakland?"

"Really?"

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

"Sure."

"This article says the pay phone is a conduit to the other side." Nancy picked her section of the paper 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."*

"Un-huh."

"I know that place. I've been there! I had a sorority sister from college whose parents lived a few blocks from that store. It was called Won Kee Kim's Supermarket and it had this old style glass phone booth right out front -- like the kind Superman used to change in from the old comic strip. I remember my friend used to check the booth for loose change. We didn't know it could call dead people though."

"That's interesting," Barry replied though he wasn't at the moment. He was finishing an article about The Turn of the Screw and how the author, Henry James, didn't believe his book measured up -- having only written it at his publisher's request to make a buck. Which it had. Which, ironically, Barry related to all too well.

"Barry, are you listening to me?"

"Yes." But he wasn't. Barry was thinking he, like Henry James, had also written several critically acclaimed novels, which he was enormously proud of, but hadn't made him very much money. And then he'd written one meager ghost story -- based off a fictionalized version of *The Accident* -- which his publisher had begged him to write as a way of turning misfortune into opportunity. And, bam, the book caught on, becoming wildly popular. At last check, the book had been re-printed in more than twenty different countries, with the royalties ensuring Barry would never have to work or write again if he didn't want to. But he did, if only to prove that that one story did not define him as a writer -- as it had poor Henry James. "Yes, Nancy," Barry spoke, "I'm listening, my dear. I believe you're reading the tabloids."

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

"What does?"

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

Sundays sitting together on the outdoor patio, shaded by the portico, looking out over the redwoods down to the ocean below, was their time together. Their special time -- drinking coffee, nibbling on crisp bacon, and quietly reading the news together. Barry and Nancy embraced the cozy and intimate closeness of those Sundays and used them to balance their marital disparities. Which could become a true wrecking force if something wasn't done to bring balance. But today, Nancy apparently had something else 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? It could make for an interesting story to write about. Maybe even publish. You're always saying how your publisher has been after you to write a follow up to your ghost story."

"I'm not a sci fi 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. 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 a time you've been having with 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 do what? 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 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 hurt Barry -- physically broke his back, shattered vertebrae and paralyzed his legs. But mentally, it broke something deeper -- causing him to disappear into his own internal reserves for a long time. Till Nancy intervened. Nancy was the person who nursed Barry back to health. Who got him to pick up the pen and paper and write again. Who saved their marriage with love, care, and encouragement till Barry returned to nearly being 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, his father, his father’s death, the Accident that crippled him. Barry still struggled and had yet to accept the deeper truth about his father.

“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 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."

"Oh, I know!" Nancy exclaimed, "How about our old neighbor Miriam? She was nice. And she certainly was quite fond of you! Doting on you every day. Didn't you have a standing invitation for tea and biscuits with her any time you liked? And I believe she was from Ireland. She'd probably 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 call poor, deceased 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? Lurking about? 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, Barry settled into the plush captain's chair of Nancy's deluxe Mercedes-Benz Sprinter and let Nancy pack his wheelchair -- the Medline M10 sport wheelchair he preferred when out and about for its maneuverability -- in the back of van.

"Need any help?" he called back.

"No, I got it," Nancy replied. "Just have to move 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 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 -- which sounded just right for the occasion.

"And away we go like a herd of buffalo," Nancy chimed backing the van 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 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'd warned him about his father's drunken, risky behavior and how it 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 weeks, 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, but 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 editor?"

"He was having troubles and needed my help."

"You mean he was in debt from heaven knows what to heaven knows who 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 nine, his mother killed herself in front of his father. Or so his father claimed. Just walked into the living room after an argument over the bender his father was on and put the barrel of the gun in her own mouth – even though it must’ve been hot and painful – before pulling the trigger. At least, that’s what Barry’s father reported to the police after he’d cleaned himself off, unloaded and cleaned the gun, and requested his mother’s body be taken away.

“Your mother killed herself, son,” Barry’s father told him that afternoon when Barry returned home from school. *“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 came from. There will be no funeral and just a small service at the church this Saturday. No further fuss will be made about it. Men don’t cry, you understand? If you have to cry, then go to your bedroom. I don’t want to see it. If you like, you can draw her a goodbye picture to include in the urn.”*

“What about dinner?” Barry asked. He loved his mother. And his favorite thing had always been afternoons spent in her kitchen after school preparing the evening meals. “Will Mom be here to cook dinner?”

“Dinner? 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!” his father spat. *“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 spoken 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.

“A good son,” Barry argued, “doesn’t throw his father away just because that father isn’t Atticus Finch!”

In the early days of their marriage, Nancy could've murdered Barry for such blind stubbornness.

"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 reaches 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 that Barry recognized as a warning.

“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.”

South Sixth 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, bullet holes piercing the walls, graffiti sprayed across every surface, intimidating young men standing in front of the corner 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. Currently, a very large Samoan man was fantastically packed inside 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 and truly tragic 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 with him 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 believe he may be blocked in some way. Or, heaven forbid, has a damaged larynx 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 if it had not been so. It’s become our life mission.”

“Excuse me, but the booth just became available,” the genteel husband interrupted, “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 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.”

"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 ten year now. But I be talkin' to her like no time gone by. She weren't too happy either. 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 toll him she sick, and then there was 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 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 in the booth, blatantly mortified 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. 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 that person's strange way of trying to help people deal with the loss of a loved one. 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. Because your father is still haunting you. Even after *The Accident* and despite him being dead. Ohh, that fucking accident! How long will it dictate 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 you and your mother 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. I didn't know."

"Barry, there's something wrong here. 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 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 after his mother passed. 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 so they could win back their soul. Only they never won. Young Barry was scared his mother might be in a similar circumstance. She might be in

hell fighting for her very soul because Father Moynihan, who had presided over his mother's short service, said suicide was a sin that condemned a person to hell.

And here Barry was watching a 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 was going on here? Barry wondered.

Fifteen minutes later, the genteel couple exited the booth without a further word and walked off looking uncomfortably dazed. Which only served to pique Barry's interest all the more. He was currently having the most uncomfortable sense of déjà vu – the same he felt whenever his father rolled into town looking for Barry to join him on one of his "adventures." And Barry, despite his mixture of guilt, dread, and anger, felt compelled go. He felt the same about this phone booth and wanted to give it a go even though Nancy didn't.

It wasn't the first time Barry had defied Nancy's advice, especially where it pertained to his father. He knew almost from the start he should've rejected his father's company, but such sense never prevented him from leaving whenever his father came around. "I love you," is all he could say to Nancy during those times, seeing the worried and broken look she wore whenever he left with his father. "He's my Dad," was all Barry could say. So why did this phone booth feel so eerily 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 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! And I love you more than anything!" Then she walked away.

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.

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* the equivalent to selling his soul and sentencing himself to the arena of tainted souls? His father had tinkered with the occult for most his life, 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 admitted, had been his father's intention.

The Accident. Oh, that fucking *accident!* Barry's father arrived tipsy one afternoon, as he was prone to, driving a brand new all black Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat and wanted Barry to join him. He'd had an epiphany and figured everything out, he'd said. He wanted to share it with his son and clear everything up. Barry said no, but the look in his father's eyes actually gave him a glimmer of hope his father might actually explain the truth about his mother's death. So he got into the car and let his father drive them off -- away from Nancy and the safety of his home.

What happened next Barry didn't remember very well. Nancy explained most of the after when Barry woke up from his coma. According to the police and dozens of witnesses, his father had been speeding recklessly down the Pacific Coast highway south of Monterey where the stark, upright cliffs towered overhead on one side and sheer one hundred foot cliffs down to the ocean dropped on the other. The Dodge slalomed through the two lane roadway in excess of ninety miles an hour, narrowly passing cars till, as they approached Bixby Bridge just south of Big Sur, took a sharp turn and veered straight off the cliff, taking flight and then plummeting to the ocean below. The police attributed the accident to the driver's alcohol intoxication and loss of control. The driver, Barry's father, died on impact. Barry lived, but only because a Coast Guard Cutter Search & Rescue team was less than a half mile away in training and actually witnessed the whole thing. Close enough to perform a live rescue and complete their training.

That was twenty three years ago tomorrow, Barry realized. What if I actually died on that day and this has all been my experience trying to reclaim my soul from the arena of tainted souls?

Or what if Nancy comes back to find me staring at nothing like a drooling zombie because Mephisto has begun 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. A world opened up before him in understanding. He finally knew what to do. About his father. About himself. About Nancy. Funny how such realizations occur in a single moment after decades of trying to find the answer to that very same question. *What would my life have been if my father hadn’t killed my mother and lied about it all those many years ago?*

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. 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 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 any longer. And believe it or not, but I’ve decided to forgive you for everything and move past it all. Unburden myself and live

MY life free of YOUR guilt. I love you I suppose, 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 he was back in that Dodge Charger minutes before the accident when his father turned, smiled at him, cranked the wheel and sent them both flying off the cliff into the darkness below.

"Son, its time."

Barry didn't listen. He slammed the phone down on the receiver and backed out of the booth quickly -- nearly tipping his chair over backwards and crashing to the pavement. He spun his chair and started pushing the wheels, rolling for all he was worth across the parking lot. He had to reach the van. Reach Nancy and the safety of the van and his peace of mind. Only he couldn't. "God help me," Barry prayed, sweating and pushing hard on the wheels. Up ahead, he could see Nancy sitting in the driver's seat waiting for him, but he couldn't reach her. The van kept moving further and further away. Not closer. Further. Like a long tunnel. He was losing ground and, for the life of him, couldn't make it up.

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 noticed something was wrong. She could sense it. She couldn’t tell exactly what it was, but she could see something was different. Something out of place with Barry. “Barry, are you okay?” she worried. “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? You’re sure it wasn’t a hoax?”

Barry just calmly looked at her and smiled. “No, it wasn’t a hoax. Far from it in fact.”

“Barry?”

“Yes?”

“Did you just get in the van on your own?”

“Yes.”

“How did you....? You just got into the van using 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.” Barry smiled again at Nancy. But this time Nancy flashed heavily on the image of Barry’s father – smiling the way he smiled whenever he was truly drunk and trying to be rakish. 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....he seemed to be...if he was then....how could he be....if the phone wasn't a hoax, then.....Nancy's hands flew to her mouth and she screamed.

"Are you okay dear? You seem a bit unsettled," Barry smiled. "If you like, I know someone we can call from the phonebooth who can help you with that." Barry laughed reaching for the keys. "It'll be eleven past in about ten minutes."

The End.