



# Telephones

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## Telephones

You couldn't convince the living of a bloody thing.

Mike knew that first hand now, and he knew it second hand. How many times had he picked up a phone, in how many towns, at how many different times and it had been the same response from the other end?

'Hello, who is that? I'll call the police if you don't stop this. I mean it. Pervert! Do you get off on this?'

And no matter how many times he'd protested, made his apologies, Diane still couldn't understand him. Or maybe couldn't hear, or maybe didn't want to hear, that was what worried him the most.

Maybe she *does* know? Maybe she's hearing every word and doesn't want to admit that I'm still here.

*Pfft!* Wishful thinking.

You think Diane wants to admit that her loving husband hasn't just run away with some other woman but he's come back from the dead?

No, he wouldn't blame Diane.

But he could blame the telephone companies. There had to be something wrong in the wiring, or the exchanges, or all that tangle of technology that allowed a voice to travel from mouth to ear across the country.

There was no other explanation. He could hear his voice, sure he could. And he'd tested the ears of a couple of stray cats and they weren't deaf to any of his cries.

So why did telephones have to be so stubborn?

And it wasn't as if he had any other options, no. Two hundred miles separated them, but when you were dead and could only travel at night, that two hundred miles was as close as the surface of the sun. He was finding out a lot of things about being dead; travelling wasn't easy, for one. For some reason daylight brought

on a kind of paralysis. He was no use in the daytime.

Cars were no better.

Why, whenever he managed to find one had it stalled as soon as he sat inside? If he'd had a car then the journey would have been a few hours instead of weeks.

Telephones, cars, computers, the dead didn't have much to help them in the way of convenience. No, the dead were discriminated against in this modern world. If you were dead then there was little point in going on.

Didn't stop him from trying.

Fifty miles away in some forgotten seaside town where the tide was always out, he walked an empty pier in the rain and found a working public phone.

This time, he told himself, it's going to be different. This time she's going to hear me.

He popped in some change.

Funny, how the dead couldn't be heard on these phones, but it didn't discriminate when it came to taking his money.

He punched in Diane's number, held the phone to his rotting ear and began.

'Now, don't be worried, Diane, this is Mike. I'm not dead, well, I am dead, but I'm still alive... at least I think it's alive. And I'm in... '

He searched the empty pier.

Where was he anyway?

He'd walked in and out of so many towns by now that they blurred into one singular place. One night spread over many nights.

'I'm in some town, I don't know where, but I'm coming home. I'm coming home, Diane.'

'Listen,' she said, 'I have the police here now. They're recording this you bloody pervert!'

'Diane, please. This is Mike. Please, can't you hear me? Don't you understand me? Just listen will you, will you please—'

‘That's it. They know where you are, you know. They're going to catch you and then you'll see not to mess with me.’

‘But Diane, please if you'll just open your—’

‘Pervert!’

The phone died.

Mike held it in his hands as though it was stunned bird and might come back to life at any moment.

Nope. Nothing. Just that awful silence.

For six weeks he'd been patient. Six weeks he'd trudged through the night and waited it out in the day. And for six weeks he'd managed to put every phone back in its cradle and walk away.

Not anymore.

Mike drew his hand back and slammed the receiver into the side of the phone booth.

The window shattered.

It wasn't over yet.

Six weeks of frustration, six weeks of living when he shouldn't have, had brought Mike to this point, this line over which he gladly jumped.

He ripped the phone from its chord and threw it over his shoulder.

'Bloody phone,' he said as he stuck his boot into the side of the booth. 'One call, that's all I asked for, just one bloody clear connection.' He kicked the rest of the glass from the booth. 'Just one. But no. No, you can't just let me have that one thing. Can't let me get through to her. Well no more. No more do you hear me?'

And then he went about bringing the phone booth to the ground.

He kicked, he punched, until the phone booth was only a memory. all that was left was the technological entrails that powered this foe. The booth shattered, ripped and scattered.

He stood back, fists balled and bloody, no breath in his breathless body.

'That'll show you,' he said.



'Nope,' the man said from behind him.

Mike faced the owner of the voice.

He was a man so at ease in the rain that Mike thought he might have actually come down with the rainfall.

He leaned against the pier railing like a nineteen-forties Spiv ready to make a deal.

'Listen, friend,' the man said, 'you can go ten rounds with every booth from here to the end of the world, won't do you no good.'

And the man wasn't afraid either.

Not in the least. Now that was something new. The few living people Mike had come across had run before they'd talked, screamed before they asked a question.

'Who are you?' Mike said.

'Maybe I'm a man who can help you. Maybe I'm the one man in this whole country who knows what a threat a phone is.'

'Oh, you are, are you?' Mike said, balling his fists again.

The man waved Mike's question away like he was shooin' a fly.

'That I am, and you can put those fists away, won't do you no good. Hurt me and you'll never know how to get heard.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean,' the man said. 'The dead are everywhere trying to place calls. You ever walked through a town, a city late at night and seen those phone boxes broken apart. Every wondered why there are so many?'

'Well,' Mike said.

'Wonder no more,' the man said, 'it isn't teenagers or angry drunks that go around smashing up phone booths for the hell of it. It's the dead trying to make contact. Dead like you, friend.'

'Who's to say I'm dead?' Mike said.

The man pushed himself away from the pier edge and walked a circle around Mike.

'Smell that way, look that way, and I seen enough dead trashing phone booths late at night to know what I'm looking at, believe me.' He

came up close and prodded Mike in the middle of the forehead. 'And you friend, are most certainly dead.'

Mike pushed the prodding finger away.

'Okay, so I'm dead. That doesn't mean—'

'Means this, friend. I can help you. I can place that call for you. I'm your exchange service right here.' The man tapped his damp chest.

Could this be real? He didn't dare believe that after these six weeks he would just happen upon an answer in the rain at the end of a lonely pier.

But maybe?

'How?' Mike said.

'How is a good enough question all right, but maybe just doing is enough, right? I wonder if you've asked yourself the same, eh?'

'The same?'

'Well here you are, middle of a very rainy night in this little out of the way town, and

you're dead. Not thought on how that came to be have you?'

'Sure, yeah, I mean... '

'No, most dead folks don't ask that question until it's too late to answer. They stumble around for the most part desperate to reach back into that world they left behind. And then when that's out the window they start to wondering about how it came to be that they're alive and yet dead.'

'What has this go to do with—'

'Everything.' The man tapped his way through a puddle and came up on the other side of Mike. 'Everything, friend. Let's say you make that call, let's say you get through and she understands every last syllable, what happens then?'

'Well... ' Mike said, and the man was right. He hadn't thought that far.

If Diane saw him, if she knew he was dead there was only one way for her to react, wasn't there? It wasn't like she'd welcome him with open arms and an open bed, was it?

But he still had to make that call, still had to reach out just like the man had said.

'I'll tell you what will happen, you'll throw that other half of yours into a world of pain, that's what. You ever wonder what it's like getting a call from a dead man? It isn't the most fun.'

'So why are you willing to—'

The man tapped his way through another puddle, then came out in front of Mike.

'Well I'm here to take you over,' the man said and bowed, 'to the other side.'

'The other side?'

The man stuck his face into the rain.

'Up for you, which is good. But you can't cross over until you make that call, for good or bad.'

Mike looked up into the rain, following the man's gaze.

Heaven? Was he really talking about heaven?

He faced the man.

'But I don't believe in—'

'Yeah, and dead men don't trash phone booths in the middle of rainy nights. Doesn't matter if you believe or not. You're going up, sonny boy. One way ticket into the clouds, but not just yet.'

Mike strained to see the man's face through the rain.

But every which way the man turned that face was always in shadow, always out of sight.

'What are you?' Mike said.

'Told you earlier. I connect the calls, I'm better than any telephone exchange there has, or ever will be. That's how I am.'

'So you're what? An Angel?'

The man pointed over his shoulder. 'See any wings?'

'No.'

'Then I'm no angel. But I am here to take you over, and we better get down to that right away.'

The man offered a crooked arm.

Mike stared.

'Well?' the man said. 'You can run around this world, beat up as many telephones as you want, but you won't ever be able to talk to her again if you don't come with me now.'

'And if I don't come?'

'Then soon enough you'll wither away to nothing but your spirit, and believe me, you don't want to haunt this world when you can't touch, taste or use your senses. That's worse than any hell I could imagine.'

Heaven and hell, curious, he'd never thought of either. The damn telephones had monopolized his time since he'd died.

And now?

Could he believe in any of this? About the frustrated dead beating up phone booths in the middle of the night? About a man in the rain who promised everything he wanted, and yet warned him away at the same time?

'I can talk to her, you promise?'

'If that's what it takes. But I'll warn you now, talking sometimes isn't the best in this situation. Talking might be the last thing you'd want to do.'

'No, it's the first thing,' Mike said.

And the man offered his crooked arm again.

'If that's the way it has to be, then that's the way it has to be. Let's go.'

Mike took the arm in his.

And they went.

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'There's one,' the man who was not an angel said, 'still uncooked, not yet seen the wraith of the recent dead.'

He dragged Mike across a road with no cars to an empty street and an empty phone booth.

'Here you are, the last call, long distance as it were.' He offered the phone booth with a waiter's gesture.

'What do I do?' Mike said.



The man brought out a silver coin from his pocket and flipped it through his fingers like the best magician.

'As you would with any phone, deposit a coin, tap in your number, connect.' He tossed the coin to Mike.

Mike caught the coin and turned it in the scant light from the street lamps.

Nothing too unusual. There was the queen in profile as he had seen so many times before. Just a coin, just a phone booth. But he knew now that wasn't anywhere near the truth.

He was dead, the world changed when a man had lost his life but still kept hold of the body.

'So I just put it in, make the call, yes?' he said.

The man leaned against the side of the phone booth.

'That's about it, yes.'

'Nothing else? She'll hear me, there won't be any confusion?'

The man looked at his fingernails. 'Now I didn't say that, did I?'

'Well, what is it? Confusion or no?'

'I'm sure there'll be some confusion. You're dead after all, people don't take kindly to being called by the dead late at night.'

Mike smiled.

'She doesn't know I'm dead.'

'She doesn't?'

'At least I think she doesn't. I'm sure she thinks I ran away with a woman. Yes, sure of it.'

'Then you have nothing to fear,' the man said and hinted there was everything to fear.

'Okay, okay. What could possibly go wrong here? What do you think will happen?'

'The worst?'

'I suppose so.'

'Well, it's like this. Maybe she thinks you are dead and you place that call. And then this love of yours she finds some hope that you're still alive.'

'And that's bad, how?'

'Because then she'll tie you to this world for sure. It'll be a long time before you can cross over if she's still holding on.'

'That's the very worst?'

'You don't know how bad that can be, friend. You're body is fine now, but a week from now, a week after that there won't be much left. You really want to hang around in that kind of state?'

Mike checked his hands, which were tattered and worn like old gloves.

The rest of his body wasn't fairing too well either.

But he'd spent so long trying to talk to Diane, how could he pass up the opportunity now? Just to hear her voice one last time, for her to hear him.

He walked toward the booth.

The man grabbed at him and pulled him away.

'You're sure now? You make that call, she gets some hope and that's it for you. You ever see a man who's not all there before?'

'Can't say I have.'

'You'll be looking at one in every mirror you pass if this goes wrong.'

Mike broke away.

He dropped his money in the slot, picked up the receiver and dialed the number.

'Well, don't say I didn't warn you,' the man said.

'I won't,' Mike said, turning his back to the man.

So what if he had to roam this world as walking compost? It wasn't like he had any pain left, and it was worth it. He had to talk to Diane. Had to hear her voice, make sure that—

'Hello?'

Mike placed the phone to his ear.

'Who is that?' he said to the man at the other end.

'Who are you?'

'I want to speak to Diane,' Mike said.

'Diane's busy, and I'm not getting her to the phone for anyone. Who are you?'

The man sounded comfortable.

At home.

In my home?

'Who are you?' Mike said.

'I'm Diane's boyfriend, now who are—'

Mike dropped the phone.

Six weeks, only six weeks and she'd swapped him for someone else. How could this be? Didn't she care? Wasn't she worried?

From the dangling receiver.

'Hello? Who is that? Are you still there?'

But Mike wasn't there, he was here, soon to be someplace altogether different.

The man who was not an angel asked; 'Bad?'

Mike nodded.

'She wasn't on the phone, right?'

'Right,' Mike said.

'Someone new?'

Mike nodded.

'Ahh, thought so. That's usually what happens.'

'It is?'

The man nodded, he leaned in and put an arm around Mike's shoulder.

'Don't you worry none. Telephone's are like that.'

'They are?'

'Sure. When a phone rings in the middle of the night it's never good news, no matter which end you're on.'

Mike nodded.

The man who was not an angel was right. What else should he have expected?

Well, he hadn't expected any of this.

'Ready?' the man who was not an angel said.

Mike looked at the empty streets, the empty booth.

'Not quite,' he said.

'No?'

'One last thing to do.'

He couldn't go back, and there was nowhere else to go but beyond this world. But there was one last act he could perform.

He rushed at the phone booth.

He didn't stop kicking and punching until there was nothing left.

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