

Reach Out and Touch Someone

It must have been a dream, because his Mum was there. Had been such a long time since he'd seen her. The auburn hair, set in impeccable curls the way she liked it. The coral lipstick that she'd taken to wearing in the last year of her life. She sat there, at Ed's farmhouse kitchen table, the one he'd built himself, out of his own hands, pressing her knees together beneath a gingham dress. Waiting for her tea.

He slowly filled the two little tea cups, which had been his mother's first and before that, his grandmother's, which he'd pass on to the kids someday. The girls, probably, because they were always fighting about his things, talking about what would be done with them when he died. It made him want to say the hell with it, to toss them all out. But Genie said it was normal for them to have a more ruthless view of his mortality than he did. Meant that the kids were well-adjusted, that they accepted death as an ordinary part of their lives.

Was it, though? Was it really?

He brought both of the cups and saucers to the table, handed one to his Mum. He knew she wouldn't drink it. Couldn't. On account of being dead and everything. But he had to go through the pantomime, didn't he? If he let on that he knew she was dead - if he let *her* know that she was dead - then she would vanish, or maybe rot away to nothing. He wasn't sure how he knew the rules of the game, but he did. He sat down with her, drinking his own tea. Studying the lines on her face. She was, he realized, just about the same age as him now, and looked older than she did in his ordinary memories. Some tucked away corner of his mind had memorized the crow's feet, the mole under her jawline, the tooth up front that had a stain on it. These weren't

flaws, mind you. Only particular details.

“Where’s Billy?” she asked. “I thought he might be here.”

Ed faked a smile. “Couldn’t make it today,” he said. “Sends his regards.”

“Oh, I do miss him,” she said vaguely. Her eyes darted around like she thought she might find him in some corner somewhere. Ed just drank, didn’t say anything. The truth was, Billy had been in and out of hospital for the last three years, and though Ed had tried to help him here and there when he could, buying him a flat, a car, getting him a job on the road with him, he’d took to the bottle the same way their old man had, had dark moods, talked about offing himself. Often. Still. His Mum didn’t need to know that.

She made a *hmm* noise. Reached out her hand, and almost, but not quite, touched his. He knew she wanted to. Knew she couldn’t. Because, y’know, she was dead.

“Poor sweet Ed,” she said softly. He looked at her, lifting his eyebrows.

“You mean Billy?” he asked. His mom blinked at him, addled, maybe.

“My poor sweet Ed,” she said again, in exactly the same sort of tone. “You won’t have an easy time of it soon.”

He looked at her. Frowning. Put down his tea cup.

“What do you mean?” he asked. She sighed. Tucked that pretty hand under her chin. He noticed the silver bracelet on her wrist. Wondered what had become of it. Whether she’d been buried with it, or if his Dad had sold it with the rest of her jewelry. Probably the latter. Money was so tight then.

“Don’t fret, darling. I’ll watch over him. And he won’t be gone long.”

“Billy?” he asked again. But then there was a screaming. It seemed to come from somewhere *inside* his Mum’s body. Shrill and tearing. Ed put his hands over his ears.

And then found himself upstairs in his bed, in the dark, the phone ringing. He bolted upright. As always, Genie slept right through it. The Wallers used to joke that she slept through the bombings, too. Even Matthew, in his little pile of blankets on the floor, barely stirred. Ed’s heart was beating wildly. The telephone rang again. He picked it up. Was barely able to choke out, “Hullo?”

“I’d like to speak to Alonzo Kittycat,” a familiar voice purred in return. Ed swallowed, hard. Laughed roughly.

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“Yeah, okay,” he said. Putting the receiver back in its cradle. Getting up. Heading downstairs.

Baron. It was only Baron.

He didn't go want to go to the kitchen this time. Too many ghosts. Instead, he thought, he'd go to the basement, which was also a den and a recording studio and an office - whatever he needed it to be, really. Dressed only in his shorts and a worn out t-shirt from the last tour. It was July, and too hot upstairs, without air conditioning, but cool down in the bowels of the farmhouse, down below. On his way, he stopped and fished a pack of ciggies and some matches out of the decorative shell by the front door where Genie hid them, thinking he didn't know. Shook out a fag, lit it, brought it downstairs with him. Didn't smoke often, but needed one tonight. Christ. After that dream, of course he did.

When he reached the basement, he closed the door behind him. Stood smoking at the top of the stairs for a moment, then headed down. Smelled mossy down there, as it always did. Bad for the instruments, the memorabilia, but not much could be done about that, the workers had said, unless they tore down the walls and “mediated the water infiltration problem,” whatever that meant. So he was stuck with it. Not that it mattered to him, not really. For the most part, they were only things. He went to the sound board. Sat down behind it. Got out the phone and dialed Baron, surprising himself that he'd managed to memorize the number since last time. Not that they'd spoken. But he'd looked at it a few times, contemplating calling him. Funny, how certain things, sometimes, get lodged in one's brain.

It rang twice. Someone picked it up.

“Alonzo here,” Ed said, sitting back in his chair. Smoking. There was a small, wry chuckle on the other end.

“Atta puss,” Baron said. “I was dreaming about you, you know. Were you dreaming about me?”

Ed sucked at the fag. “Don't think so,” he said, trying to ignore how the very mention of *dreaming* made him feel a bit queasy and miserable. Didn't want to think about that dream. Willed it away. “What were we doing?”

“Each other,” Baron said, and Ed had to laugh at that. There was no beating

around the bush with him, was there?

“Ah,” Ed said. No ash tray down here. He rolled his chair over to the wet bar in the corner, grabbed himself a tumbler, ashed into that instead. “Thought you might be calling for more babycare advice.”

“Well, Mr. Spock-”

“I think you mean Dr. Spock.”

“The wife and offspring are away right now. Left me all by my lonesome. And so I’m feeling lonesome.”

“Nobody in New York you could call?” Ed asked carefully. Not really sure *why* he was asking. Except there was a part of him that wanted to know, always, what Baron was up to.

Who he was up to. And all that.

“Oh, sure, there are friends. A lad named David I’ve been spending time with. British. A musician, actually. A blond. Like you.”

Ed sucked at that cigarette, taking a long draw. Rolling his eyes a little. Wasn’t that just like Baron, to hint he was screwing Bowie? Maybe trying to make him jealous, a bit. Ed felt too old for that sort of game.

“If you mean who I’m thinking,” Ed told him. He snubbed out the cigarette in the glass. “Then he’s got a cute arse at least.”

“Bit small, actually,” said Baron. “Yours is sweeter.”

Christ. He was all alone down there. Blushing like a child.

“Christ,” said Ed. “You know I’m payin’ for this phone call.”

“Might as well get your money’s worth, then,” Baron told him. “What are you wearin’?”

Ed glanced down at himself. Contemplated lying. Decided against it. “T-shirt. Shorts.”

“Gorgeous,” Baron said, then there was a pause, long and sticky, and he added, “You should take ‘em off.”

Ed let out a puff of laughter. But Baron’s voice was dry, stern in response. “Not a suggestion, Ed,” he said. “I’ll know if you haven’t.”

“Um,” Ed said. He glanced at the closed door at the top of the stairs. Then he set the phone down on the sound board, stood, and peeled off his clothes. Dumped them in a pile on the floor, like some kind of slob. Sat back down.

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When he picked up the phone again, Baron's breathing was heavy on the other side.

"Are you hard?" Baron asked. Ed looked down again, even though he didn't really have to.

"Yes," Ed said, his own voice coming out husky and muddled. "Hard."

"Good," Baron said. "I am, too."

"What are *you* wearing?" Ed asked. His hand drifting down. He began, idly, to stroke himself.

"Just a robe, as they call them here in the states," said Baron, his voice wry. "Ed, are you bein' naughty? Are you touching yourself?"

He was. Stroking slowly, his voice smaller now. "Yes," he said.

"Didn't tell you to do that, yet," said Baron. "It's not time yet, love."

Ed didn't want to listen, but he let himself go. Letting out a strangled little gasp when he did. His balls were almost aching. Hadn't even realized that he was so randy. Though if he thought about it, it had been a long, long while. Genie wasn't in the mood lately. Didn't want another baby, hated using rubbers or the pill. And Ed had never wanked much. Usually didn't need to. But maybe he should have been making a more regular habit of it. Fuck, it ached.

"Okay, Barry," Ed said in a quivering voice. Feeling himself, balls and cock and all of him, throb uselessly for a second. Christ, almost felt like he could come without touching himself at all.

"If I were there . . ." Baron said slowly. There was a smile in his voice. Ed heard a crackly sort of sound. Baron moving his hand down his own chest, maybe. Lower.

"You'd what?" Ed demanded. Desperate to know. Among other things.

"Oh, you know . . ." Baron began, the smile in his voice turning into a full-on wicked grin. "I think I'd take that delicious cock of yours and suck it nearly dry. Then right before you blew your load, I'd let you fuck me. As hard and as long as you wanted."

"Wouldn't take long, actually," Ed said. He was really throbbing. Wanting to touch himself *so* badly. Refusing to allow himself yet. Though on the other end, he heard Baron's breath getting faster, heavier. The rhythmic sound of

him stroking himself, too.

“How’s it sound?” Baron asked. Ed chewed on his lip.

“Yeah, it’s alright,” Ed said coarsely. Laughing a bit. “Wouldn’t mind that.”

“No, no,” Baron said. “Of course you wouldn’t. Always loved my arse, didn’t you?”

What was the use in denying it? He had. Sometimes made him feel funny, sometimes he’d worried it wasn’t quite clean, but . . . well, if he had regrets in this world among them were the number of times he *hadn’t* stuck it in Baron. Should have done it more. You only live once, after all.

“Yeh,” Ed said, squeaking a bit. Gasping.

“Say it,” Baron said.

“I love your arse, Barry.”

“More,” Baron said. Ed swallowed. Throbbled.

“I love your tight little arse,” he said. “An’ I love putting my cock inside it.”

Baron let out a long, low moan.

“I’m touchin’ it, Ed,” he panted into the phone. “My arsehole. Can you tell?”

“Yes . . .” Ed said, almost gurgling. Still not touching himself, though his cock was bobbing in the empty air, threatening to resolve the problem without any touching at all.

“Do you want to touch yourself, Ed?” Baron asked. Ed moaned.

“Yes, yes,” he said. Desperately.

“Then I want you to beg me for it.”

Ed winced. “Please, Baron, let me touch myself.”

“More,” Baron commanded, his own words coming shorter now, more grunted.

“Please, Baron,” Ed whined. “Oh God, please let me. My balls are achin’. Please let me cum. *Please.*”

“That’s better,” Baron said. “Go ahead, love. Touch yourself for me. Let me hear you cum.”

And so Ed did. Stroking it fast, furiously, and it took almost no time at all before he was writhing in that chair, semen spilling over his own belly and hand and cock and balls. His toes curling, his back arched, and he let out a long, strangled moan and on the other end, he heard Baron cry out too.

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Cumming at the same time, in different time zones, across a vast, vast sea.

It took a moment for Ed to unarch his back, for his toes to stop twitching. Laughing and laughing to himself when, at last, he returned to his body.

On the other end, Baron was chuckling, too. “Fuck, Hammy,” he said. “I made a mess. Think I hit the ceiling with that. An’ they’re high ceilings.”

Ed looked at his own sticky hand and body, laughing even more. “Same. Christ. Where are the tissues? Hold on a minute, love.”

He put down the phone. Went into the basement bathroom, tucked away in the corner, to clean himself off. Rinsing himself with a little hand soap and warm water, drying himself out. Using a piece of toilet paper to squeeze out one last drop, moaning a little at the sensation. Fuck, he hadn’t expected that. To cum so hard.

He picked up his shorts from the ground, pulled them on. Sat back down, tucking the phone beneath his chin.

“I miss you,” is what he said, by way of greeting, not even stopping to think about whether it was a good idea. “You old fruit. When are you coming back home?”

“New York is home now,” Baron said. Ed could hear how he was smoking a cigarette on the other end, exhaling. “But it’s bound to happen eventually. Not soon, though. Taking me trip to Trinidad first. Next week, actually.”

“Oh?” Ed said, sitting forward in his seat. Trying not to sound concerned. Baron had been talking about this trip for awhile in his letters, writing about how he was going out to find his dad. Ed thought it sounded like a terrible idea, but when has he ever been able to convince Barry of anything?

“Yeah, that’s why Alana and Naomi are away. Staying with friends, the two of them. While I’m out of town.”

“They didn’t want to come with you?”

“No,” Baron said. “Alana’s done with Peter X.”

Ed wasn’t sure what to say about that. Wanted to say, *Well, maybe you should be done, too*. But didn’t. Knew it would have made no difference. How long had Baron kept Dickie Ashby around, even inviting him to visit them on tour in the states? No one could convince Baron Templeton to make a wise choice. Certainly not Ed.

“Anyway, will only be out there a few weeks. But I wanted to tell you. I sent you a package.”

“Yeah?”

“Me guitar, the Ricky. For safekeeping. In case something happens. Alana can have the rest of them. But I want you to have that one.”

“What’s gonna happen, Barry?” Ed asked, frowning. There seemed to be something grim to him in the idea of Baron without that old guitar, his very first electric.

“Nothing, probably. I’ll be fine. I’ll be home in a few weeks. Then you can mail it back. I’ll pay, if you’re too cheap for it.”

“No, it’s fine,” Ed said. Chuckling to himself, noiselessly. They were both loaded. What a thing to worry about.

“Maybe you can take a look at it while you have it. One of the pick-ups is dead. Tried to fix it but I’m crap with a soldering iron. Just burned me’self.”

“You need to be careful, love,” Ed said. “Or at least hire a professional. Got me old bass appraised a few years ago. You know what that’s worth? Good lot more than a car or even a house. You forget we’re famous, Barry.”

Baron sucked at his cigarette.

“Don’t care,” he said. “Don’t want anyone besides me or you messing around with it. Alright? It’s special. Good ol’ Ed.”

Ed smiled a little, toward the darkness of the room beyond the glass.

“Still can’t believe you told the press you called it that.”

“No harm. They thought it was a joke.”

“Wasn’t, though.”

“No,” Baron agreed. Ed sighed. Squinting into the darkness. His own instruments were there, hung up on the walls.

“Y’know, it’s funny. There’s something I never told you.”

“What’s that?”

“Y’know the Supro? The first one, not the second one that the company sent. The one I bought in Hamburg.”

“Yeah,” Baron said. “What of it? Always thought you should have stolen something a little cooler. A Framus, maybe.”

“I was a Boy Scout, Barry. Framus was too rich for me, and I didn’t want to

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nick my instrument. Saved up for the Supro fair and square.”

“Sure, sure,” Baron said. “Well, what of it?”

“Well,” Ed drew in a breath. He’d never admitted this to Baron before, had carried it around in his pocket like a secret for all of these years. “In my head, I always thought of it as Baron. Y’know, after you.”

A pause. Long and full. Finally, Baron let out a pleased little sound. “Edmund,” he said. “How very queer of you.”

“Yeh, well,” Eddie said, shrugging. “Guess it is. But I figured, you had a guitar named after me. So. I thought I’d return the favor.”

“You sweet, sweet boy,” Baron said. Ed smiled a bit. Sighing.

“I was, wasn’t I?”

“Yeh,” said Baron. “Still are.”

Ed sat back in his chair for a moment, pleased. But then his gaze fell on the digital clock on the shelf in the corner. Square red numbers saying it was nearly six. Not long, now, before the kids were up, before the animals would need feeding.

“It’s late here, Baron. Or early. I should go.”

There was a pause. When Baron answered, his tone sounded a little sour. “Sorry to keep you, love, from your real life.”

“Oh, no . . .” Ed said. He sat forward. “Baron, you’ve got to know. What happens between you and me? That’s the real stuff. The rest of my days are just static.”

“Hmm,” Baron said.

“What?” Ed asked.

“Sounds like a song. You should put it in one.”

Ed smiled. Chewed on his lip. “Right. Think I will. Been awhile since we wrote one together.”

“You’ll play it for me when you’re all done?” Baron asked.

“Course.”

“Good. I’d like to hear it. G’night, love. Or morning, I suppose.”

“Night, Barry,” Ed said. “Sleep tight.”

Hard, to hang up. But had to be done. So Ed did it fast.

Was only later, when he was making the kids breakfast, that he realized he’d

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forgotten to tell Baron he loved him, in those exact words. Well, no matter, he told himself, flipping over the eggs. He'd talk to him again soon enough.