

A Simple Phone Call

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ROOM

Esme sat and stared at the motel room wall. It was blank except for two long cracks in the thick lead based paint. Esme yawned, the force of it causing her entire body to tremble. Her feet were propped up on an imitation oak coffee table and her arms were slung over the arms of the badly upholstered couch as the currents of time slipped over and passed her body.

She realized if she stared at the cracks in the wall long enough they started to form the outline of Richard Nixon.

With some difficulty she brought herself back to life. She raised her arms over her head, stretched, and then brought them down to rub the crud out of her eyes. She struggled to return to full and normal consciousness, but it wasn't coming. The closest she could get was the strange hyper-reality that accompanies extreme sleep deprivation.

Like a zombie, Esme shuffled to the small hotel kitchenette, took up the pot of coffee that sat there and poured the latest in a long line of extra large cups. The strong aroma of the liquid floated up to her nose and she wished, as she always did, that the coffee would taste half as good as it smelled.

Blowing hesitantly on the rim, Esme took a sip. It was too hot. She pursed her lips together and sucked the top of her scalded mouth, trying to assuage the pain. At least her eyesight was clear and focused now. She set down the coffee to cool and started walking circuits around the room, trying to get her heart rate up a bit.

Esme was waiting.

It was the central activity in her life. The only one. Waiting and not sleeping. It was the fulcrum upon which everything else rested. The thing was- she wasn't really sure what she was waiting for. She knew the phone was supposed to ring. She knew it was worth waiting for; or she thought she did. After 34 hours, Esme was starting to think she'd been wrong. Like Estragon and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, she was waiting for something that wasn't every going to happen.

Then the phone rang.

Total silence had engulfed the room for so long the sudden shrill explosion of the phone nearly caused her to fall down. She nearly dropped the coffee mug she had no memory of picking back up in the first place. She literally ran to the phone, her feet skidding to a stop in front of the desk it was sitting on.

She reached it on the third ring and snatched it out of the cradle. She brought the handset up to her ear.

"Hello?" Esme asked, as if unsure the person on the other line was going to speak.

"Is this Esme Brooks?" A voice asked without introduction or greeting.

Somehow the voice managed to be completely gender neutral. She couldn't tell the sex, age, or attitude of the person on the other end. The total lack of personality felt a little creepy.

Nevertheless, she answered, “Yes, this is Esme Brooks.” She paused, and added, “How may I help you?”

“It’s not how you can help me.” Replied the flat voice, “It’s how I can help you.”

Esme didn’t really need any help. She was 25 years old with 2 college degrees and was currently a graduate student. Everything was going as well as it could possibly be expected to go.

Of course, Esme knew that this was a lie. Something was wrong. She’d known her life that something was wrong. Never had she been able to pin down what the feeling meant, but it had been there, lurking, in even her oldest memory.

Why else would she be sitting in a random off-the-highway hotel room, exhausted to the point unachieved even in her most hellacious finals week, talking to this weird monotone voice.

A BAR 27 HOURS EARLIER

“You probably think I am going to ask you if I can buy you a drink.” said the pretty darn handsome guy, a sheepish smile on his lips.

“I do now, yeah.” Esme agreed, smiling herself.

Esme didn’t want to go out drinking with her roommate. She was actually planning on turning in early and getting some much needed sleep. But this guy wasn’t so bad- maybe going out would pay off for once.

“Well, I’m not going to ask to buy you a drink. In fact, I think you should stop drinking because I’m going to offer you something far more wondrous than booze.”

Esme thought, “If this guy starts talking about how good he is in bed I’m going to puke on him, I don’t care how cute he is.”

Apparently Mr. Pretty Darn Handsome read her mind because he suddenly blushed and blurted out, “No not that!”

His shock that he would be suggesting such a thing to her was a bit of a blow to Esme’s self esteem. What was so wrong about having sex with her?

“Not that I wouldn’t...” The guy started and then stopped. He met her eyes and held them. “Listen, you’re going to think I’m a weirdo anyway. That’s okay. There’s always the chance you will see the sincerity in my eyes and take my advice. If you do, I promise you won’t regret it.”

“What are you talking about?” Esme asked, her curiosity piqued by this strange man.

“I’m talking about transforming the nature of your life.”

“You’re a very strange person. You know that right?”

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard that particular value of my character.” The man smiled pleasantly.

“What’s your name anyway?” Esme asked.

“Ron Lowell.” He held out his hand and Esme shook it. His hands were soft, but strong. The strength was implied rather than felt, Ron felt no need to squeeze her hand the way some men did.

“Nice to meet you Ron.” Esme said.

Ron’s face, while still smiling on the outside, seemed to harden a bit internally. He said, “Esme. I am going to suggest that you do something. It’s going to sound very

strange. You must leave straight from here and go to a motel. It doesn't matter which one. Get a room and wait. You cannot fall asleep. Eventually a phone call will come, it will be the most important call you ever receive."

Esme immediately started to object, but before she could get a word out of her mouth Ron continued, "I know you have to work tomorrow morning. Don't go. You hate working at the bank anyway. Someone will cover your R115 class on Monday."

Ron was right about what he was saying. Esme had no idea how he could possibly know such things about her life, but clearly he did. For some reason the spookiness of the guy's knowledge didn't scare her, it made her want to listen to what he had to say.

"I can tell you now that you will not regret doing this thing. In fact, you will regret it very much if you don't. Go and wait for the phone call. Do not fall asleep. If you fall asleep the call will not come. Do you understand?"

Feeling a bit like she was under a spell Esme agreed that she understood his instructions.

Ron Lowell smiled at Esme, an unclassifiable smile- friendly but dangerous, fake and genuine, all at once. He reached out and touched her hand, but only for a moment. Then as abruptly as he arrived he slid off of his stool and walked away.

Almost in spite of herself, Esme hopped off of her barstool to follow.

Only he was gone. One minute he was there, the next he wasn't.

Like a dream or a handsome hallucination.

ROOM

The bland voice on the phone said, "You met someone in a bar. This person suggested that you go to a hotel room and wait. You knew you could lose your job, yet you went straight to the closest hotel. Why?"

It was a legitimate question. A good question. One Esme didn't have a sufficient answer for. She thought she might've known when she first arrived at the hotel. She was pretty sure she'd come up with some flimsy justification- but she couldn't remember what it was anymore. She was too tired. It seemed a distinct possibility that she was dreaming the entire experience.

"I don't know." Her voice shrugged. "I guess it was because of the look in Ron's eyes. He looked...wise somehow. Like he knew a secret the rest of us don't know. There was a twinkle there- a twinkle I want to see in my own eyes."

"He could've just been some guy messing with your head."

"But he wasn't. You're calling aren't you?"

You will lose your job and you don't know why. If you lose your job you lose your house. All of this to chase after the promise of what?"

"The guy knew stuff about me..."

"That anyone with a computer could learn in fifteen minutes." The voice finished for her.

"I live in a world where everything makes sense. All my life I've read and watched stories with magical and supernatural themes, but nothing weird has ever happened to me personally. When the ineffable finally came to visit my life, I didn't want to be someone who always wonders what if."

“Interesting. That’s very rare.”

“What is?”

“Living. Choosing the mystery over the safety. What you did is miraculous and rare.”

“I went to a motel and deprived myself of sleep. What I did was irresponsible and stupid. It just so happens that I’m too irresponsible and stupid to care right now.” Esme said; plopping down in the chair next to the phone and laying her head back against the headrest.

“Isn’t it possible there’s genius in that?”

“Anything is possible.”

“Anything?” The voice asked. For the first time there was a hint of emotion in it, a certain playfulness absent until that point. For some reason, the sudden interjection of humanity into the voice made her a bit nervous.

“To be honest, I suppose yeah, anything seems possible right now.” A wave of exhaustion passed over Esme that made her earlier state of fatigue seem like well rested bliss.

“Do you want to know what is going on?”

“Yes. I very much want to know what is going on.” Esme agreed, her eyes closed.

“You were chosen at random. You are one of many. We are almost always ignored. Very few human beings chase after the ineffable, even if their guts tell them to. You are a rare creature in your world. You still have curiosity. You choose to follow information that doesn’t fit easily into your established worldview. This is your kind’s most interesting trait, and we’ve developed this rather unorthodox method to weed out those of you who are willing to follow down this path of strangest existence.”

“So do I get one of the five golden tickets or something?” Esme asked- referring to the golden ticket Charlie finds in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.

“A what?” Asked the voice.

“You know, do I get to see behind the wizard’s curtain?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look. I came here and waited for you to call. So either tell me why I’m sitting here or let me fall asleep because I’m running out of consciousness here.” Esme used the palm of her hand to pry open her closed eyes.

“Very well. All I require is a yes or no.”

“Lay it on me.” Esme replied, her eyes closing again.

“If I were to offer you immortality, would you take it?”

“Why, is that the kind of thing you’re inclined to offer me?” The last few syllables were slurred.

“There is a plague coming in the next year. If you want to survive we must alter your DNA in such a way that you will become immortal. It is a long and painful process, but you will come out of it remade. I offer this to you now. I offer you immortality. Would you take it? Yes or no please, then you may sleep.”

Silence.

“Esme? Are you still there?”

In a random hotel room Esme’s head was tilted back, deep snores rolling from her throat.

She was fast asleep.