

Sarah Johnson

### The Phone Call

I close my front door, and after a few moments, I hear their cars drive away quietly. I am alone. I don't want to be, though. I wish he were right here, right now – with me. To just...answer some questions. To help me answer *theirs*.

The phone rings. I can feel my heart drop, but my legs are working fine. I pick it up as if it might be the insurance company, or maybe my Aunt Carla is calling again for that cheesecake recipe. My hand isn't even shaking when I see it is an unidentified number. Somehow I know, though. So why am I acting like it's okay? It's not okay anymore.

"Hello?"

There isn't even a second of open air before, "Penny. It's me."

"I figured that much out, thanks, Evan." I let the snarky tone seep out, because it feels like I have nothing to lose right now.

I'm not quite sure how I'm even able to sass him, when I expected to crumble and fall apart in hysterics if I ever heard him speak again.

"How? Is the caller id showing? This is a different number," His raspy voice says so coolly, so intoxicatingly.

It's as if he is reading out poetry every time he talks, and it's ridiculously not appropriate right now. Or ever, really.

"No, I just knew." I say quietly.

"Oh. Well, I've been meaning to call..." He hums, as if I'm just a check on his list, as if I'm a friend he's been meaning to catch up with.

"Why are you acting so casual about this?" I interrupt him.

I'm trying to sound forceful, but I can feel my voice breaking slightly. I guess he can too.

"Pen, don't cry – please – please. Look, I've been trying to get a hold of you, without them finding out..."

"You didn't even...you didn't even leave a note for me – did you think I wouldn't assume the worst, Evan?"

Because I've assumed the worst and much more.

"You can't believe what you've been told, Penny." He tries to say hurriedly, before I keep going on.

"So none of it's true then?" I blurt out.

There's a dead silence on the line, and I know he's thinking of how to answer. My mind is reeling, realizing he, in fact, has to think of an alibi – a way out of this one. But he can't.

"Some of it might me true."

I break out into sobs, my body racking with each one that washes over me. Maybe it was hearing him actually acknowledge the facts, or at least the vague idea of them, is what's finally hitting me now.

"PENNY! Penny – please! Please don't...oh gosh." His voice slurs.

The romance novel he's been reading is turning into a horror film, not going the way he wanted at all. I've never been his perfect leading lady – I've always

messed up the lines. Evan was the one who always spoke for the both of us – made everything right. He needs to just make everything right.

“I’m still me.” He gives up trying to calm me down.

“My husband, *Evan*,” I say aggressively, to this imposter, “would have been here weeks ago – he would have been here and he would have sat down and *explained* things to me. He would have told me the truth. No matter how horrible it was. Or rather – the truth wouldn’t have been *this*. It would have all been a mistake...” I’m shaking my head now, crying.

“Please, Penny – don’t cry. I know, I know – I tried to contact you...”

“It’s been a *long* time, Evan.” I snap out of my tears, angry again.

“Honestly Pen, I’ve been gone longer on business trips...” he laughs in the background, sounding so casual.

“Yes, on those ‘business’ trips, doing who knows what or who know *who*.” I feel my bare teeth slice the air.

A pause.

“You know it wasn’t like *that*, Penelope,” his tone grows darker, sterner, “It was *never* like that.”

“Really, Evan? Then tell me what was it like.”

“It never happened while we were together.”

The phone cord is cutting off my fingers’ circulation. I let it snap back into place – the tension releasing.

“Is that supposed to reassure me?” Even though I know it does somewhere inside of me, but I soon feel myself deflate again, “And...how am I supposed to believe you?”

Another pause. In the silent moment, I keep ignoring the fact that this supposed truth shouldn’t even be good news to me, because of all the bad still surrounding it.

“I don’t know how to make you believe me.”

“*Make* me believe you...?” I almost laugh.

“You know what I mean, Penny. You know...look – you know me. You know *me*.”

“I thought I did, Evan. How can you even begin to say I still do?” I was getting rather annoyed now.

“No – you know *me*. The ‘me’ I didn’t really think was real until I met you. And all this nonsense that is happening...you just need to realize it all revolves around someone who made mistakes before he met *you*,” His voice is dripping with sincerity and rubbish persuasiveness.

I don’t quite know how to respond. I know the Evan I married. The one who’s slicked back hair and devil-may-care personality drew me in like a bee to nectar, and got me stuck like honey. I know the Evan who looks like he never got enough sleep, with his dark under-eye circles, who still managed to know exactly what to say and how to say it at all times of the day. The Evan who’s heels I tripped over when he so leisurely walked into that Tube station that grey Monday morning – the kind of morning only London can offer – the kind that mirrors his mysterious and tired appearance.

Was he tireless because he was out...doing other things? The Evan I know is a drastically different one than the Evan I see in this *Lifetime* movie plot I have unfolding in my head now. Everything takes me back to when I first met him. I'm scrambling and grasping for clues – something I missed.

I think of how when I had tripped, I was sprawled on the floor behind him – his head whipping around to find me, a mess laid out before him – a mess for his taking. He made it so easy to let him save me. – to let myself make him my whole world. Was that intentional? Everything seems so constructed, so planned out now.

“What’s your name?” he had asked me, his voice still inappropriately dripping with ease and flirtations.

“Penelope – er, Penny,” my mumbling voice was drowned out by his kind smile.

“Lucky name...but it looks like it’s *my* lucky day,” He had raised his eyebrows, laughing at his own horrible pun.

I think about every date that followed after – every stroll in Kensington Park, every late night phone call that wouldn’t end – every talk in between.

I try to imagine a world where Evan isn’t the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. But I don’t get past initial thought of seeing a life without him right beside me – it’s just not possible.

He says that everything he has done is in the past...but what about the now? How can we forget about the problem lying right in front of us? The reason he is gone, the reason I’m clueless, the reason I have no answers – except the ones I’m choosing to ignore.

“There’s the girl, though, Evan – you keep forgetting. You may want to bury all of this, but there is obviously a reason you aren’t here, with me, right now.”

I hear him suck in a breath, as if he were hoping I’d forget about her.

“She...was an accident.”

“An accident.”

“Oh, don’t go all noble on me, Penny. If they’ve told you what I think they’ve told you, then you’ll know how long I’ve resisted.” I can hear exasperation in his voice.

“Yeah – yeah, I’m sorry this hunger of yours didn’t overtake you these past few years. Only came on again now, eh? Something set you off, dear?” I’m angry now.

I can hear him sigh and probably run his fingers through his soft and moldable hair. I can feel it fall into place. I try to think of what made me fall in love with him, and I can still list every reason off the top of my head. What am I doing? What will I do?

“I stopped for a reason.” He breathes into the phone.

“Because it became, I don’t know, a threat to your livelihood, perhaps?” I give a cold laugh.

“No, I have rules about it, you know.” He snaps at me.

“Rules. Oh, okay. Rules. What is this, some sort of game to you?” I nearly yell into the phone.

“Yes, to me, it kind of was – sure, let’s call it that.” He stammers.

“Go on.”

"The rules didn't work on you." He lets out a breath it seems he's been holding in.

I'm taken aback.

"You...you attempted your game on *me*?" I whisper, holding the phone close to me, as if it's my comfort, because nothing else is anymore.

I should be downright disgusted – terrified, actually. But deep in my heart I feel – what is that? Flattery? I want to vomit. Who is Evan, but more importantly, who am *I*?

"Of course I did." His buttery voice is full of innocence and deceit and obviousness.

"And so why am I still around then?" I ask, cocky and delirious, tears spilling over without making a sound.

"Because you made me break all of my rules."

This was the opening to a Harlequin romance novel, this was his pick-up line – this was how he reeled me in – right? No, this was all wrong – what did it mean?

"So...you stopped. After me?"

The question lingers.

"Yes." He says so matter-of-factly, that I believe him.

"And you never once...thought to tell me...about any of it? Husbands can...they can tell their wives about these types of things..." I begin, knowing I'm wrong.

"How well do you think that would have boiled over, Penelope? I kept my secrets. I would still have them, if I hadn't have been so careless."

"Evan, you're still talking about this like it's a game."

"That's because it still *is*, Penny."

I gulp, loudly.

"What are you saying?"

He's scaring me and my heart is racing.

"I'm asking you, if you're going to continue playing it with me."

His voice is the only thing drawing me in now, and my memories of him are all I have to hold onto. The way he would half-grin when I tell him my most irrational fears, the way he'd listen when I'd spill my deepest secrets. The way he is my safest haven and my only best friend.

I don't answer him.

"I'm asking you, to come with me, Penny."

"Why on earth, do you think I'd ever agree to help you? To join you?" I spit out, trying to sound disgusted.

He chuckles this sort of raspy laugh, one of those easy-going ones that has me wishing I could see him right now.

"Because, as much as I've tried to never tap into that side or ever let it surface, there's a reason you married me, Penny. And you know it."

"But...but there's a reason you married me too, right?" I start to cry again.

"Right," It's like he's trying to forget that, "But that side of our marriage is over now, Pen. Is it the life you have now or is it me you're going to choose?"

I bite my lip, thinking in my head, *there isn't a difference between the two*. Evan *is* my life. So then I have my answer.

I breathe out, as Evan takes a quick inhale. Our breaths, connected still, even if just by a phone-line. I wipe away my last tear.

“Give me your address.”

It’s like I can hear his grin through the phone, and I wonder if I’m playing the game with him, or if he’s just playing me. I find it terrifying that I just really don’t care.