

## Anonymous Caller

Synopsis: A young woman is taunted by an anonymous caller while looking after her elderly aunt. The calls stop not long before her aunt passes away, but she finds herself unable to move on...until she figures out what's really happened.

Standing at the edge of the sink, I watch tendrils of frost creeping their way across the windowsill. Outside a fresh layer of snow covers the trees in the backyard, as if they've donned bulky, loose-fitting white coats to protect themselves from the harsh northern winter.

I'm still rinsing the last of the warm suds of the lunchtime dishes from my forearms when my thoughts are interrupted by the tinkling sound of a bell from upstairs.

Marian is awake again.

A sigh drains from my lungs as the tepid water bleeds out from the basin. She can hardly be hungry; I've only just finished the lunchtime washing up. Perhaps she needs another blanket? Or maybe help to find the TV remote? Last week it slipped into the narrow gap between her bed and the wall and I spent half the day on my hands and knees searching for it. More likely she needs my help to go to the bathroom. Again.

The bell rings a second time insistently.

I dry my arms and call up the stairs. "I'll be there in a minute Aunt Marian."

No reply.

Don't get me wrong, I love my Aunt Marian. I suppose it's karma in a way. I was three years old when my parents died. It was Marian who took me in and cared for me. Now it's my time to return the favour.

I ascend the stairs to the second-storey bedroom. Marian has fallen asleep again by the time I arrive, so I collect the cup of tea which has grown cold beside her and retreat as quietly as I can back down the stairs. Halfway to the kitchen, the telephone rings. I hurry to the little side table in the hall to answer it before it wakes Marian from her slumber. I get there on the third ring but when I hold the receiver to my ear there's only a dial tone.

I replace the handset in its cradle and finish taking the half-empty cup to the kitchen. I've no sooner deposited it into the sink when the phone rings again. I rush back into the hall and pick it up.

"Hello?"

The person at the other end says nothing, but I know someone is there because I can hear the ragged rhythm of heavy breathing from the end of the line. A cold feeling creeps up from deep down in my stomach and I feel myself shudder.

"Who is this?" I tentatively ask the disembodied caller. The only response is the whispered rasp of their breath.

"Who's there?" I repeat, trying my best to sound more forceful this time. The anonymous caller remains mute. I slam the receiver down, my hand trembling slightly. As I go to return to the kitchen it rings a third time. Now I whirl around, whipping the receiver to my ear.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

For a moment there's silence again. Angry now, I prepare to lambast the nameless caller, but then a woman's voice, distant yet vaguely familiar, screams.

"Lucy...! Don't...!"

I freeze at the sound of my name. "Don't go...Don't...slip...up." But before I can utter a reply the line falls dead.

I drop the phone. Now I'm the one breathing heavily. I reach out a shaky hand against the wall to steady myself. The phone rings yet again making me jump. Hesitantly I raise it to my ear.

"Who are you?" I demand. "Please, just leave me alone!"

"Lucy?" A male voice asks. "Are you okay?"

Relief washes over me as I recognise the sound of my boyfriend's voice.

"Matt...I'm...yeah, I'm okay. I guess I'm just a little spooked. Hey...did you phone earlier?"

"No, why?"

"Oh...it's probably nothing. I had a couple of prank calls, that's all. What's up?"

"There's a new movie playing at the Roxy later. You want to go?"

I hesitate, casting an eye toward the stairs.

"I don't know. You know I've got to take care of Marian."

"I'm sure your aunt would be okay for a couple of hours. Besides, you've got to take care of yourself too."

It doesn't take much for Matt to twist my arm. Marian will probably sleep for most of the time we're out and I need to collect some groceries anyway. Plus, after the creepy phone calls, I convince myself some time away from the house will do me good.

"Okay. I'll meet you in half an hour."

After I hang up, I head upstairs and wake Aunt Marian to explain I need to go out and do some shopping, but I'll be back soon. She says nothing, just nods, flicks on the TV, and cranes her neck to see the screen around me.

I grab my coat and scarf and collect the keys from the hook by the front door. Outside cold air claws at my exposed cheeks and my breath quickly forms tiny white crystals on the scarf wrapped tightly around my neck. I set off, footfalls crunching across a diamond-encrusted path. I reach the corner and take a couple of unsteady paces down the steep steps to the main road. A few paces down my foot slips on a patch of black ice and I reach out to stop myself tumbling forward into the street below.

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When I next see Marian, things have taken a turn for the worse. The wooden stairs of Aunt Marian's house groan as I ascend to the bedroom. I push open the heavy door, which creaks on its hinges in protest. A cold breeze seems to follow me into the room. Aunt Marian stares wide-eyed in my direction. Before she seemed distant and forgetful, but now it's as if our roles have reversed. She has become the child and me the parent. Thankfully, at least the anonymous phone calls have ceased, but instead it feels like it's me who's become a nameless stranger. Marian's eyes widen as I approach the bedside.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?"

"Aunt Marian, it's me, Lucy, remember?"

"Get away from me! You're not supposed to be here!" She screams, hurling a plate across the room directly toward me. Somehow, I manage to avoid being hit, as if by some miracle it goes straight through me and smashes against the base of the wall on the opposite side of the room.

I try to talk to her, to calm her down.

"Please Aunt Marian, I just want to take care of you." But she doesn't seem to hear me. Instead, my presence seems to be doing more harm than good, and in the end, I'm forced to go, leaving a wail of sobbing cries in my wake.

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The day of the funeral is grey and sombre. A small procession of mourners, distant nameless relatives, and a handful of local parishioners attending out of a sense of duty, shuffle into the church to take their places scattered among the first two rows of empty pews. The Vicar stands at the front foyer handing out service sheets. I brush past him without taking one. At the other end of the aisle, the closed coffin rests in the centre of the passage in front of the congregation, directly before the altar. I don't want to look at either. Instead, I stare at the ground in front of me, trying to avoid eye contact with the others. I needn't have bothered. No one says a word, not even to offer their condolences. Even Matt doesn't seem to be speaking to me. He hides tears behind dark glasses. I didn't expect him to be that upset. She was my aunt after all, and yet he barely acknowledges me as I occupy the empty spot next to him on the pew. I don't understand what I've done wrong. You'd think today of all days, at my aunt's funeral, he'd at least be able to muster some support.

When the service is over a hardy few stragglers brave the cold of the church reception, staying on to exchange pleasantries over a cup of sickly-sweet tea. I decide not to hang around. A suffocating blanket of grief has descended over me and all I want is to get as far away as possible, but something tugs at my insides, drawing me back, compelling me from going too far.

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I don't know how long it's been since the funeral. The combination of grief and lack of sleep has made me lose track of time until the days merge into one long blur. It feels like I'm in a state of limbo, not sleeping, but never quite awake either. When I do seem to sleep, my dreams are haunted, filled with scenes of Aunt Marian's service, which I can't seem to stop returning to.

A few days later, I'm standing at the bottom of the stairs watching Matt stuff a handful of things into a black plastic tidy bag. I can't bring myself to help. He draws the ties tightly closed without saying a word to me and gently pushes the bag into the corner. Something about watching him do it feels wrong. Aunt Marian lived most of her life in this old house. How could the resulting output of a whole life simply be bundled up and tidied away in a single plastic bag and pushed aside? Was this all I could hope to leave behind one day? I'm not ready to face that yet, so like the bag, I push the thought into a corner of my mind and quickly leave again.

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I had the dream again last night. I'm back at Aunt Marian's house. Standing in the downstairs hallway the scene plays over in my mind for the hundredth time. The little church, the handful of mourners. This time though it's different. I'm seeing the view from a different angle, as if I'm outside of my body, floating above the scene as it unfolds below. Matt is sitting on his own in the front row. He brushes at his cheek, swiping away a tear which has managed to escape from behind the façade of his dark glasses. I still don't understand why he's taken it so badly. She was my aunt, not his. In front of him candlelight from the little church's altar glints and reflects off the closed casket in a shimmer of faux gold handles and rosewood veneer. I jump as the vision is interrupted and I'm brought back to the present by the sound of something dropping on the floor upstairs. I stop and turn, as I do so I catch sight of the telephone in the hallway. At least it remains silent. Something I've fought to shut out seeps slowly in through the cracks in my awareness. If there's someone upstairs, then...

Realisation dawns. Memory floods back and I feel myself...slipping...falling. Cold air whips past my ears as I find myself tumbling forward, rolling until I'm staring straight up at the cold icy blue sky. I hear the sickening crack at the back of my head. Everything fades to black.

When I eventually open my eyes, I'm still standing in the hallway of Aunt Marian's house. Why am I still here? Beside me is the telephone sits silently on the side table.

I know what I must do.

I can't tell her it's me. She wouldn't believe me if I could, but perhaps I can still find a way to fix things. To warn her.

I pick up the handset and trembling, raise it to my mouth.

“Who is this?” A young woman’s voice at the other end of the line demands.

For a moment I just stand there fighting for breath, trying to find the words I need to warn her before it’s too late.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“Lucy!” I scream down the line. “Don’t go out of the house! Don’t go or else you’re going to slip up and fall!”

But before I can get the last words out, the line like me, falls dead.