At Death’s Door
Nick Rogen

As John attempted to open his door, scraped up with silver from so many drunk misses from his keys, he knew one thing for certain. He was dying.
In a way, dying was a lot like being drunk. Really drunk. Blackout drunk. Except it hurt like hell.
John knew of nothing more difficult than steadying his hand enough to push the key into the lock when his life was bleeding out the side of him.
He groaned, swore, and his left hand clenched his stomach harder. The knife had cut so deeply, he swore he could honest-to-God feel his stomach.
The lock finally clicked and the key twisted. He didn’t so much as open the door as collapse into it. Hell, it was loud, but the neighbors had surely heard worse from his house.
And he was on the ground. Like usual.
Tears burned his eyes. But this wasn’t normal. This time he wasn’t drunk. Far from it.
He wiped his tears, blood smearing his face like war paint.
*Dear God.* I really am dying, he thought.
All because some scared young punk demanded his wallet. He told the kid off and pushed him away. Poor kid swiped with his knife, made contact, and freaked out when he had realized what he had done. He ran down the sidewalk and into the midnight as fast as he could from a swearing, collapsing, old man.
Kid should have known better. Never rob a bitter old geezer.
They never have anything worthwhile to lose.
Well, at least that’s what John thought at first. Nothing to lose. Nobody around him that cared enough. Death, he always thought, was only daunting if you were separated from the things and people you loved and who loved you. That’s why he never felt scared. He never had anyone like that.
But now it was different.
At death’s door, he did have something to lose.
And in a life full of losses, he needed this last win.
He groaned. Bones snapped. Or broke. But he was able to wobble onto
his knees.
One call. That's all he needed.
John rubbed away his tears again.
He braced the wall. His old hands were thick in blood. Old blood with
a rusty, iron-like color.
According to his blood, he'd died a long time ago.
With his teeth clenched together, he pulled himself up to a stand. A
stream of blood poured out his side. The hole sucked in air and his body
trembled.
He was now standing.
But, Goddamn, he was standing!
911 didn't matter now.
Only one call mattered.
His feet marched like heavy columns through the apartment, a zombie
shuffle leaving a bread trail of red.
He made it to his living room table before collapsing again. The knees
buckled. The cheap table gave way. Dozens of empty and full cans and bottles
smashed into the floor or rolled their way into the kitchen.
John groaned. He just didn’t have the energy to scream anymore.
A trickle of blood crawled down his face. A concussion, maybe?
Screw it. When you’re about to die, do the small things really matter
anymore?
He rolled onto his back and his breathing melted from his mouth. His
chest ran up and down like an old lawnmower about to suck up the last of the
gas before it died completely.
He managed out a laugh. A single bloody laugh.
So this is all I have, he thought.
A minute. Maybe a few more.
Kind of hard to regret a whole life in a matter of minutes.
He could have called Martha. She'd been a good wife.
Maybe he could call and apologize. He had always been a lousy
husband. He was old enough now to realize that and couldn’t really blame her
for cheating on him.
   He’d have done it too if he had to live with himself.
   But no, Martha wasn’t going to be his phone call.
   The ceiling fan above him was wavering with his vision. There just wasn’t enough time.
   He closed his eyes.
   But for all his faults, maybe his ungodly stubbornness would actually come in handy. For once.
   He suddenly felt the cold. The pain. Felt the death creeping in.
   He deserved it all and even wondered why it took so long. But he opened up his eyes and rolled to his good side.
   He picked up his body. It limped into odd positions as though he were a poorly built mannequin.
   He stumbled to the phone, picked up the receiver, and fell again. His back cracked as he slid down the side of the wall clutching the phone.
   This was it. He wasn’t getting back up again, that was for sure.
   He wanted to make a joke about his oldness, but he stopped himself.
   Fifty-five years of bitter sarcasm.
   Of black humor.
   All of it was wiped away. Dead before he was.
   This was no longer a joke.
   He was crying.
   He’d wanted this moment for years. And now that it was here, he wanted to take all the mistakes back.
   But it was too late for that.
   He had time for just this call.
   Realistically, that’s all he needed.
   His fingers clicked the numbers, a bloody trail connecting them like a crossword. He hadn’t called the number in fifteen years. Hell, he was the guy who couldn’t even remember his second wife’s name!
   But this number.
   This number was his life. Funny how it took death to realize it.
   He heard the dial tone and prayed his son would answer.

~
Michael turned the knob over for more heat, and smiled at his wife in the passenger seat.

“Better?” he asked.

His wife’s mascara was dripping black veins down her face, mixing with the water scrolling down from her bangs.

Her laugh was manic and loud.

“Was that fun, or what!” She shook her head like a wet dog and sprayed the car’s leather interior.

Michael wiped the water from his own eyes.

“God.” He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss before grabbing back the steering wheel. “I love you.”

“It’s why you married me, right?” She grinned a movie-star grin. He loved that most about her. It was worth a million, hell, a billion bucks to him!

“For the spontaneity? Nah! I married you because you were just really, really hot!”

“Hell yeah, I was!”

“Good thing I married you then, because now you’re absolutely gorgeous!”

She blushed and ran her fingers through her brown hair. “Even after making you dive into the damn-near coldest ocean in the world, business suit and all, just because?”

“Tough days call for tough measures.”

Michael laughed. He was so straight-laced before he had met Sarah. It was always business. Always stocks. Always something. He buried himself in work to escape the fate of becoming like his father. Luckily, Sarah came into his life. She brought excitement. Something he never knew he needed so badly.

“Yeah, well,” Sarah stopped. The car’s interior lit up in the dark. The phone on the dash danced a Morse code of blinking lights.

“They can leave a message,” Michael said with a grin as the phone stopped. “Ten years and we still got it.”

Sarah laughed.

“You mean our insanity? Who else would make her husband take a dip on the way home from some swanky restaurant?” The phone beeped once and went black.
“Hey now! You didn’t make me.” Michael put his arm around her shoulder and combed his hands through her wet hair.

The phone sang. Again.
Michael sighed. It was too late to go back to the office. And he sure as heck wasn’t going back tonight.
“Do you want me to answer it?”
“Yeah, sure. If it’s my boss, tell him…”
“You’re in the shower?”
Michael chuckled. “That’d work.”
Sarah reached over and took the phone. The screen illuminated her face. And the movie-smile was gone.
Just a blank stare and dripping water.
“What is it?” Michael asked. “Sarah?”
“I think. I think it’s your father’s number.”
The car screeched to the side of the road.
“What?” His throat was dry.
Sarah nodded and handed him the phone.
She was right. It was his number alright. No name. No contact information. No fancy picture. He had never bothered to put one in for him. Nor would he have ever done it even if he was forced at gunpoint.
Michael contorted his face. “What do I do?”
Sarah’s eyebrows arched. “What do you do? Well, you answer it.”
“I…” Michael stumbled on his words. “I….can’t do it…”
“Michael…”
“No.” Michael shook his head. “No. No. No.”
The phone stopped shaking. Blackness again in the car.
“Not after all these years.”
“But Michael. He’s never called you, right? This could be important. Really important. I think you have to call…”
He didn’t want to let her finish. “That would be the first important thing in fifteen years.”
“Please, Michael, I’m asking you to do this.”
Sarah always tried to wear the pants in the relationship. Michael had never minded. Not now though. Right now, this was his decision. His hands were shaking. He could feel his face getting red.
“Jesus, Sarah! I just can’t! I can’t speak to a man who abandoned me and my mom. He’s an alcoholic who only knows how to lie. You want to know why he’s calling? You want to know?”
Sarah shrank in her seat.
“Because he’s probably hammered is why.”
His wife was never one to back down. “I don’t care what happened between you two. It could be an emergency!”
The phone beeped.
“The voicemail is good enough for him.”
Sarah looked away and watched the ocean pass by.
Michael rubbed his eyes and clenched his teeth. There goes Dad again. Spoiling everything. Even after fifteen years.
Michael turned onto the freeway ramp and silence filled the car.

~

It rang.
John held his side to stop the increasing pain.
And rang.
His eyes stung of blood and tears.
And rang. And rang. And rang.
And then a click.
“Hi! This is Michael. I’m either not near my phone or I’m at work. But if you leave me a short message, your name, and a number I can call you back or, I’d be happy to call you back at my earliest convenience. Thanks, and have a wonderful day!”
There was a loud beep in John’s ear.
He tried to speak. It’s not that he was too weak to say anything, but rather he didn’t have a clue on how he should start.
He hung up.
_Breathe, John. You can do this._
He pressed redial and listened again to his son’s voice until the beep.
How do you ask for forgiveness from a son you failed?
He cried, drenching the phone, until the line cut him off.
Michael slammed his hand on the steering wheel. He couldn’t stand the silence anymore. He was pissed.

“Why should I give that man even one more minute of my life? He’s already stolen so much from me. I don’t want to hear excuses anymore. I don’t want to hear a fucking thing from that man.”

Sarah took her head off the window.

“Was he that bad? Bad enough to never talk to him again? Maybe he’s reaching out.”

“You don’t get it! He always loved his booze and his job more than me. And he sure as hell hasn’t lifted a finger to try to reach out to me. I’ve never received so much as an apology for everything he has done. Or, rather, never did.”

“I get it, Michael. I do. Really. But look at the way you are acting! Maybe he really does want to apologize!”

Michael let out a laugh that even scared rum.

“Right! Apologize? The man doesn’t have it in him.”

John hung up and pressed redial. He didn’t have strength to wipe away his tears. The apartment around him was turning into a reddish blur.

Again, the voicemail answered.

It beeped and this time John spoke.

“Michael?” He hadn’t heard his voice since the stabbing. It sounded frail and weak, breaking and shattering into the mouthpiece of the phone.

“I…” He struggled for breath. “I’m dying, Michael.”

“And, ah, listen.” A coughing fit struck him suddenly and his grip on the phone wavered. A lung was failing, he was sure of it.

“All these years. Christ. It’s taken me all these years and death to finally do this. Pathetic, eh? And cliché. But this guilt…” He paused and groaned.

“Regret. It’s all been haunting me. Hanging over me like one large weight.
What I did to your mother. What I did to you.”

John was in pain now. He could feel his body shutting down. He focused off the pain and on to his speech. He’d had it memorized for a very long time, even if he didn’t know it.

“I’m sorry.”

He let the words bleed into the small holes in the phone.

“Your mother was a queen. A royal queen. Beautiful. Majestic. And I never gave her the attention she needed. No, deserved! I never remembered the birthdays. The anniversaries. The small things that make marriage and love work.”

He breathed hard.

“And you. I treated you like you weren’t even there. Like you weren’t the best damn son a father could ask for. I never went to your games. Never was there to give you that fatherly advice.

“I was a stranger. A drunk who didn’t have the courage to let you two get close to me. Maybe I was scared to open up. Because then... then you’d realize how much of a failure I was. How weak of a father I was.”

He let out a laugh. It turned into a cough. Blood dripped down his mouth.

“Funny how life is. It worked the other way around. By closing you off, I showed you how pathetic I really was.”

He sighed. Dizzy and sleepy now. The pool of blood collecting around him felt cold already.

Make it quick, John, make it quick.

“The deathbed confession isn’t right. I know. It isn’t fair and I know it won’t solve much of anything, nor patch our relationship back up.

“But even so, I want to tell you how so proud I am of you. How you turned out. How beautiful your family is.

“You turned out to be everything I wasn’t. I thank you for that, with all my heart.

“And I’m sorry.”

He gripped the phone with all the strength he had.

In almost a whisper, he said, “Goodbye son.”

He hung up, smiled, and closed his eyes.

And fell asleep.
The phone beeped again. The voicemail was still waiting.
“Michael, enough of this! See what it’s about!” Sarah almost screamed.
Michael continued to stare straight ahead into the night.
“Am I a good father, Sarah?”
He looked over to see her face. She looked taken back.
“Of course you are,” she said. “What in the world does that have to do
with this?”
“Modesty be damned. You’re right. I am. But you want to know why?
It’s because my father never was.”
He paused and sighed.
“All I ever wanted was an apology for what he did. A sorry for Mom.
For me. Hell, for anything! But he’s a bitter old man who only has ever
thought about himself and he’d never apologize. Until the day he does, I won’t
answer that phone.”
“You sound like the bitter one here, Michael.”
“Well, you’re right. I am the bitter one.”
The window scrolled down. The phone tumbled out of Michael’s
hands into the wind.
“Whatever he said, that’ll make it so I’ll never hear them. I know he’ll
never change. Never apologize. So I guess I’ll let those drunken words of his
fall on deaf ears. It’s all he ever did to me.”
Sarah said nothing.
And neither did Michael for the entire way home.

The man standing over John looked like an angel. Everything behind
him was blurred. John couldn’t make out the man’s face that seemingly glowed
in the night.
“It’s going to be okay, sir. We’re getting you to a hospital.”
“Did…Michael get…my message?” His own voice sounded foreign
and weak.
“Please, don’t try to talk.”
John tried to lift himself. He couldn’t.
“My son. Did he...get...my message?”
“Sir, please...”
“Please. Did he?” John’s heart began to tremble.
The medic shook his head. “I...I don’t honestly know.”
John sighed. His pain was almost gone now. An almost weightless sensation was spreading through his body.
“Do you think it’s ever too late...to say...you’re sorry? To make things right?”
“Sir...I don’t...”
Maybe this medic had dealt with men like John before. A crazed old man demanding answers for everything before the end. Whatever the reason was, it seemed the man decided to answer him.
“I don’t know,” the medic said, “but I sure hope not, sir, I sure hope not.”
John smiled. “Me too.”
And then John’s heart stopped.

~

That night, in the middle of a fitful sleep, Michael was awoken by the telephone.