

Not A Funeral

(Ian, a youngish-looking middle-aged man, talks to someone on his cell-phone. Preferably, a “hands-free” headphone/mike combo will be used.)

IAN

Michael, Michael, it's Ian. No wait, listen to me. It's fantastic. It's bloody wall-to-wall birds out here, not a fucking slag among them. The music is mindblowing. Band out of Brighton called Whack Attack. Brilliant covers: Chemical Brothers, *old* Prodigy—the good stuff—Lords of Acid, everything. The E is everywhere, it's scattered on the ground like fucking manna. No, I don't care what you've got on, mate, you have got to get *down here now*. Oh, hemming and hawing, hemming and fucking *hawing*, it is not *you*, mate! That's five cancellations in a row—don't interrupt—five. I count them. They're on my calendar. Two clubbing dates, the Glastonbury rave, the Shropshire excursion—for which I promise you will never, ever forgive yourself—and now tonight. No, I can't ring you back in the morning—I don't know where I'm going to be waking up, now do I? Think, Michael. Now, are you coming down here or not? Not. I knew it.

(Covers mouthpiece)

Fuck!

(Uncovers, glares at some passersby)

It's her, isn't it? Your girlfriend? Oh, excuse me—your *fiancé*. Yes, I know that—I know she has a name. Diedre, all right? What, like I don't know the name of my best friend's fiancé? Well, all I'm asking is, what in fucking hell are you doing? What has Diedre got you doing that could possibly compete with this? What? No, I won't. I promise I won't laugh at you. When do I laugh at you? It's what? A baby shower. A *baby shower*? Where? In Dorking. Are you fucking joking? A baby shower in fucking *Dorking*? No, I'm not laughing, I'm not. Okay, I am laughing, you fucking moron!

Wait! What? Are you like hanging up? On *me*? Michael. Jesus. Listen, mate. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you owe me some money? Somewhere in the vicinity of fifty quid, if I'm not mistaken... No, I *know* you'll pay me, that's not my point. My point is an offer: you don't have to pay me. That's right. I'll consider all debts cancelled if you'll come out here with me now. Even bloody Stephen, *and* I'll pay the door. All you have to do is... What? Of *course* you can. Just ask her, or *tell* her, do whatever you have to do to get here. All right, wait! Wait. How's this: you don't even have to come out here. Just listen. Listen for a few minutes, undivided attention, and I'll take twenty-five quid off the top. Right? How difficult is that? I mean, Jesus bloody fucking Christ, this is what we're down to: I'm basically paying my best friend to talk to me. And you can't even say yes: you're *thinking* about it. It's pathetic. I can't fucking take it. I'm looking at a bridge right now, and I think I'm going to go jump right the fuck off it. Even better, I'm looking at some shite-hole of a Paki restaurant. I am going in there and I'm going to eat an *entire combination platter*. Good-bye, Michael. And fuck you.

What? Yes, two minutes. That's all I'm asking. Five, maybe. Something like that. But here's my question... Yes, it's a question to start out with, you insufferable pain in the balls, and then something else. It's my five minutes, all right? And the question is: two nights ago—Thursday—think back. Did you *feel* anything? You did, didn't you? No, no, don't answer yet: *think*. Thursday, any time that night, but strongest maybe about, say, 2:30 a.m. Don't even *tell* me about sleeping, mate—I'm not going to listen to that shite.

Thursday. Think. Forget about early Thursday. I'm not talking about early. Early was bloody dull, in point of fact. A funeral. I almost forgot about it, but cousin Rodney—you remember him—is considerate enough to remind me. What? You don't know her, I don't think. My Mum's sister Rita. Yeah, something, ennit? First Mum, then her Sis. All I do is go to bleeding funerals.

Rita. The one with the big teeth. Nah, you don't know her. She died last week. Yeah, well. Uh, liver disease or something. I dunno. But the point was, they had this awful fucking funeral. The usual shite, you know, but worse. Everyone's all boo-hooing, and hugging the fucking coffin... What? No, fuck no, not an open casket. Thank fuck for that. That would have been the topper, that would have. Bad enough they got this dark bloody cathedral place and all these old gits speaking in fucking Latin. Can you believe it? I mean, like, you got Rita, and she's like this fun-loving cow with dentures two sizes too big, didn't want nothing in this life but to laugh, and snog about with the occasional bloke too pissed to see what he's shagging. That's Rita, that's what she's about, and here they got this fucking thing with these old prats all swinging this smoky shite about and marching and all like (*chanting*) "Omni deus hocus pocus ave bloody Maria abra-fucking-cadabra." What does any of that shite have to do with her?

And this *music*! The music, Michael! This organ shite! It was the worst thing, the worst thing of all. I couldn't take it—it's like poisoning me, getting into my blood, you know? And I'm going bloody crazy, just climbing up and down the fucking walls and I knew I was about to start screaming at them: "You're not easing my sorrow—you are the fucking sorrow! You *are* death! This place, this big stone...fucking place is a tomb, and this music, this *music* is the bloody *embalming fluid*!"

So I left. I ran out. Everybody was like turning around, thinking "Poor guy, he's all overcome. Let him be alone with his grief" and I ran so fast I managed not to slap all their big, rubbery faces on the way out. And I kept running. I didn't know what else to do. I ran like twenty blocks or something—that's the first time I called you, that's why I'm all breathless—and I zig-zag about for a block then I fly around a corner and bam! Right into the side of a van. Standing still, fortunately, but it still almost knocks me bloody unconscious. I'm lying on the sidewalk and someone gets me by the arms, and considering the way the evening has basically gone all to cock, I'm thinking, fuck me, what is it now? But what do you know, I open my eyes and it's this lovely little thing, a bird with like lots of curly hair and she's all worried am I all right, am I all right? And I'm like, "I am now." And the van opens up and there's another bird in there and a couple of blokes sticking their heads out—"are you all right, are you all right?" "Yeah, yeah"—and everybody just like smiles at me and one of the blokes like nods his head and says "Cool. You want to come with us?" And I says "I dunno. Where?" And this curly-headed bird says—I kid you not, Michael—"We're going to a rave."

Can you believe this? A rave. A fucking rave. At that one word you could say my whole evening started to change its complexion. And I said “Why the fuck not?” So they all nod “Cool, cool” and I jump in, we take off, and I say “Where’s the rave?” and they say “Shropshire.” Fucking Shropshire. I’m thinking who the fuck we gonna be dancing with: bloody sheep? But at this point I’m basically going with the flow and I start looking around at this van. They’ve taken out all the seats in the back and it’s just carpet, and they got all these like...symbols hanging everywhere. And the place kind of smells, you know, like bad sweat plus a shite-load of patchouli oil. And I says to them, you know, trying to be like diplomatic and all. “What’s the, you know, what’s the deal here?” And the other bird says—she’s this lanky job with black hair, and she says “We’re pagans.” And I’m like holy bloody Christ! I mean we seen these people at the clubs, Michael. At least I think. You know, there’s always like these people all tie-dyed or like wearing capes and top hats or some such bollocks and dancing all weird, like their spines are fused or something? And I’ve got to say, I always been curious, and what you know, here I am driving with a vanload of ‘em up to a fucking rave in Shropshire.

Already something here is feeling like pre-ordained, and like really bloody magical and all I can think about, mate, is that my best friend would really fucking love this, and so at this point is where I try reaching you for a second time. If you listen close to that message you can hear the birds all laughing in the background, and this loud bubbly water-pipe that I swear never stopped bubbling once. And we’re talking and they’re really fucking weird, Michael, but basically pleasant as all hell, when you come down to it. This bloke with the pipe—Mick, but he called himself “Chakra”—is telling me all about something called “ley-lines.” You heard of this? *Ley-lines*. Nah, I hadn’t either. According to them, there’s like these lines of energy—like magnetic energy or something—underneath all of England. And there are special places, apparently, like Stonehenge, where a bunch of ‘em all come together like...like...something with a lot of lines in it. And then the driver starts telling me—this guy was kind of quiet and scary, but again, basically nice in the end; name was Tim but he called himself St. Mephisto—but he tells me that he had like a vision that Shropshire is the biggest...line thing of all. Now of course I’m regarding all of this as so much bollocks, but it’s like their water-pipe, so I smile and nod all polite and such. Yes, I’m getting to the point. What, you can’t even *hear* about fun anymore? Is that against the rules?

Jesus. Anyway, by this time this curly-headed bird is like leaning all over me. Yes, really. Oh, you’re listening now, are you? Now there might be shagging in the story, you’re all ears. Anyway, it’s very nice, all the leaning she’s doing—her name’s Jill, by the way, but she calls herself Aquitaine. Anyway, I’m sending out little hints of my own, like reaching across her for the lighter, *grazing* her here, *grazing* her there, basically grazing anything I can bloody graze, when suddenly she opens a little cabinet and takes out a few bottles of ale, and then gets out this little packet of blue pills and shakes a couple into my hand, and I’m like “Is that what I think it is, love?” And she just smiles and even though with pagans I figure it could be anything from quaaludes to bloody kelp extract, I want to be polite, so I swallow ‘em down, glug, glug, glug, and we go back to our brilliant, mystical conversation about energy grids and leprechauns and some shite, and lo and behold, we make it to Shropshire. We’re bumping around in some fucking pasture, I’m flying all over the place—this giant plastic pentagram falls off the ceiling and hits me in the head—and they’re all laughing their bloody heads off at me,

‘cause they like do this all the time, apparently. And lo and behold again, I get up and there’s like a whole fucking...village out there. Vans and trucks and caravans parked every which way. Tents all over the bloody place, and I’m peering out there wondering what I got myself into, when St. Mephisto climbs out of the van and he’s got this big like sea-shell in his hands and he blows into it, no joke: (*makes sea-shell horn sound*).

And apparently, this is the signal they’ve all been waiting for, because suddenly: lights! You wouldn’t have believed it, my friend. Get this: they have, like this giant model of Stonehenge, all the rocks, like all the top things on top, but like all made of *plastic*. And they got lights inside them, and they’re like flashing over here and strobing over there, every color you can imagine. So I jump out of the van and my God! The E is like rushing through my veins already—*already*—which means either A) that it’s really like mind-blowing E or B) that she gave me enough to get off a rhinoceros. Or maybe, perhaps, it was A *and* B. So, anyway, I’m traipsing about all saucer-eyed, grooving on the lights, and even like the breeze on my skin feels like some sort of erotic feather massage. And then the music starts up, and my Christ, I never felt a rush like this before. They got these gi-normous speakers, you know, like ten feet tall. The kind where the bass climbs inside your chest and tries to like recalibrate your heartbeat.

Amazing. It’s like total muscle orgasm, and I’m standing there bloody near paralyzed, just twitching and drooling like, totally helpless. I might still be standing there, except luckily the lanky bird—her name’s Miranda, but she calls herself Pam... (*Slight pause*) I’m not sure I get that one, really. Anyway, she pulls me over and starts dancing with me, and immediately it’s like the best dancing I ever did in my life. You know, I’m like standing outside my body, watching it do all these fucking amazing things and I’m like “Wow! Look at me go! I’m incredible!”

They’re playing this like medley of Celtic techno... Yes, that’s what I said. Celtic techno. Like harps and bagpipes and shite with like bass lines and drum machines. I know, it sounds stupid as all hell, but it was brilliant. And this Celtic music goes on and on and on, until after who knows how long Pam just leans over and starts to kiss me, and just like that, without missing a beat of music, we’re snogging like anteaters and doing some new dance, like a body-rubbing, Celtic lambada kind of thing, I suppose. And she keeps saying something, and I can’t make it out—the music’s too loud, so we dance away from the speaker and she like sticks her lips in my ear and says: “I get very turned on...by older men.” (*Slight pause*) So, anyway, fuck Pam. I go looking for Acquitane.

Dancing my way through, the way you do, you know, this bird here, that bird there, and even for a bit with these two blokes wanted to rub their faces on my shirt. Yeah, my shirt. It was a DKNY, very shiny—I can understand the appeal, you know? But one of the blokes’s got like this bone through his nose, and as obliterated as I am, I’m not above wondering if I want someone’s nose-bone on my DKNY, and I’m trying to figure a way to like extricate myself from the situation when suddenly Acquitane like swoops in out of nowhere and rescues me. She hauls me over to the other side of the circle and like *places* me in this one spot, I don’t ask why, and we dance for a bit, and then she starts to snog me, too! And it’s even better snogging, ‘cause Michael, she’s got that *hair*. My God. Put your face in there, it’s like falling into a bottomless pit of dandelion fuzz. Except...nice.

And we’re dancing and snogging, dancing and snogging, and the E just keeps getting stronger and stronger, and I keep expecting it to top off, but no, it doesn’t, it just

keeps going and I'm a superhero of dance, Michael, I'm the bloody Fred Astaire of Celtic techno. The only thing bringing me down at this moment is this little like sore spot in my heart that's saying "Michael needs to be here. Michael *needs* to be feeling this!"

But I soldier on, you know, stay with the program, and you know how even on the best E, after a while you feel a bit knackered, you know, you wanna like sit down and contemplate stuff, but not me, not the Celtic Fred Astaire, I couldn't get tired if I tried. It almost started to frighten me, Michael. It was like "Is my body ever going to stop?" And I look up, and Acquitane is smiling at me, and it's like she's totally read my mind, 'cause she points at the ground and shouts "It's the ley-lines!" And I'm like holy shite, she's right! I forgot all about all them lines of energy, but she's right—you could like feel it just humming out of the ground, like climbing right up your legs. And we kiss again and the energy is like crackling in her hair; our tongues are like electric eels wrestling.

And all of a sudden, right in the middle of what might be the best moment of my entire life, I get this picture, this totally depressing, buzz-kill of a picture. Guess what it's a picture of. Can't guess? It's you—it's a picture of you. Sitting on your couch with your fiancé. All droopy, watching something on the telly. Maybe reaching over to like sip out of these tiny, sad little teacups. And there's music with this picture, filling my head till I can't hear a bloody note of my dance music. You know what it is? You know what kind of music goes with your picture? Organ music. And I get this terrible moment of understanding. You started your funeral, mate. Twenty, thirty, fifty years early, whatever, but you started the ceremony. Inviting in the geezers with the robes is just a formality. And I'm not going to let you!

Don't you get it, Michael? It's not a funeral! It's not supposed to be a fucking funeral! Not yet! It's going to get you, anyway, mate, but you don't open the fucking door and invite it in!

So I sent you back a little picture of my own. I gathered up all my ley-line energy and blasted it right out to you. A picture of *me*, right at that moment. Doing what I'm doing. And I know you got it! I could feel you getting it, waking up out of your little coma, smiling in gratitude... No, I'm not wasted! Don't say that! You're wasted! Wasting your fucking life! And I know you got it! I connected with you, god damn it! You saw it, you *felt* it. Me: levitating with energy, Celtic techno pulsing in my veins like the water of life. You: taking another sip of tea. Me: body made of nothing but like helium and stainless steel. You: click on the sitcom. Are you getting the picture? Are you beginning to see a pattern? Me: *bathing* in gorgeous, fuzzy pagan-hair. You: rubbing her tired, little feet. You: snug and cozy in your little death-cocoon, leaving me out here all...by...my...bloody *self*!

(Slight pause)

What? Who is this?

(Slight pause)

Hi, Diedre. What? No, I was just talking, you know. No, I'm sorry to disturb you. Make you late for your...whatever. What? Dinner? With you two? But I thought you had a... Oh, after the...baby shower. Well...that's nice. That's, um, very nice of

you. Sounds very nice. But the thing is...I've got plans. You know? Some mates out here, you know. Gonna have a few pints. A little fun, you know. But I appreciate it. I do. Yeah, well. Bye, then. Have fun at your...thing.

(He hangs up. Sits for a moment, then looks up)

Hello, there. No, I'm not depressed. I'm just...contemplating. I'm a contemplative bloke. I'm Ian. Cathy. What a beautiful name. What you got on tonight, Cathy? Are you joking? Peyote and jello shots. Sounds like a winning combination, that does. Do I hear an invitation in there? All right, then, what are we waiting for?

(He stands, starts to follow her, then stops)

You know what, Cathy? You go on in. I'll be right there. I'll meet you at the back. You know, by that giant piranha tank. Go on, I'll just be a moment. Ta.

(He waits for a second, then pulls out his phone and punches buttons.)

Michael. It's...me. That invitation. Is it still good? Great. Great. All right, then. 9:00, Dorking Station. See you there, mate.

(He closes the phone, thinks for a moment, then slowly walks off as the lights fade.)