

Are You a Doctor?

In slippers, pajamas, and robe, he hurried out of the study when the telephone began to ring. Since it was past ten, the call would be his wife. She phoned — late like this, after a few drinks — each night when she was out of town. She was a buyer, and all this week she had been away on business.

“Hello, dear,” he said. “Hello,” he said again.

“Who is this?” a woman asked.

“Well, who is *this*?” he said. “What number do you want?”

“Just a minute,” the woman said. “It’s 273-8063.”

“That’s my number,” he said. “How did you get it?”

“I don’t know. It was written down on a piece of paper when I got in from work,” the woman said.

“Who wrote it down?”

“I don’t know,” the woman said. “The sitter, I guess. It must be her.”

“Well, I don’t know how she got it,” he said, “but it’s my telephone number, and it’s unlisted. I’d appreciate it if you’d just toss it away. Hello? Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I heard,” the woman said.

“Is there anything else?” he said. “It’s late and I’m busy.” He hadn’t meant to be curt, but one couldn’t take chances. He sat down on the chair by the telephone and said, “I hadn’t meant to be curt. I only meant that it’s late, and I’m concerned how you happen to have my number.” He pulled off his slipper and began massaging his foot, waiting.

“I don’t know either,” she said. “I told you I just found the number written down, no note or anything. I’ll ask Annette — that’s the sitter — when I see her tomorrow. I didn’t mean to disturb you. I only just now found the note. I’ve been in the kitchen ever since I came in from work.”

“It’s all right,” he said. “Forget it. Just throw it away or something and forget it. There’s no problem, so don’t worry.” He moved the

receiver from one ear to the other.

"You sound like a nice man," the woman said.

"Do I? Well, that's nice of you to say." He knew he should hang up now, but it was good to hear a voice, even his own, in the quiet room.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I can tell."

He let go his foot.

"What's your name, if you don't mind my asking?" she said.

"My name is Arnold," he said.

"And what's your first name?" she said.

"Arnold is my first name," he said.

"Oh, forgive me," she said. "Arnold is your *first* name. And your second name, Arnold? What's your second name?"

"I really must hang up," he said.

"Arnold, for goodness' sake, I'm Clara Holt. Now *your* name is Mr Arnold what?"

"Arnold Breit," he said and then quickly added, "Clara Holt. That's nice. But I really think I should hang up now, Miss Holt. I'm expecting a call."

"I'm sorry, Arnold. I didn't mean to take up your time," she said.

"That's all right," he said. "It's been nice talking with you."

"You're kind to say that, Arnold."

"Will you hold the phone a minute?" he said. "I have to check on something." He went into the study for a cigar, took a minute lighting it up with the desk lighter, then removed his glasses and looked at himself in the mirror over the fireplace. When he returned to the telephone, he was half afraid she might be off the line.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Arnold," she said.

"I thought you might have hung up."

"Oh no," she said.

"About your having my number," he said. "Nothing to worry about, I don't suppose. Just throw it away, I suppose."

"I will, Arnold," she said.

"Well, I must say goodbye, then."

"Yes, of course," she said. "I'll say good night now."

He heard her draw a breath.

"I know I'm imposing, Arnold, but do you think we could meet

somewhere we could talk? Just for a few minutes?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he said.

"Just for a minute, Arnold. My finding your number and everything. I feel strongly about this, Arnold."

"I'm an old man," he said.

"Oh, you're not," she said.

"Really, I'm old," he said.

"Could we meet somewhere, Arnold? You see, I haven't told you everything. There's something else," the woman said.

"What do you mean?" he said. "What is this exactly? Hello?"

She had hung up.

When he was preparing for bed, his wife called, somewhat intoxicated, he could tell, and they chatted for a while, but he said nothing about the other call. Later, as he was turning the covers down, the telephone rang again.

He picked up the receiver. "Hello. Arnold Breit speaking."

"Arnold, I'm sorry we got cut off. As I was saying, I think it's important we meet."

The next afternoon as he put the key into the lock, he could hear the telephone ringing. He dropped his briefcase and, still in hat, coat, and gloves, hurried over to the table and picked up the receiver.

"Arnold, I'm sorry to bother you again," the woman said. "But you must come to my house tonight around nine or nine-thirty. Can you do that for me, Arnold?"

His heart moved when he heard her use his name. "I couldn't do that," he said.

"Please, Arnold," she said. "It's important or I wouldn't be asking. I can't leave the house tonight because Cheryl is sick with a cold and now I'm afraid for the boy."

"And your husband?" He waited.

"I'm not married," she said. "You will come, won't you?"

"I can't promise," he said.

"I implore you to come," she said and then quickly gave him the address and hung up.

"I implore you to come," he repeated, still holding the receiver. He slowly took off his gloves and then his coat. He felt he had to be careful. He

went to wash up. When he looked in the bathroom mirror, he discovered the hat. It was then that he made the decision to see her, and he took off his hat and glasses and soaped his face. He checked his nails.

"You're sure this is the right street?" he asked the driver.

"This is the street and there's the building," the driver said.

"Keep going," he said. "Let me out at the end of the block."

He paid the driver. Lights from the upper windows illuminated the balconies. He could see planters on the balustrades and here and there a piece of lawn furniture. At one balcony a large man in a sweatshirt leaned over the railing and watched him walk toward the door.

He pushed the button under C. HOLT. The buzzer sounded, and he stepped back to the door and entered. He climbed the stairs slowly, stopping to rest briefly at each landing. He remembered the hotel in Luxembourg, the five flights he and his wife had climbed so many years ago. He felt a sudden pain in his side, imagined his heart, imagined his legs folding under him, imagined a loud fall to the bottom of the stairs. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Then he removed his glasses and wiped the lenses, waiting for his heart to quiet.

He looked down the hall. The apartment house was very quiet. He stopped at her door, removed his hat, and knocked lightly. The door opened a crack to reveal a plump little girl in pajamas.

"Are you Arnold Breit?" she said.

"Yes, I am," he said. "Is your mother home?"

"She said for you to come in. She said to tell you she went to the drug-store for some cough syrup and aspirin."

He shut the door behind him. "What is your name? Your mother told me, but I forgot."

When the girl said nothing, he tried again.

"What is your name? Isn't your name Shirley?"

"Cheryl," she said. "C-h-e-r-y-l."

"Yes, now I remember. Well, I was close, you must admit."

She sat on a hassock across the room and looked at him.

"So you're sick, are you?" he said.

She shook her head.

"Not sick?"

"No," she said.

He looked around. The room was lighted by a gold floor lamp that had a large ashtray and a magazine rack affixed to the pole. A television set stood against the far wall, the picture on, the volume low. A narrow hallway led to the back of the apartment. The furnace was turned up, the air close with a medicinal smell. Hairpins and rollers lay on the coffee table, a pink bathrobe lay on the couch.

He looked at the child again, then raised his eyes toward the kitchen and the glass doors that gave off the kitchen onto the balcony. The doors stood slightly ajar, and a little chill went through him as he recalled the large man in the sweatshirt.

"Mama went out for a minute," the child said, as if suddenly waking up.

He leaned forward on his toes, hat in hand, and stared at her. "I think I'd better go," he said.

A key turned in the lock, the door swung open, and a small, pale, freckled woman entered carrying a paper sack.

"Arnold! I'm glad to see you!" She glanced at him quickly, uneasily, and shook her head strangely from side to side as she walked to the kitchen with the sack. He heard a cupboard door shut. The child sat on the hassock and watched him. He leaned his weight first on one leg and then the other, then placed the hat on his head and removed it in the same motion as the woman reappeared.

"Are you a doctor?" she asked.

"No," he said, startled. "No, I am not."

"Cheryl is sick, you see. I've been out buying things. Why didn't you take the man's coat?" she said, turning to the child. "Please forgive her. We're not used to company."

"I can't stay," he said. "I really shouldn't have come."

"Please sit down," she said. "We can't talk like this. Let me give her some medicine first. Then we can talk."

"I really must go," he said. "From the tone of your voice, I thought there was something urgent. But I really must go." He looked down at his hands and was aware he had been gesturing feebly.

"I'll put on tea water," he heard her say, as if she hadn't been listening. "Then I'll give Cheryl her medicine, and then we can talk."

She took the child by the shoulders and steered her into the kitchen. He saw the woman pick up a spoon, open a bottle of

something after scanning the label, and pour out two doses.

"Now, you say good night to Mr Breit, sweetness, and go to your room."

He nodded to the child and then followed the woman to the kitchen. He did not take the chair she indicated, but instead one that let him face the balcony, the hallway, and the small living room. "Do you mind if I smoke a cigar?" he asked.

"I don't mind," she said. "I don't think it will bother me, Arnold. Please do."

He decided against it. He put his hands on his knees and gave his face a serious expression.

"This is still very much of a mystery to me," he said. "It's quite out of the ordinary, I assure you."

"I understand, Arnold," she said. "You'd probably like to hear the story of how I got your number?"

"I would indeed," he said.

They sat across from each other waiting for the water to boil. He could hear the television. He looked around the kitchen and then out toward the balcony again. The water began to bubble.

"You were going to tell me about the number," he said.

"What, Arnold? I'm sorry," she said.

He cleared his throat. "Tell me how you acquired my number," he said.

"I checked with Annette. The sitter – but of course you know that. Anyway, she told me the phone rang while she was here and it was somebody wanting me. They left a number to call, and it was your number she took down. That's all I know." She moved a cup around in front of her. "I'm sorry I can't tell you any more."

"Your water is boiling," he said.

She put out spoons, milk, sugar and poured the steaming water over the tea bags.

He added sugar and stirred his tea. "You said it was urgent that I come."

"Oh, *that*, Arnold," she said, turning away. "I don't know what made me say that. I can't imagine what I was thinking."

"Then there's nothing?" he said.

"No. I mean yes." She shook her head. "What you said, I mean. Nothing."

"I see," he said. He went on stirring his tea. "It's unusual," he said after

a time, almost to himself. "Quite unusual." He smiled weakly, then moved the cup to one side and touched his lips with the napkin.

"You aren't leaving?" she said.

"I must," he said. "I'm expecting a call at home."

"Not yet, Arnold."

She scraped her chair back and stood up. Her eyes were a pale green, set deep in her pale face and surrounded by what he had at first thought was dark makeup. Appalled at himself, knowing he would despise himself for it, he stood and put his arms clumsily around her waist. She let herself be kissed, fluttering and closing her eyelids briefly.

"It's late," he said, letting go, turning away unsteadily. "You've been very gracious. But I must be leaving, Mrs Holt. Thank you for the tea."

"You will come again, won't you, Arnold?" she said.

He shook his head.

She followed him to the door, where he held out his hand. He could hear the television. He was sure the volume had been turned up. He remembered the other child then – the *boy*. Where was he?

She took his hand, raised it quickly to her lips. "You mustn't forget me, Arnold."

"I won't," he said. "Clara. Clara Holt," he said.

"We had a good talk," she said. She picked at something, a hair, a thread, on his suit collar. "I'm very glad you came, and I feel certain you'll come again." He looked at her carefully, but she was staring past him now, as if she were trying to remember something. "Now – good night, Arnold," she said, and with that she shut the door, almost catching his overcoat.

"Strange," he said as he started down the stairs. He took a long breath when he reached the sidewalk and paused a moment to look back at the building. But he was unable to determine which balcony was hers. The large man in the sweatshirt moved slightly against the railing and continued looking down at him.

He began walking, hands deep in his coat pockets. When he reached home, the telephone was ringing. He stood very quietly in the middle of the room, holding the key between his fingers until the ringing stopped. Then, tenderly, he put a hand against his chest and felt, through the layers of clothes, his beating heart. After a time he made his way into the bedroom.

WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE?

Almost immediately the telephone came alive again, and this time he answered it. "Arnold. Arnold Breit speaking," he said.

"Arnold? My, aren't we formal tonight!" his wife said, her voice strong, teasing. "I've been calling since nine. Out living it up, Arnold?"

He remained silent and considered her voice.

"Are you there, Arnold?" she said. "You don't sound like yourself."

Raymond Carver

WILL YOU PLEASE BE
QUIET, PLEASE?

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