

## JUST ASKING

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**JUST ASKING**

MRS. MENDELSON 90+

ROGER ELLIS 30s

(AN APARTMENT.

MRS. MENDELSON opens the door. ROGER ELLIS is standing in the hall.)

ELLIS

Mrs. Mendelson? I'm Roger Ellis, and I represent...

MRS. MENDELSON

You must be the lawyer. Come in.

(He enters.)

ELLIS

You know who I am?

MRS. MENDELSON

Who else would you be?

ELLIS

You said *the* lawyer. You knew I'd be coming?

MRS. MENDELSON

Apparently.

ELLIS

Can I presume that means you know why I'm here?

MRS. MENDELSON

You heard from Julius?

ELLIS

Yes.

Your husband wants you to stop contacting him.

MRS. MENDELSON

I'm not so sure about that. We loved each other. We had a very good marriage.

ELLIS

I have to presume at least one thing was wrong. Or I wouldn't be here.

MRS. MENDELSON

You want to know what was wrong?

ELLIS

That's not really my business. I'm just following my client's orders.

MRS. MENDELSON

I'll tell you what was wrong.  
I could never record a program in advance on the TV.

I know, I should learn to do it myself.  
But it's nice to have someone to always do something for you.

But it drove Julius crazy. Or so he said. He kept saying I'd better learn,  
because some day he wouldn't be around to tell me.  
So now he wants to teach me a lesson.  
Am I bothering him? I'm just asking how to record on Monday  
what will be playing on Tuesday.

ELLIS

That really isn't my...

MRS. MENDELSON

So I know he thinks he's teaching me a lesson.  
That shows how well we knew each other.

ELLIS

It certainly shows how well he knew you. He knew you'd contact him...

MRS. MENDELSON

Each other. / knew he'd do this.

ELLIS

And, now I'm afraid I have to do *this*.

(He hands her an envelope.)

This is...

MRS. MENDELSON

A letter from Julius.

ELLIS

Yes. Stating that you are not to contact your husband any more.

(Short Pause.)

MRS. MENDELSON

My husband is dead.

(PAUSE.)

ELLIS

What??

MRS. MENDELSON

You didn't know?

ELLIS

No. They just gave me the envelope and told me to see you.

MRS. MENDELSON

Some way to run a business.

ELLIS

Let me understand this.

Your husband is dead, but you've... You *claim* you...

MRS. MENDELSON

We talk several times a week.

ELLIS

(To himself, shaking his head)

Explains why Hayes was smiling when he gave me the envelope.

MRS. MENDELSON

Excuse me?

ELLIS

Nothing. Uh... I'm sorry for your loss.

MRS. MENDELSON

It'll be two months, this coming Thursday.

ELLIS

Again, I'm sorry.

Uh... Yesterday, papers were delivered to my office.

They have detailed instructions about what your husband wants... wanted done.

MRS. MENDELSON

He waits two months to say what he wants? How important could it be?

ELLIS

Apparently, getting the papers to us was an involved process.

Several intermediaries... I'm not really clear on the details.

However, the papers are very specific about his wishes.

MRS. MENDELSON

Which is for me not to contact him. Or so he says.

ELLIS

It's stated very clearly. Right there in paragraph...

MRS. MENDELSON

I can read Mr. Very Clearly.

How well did you know Julius?

ELLIS

I never met him. I've only been with the firm for a couple of months. Before I joined, he engaged my office to handle some matters for him after his death.

MRS. MENDELSON

So there are other matters?

ELLIS

It turned out there was only this one. Although I shouldn't be telling you that.

MRS. MENDELSON

My lips are sealed.  
So, you don't know Julius.

ELLIS

I never had the chance to...

MRS. MENDELSON

You don't know about his habit of always changing his mind. He'd say on Monday he wanted fish for dinner on Tuesday. And on Tuesday, he'd say he wanted steak instead.

ELLIS

That...

MRS. MENDELSON

Or he'd say on Wednesday he wanted to play golf on Thursday, and Thursday he'd say he wanted to take a walk instead.

ELLIS

That may be. But I think it's highly unlikely he'll change his mind about this. Given his...present circumstances.

MRS. MENDELSON

How many envelopes did he send to your office?

ELLIS

I beg your pardon?

MRS. MENDELSON

You said he sent instructions. How many envelopes?

ELLIS

I said he sent papers. I didn't say envelopes.

MRS. MENDELSON

But they were in envelopes.

ELLIS

I really can't...

MRS. MENDELSON

And you're supposed to open a new one each day.  
Am I right?

ELLIS

As I said, I can't...

MRS. MENDELSON

You don't have to. I'm right. That shows how well we knew each other.  
Also, he told me all about this. Last night.

ELLIS

Last night.

MRS. MENDELSON

That's how I knew who you were when I opened the door.

ELLIS

Mrs. Mendelson...I'll put this as gently as I can...

MRS. MENDELSON

And if I don't contact him, who will?

ELLIS

I don't...

MRS. MENDELSON

Not your concern?

ELLIS

To be honest, no.

MRS. MENDELSON

And if I refuse?

ELLIS

Then I'm authorized to take further action.

MRS. MENDELSON

Such as?

ELLIS

That remains to be seen.

MRS. MENDELSON

You threaten someone my age?

ELLIS

I'm not threatening you. I honestly don't know. I've only opened the first envelope. I'll open the second one tomorrow.

MRS. MENDELSON

Want to know what it will say?

ELLIS

Not...

MRS. MENDELSON

I'll tell you what it will say.

It will say I didn't listen to you. So you have to come back and give me another legal paper.

It will say you told me not to contact him, but I couldn't help myself.

ELLIS

If you know that, why will you...continue to do...whatever it is you're doing?

MRS. MENDELSON

I won't be able to help myself.

As a matter of fact, I'll do it right after you leave.

There's a program I want to see tomorrow night.

ELLIS

Well, I've done what I came here to do. I hope this doesn't become...messy.

MRS. MENDELSON

I'll tell you what could be messy. If I try to record the TV by myself.

You want me to lose every episode from *Game of Thrones*?

ELLIS

Personally, I sympathize. But this isn't a personal matter.

MRS. MENDELSON

Speak for yourself. For me, this is very personal.

ELLIS

Of course it is.

And...there are...some people...who might try to use a situation like this to their advantage.

MRS. MENDELSON

Is this how you talk to a grieving widow?

ELLIS

This may sound cold, but, since you brought it up...  
You don't exactly seem to be a grieving widow.  
Sorry. I shouldn't have said that.

MRS. MENDELSON

I'm not grieving enough to suit you? Maybe that's because I still have Julius.  
When I talk to him, it's like he's still here.  
Would you deny me that?

ELLIS

This is a very difficult time. And I'm sure that...whatever you're doing...  
is helping you get through it.  
But perhaps you might be better off if you... I'm overstepping here, but...  
At some point you'll realize it's impossible to talk to the dead.  
Then where will you be? Have you thought about that?

MRS. MENDELSON

No. I'll ask Julius what he thinks.

And anyway, Mr. "Can't Talk to Julius," isn't that why you're here?  
To tell me to stop? So if you're here to tell me to stop — *sequitur*,  
which means, "it follows", if you don't mind me using a little Latin —  
that I *have* been talking to the dead. *In hoc casu* — again, a little Latin,  
"in this case" — Julius.

(PAUSE.)

ELLIS

You speak Latin??

MRS. MENDELSON

*Paucis verbis.* I picked up a few words from a dead college professor.  
A very nice man, but sometimes a little pedantic.

You know, there's a long history of people contacting the dead.

(This sets Ellis off.)

ELLIS

There's a long history of people *claiming* to contact the dead.  
All of whom have been proven to be fakes preying on people.  
And some of those people pay a very high price.

MRS. MENDELSON

So, you have strong feelings about this?

ELLIS

Sorry... I shouldn't have said anything.

MRS. MENDELSON

No, it's good for you to get it off your chest.

But as long as we're making speeches... You should know I don't take advantage.  
And any praying I do, it's just to ask for things to be better.

ELLIS

We shouldn't even be having this conversation.  
But every time I hear something like... Mrs. Mendelson, do you really think  
you talk to the dead?

MRS. MENDELSON

Living... Dead... What did that Chinese man say?  
I dreamed I was a butterfly. When I woke up, maybe I was a butterfly  
dreaming I was a man.  
That's a wonderful thing, to go back and forth like that between a butterfly  
and a man. I go back and forth between the living and dead.  
Which, apparently, makes you a little upset.

ELLIS

I get upset because... Anyone who thinks they can do that...isn't thinking very clearly.  
No — they're not thinking at all.

MRS. MENDELSON

It's important to think. Because when people don't think,  
they wind up voting for certain people for president whose names,  
if you don't mind, I'd rather not say.  
But sometimes you can think too much. Sometimes you just have to let go  
and let it be.

ELLIS

All right. I really don't care. As long as you keep your delusions to yourself, and...

MRS. MENDELSON

I know, I know. Don't take advantage. Tell me, Mr. Burn-Her-At-the-Stake, why is this such an issue with you? Just asking.

ELLIS

It doesn't matter.

MRS. MENDELSON

Did someone dead bite you when you were a child?

ELLIS

Actually, you could put it that way. I was taught a very painful lesson.

MRS. MENDELSON

Which was? Don't touch a hot stove?

ELLIS

I was six. I heard my parents talking about it. My Aunt Sally had just died. Because she followed the advice of a... someone who claimed to be a medium.

MRS. MENDELSON

That sounds terrible.

ELLIS

It was.  
I loved Aunt Sally.

No one knew she was involved with...that woman. It wasn't until after she died that... My parents had her diary. She...missed her husband...and this woman led her to believe they were in contact with him. The last entry in her diary said the medium had told her to go to a lake and... She never got there. There was a car accident. Drunk driver... Head-on collision... If she hadn't been on her way there...

MRS. MENDELSON

I'm...

ELLIS

So don't tell me it's harmless. I know it's not.

Houdini devoted his life to exposing mediums. Sometimes I wish I could do the same.

Which explains why I was given this job. And no one told me your husband was dead. It's a joke.

MRS. MENDELSON

Not to me.

ELLIS

Sorry, I didn't mean that. It's a prank the people in my office are playing on me. They know how I feel about this. So Hayes thought it'd be funny to... He was smiling when he gave me the envelope. Know what he said? "This one's right up your alley."

MRS. MENDELSON

Just so you know... I never tell people to go anywhere. I just sit in that chair, all by myself, and wait. Sometimes they come. Sometimes they don't. Lately, I've been lucky. I think maybe it has something to do with global warming.

ELLIS

Clearly, we have very different ideas about this. I've told you mine. I don't want to hear...

MRS. MENDELSON

You know, sometimes a door opens. How or why, or who opens it, who knows. But ever since I was a child...as a matter of fact, I think it started when I was six... I knew things. Things I knew no one would believe. Do I know why? No. Do I ask? No. I just accept.

ELLIS

Y'know, there's something you people never seem to think of. That the dead don't want to talk to the living.

MRS. MENDELSON

That's not what they tell me.

ELLIS

My mother died eight years ago. She was a very private person. She would not like being "contacted."

MRS. MENDELSON

Are you sure?  
She's probably very disappointed she doesn't hear from you.

ELLIS

That's it.

Mrs. Mendelson... Your husband has made himself clear.  
I've done what I came here to do.

(ELLIS strides out.)

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

(LIGHTS UP on the apartment. MRS. MENDELSON has just opened the door. ELLIS is standing in the hall. He holds an envelope.)

MRS. MENDELSON

Oh, it's Mr. Here's Another Envelope. Come in.

(He ENTERS.)

ELLIS

This is a letter threatening legal action if you don't stop contacting Julius.

MRS. MENDELSON

Julius is dead.

ELLIS

I know that. And I feel like an idiot coming here and...

MRS. MENDELSON

So he's not going to know if you don't follow his instructions. Unless I tell him. Which, believe me, I have no intention of doing. So why don't you just let Julius and I work this out between us.

ELLIS

Because Julius is dead.

MRS. MENDELSON

You think I don't know that?

ELLIS

And he's my client...

MRS. MENDELSON

Was.

ELLIS

...and it's my job to follow my client's instructions.

MRS. MENDELSON

I don't think that's such a good idea. And I'm not the only one. Your mother agrees with me.

ELLIS

My mother?

MRS. MENDELSON

I spoke to her yesterday. Right after I contacted Julius.

ELLIS

And how is Marsha?

MRS. MENDELSON

I wouldn't know.

ELLIS

Even though you spoke to her?

MRS. MENDELSON

Yes. Because you're mother's name is Andrea.  
You think it's nice to try to trick me like that?

ELLIS

But you can try to trick me.

MRS. MENDELSON

Who's tricking? I spoke to your mother, and she says I should tell you  
that she said to stop bothering me.

ELLIS

After everything I...

MRS. MENDELSON

Oh, she wants to know, did you finish law school?

ELLIS

Is that the best you can do? Not something a little more tantalizing?  
Like did I...

MRS. MENDELSON

And also, did you marry that nice girl you were seeing? Yvette.

(PAUSE.)

ELLIS

How did you find out my wife's name?

MRS. MENDELSON

Your mother told me.  
She'll be very happy to hear she's your wife now.  
When did you marry? Just asking.

ELLIS

I'm not going to tell you that!  
You people... You worm information out of people, then you use that to worm more,  
and then you...

MRS. MENDELSON

No one's worming. I just thought your mother would like to know.

ELLIS

To even pretend you spoke to...

MRS. MENDELSON

OK, Mr. Temper Tantrum. We won't talk about it anymore.

Although, I have to tell you, your mother said you'd react this way.

Oh, she wants me to tell you they didn't mean for you to hear that conversation  
about Aunt Sally. They thought you were asleep upstairs. They didn't know  
you were listening until they saw you standing there, holding that little bear  
you loved so much. Benny? The one that had a button for a nose?

ELLIS

(Thrown, almost in a trance)

There is no way you could know that.

MRS. MENDELSON

Your mother told me.  
Anyway, I'll tell her you married Yvette a few years ago. That way, I'll be able to...

ELLIS

(Still dazed)

Five. We were married five years ago.

MRS. MENDELSON

You have children?  
I assume she'll ask.

ELLIS

(On automatic)

Not yet.

MRS. MENDELSON

She always wanted grandchildren.

ELLIS

(Still on automatic)

Yes, she did. She said that for years.

MRS. MENDELSON

Working on it? Just asking.

ELLIS

(Finally recovering)

OK. That's enough!

I have no idea how you know...what you know.

I won't take part in this!

From now on...if I come here again... There is to be no more of...*this!*

The subject is closed!

MRS. MENDELSON

Don't get so excited. There's only two more envelopes.

ELLIS

How do you... I'm not going to answer that.

MRS. MENDELSON

So, I'll see you tomorrow then?

(ELLIS grunts and walks out.)

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

(LIGHTS UP on the apartment. MRS. MENDELSON has just opened the door. ELLIS is standing in the hall. He holds an envelope.)

MRS. MENDELSON

Want some lunch? Coffee?

(She steps aside. He enters.)

ELLIS

No thank you. I came to give you this. It's a final warning, instructing me to...

MRS. MENDELSON

I've got some news for you, Mr. Final Warning. It's not only me who wants you to stop doing this. And your mother. Julius wants you to stop, too.

He told me, he doesn't mind me contacting him anymore.

ELLIS

How convenient.

Well, you've got your delusions. I've got my instructions.

MRS. MENDELSON

Want to know why?

ELLIS

No.

MRS. MENDELSON

Aside from the fact that he was always going to change his mind.

ELLIS

I don't...

MRS. MENDELSON

He's lonely. And if you ask me, I think that he thinks this is a better lesson to teach me. Because every time I want to record a program, I have to ask him. He's a little bored. This gives him something to do.

ELLIS

Mrs. Mendelson...

MRS. MENDELSON

So I guess you know what this means.  
It's time to open the blue envelope.

ELLIS

I'm not going to ask how you know about that.

MRS. MENDELSON

Julius told me.

ELLIS

Did he also tell you about the special instructions regarding the blue envelope?

MRS. MENDELSON

Yes. He said don't open it...

ELLIS

Then I can't open it, can I?

MRS. MENDELSON

...except under one condition. And you know what that condition is.

ELLIS

Suppose you tell me.

MRS. MENDELSON

Someone will say to you, it's time to open the blue envelope.  
And you should tell them, the only way you can open it is under one condition.  
Sound familiar so far?

ELLIS

This still hasn't met the condition.

MRS. MENDELSON

I'm getting to that.  
You'll be asked a question. A question that contains a word that wouldn't come up  
casually in an ordinary conversation.  
Sound familiar?

ELLIS

That isn't the question.

MRS. MENDELSON

Don't be a smart mouth.

You know why Julius left those instructions?  
I do, because I know my Julius. I told you he'd change his mind about this.  
And I know that he knew that I'd know he'd change his mind.  
And he'd know that I knew that he'd know the only way for *you* to know  
he'd changed his mind was a special instruction from a person  
who used a code word.  
And who would that person be? Me.

ELLIS

You still haven't asked the question. Or used the word.

MRS. MENDELSON

I'm getting to that. You sure you don't want lunch?

ELLIS

Thank you. I've already eaten.

MRS. MENDELSON

Then perhaps I could interest you in desert? Maybe a nice piece of *cantaloupe*?

ELLIS

Oh. He told you the word before he died.

MRS. MENDELSON

He told me the word last night.

So now you can go back to your office and open the blue envelope.  
And when you do, you'll see it says he changed his mind (what else is new?).  
Or, as my friend the college professor would say, *non mirum*, "no surprise."

And I can contact Julius.  
And you can stop pestering me with this nonsense.

ELLIS

It will be my pleasure.  
I can't wait to get back to my office and open that envelope.  
I didn't go to law school for this!  
This has been a ridiculous waste of my time.

MRS. MENDELSON

Maybe not such a waste of time.  
I have a message from Aunt Sally.

She'd like you to know that's not the way it happened. With the medium and the lake.  
She decided the medium was a fake, and wasn't going to see her anymore.  
When that accident happened, she wasn't on her way to the lake.  
She was just out doing some errands.

ELLIS

You're forgetting about her diary.

MRS. MENDELSON

That last entry, that your parents read, was written the night before.  
She changed her mind in the morning. But she never got to write about it.

(PAUSE.)

ELLIS

(Almost to himself)

I'd actually like to believe you. It would...

(He doesn't finish.)

MRS. MENDELSON

And she said to tell you, "Aunt Sarry sends you a hug."  
You want me to...

(She begins to open her arms, offering the hug.)

ELLIS

Aunt Sarry??

MRS. MENDELSON

She said you had trouble with your /s.

(PAUSE.)

ELLIS

(Quiet)

I have to go back to the office.

MRS. MENDELSON

First, have some cantaloupe.

ELLIS

(Smiles in spite of himself)

You don't have to keep using the word. And as I've said, I've already eaten.

MRS. MENDELSON

This time I'm not just asking. I insist.

ELLIS

And why is that?

MRS. MENDELSON

Your mother wants you to eat more fruit.

(PAUSE.... Then:)

(ELLIS laughs.)

ELLIS

She said that for years.

MRS. MENDELSON

She's right. Everyone should eat more fruit.

Have a piece of cantaloupe. It'll make your mother happy.

ELLIS

(Softening)

OK, I'll have some cantaloupe.

MRS. MENDELSON

I'll cut the skin off. Just the way you like it.

(ELLIS can't hide his surprise at this.)

MRS. MENDELSON

And I'll cut it into little cubes.

(ELLIS is astounded.)

MRS. MENDELSON

And don't worry – I won't forget the toothpick. Always a toothpick, never a fork.

ELLIS

How could you *possibly*... You can't... You couldn't...

MRS. MENDELSON

Living... Dead... Mothers know.

(ELLIS takes a few seconds to recover.)

ELLIS

I'll tell you what... You tell me where you've been getting your information about me... And I'll show you how to record programs in advance.

MRS. MENDELSON

That's a very nice offer.  
But I have to say no thank you.

ELLIS

All right. Then since we won't be seeing each other again — if you're right about the blue envelope — why don't you just tell me. I'm curious.  
How did you find out all those things about me?  
Just asking.

MRS. MENDELSON

Your mother...

ELLIS

Fine. Don't tell me.

MRS. MENDELSON

Although it's not information, so much as two mothers talking.

ELLIS

Oh, for...

MRS. MENDELSON

And regarding the other part of your offer...  
I can program the TV myself now. I learned last night.

I decided it was time.

(Continued...)

MRS. MENDELSON (Continued)

It's nice to have someone to always do something for you.  
But you also have to learn to do for yourself. Because you never know.

Even I can still learn something.

(PAUSE.)

MRS. MENDELSON

Although, it makes Julius feel good when I ask him for help.  
He says it drives him crazy. But I know — Secretly, he likes it.

Tonight, I'll tell him about the blue envelope. So he'll know you followed his instructions.  
And, if you don't mind, I'll tell your mother you'll start eating more fruit.

ELLIS

Mrs. Mendelson, could you...

Tell her Yvette is pregnant.

(BLACK OUT.)