

ROBOCALLER

by

PH Cook

FADE IN:

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Close on framed photos of a family. A MAN (40s), a WOMAN (30s), TWO KIDS. Everyone happy in every picture.

In the background, sounds of someone making coffee.

Continue close on other items. Awards of various types. Scholastic, athletic, artistic.

VERNON JONES (80s), in pajamas and robe, pours coffee into a mug, places it on the table next to his cell phone, then heads towards the front door.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

The front door opens. Vernon steps out onto the front porch.

He looks down his driveway. Newspaper is there. He takes the steps down to fetch it, picks it up.

A car comes down the street.

A hint of happiness in Vernon's eyes.

The car stops in front of the neighboring house. A WOMAN gets out. Her sunglasses obscures most of her face. Hard to read her, but she doesn't look very friendly.

She glances in Vernon's direction.

He produces a smile and a wave.

VERNON
Good morning.

She continues to her house with a tiny wave back at Vernon. Something between a weak hello and a dismissive, go away.

Dejected, Vernon's face falls. He trudges back to his house.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Vernon enters the house, newspaper in hand. He sits down at the table where his coffee cup waits and unfolds the paper.

He reads some articles.

Turns a page. Reads some more.

Obituaries. He's not listed. That's good.

He sips his coffee, settles on the crossword puzzle.

His phone rings.

Startled, but in a good way, Vernon fumbles for the phone. With a smile of anticipation, he answers.

VERNON

Hello.

On the other end, a recorded message.

RECORDED MESSAGE

This is an important message.
Please do not hang up.

Annoyed, Vernon ends the call, puts the phone back down on the table. With a disappointed sigh, he glares at it, then turns back to the crossword puzzle. Every now and then, he glances at the phone, but it stays quiet.

LATER

The phone lies silent on the table while the sound of Vernon running water in the bathroom, getting dressed in the bedroom fills the space.

Vernon enters from the bedroom. He's washed and dressed. Ready for another day of nothing...

He passes some of the framed photos of the family, then stops, takes a step back. He looks at the photos. A loving smile on his face.

He walks over to the table, picks up his phone, thinks for a moment, then puts the phone back down.

He steps over to the window, gazes out at nothing.

After a moment, he makes up his mind. He turns to the table, snatches the phone, then pushes a few buttons.

With nervous anticipation, he waits while it rings.

MAN

(on phone)

I can't answer the phone right now.
Leave a message and I promise to
call back as soon as I can.

Disappointed with the message, he still hangs on, leaves a message of his own after the beep.

VERNON

Hi. It's me.

Not sure what to say.

VERNON

Your dad. Uhm. I hope you all are doing well. I'm doing okay. Trying to stay busy.

Another pause while he ponders what to say.

VERNON

Sometimes the mail lady has time for a chat if she doesn't have too much mail to deliver. Her name is Lauren. She's very nice. Maybe she will bring me a birthday card today. I've told her to keep an eye out since --

BEEP

The end of the voicemail.

VERNON

-- my birthday was two days ago...

A heavy sigh, then he puts the phone back on the table.

He goes to the kitchen, opens the fridge.

The phone rings.

He hurries back to the table. Doesn't even shut the fridge. Eagerly, he grabs the phone, answers it.

VERNON

Hello.
Hi.
I don't want to sign up.

FEMALE VOICE

Hi. This is Jenny. I'm calling you to let you know about our great deals for new customers on our unlimited phone and text pla. Please press one to --

Disappointed and angry, Vernon ends the call, tosses it down on the table. He shuffles back to the kitchen, closes the fridge door, then heads to the living room area where he sits down on the couch.

He grabs the remote, turns on the TV. Politics!

He changes channel. More politics. Changes again. News. Bad news. Disasters.

Vernon turns the TV off followed by a heavy sigh. He glances around the room. Looks for something to do, but nothing inspires him.

The phone rings.

This time he doesn't hurry, just looks in the direction of the kitchen table. Is it worth answering?

He decides it is, gets up, picks up the phone.

VERNON

Hello.

INT. JIM'S APARTMENT - DAY

In a cramped home office, JIM (35) sits at an equally cramped desk. A computer in front of him, a headset on his head. His hair hasn't seen a comb in days. Nor his face a razor. That shirt looks pretty grimy too.

With forced excitement and big smile, he speaks into the mic.

JIM

Good morning! My name is Jim with the sunshine timeshare company. Is this Mister Vernon Jones I'm speaking with?

INTERCUT:

Vernon, thinks for a bit, then decides to play along.

VERNON

Yes, this is he.

JIM

Oh great. Great. Great. How are you doing today, sir?

Jim is going 100mph. Vernon cruises at 30mph.

VERNON

I'm doing okay.

JIM

That's fantastic! Boy, do I --

VERNON

How are you doing, Jim?

JIM
I'm fine, thank you. I have a
really amazing deal on --

VERNON
Did you watch the Red Sox
yesterday?

Jim's losing speed. WTF?

JIM
No. I did not.

Jim tries to get back in gear.

JIM
The reason I'm calling you today
Vernon, is that I have an unheard
offer of a deal for you on a time
share on the beaches in Florida.

VERNON
It was a hell of a game.

Jim rolls his eyes. Patience tested.

JIM
I'm sure it was. Now this offer I
have for you --

VERNON
Have you bought one of these time
shares you're selling?

Jim scoffs, glances around his office.

JIM
No, Mister Jones, I have not.

VERNON
Why not?

Jim's flabbergasted. Loses his patience.

JIM
Why not? Because I'm fucking broke,
man.

VERNON
I see. Why are you broke, Jim?

JIM

Well, Mister Jones, it was nice talking to you, but since you're obviously not going to buy anything I have to move along here.

VERNON

Don't hang up. Please...

Jim softens a little at Vernon's quiet plea.

JIM

This isn't a social call. I told you I'm broke. I have to get to the next call. If I don't, I'm going to be even more broke.

VERNON

Tell me about yourself, Jim.

JIM

What is this? Some kind of Hannibal Lechter quid pro quo shit?

VERNON

Are you married?

A hint of sadness hits, Jim.

JIM

Married? No. Not anymore.

VERNON

Why not?

Jim rolls his eyes.

JIM

Why not? Because, no woman wants to be married to someone who wakes up screaming every night and pisses his pants every time a kid pops his balloon or someone shoots off fireworks.

Silence for a moment.

VERNON

PTSD? There's help you know for that kind of thing.

JIM

Oh wow! I had no idea! So, instead of losing everything I had and suffering these last ten years, all I had to do was seek help. Oh jeez! Why didn't I think of that.

VERNON

What happened?

Jim sighs, sits back. Serious. Down to 30mph as well.

JIM

Same ugly shit that happens in every war, Vernon.

Vernon's gaze drifts off into space. Reflecting.

JIM

What about you? What makes you so desperate to talk to someone, you have to resort to talking to a robocaller?

VERNON

I don't have anyone that wants to talk to me. I'm eighty-two. Not gone yet. I'm still here. But, somehow everyone seem to already have forgot about me. Like I don't exist.

Jim can sympathize. Decides to give Vernon a break.

JIM

No one really wants to talk to me either. I don't know why. I look normal. No scars on the outside, but somehow they all seem to sense that something's off.

They sit quiet again.

VERNON

What happened to you, Jim?

JIM

In Afghanistan?

VERNON

Afghanistan. Yes.

Jim weighs whether or not he wants to go there. Thinks back. Gathers strength, then decides to do it.

JIM

It started out like any other day in that hellhole. A routine transport of a contractor to Bagram. There were three of us besides the contractor.

Jim's flooded with bad memories.

JIM

Ricky was driving. Dwayne and I were providing armed support. Ricky was the kind of guy you could always count on for a good time. Always joking, having fun. Making the best of every shitty situation. The half full glass.

Jim reaches for a bottle of water. Drinks it as if it's a bottle of Jack.

JIM

Dwayne, was a big guy. The nicest guy you've ever met. He'd do anything for anyone. Never asked for anything in return. A genuinely nice guy.

Jim pauses, scrunches his brow.

JIM

The contractor, man... For the life of me, I can never remember his name. No matter how many times I'm told, I just can't remember him.

VERNON

What happened?

Jim's very somber as emotions grow stronger.

JIM

We hit an IED. Big motherfucker too. Our truck went up twenty feet in the air. The contractor died instantly.

His voice shaky.

JIM

I remember being on the ground. Dwayne had landed on top of me. He was crying for his mom. I heard Ricky screaming. I looked over.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

Saw him lying by the side of the road on fire. He was still moving. I needed to get to him. Put out the flames, but Dwayne was so heavy. I couldn't move. I yelled out to Ricky. Told him I was coming, but I couldn't get there. He burned to death in front of me.

Vernon takes a tissue out of his pocket, dabs his eye.

JIM

I finally got Dwayne off of me. That's when I saw his whole front was a fucked up mess. I pulled his shirt open thinking I was going to try to stop his bleeding, but all I saw was his insides. His guts were coming out.

Jim's struggling. This is hard. His recurring nightmare.

JIM

I tried to keep them from coming out, but I couldn't. It was like a pot that's boiling over. It just kept flowing over. I tried to put his intestines back, but they got tangled up. I had his liver in my hands. It was so slippery. And this whole time, he kept crying for his mama.

Jim cries.

JIM

The nicest guy I've ever met died in my arms with his insides spilled out on a dusty road in a far away land where no one could give a shit what happened to him.

Jim takes a few moments, then composes himself.

JIM

And that, Vernon, is what happened. War is an ugly thing. I don't expect you to understand.

Vernon's turn get serious.

VERNON

The scars of war may not ever go away, but you can learn to live with them.

Jim scoffs.

JIM

Not scars on the brain, man.

Deep in thought, Vernon's gaze drifts off through the window.

VERNON

I was eight years old. I remember being cold. Coldest I've ever been. I was with my mother and my little sister. The snow was falling when we stepped off the train.

Jim casually listens.

VERNON

They separated us into groups. Men and females. I was big for my age, so they sent me with the men.

(beat)

That was the last time I saw my mother and my sister.

Jim crinkles his brow. Pays more attention.

VERNON

They made us walk to the barracks. It was a long way. By the time we got there, I had no feelings in my hands or feet. I remember thinking I would be warm once we got inside.

Vernon gathers strength to continue.

VERNON

The barrack was filled past capacity. Filled with dead and dying men. I was so scared. I just wanted to be with mother. I didn't know what this place was. Then one of the kapos saw me. He took a liking to me. This turned out to be both a blessing and a nightmare.

Vernon has Jim's full attention.

VERNON

He was a sadistic son of a bitch.
As mean as any of the Nazis. He
enjoyed the little power he had.

(beat)

By the time the British arrived,
most of the people that came at the
same time as me were dead or wanted
to be. Starvation and typhoid made
sure of that...

(beat)

As cruel as he was, I credit that
kapo for my survival, because as
long as I gave him pleasure, he did
give me those extra scraps.

JIM

You were in a concentration camp?

Vernon nods solemnly.

VERNON

Bergen - Belsen.

JIM

What happened after the British
came? How did you end up here?

VERNON

I spent two years in England, then
someone knew somebody who knew a
family in America who wanted to
adopt, and they sent me off.

JIM

Wow.

VERNON

Turns out they weren't really
looking to adopt out of love. They
mostly just needed a farmhand. I
had a tiny room in their attic on
their farm in Wisconsin. It was
very hard work, but I had a warm
bed to sleep in, plenty of food and
no one ever laid a hand on me.

JIM

That's some heavy shit, Vernon.

They stay quiet. Reflecting on each other's stories. Until --

VERNON

Where do you live, Jim?

Jim smiles. Happy to move on.

JIM
Some shithole place you've never
heard of.

VERNON
Try me. I've been around.

JIM
Palatka Florida.

VERNON
I know where that is. My wife
worked for years in accounting at
the paper mill. I'm in Saint
Augustine.

JIM
Really! I love Saint Auggie.

VERNON
Well, drive on over. We can have
lunch at the White Lion.

Jim's excited. So is, Vernon.

JIM
Okay. I will. How about tomorrow?

VERNON
I got nothing else to do.

JIM
Great! I'll see you at the White
Lion at noon?

VERNON
It's a date.

They end their call. Both happy.

Vernon heads towards his bedroom. Notices the family photos
when he pass. He ponders for a moment, then heads back to his
phone on the table, dials a number.

MAN
(on phone)
I can't answer the phone right now.
Leave a message and I promise to
call back as soon as I can.

After the beep, vernon is eager to leave a message.

VERNON

Hi. It's me again. Just wanted to let you know that if you were planning on calling me, don't do it tomorrow, I'll be busy. I'm having lunch with a friend... Bye.

FADE OUT: