On Hold

by

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FADE IN:

INT. HOUSE - DAY

A bare, minimal house. Nothing out of place.

SAM (early 30s) stands in front of the hallway mirror in trousers and shirt.

He stares at his reflection as he holds his unfastened tie in both hands as it rests around his neck.

He breathes slow, deep. Closes his eyes.

SAM You can do this.

He glances to the other wall - a family photograph hangs there; pride of place. Sam and BETH (30s), they both look happy. In her arms a BABY.

BLACK.

SAM (O.S.) You can do this, Sam.

INT. OFFICE - NIGHT

MR. JOHNSON (mid 50s) leads Sam through an almost endless stream of identical telephone 'pods'.

MR JOHNSON Well, it always takes some getting used to, Sam. You're doing a great thing though -- just you try and remember that.

Sam smiles, half-heartedly, as Mr Johnson stops, turns, then snaps his arm out to gesture to an empty pod.

> MR JOHNSON Your new home!

Sam glances around then slowly takes the seat.

MR JOHNSON Never hang up on a caller, don't give out your personal details and a five minute break every two hours. For anything else -- Val...

Sam opens his mouth to speak but Mr Johnson is already gone.

He looks down at the telephone on his desk, the headset, then finally over his shoulder to VAL (mid-60s,motherly). VAL (with a smile) Cuppa? Sam smiles, lets out a small sigh and nods. LATER Sam sips his cup of tea. VAL I've always been a helper. 'Do-gooder' some people call me. So I guess I've always been doing this... in a way. SAM It must be rewarding. VAL At times. It's mostly just depressing... I think that's the hardest part, not letting it bring you right down... or at least trying. Sam offers a sympathetic smile, reaches into his pocket and pulls out a photograph. He gazes at it with sadness. VAL Family? Sam nods and hands over the photograph. SAM Isn't that gorgeous. A lovely, lovely family. She hands the photograph back. Sam pins it to the wall of his pod. VAL (O.S.) You're a lucky man. Sam simply stares at the photograph, as if in his own little world. In the background, Val lowers her head, sighs, then turns back to her own pod. Sam's phone rings.

Sam's gaze snaps to the phone, reaches for the headset and puts it on.

SUPER: CALL ONE

He presses 'answer' on the phone's keypad.

SAM

Hello, how can I help?

Silence...

SAM Hello? How can I --

FEMALE CALLER The bastard!

Sam's eyes widen. He turns to look for Val, but she's on a call of her own.

FEMALE CALLER The selfish bastard!

Her voice suggests she's a little drunk.

SAM How can I -- How can I help?

SNORT of laughter on the line.

FEMALE CALLER You've already said that. Is that the best you've got? I'm fucked if it is.

SAM It's my first day.

Silence.

SAM You're my first caller, actually.

FEMALE CALLER Well, woopdy-fucking-doo!

Sam cringes.

SAM I'm sorry. Let's get back to your FEMALE CALLER You sound just as useless as him. You just as bloody selfish too?

SAM Well, I'd like to think not.

He glances at his photograph.

FEMALE CALLER Oh, what's the fucking point.

Dialing tone...

Sam lowers his head and closes his eyes.

VAL (O.S.) The first one is always tough. Drunk?

Sam turns around in his chair.

SAM Yeah, I think so.

VAL

(nodding)
Just lonely, I'm guessing. It's
normally around the bottle and a
half stage where they need to talk
to someone. At least with wine.

SAM Sounds like you're speaking from experience.

VAL From both sides, yes. It gets tough being on your own. But, you wouldn't know that.

She gestures to the photograph with a warm smile.

Sam follows her gaze.

Sam's phone rings.

VAL Oh, you're up!

Sam picks up the headset with more confidence than before.

SUPER: CALL TWO

He gives a determined look to his photograph then presses answer.

SAM Hello, how can I help?

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER Hello? Hello?

Sam smiles.

SAM (raises his voice a little) Hi, how can I help?

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER Can you speak up, please?

SAM (almost shouting) I'm sorry. How can I help?

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER Ah, that's better. Can hear you now. It's good to hear someone actually talk.

Sam looks back to his photograph, pulls it off the wall and places it on the desk in front of him. Gazes down at it.

SAM I'm pleased. What would you like to talk about? You talk. I listen.

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER Oh, I'd much rather hear you talk. You sound a lot like my son. Not that I see him, or even hear from him very often.

SAM I'm happy to talk just --

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER He works away you see. Very busy. Very important. Doesn't have time for his mam.

Sam lets out a little sigh.

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER I can't blame him, it's just... you know, since Alfie died, it gets so lonely here by myself.

Sam traces his finger over the woman's face in the photograph.

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER I wish I had gone first.

Sam traces his finger over the baby in the photograph.

SAM You don't mean that.

ELDERLY FEMALE CALLER Just a call once in a while, that's all. You'd think he'd have time for that, wouldn't you? For his mam.

SAM You would. But sometimes people don't know what they've got. I hardly ever call my mam.

He pins the photograph back on the wall.

BATHROOM - LATER

Sam throws cold water over his face. Stares into the mirror in front of him.

From one of the closed cubicles behind him BLOOD starts to flow from under the door. Sam spots it in the mirror then turns around.

He walks to the door.

SAM

Hello?

The blood reaches his shoes and he takes a step back.

He looks around for help.

SAM

Hello!?

He walks through the blood. Bangs on the door.

SAM

Are you okay in there?

He bangs harder. Bangs with his fist.

SAM For christ's sake, are you okay!?

He barges it with his shoulder. No movement.

Again. He grimaces with pain in his shoulder. Still no movement. He backs up.

Charges the door again. Crashes through. Stumbles to the floor.

Empty.

He looks at the floor, dumbfounded. No blood. The floor is spotless.

He staggers to his feet.

OFFICE

Darkness. Empty.

In the far distance, a light - Sam's pod.

A distant phone rings. Barely audible.

Sam walks along. Slowly. His eyes squint and strain through the darkness.

The phone grows louder as he gets closer to the light.

It's almost deafening as he stands over his desk.

He looks all around. At Val's empty desk. Then to the ringing phone.

He lowers himself into the seat.

Picks up his headset.

With a trembling hand, he hovers his finger over 'answer'.

SUPER: CALL THREE

Presses it.

BETH

-- Sam?

Sam leans forward in his chair. Moves the earpiece more firmly in place.

BETH Sam? Is that you?

Sam's eyes widen. He brings his hands to his face.

BETH I know it's you. It's okay if you don't want to talk. I understand.

Tears well in Sam's eyes. He rubs them with the palm of his hands. Places his hand on the phone.

BETH I'm sorry, Sam.

Tears flow down Sam's cheeks.

SAM

... Beth?

BETH I'm here, Sam. I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me?

SAM Ofcourse I can, darling. Don't be silly. I love you.

BETH I don't know how long I have. I feel sleepy.

Sam stands up. Grabs the photograph from the wall and holds it in front of his face.

SAM Stay with me, okay!? Don't close your eyes. Don't go to sleep. Stay with me!

BETH You sound so quiet, Sam.

Sam punches the wall of his pod. It falls over.

SAM Is Michael with you? BETH He was crying so much, Sam. He just wouldn't stop. He's quiet now, though. He's sleeping. SAM What have you done, Beth? BETH You forgive me. You said you did. God, I'm so tired. SAM Beth! BETH We love you... Sam. SAM Beth! Beth! Sam crumbles to the floor. His light goes out. Black! INT. HOUSE - NIGHT The key turns in the door. Sam trudges in. Throws his coat on the floor. He staggers up the stairs, opens a door and walks in. The door closes. MORNING The sound of a woman CRYING. Down the stairs. In the living room. BETH sits, all dressed in black, MICHAEL (baby) in her arms. MARGARET (70s) stands over her. Helps Beth to her feet. They walk to the front door.

BETH God, why couldn't he just talk to us? To somebody?

Margaret rests her hand on Beth's shoulder. Smiles down at Michael. She slowly shakes her head.

They all walk out the front door.

In the background, Sam stands in front of the hallway mirror in pants and shirt.

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