



END OF THE LINE

Phil Parker

'Hi. Erm. Sorry I'm late. The meeting over-ran.'

'Hi babe. That's OK. I'd forgotten you were phoning tonight anyway.'

'Oh. Had you? Really? But I said.'

'I know. I just forgot. I remember you said you'd be in Newcastle, I couldn't remember when though.'

'Newcastle?'

'Yeah.'

'I'm in Nottingham.'

'No you're not. That was last month.'

'I'm definitely in Nottingham. Been here all week.'

'Not Newcastle?'

'No. Newcastle was... Hang on. I've never mentioned Newcastle. We don't have a branch there.'

'Could have sworn you said you were. Oh well. Never mind eh?'

'Yeah. Never mind.'

'So how are things in Birmingham?'

'Nottingham.'

'Yeah.'

'Awful. It's chaos. Their budget overspend is ridiculous, staffing ratio is way out and the manager doesn't like me because I keep telling her she can't add up.'

'Oh, that's nice sweetie. Did I tell you Sam and Finn are coming for dinner tomorrow night?'

'Tomorrow night? No. I won't get back till seven-thirty at the earliest. I'll be knackered. It's been a hell of a week. Can't we find another time?'

'All right darlin'. I'll tell them eight.'

'No, that's not what I meant.'

'Oh, god! No!'

'What? What is it? You all right?'

'What?'

'I said are you all right?'

'I'm fine. Why?'

'Because you shouted, "Oh god!" down the phone.'

'Did I? Oh.'

'Going to tell me why?'

'Why what?'

'You're watching EastEnders aren't you?'

'How did you know that? Are you psychic or something, babe?'

'No. I just know you.'

'Ooh. Oh no!'

'Shall I call you back?'

'What? Why?'

'Because you're watching EastEnders.'

'I know I am. I already said I was. You need to listen to yourself.'

'Yeah. One of us should.'

'You sound a bit grumpy, babe. Have you had a bad day or something?'

'No. It was wonderful. They love me at the Birmingham branch.'

'Oh, that's nice.'

'...sigh... Actually, I've been trying to think how to say... I can never find the right words somehow. Especially when I'm home. You're either on the phone to your mum or to Louise or to Eddie. Or Karen is round. I can never get a word in when you two get started. I thought the phone might be better.

'Yeah?'

'You're still watching EastEnders, aren't you?'

'Only with one eye. It's so exciting. I think we're about to find out the truth finally. Karen said we would tonight.'

'Look, I'll phone back later.'

'No, you can't. I'm out with Lou in ten minutes.'

'But this is important. I really need you to listen to me. Just for once. Please?'

'Of course, babe. I'm all ears. He he. That's such a funny saying isn't it? Why would having lots of ears make you hear better? I'm gonna put that on Facebook now. Hang on.'

'No don't do that. I really need you to listen. I can't find any other way to say what I need to say to you. I know it's... impersonal. But distance gives us some time to think. Avoid arguments. Not that we ever argue. Eh? I mean, that would mean listening wouldn't it? So, I went for distance. Anyway, it's not easy to say, but here goes...

'Hi again. Eddie's cracking up about what I've said about being all ears.'

'...sigh...'

'Eddie reckons if Prince Charles' was covered in ears the size of his, he'd get carried off in a high wind. I tell you, he is such a comedian. I don't know why you don't like him.'

'I didn't say I didn't like him. I just said...'

'You did. You said he was rude and heartless.'

'Because of the way he makes fun of anyone who's different. That comment about the guy in the wheelchair in the lift. That was awful. Embarrassing.'

'Everyone else laughed. We all cracked up. Except you.'

'Yeah. Well.'

'What does that mean?'

'Nothing. Look, I'm trying to have a conversation.'

'I thought we were. About how you think you're so much better than my friends.'

'No, I don't. You keep saying I do. It's not the same thing.'

'You know what Eddie says about you?'

'I'm sure it's highly inappropriate and you all laugh like drains.'

'Drains? What are you saying about my friends?'

'Nothing. It's just a saying.'

'No. Come on. If you've got a problem with my friends, come out and say it.'

'Never mind about your friends. Look, can we get back to what I was saying earlier please? You're going out with Louise in less than ten minutes, aren't you?'

'How did you know that?'

'I'm psychic.'

'I said you were. You knew I'd got EastEnders on. Weird eh? Huh. That's one of the better words my friends use to describe you. I wish you made more of an effort with them. You know they don't understand you half the time, don't you?'

'Really.'

'Yeah. When you was talking about that film you dragged me to go and see. All them flashbacks and things. I didn't know what was happening. It was such a stupid film, you couldn't tell who anyone was.'

'Perhaps if you'd listened, rather than keep whispering about Karen's latest conquest.'

'Her latest what?'

'Never mind. Look. I need to tell you something. I need you to listen. Please. Can you really try hard to listen?'

'Oh, all right. Don't know why you have to get so serious all of a sudden. Eddie says you're always serious. He says you're like you've got a brush stuck up...'

'You're not listening to me!'

'All right. You don't have to shout. Christ! You had a bad day or something?'

'Just listen. Please.'

'All right. Jeez. I'm listening.'

'Turn the TV off then.'

'What? But EastEnders...'

'Watch it on iPlayer. Just listen. Please. Before I lose my mind. Turn it off.'

'All right. It's off. Happy now?'

'No. No, I'm not. I haven't been for a long time. That's what I'm trying to tell you.'

'Then change your job. I know it stresses you out. You're always so stressed. You always look like you're upset or uptight about something when you're home. I think it's all your business trips, you're never at home these days. I was only saying to Karen yesterday that...'

'You're supposed to be listening to me.'

'I am! You're unhappy. See? I listened. I'm just saying what you can do about it. Karen says there's a job like yours going at her factory.'

'Really. What job is that?'

'I don't know. Something to do with numbers and accounts.'

'Is that what I do? Numbers and accounts?'

'Yeah. It is, isn't it? You've always got spreadsheets in front of you.'

'Yeah. Yeah I do, don't I? I'm having an affair with a spreadsheet.'

'Why has your voice gone funny, babe? You all right? Are you feeling sick or something?'

'Yeah. Yeah. I am. Sick. Sick and tired.'

'Well perhaps you should have an early night. I'm going to see you tomorrow night anyway.'

'No, you won't.'

'Just don't be sick tomorrow night because I'm doing that chicken curry that Rosie did for us when we went round to them. You liked it, didn't you? Well, at that time. Not a couple of hours later when you didn't leave the bathroom for an hour. I was telling Eddie about that the other day. Oh, we did laugh.'

...sigh...

'Babe? Are you still there?'

'No. I put the phone down ten minutes ago.'

'Did you? Why? Oh you! Now why can't you be funny like that with the gang?'

'You didn't hear what I said a minute ago.'

'I did. You're feeling all sick and yucky. See? I did listen.'

'No. Not that part.'

'Which part then?'

'When I said I wasn't coming home.'

'You didn't say that. I'd have heard. Are they keeping you in Birmingham over the weekend? You should refuse. They take advantage of you because you're so easy going.'

'Look, there is no easy way to say this. I wish there were. I've been trying to find ways. But how do you tell someone something this big? So momentous. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. It really is. You know I still care for you. To some extent. But I've met someone.'

We've been seeing each other for three months now. Not all of my trips have been for business you see. Most of them have been, usually I've added a day on to them, made it look like I'm still working. But I haven't been. Working. I'm sorry. I didn't know how else to tell you.'

'You know your trouble babe? You use a dozen words when you could just use one. I can't take everything in. It all sounds like blah...blah...blah after a time. Eddie says you must have swallowed a dictionary.'

'Yeah... sigh... Right. I'm leaving you.'

'What?'

'I'm leaving you.'

'But why? I don't understand. What's wrong? I thought we were happy. Aren't we?'

'No.'

'I can't believe it. It's so unlike you. You never said you were unhappy. Why didn't you say?'

'I did. It's just that when we talk....'

'Oh god! Oh no!'

'It's all right. Don't be upset. You'll find someone else.'

'What am I going to tell Sam and Finn tomorrow night?'

'...sigh... Tell them... I've got delayed. Held up in Birmingham.'

'Yeah. Yeah. Held up. Yeah.'

'You all right?'

'I'm in shock. I can't believe you're leaving me. I thought we were good together. Wait! I know. We could go to couple's therapy.'

'No. It's not for us.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Why not, babe?'

'We'd need to talk. You'd need to listen. I'd need to say what I mean.'

'Yeah. OK. Let's talk about it when you get home tomorrow. From Birmingham.'