



REALLY RED

Mabel Episode Two: Really Red. In which someone gets angry.

[INTRO:]

MABEL: Hi, you've reached Mabel Martin. I'm not here to take your call right now, so please leave a message after the beep. Thanks!

[BEEP]

[Singing, muffled]

[BEEP]

ANNA: Hi, Mabel.

Can I call you Mabel? I feel like maybe we're on a first-name basis at this point. You know some of my secrets, I know some of your secrets, but more than that: more than your childhood memories I hear second-hand, more than the letters I found in the attic and what happened after, I know something else, some important, hidden thing: I know you're listening. I know, because yesterday this voicemail inbox was full, and today it isn't. You

can't clear an inbox if you're dead in a ditch or somewhere far beyond cell reception. You just can't! So, yeah. You're there, and I'm here, and maybe you're only skimming these messages to get to the end, so you can erase them and keep your inbox empty again, but you hear me. You hear me, so I'm real. At least a tiny bit.

I don't mean that, really. I don't want you to think that the quality of care your grandmother receives with Kings County Home Help is in some way compromised by her live-in carer's growing detachment from reality. I know I'm real, I know what is and isn't true. It's just – you get strange, up here above everything. Here with the black cherry and the switchgrass. You start to question. Not the important things, like did I give my client her morning meds or am I supposed to change her bandages today or tomorrow, but smaller details. Have I looked in a mirror in the past month? If I met myself on the street, would I know me? Have I altered in some way? Am I a stranger?

Sally's calling.

[BEEP]

Look at him. I think he sees me. Hey. [TAPS ON GLASS]

[BEEP]

Sometimes I get angry. It doesn't happen very often, but when it does it's like – it's like something inevitable, something I can't stop. Like a tidal wave or a gale force wind, I just have to sit and wait it out. Most days I'm fine, really, I can do what I need to do and go to bed and sleep and wake up and do it again, but sometimes – it's always something small that sets me off. Not enough milk for my morning coffee, stubbing my toe when I get out of the shower. Something completely meaningless, completely *fleeting* in the grand scheme of my life, but one minute I see that my tire is a little bit flat and the next I'm banging my fist on my horn over and over, furious about systematic oppression and corruption and children born into poverty and every terrible thing I've ever witnessed or read about. This morning I woke up too early and couldn't get back to sleep, and then when I got out of bed I stepped on an exposed nail, and then I found a dead baby crow outside the front door, and that was it. That was all it took.

I know I sound crazy. I promise I'm telling you this for a reason. The point isn't that I have an anger problem – I don't, really, I'm just weird – the point is

that today, the only thing I could think about after I got too little sleep and cut my foot and had to bury a dead baby bird in the flower pot was you. You with your distance, you with your high ground. You never having to witness anything, always at a remove, you giving up responsibility.

Yeah, I know, it's not fair. Of course it's not *fair*, what is? You had a fight with Sally, and I don't know what it was about but I know it happened, she told me that much, and I should respect it – respect your choice to stay away. But staying away is easy. You don't have to see anything, you have the luxury of putting it all out of your head, all this mess. Sally is dying alone, and you might know that, but you know it in abstract, in theory, not in practice.

God, I'm making myself angry again. This was what the whole morning went like. I know – I really do know that this isn't about you, not wholly, at least. Maybe it's because I'm the last person who will ever be close to your grandmother. Maybe because I keep thinking if you could see her, if you could see how small she is, how much difficulty she has with even the most basic tasks, maybe – maybe it wouldn't change anything, but –

Anyway. I was thinking about you all morning, like – slamming pans down on the stove, *Mabel* doesn't have to do this, shooing a stray cat away from the flowerpot where I buried the dead crow, *Mabel* probably never had to bury a dead animal in her life. *Mabel* doesn't have to watch anyone die, *Mabel* doesn't have to take responsibility for anything. And like I said, I know that's not fair. And still, it's true. You don't know what your grandmother's existence is like. You don't know what she's struggling with, alone, except for me, who she has to pay.

So – listen. I'm going to tell you. Not so you're forced to see the gruesome horrorshow of Parkinsons and dementia and old age, nothing like that, I promise. Just so you're part of your grandmother's life again, even if only for a few minutes. Even if only from a distance.

Today is – what day is it? Today is Wednesday. Sally woke up at seven. It was a bad morning – you learn to tell before you even go in, you can kind of feel it. The house feels it. I brought her tea and medicine – she's taking a lot of meds these days, she has to in order to keep any kind of mobility in her limbs – and I sat on her bed and we talked about our dreams. Sally dreamed she was at a garden party in a white dress, listening to an ambassador complain about deforestation. I dreamed I was trapped in a mall after all the stores were closed. When she was ready to get up I helped her into the chair and brought her downstairs – she has a stair-lift now, she calls it Goliath because

it reminds her of a giant hand lifting her up and down. I made her oatmeal for breakfast, and she listened to the radio while I cleaned, and then I gave her a bath. She had to take a nap after. She gets tired so easily. After lunch I had to make her do her physical therapy – she hates it, always tries to bribe me out of it. I’m a good carer, though. I never take bribes. Later the relief carer came over, and Sally napped while I went up to my room and read a book, and then I made dinner – soup, we always have soup – and she watched the news on TV. And then she was tired again, and I brought her upstairs again, undressed her and put her to bed. And here we are. Tomorrow will be the same. The day after will be the same. Everything will be the same, until something changes.

It’s dark now. I’m sitting in the big living room, the one Sally calls the Green Parlour. I can see my own handprint on the window, from where I reached out at the dark earlier in the evening. Fog and breath and cold. I’m waiting for something, but I don’t know what. The house is waiting.

[BEEP]

I lied to her, actually. I didn’t dream about being stuck in a mall after closing hours. Or, no, I did, but that wasn’t the whole dream, that wasn’t the point of it – the point was, there was someone else in there with me. I think it was a girl, though I couldn’t really see her face – I could only see her mouth, bright red. Not Revlon Really Red red but like – meat-red, something raw. She kept saying a single word, over and over, the same word – I think she was trying to make sure I remembered it, or something, but I didn’t. It was gone from my head when I woke up, only the shape of it was left. Three syllables. Something like – like *penumbra*, but not *penumbra*. Like *autumnal*, but not.

I don’t think dreams really mean anything. There’s too much white noise in our heads. But it was –

[BEEP]

Does it bother you if I call you at night like this? Or do you have some kind of special app on your phone that never lets my number even ring? You’ll listen to this sometime, even if you don’t listen to it tonight, so it’s like I’m not alone. Like the future tense of me isn’t alone. I don’t know. Whatever.

I can’t sleep. It’s just one of those nights where no part of your body wants to rest where you set it. Do you ever have nights like that? Maybe you don’t.

Maybe, Mabel. [laughs] That's the kind of joke you make at three a.m. on a work night.

There are lots of things that might be keeping me awake. I'm worried about Sally. I'm worried about my own mother – she's been sick the last few weeks, she's going to the doctor for tests tomorrow. I'm worried about my nephew who can't stop crying when my sister drops him off at kindergarten, and I'm worried about my own future, what it'll look like. If it'll ever look any different from this. All of these are real concerns, they're logical. No one would begrudge me a sleepless night because of them.

But – here's another secret. It's not worry keeping me awake. It's – curiosity.

I can't sleep, because I can't stop thinking about those god damned letters.

[BEEP]

Maybe if I opened just *one* –

[BEEP]

I'm taking you with me. I'm making you an accomplice in this, I'm making you culpable. Sally's asleep, she's a deep sleeper. It's just the two of us, tiptoeing through the house.

Did you do this when you were a little kid? Sneak around after all the grown ups were in bed, down to the kitchen or out to the garden or the hills? I would have been too scared, but you don't strike me as the kind of person ever to have been afraid of the dark. Not even as a child. I know, that's a funny thing to say – I've never met you, never even spoken to you. But the stories Sally told me about you, they make you mythic. I know you the way I know any of my other favourite characters. And if I'm wrong about you? Well, so I'm wrong about you. It's not like you're going to correct me.

[GASP]

Oh my god.

[LAUGHTER, RELIEVED.]

We're at the bottom of the stairs now, by the sliding glass doors that section off the main foyer, the one no one uses. I saw my reflection in the glass, and

– yeah, whatever. I’m an idiot who’s wearing a white nightgown. Did I tell you I used to be afraid of the dark? Maybe scratch *used to*.

We’re walking down the hall. I’m trying not to look in the big brass mirrors, because I know if I do I’ll see something – I don’t know, just *something*. I’m passing the door to the library, and the Green Parlour, and the front room. All right, I’m in the kitchen, where I shoved the box of letters under – yeah, here it is.

This is as much your fault as it is mine, I hope you know that. You might not be here, but – you’re here. You’re in this with me. This is your story, too, even if you won’t admit it.

Okay, Mabel. I’m opening one of the letters.

Do you know someone named –

[CRASH]

[MUFFLED SCREAM]

Oh shit. Sally, are you –

[PHONE DROPPING]

[DIAL TONE]

[OUTRO:]

Mabel is written and produced by Becca De La Rosa. The voice of Mabel Martin is [CENSORED]. The voice of Anna Limon is Becca De La Rosa. The music in this episode was by Ars Sonor, Chris Zabriskie, AVOIDANT, Caroline Park, LJ Cruz, Hogan Grip, and (morse), and all of it is available to download on the Free Music Archive at freemusicarchive.org. For more information about Mabel, including a full tracklist for each episode, visit us online at mabelpodcast.com, or on Twitter, @podcastmabel.