

The Word

The two were seated on the couch, both a little drunk after a night at the bar after work. They were at Albert's place after Albert insisted that Ed come back to see something 'super cool' that he had found.

"No, I'm Telling you, man, watch this." Albert put his hand over the first letter of his name, written on a sheet of paper. Ed watched as Albert spoke "Efealantorce" he swiped his hand across the paper. His hand passed over where the letters appeared. On the other side, a blank page remained, not even the indent of the pencil that had written it remained.

"That's so cool man, show me how you did that."

"That's not- I don't know how I did that. It's spells man, magic spells."

"Right..." This sort of bullshit was not out of Albert's wheelhouse. He had once convinced Ed and the rest of their friend group that he had broken his leg. He had kept up the charade until they were in front of the hospital. The light-hearted laugh Albert gave was forced as everyone cursed him out. Their friend Rob had risked driving drunk to get him to the hospital. Albert insisted that the funniest part was the followthrough.

"Ok, that one was the most obvious. There are others." Albert pulled a bunch of folded sticky notes from his pocket. "Here." Albert read off a note as he extended a hand to Ed.

"Drilonsoa."

A weak gust of warm wind passed over Ed's face.

"Geriondanna. Now when I say something" Albert said quickly in a nasally, almost robotic voice "It sounds weird for a few seconds. That one's not that interesting." he finished in a normal voice. "Here, Benskapp." Albert clapped, Ed's attention was drawn to Albert's two hands as they met, he swore he could almost see the sound wave emanating from it. "I can't-" Ed's

attention was drawn to Albert's mouth as he watched it produce this strange, extra-detailed sound. "Really explain what that one does" Albert continued normally. "But it's definitely something."

"Where did you find this?" Ed asked, his mind was sufficiently blown. Even if this was an elaborate Albert prank, the practice it must have taken to pull them off one after the other was impressive.

"I went to an estate sale I saw while walking around the neighborhood. There was a book that I opened with a bunch of silly words. I said one of them aloud cause it didn't make sense and it erased half a page. I asked to buy the book but it was like a hundred-something dollars, it was obviously hand-made. So I asked for a notebook I could use and she gave me these." He held up a handful of sticky notes. "Most of them don't do anything as far as I can tell. I'm going to call and see if they've got the book tomorrow. I've got a whole bunch right now though. 'derioulios', 'ghorthonstrea' '..."

srrrrrt Ed was suddenly ripping off the tag attached to the back of the back cushion he sat on. How did he sit down? "That's insane. What the hell do you do when you've figured out magic exists?" Ed found himself saying. He felt that he had just been astounded, as if he had just been blown away by ... something that had just happened. "What just happened?"

"I hadn't tried that word yet. Let's do it again," Albert was sitting on the other end of the couch from Ed, he pulled out a match, struck it, and uttered "Borellious." The air around the

match twisted and flared into a fireball that almost engulfed Albert before fizzling away.

"Whoa!" Albert exclaimed.

"Whoa, no, that's not what I mean. How did I get on the couch?"

"Uh, we sat down?"

"No I mean I can't remember it."

Albert cocked an eyebrow. "I mean we sat down a couple of seconds ago. I did the fireball thing before we sat down on the couch. Albert's eyebrow raised higher as he observed Ed's confusion. He pulled out the sticky notes with the words written down. "I guess before that I said said 'derioulios', 'ghorthonstrea' '..."

srrrrrt. "Look how long that tag is!" Albert held the tag ripped off from his brand-new jacket. He held it up to show Ed and then turned it towards the camera that was following them. Ed supposed it was a longer tag than normal, about four or five inches long, nothing to write home about. It didn't matter, it was more about keeping the content flowing. They joked to each other that neither of them was very good at keeping content going but-

Albert muttered the word "Borellious", covering his mouth as he did so with deft practice, not drawing attention to the source of his power. The tag burst into flames and Albert dropped it, he brushed it off like it was nothing, adjusted his sunglasses, and straightened his jacket. It would go in a compilation later, probably in slow-motion with music behind it.

Ed found himself straightening his sunglasses and looking into the camera. He was supposed to say something that would make his hair and glasses flash rainbow colors. But he couldn't remember the word...

He couldn't remember how he got here. It was warm and sunny, they were outside. It had been nighttime and snowing just a moment ago. They had been sitting on Ed's shitty couch, in his shitty apartment...

Ed noticed he was walking, he stumbled and grabbed Albert's arm. "Hey." His voice caught as Albert turned around. The man in front of him was not the Albert Ed remembered from a few seconds ago. Albert had been overweight, with long black hair. This Albert was wiry, with short, white hair styled in a type of fade.

"Aww, you messed it up!" Albert said with a grin. It was a good-natured ribbing. He looked towards the camera and grinned, lifting his glasses he muttered something, his glasses, and his hair riffled through the colors of the rainbow before returning to black and white. "Haha!" Albert doubled over in laughter and rose back up to meet Ed's dumbfounded face with a grin.

"Where are we? What's going on? Albert, I think something's wrong!" Ed's voice grew more hysterical as he spoke. Albert turned to the camera and nodded, the cameraman nodded back and put the camera down.

"Ed, what's wrong man? You haven't called me Albert in... months at least." Albert beamed at Ed. Confidence had never been his strong suit until... Now?

"Albert, where are we?"

"We're in Barnard! Ed, what are you talking about?"

"Weren't we just in Pittsburgh?"

Albert looked at the cameraman, and back at Ed. He took Ed by the arm and led him down an alley. Once they were far enough down the alley Albert whispered "Nelbrudent". The noise of the outside world stopped, Ed tried to speak, but couldn't hear his own voice. Albert walked a quick circle around Ed and back to his place in front of him. "Ok, what's up?"

"Where are we?"

"California. We haven't been in Pittsburgh in months, Ed." Albert looked concerned, his face turned a shade of red and his brow furrowed, more like the Albert that Ed remembered.

"The... Last thing I remember we were sitting on your couch in the middle of winter." Ed squeezed his eyes shut, trying to remember anything in between, wondering if he had suffered some sort of brain damage. The truth was that Ed felt pretty good. Like Albert, he was fitter than he was before, he didn't feel drunk or hungover, and his breathing was better... He was probably in the best shape of his life.

"You don't look great. We should probably get you to a hospital. 'Nelbrudent'" the sound of the outside world rushed in. Yelling from the beach, a bird chirping on some roof. Even the wind had stood still.

Ed agreed, whatever had just happened had been absolute. He couldn't even feel like he might remember something. It was probably some sort of acute brain hemorrhage he told himself. He then realized that that thought was not reassuring.

They got into the back seat of an extremely luxurious car, driven by a chauffeur. As they left Albert told someone to get a police escort and they sped to the hospital as fast as possible.

On the way there, Albert asked: "So what exactly do you remember?"

"It's like it happened fifteen minutes ago. I dunno. You introduced me to... Magic? Is that-? No. Holy shit I must be making up memories."

Albert shook his head, "is that *really* the last thing you remember?" He held up a finger. "Gorzolandsin." His finger turned shiny and metallic.

Ed furrowed his brow. "Yeah like that."

"Feel it" Albert goaded. Ed touched his finger. It was extremely soft, it felt like silk, and it was malleable, staying in position after Ed poked it. "Go ahead. Here." Albert reached with his other hand and smashed the metallic finger down as Ed recoiled. "Now when I flex my finger." The squished finger reformed to its previous shape. "Gorzolandsin." And it was back to normal.

"So... there's magic?"

"Jesus. Man, we've been using it for over a year. You should know about as many words as I do. We've made A LOT of money off of it."

"That's how you changed the color of your hair?"

Albert nodded. "Foudnolp" his hair turned bright pink.

"So that's all we know? Party tricks?"

"Kind of. There are some that will definitely be useful. We agreed to release it to the public after a year of doing this." Albert gestured to the fancy car being driven for them. "So far I'm still feeling pretty good about it."

They arrived at the hospital. Ed was checked out. According to the doctor who saw him, the two had spoken last week about hair loss prevention.

"All your vitals seem fine. We're going to get you into a CAT scan as soon as possible. I'll give you some forms to fill out. We can do it today probably."

"Ok sounds good." Ed walked out of the office dazed.

"Hey," Albert waved Ed over to an empty doctor's office. He shut the door as Ed entered.

"Ok, I know this is crass. You can refuse if you want, but we're kind of in the middle of a huge

push for our brand, uh, "Fly". The news of our hospital visit has already spread. If you could hit up the camera and just cast a spell or two we can keep that up till the end of the week. Then you can disappear, or rehab or, Jesus I don't know what they do when people get this..." Albert let the end of his sentence hang in the room. Ed wasn't paying attention. He kept trying to make himself remember what had happened in the last couple of months, but it was clear as day that the pair had been in the middle of his apartment in the middle of winter back in Pittsburgh. It was like he blinked and skipped a year. "I can re-teach you the magic words. It's really really simple actually. So simple that the best we can do is cover our mouths when we say them on camera 'cause all you need to cast spells is to know the word and what it's supposed to do."

"I think I remember some of them. You said 'Borellious'." A flash of light appeared between the two.

"Oh!" Albert jumped back. "Yeah, that one's kinda unpredictable. It works well with something flammable in your hand. What else do you remember?"

"There was deri... olios?"

"Yeah, wow that was back when I just had things scribbled down on sticky notes. Here I got them. We dropped that one 'cause it doesn't do anything as far as I can tell." Albert pulled out a little notebook from his pocket. It was kept in a sleek stainless steel case. "They're kept in here, you actually have one too. 'Derioulis' is one of the ones we named 'no-gos' along with 'ghorthonstrea' and '..."

Srrrrrt Caitlin ripped off the tag on the pillow they were going to give to her sister. "Why do they put tags like this hanging off of pillows? It's itchy, it basically ruins the whole point of a

pillow. Oh shit.” Caitlin held up the tag to show Ed a piece of string that was unraveling from the seam it was torn from.

“Here.” Ed reached for the scissors he had set down a moment ago, leaned over to his wife, and snipped the loose string. He looked up and saw that he was face-to-face with Caitlin. Her deep brown eyes stared into his, framed by damp brown hair fresh from the shower. His vision traced the contours of her face down from her eyes to her mouth and chin. He saw the wrinkles that had begun to form at the corners of her mouth in the last five years which he thought only made her more beautiful. Wait...

“Oh, well hello Ed.” Caitlin gave him a devious smile.

“Who are you?” Ed was confused.

The woman in front of Ed giggled. “I’m Caitlin Macavaney, but you should know, I’m a married woman!” She rested her hand on the back of Ed’s neck.

“No, I mean...” Ed stood up and looked around for a mirror. He was in a large bedroom with a grey carpet and a ceiling two floors above him. He and the woman had been sitting next to a large bed with a dark wood frame. On the far end of the room stood floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the lights of a large city at night. To the right of the window was a chest of drawers made from the same wood as the bed frame, and next to them a full-length mirror set in an ornate steel frame.

Ed walked over to the mirror. What walked into the frame was another man who looked astonishingly similar to photographs Ed had seen of his grandpa playing with his mother when she was in high school. The man was about fifty years old, wearing a set of light blue silk pajamas. His hair was thinning but not quite balding. Ed moved to scratch his nose and saw the

man in the mirror do the same. He noticed that the joint on his ring finger ached if he tried too hard to ball it into a fist and his skin-to-skin contact felt astonishingly dry.

Caitlyn moved into the frame dressed in a light pink robe, and wrapped her arms around Ed. She was grinning ear-to-ear. "Here." She ruffled her hair and said "Foudnolp." Her hair turned crimson, she admired it in the mirror. "There, now I'm a seductress." She patted Ed on the shoulder as she said *duct* making fun of herself. "Foudnolp. Ahh! That's way too blue." She had changed the color of Ed's hair to an ice-blue sheen. "Here, change it to something you like." She grinned and caught Ed's eye.

Ed was not inside himself. He watched, stalk still, as the man in the mirror *existed*. He didn't dare move, lest the man staring back copied him.

"Edward. What's wrong?" Caitlin grabbed Ed's arm. Ed jerked it away.

"Caitlin?"

Caitlin shoved a hip to one side and put a hand on it in jest. "Yes?"

"Caitlin I'm sorry, but I don't know who you are."

"What the fuck do you mean by that?" Caitlin started the sentence smiling, but her mouth turned to an uncontrolled frown as she gazed into Ed's eyes through the silence, Ed shifted his eyes to the side to look at the large bizarre impressionist portrait hanging up in a corner of their room, Caitlin's jaw dropped, and she let out a low groan as she buried her face in her hands.

"This has happened before," Ed spoke as if this revelation would solve the situation. "Once. To me, it happened just a few minutes ago. I was probably twenty-four or twenty-five. It's the last thing I remember. Caitlin, I'm sorry. The last thing I remember is being in my twenties. I don't even know if I knew you then, it was only a couple of hours that I remember, and most of that was in the hospital."

Caitlin was on her knees, obviously trying to keep her emotions in check she frowned, tears streamed down her face but she did not sob as she stared at the ground. "We should call Al."

"Albert? What's he up to?"

Caitlin continued to avoid eye contact. "About the same thing as us. You both got very rich off of Magic." She stood up, dazed, and walked over to her phone that was charging on a table beside their bed.

Ed looked around at the room they were in, he saw multiple framed photos on the wall. One of a couple, him in a suit and a young Caitlin in a wedding dress. A set of photos of them in front of an ocean in a composite frame. He looked back at his face in the mirror. "Caitlin? How old am I?"

"You're fifty-five, Edward." Caitlin held the phone up to her ear, looking Ed in the eye. She started when Albert picked up. "Hey Al, no it's fine - actually yes, sorry, something is wrong. It's really wrong Albert. Can you come over to help? I think it has to do with your spells. Something's really wrong with Ed. Ok, thank you." She hung up the phone, staring at it as she talked to Edward. "Ok, Al will be here in a few minutes." Ed stared. "Oh Ed, don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you don't know me." Caitlin drew the robe tighter around herself.

"How- um, where are we?" Ed asked.

"We're in Hollywood, California."

"How did we afford this place?" Ed walked to the door and looked through. On the other side was another room, with more full-length windows. Through these, he could see the rest of the house, a semicircle of darkened rooms on the side of a mountain overlooking Los Angeles.

From the bed Caitlin said. "Honey, you saved the world. You and Al and your spells have given us free energy. That spell, Gorzolandsin, *cures* a lot of physical conditions like broken bones, and you were supposedly the one who discovered that." Caitlin hugged him, her face was red. "You're only-" she choked and swallowed air. "You're only fifty-five. We just settled down. You don't deserve to--- lose it."

Edward stood in the doorway. He fought his mind to remember anything that had happened in the last couple of hours, days, months, years, decades.

Edward's cell phone buzzed. Then Caitlyn's did. Edward walked over to his phone and opened it, at least his thumbprint was the same. "He's outside," Caitlin said, looking at her phone as Edward read the same text from Al.

Edward followed Caitlin downstairs to their doorway to see Al jogging up the driveway. He smiled when he saw the couple. Al looked great, no older than 35. Edward wondered if it was a conscious decision between him and Caitlin to look as old as they were. "How are you two doing? Ed, you're still with us?"

Caitlin had a large frown on again, holding back tears. She moved to go back inside, then turned back around when Edward didn't follow and opted to start pacing back and forth across the porch.

"Al, do you remember, I guess it was like 30 years ago when I went to the hospital because I couldn't remember how we got to Los Angeles?"

Albert immediately started fishing around in his pockets. "Oh, yeah I remember, that was scary Ed, you were messed up." Albert produced his wallet and flipped through it. "I think we figured it out in the end though. Here"

He handed a piece of paper to Caitlin. "Here, this is more for you than him, Caitlyn, if he ever gets like this again, just remember the word '...'"