

Reverse Charges

“Oh God, who’s that on the phone at this time of night?”
“Maybe you should answer it - might be important?”
“More likely someone wanting the Chinese take-away. Or the bank wanting to sell me a mortgage.”
“Go on, answer it - they’re obviously not giving up...could be serious, maybe.”
“Hallo? Hallo?”
“Hi - is that Mr. Brown?”
“Yes, this is him speaking. Who is that?”
“Hi, my name’s Sandy - Sandy Brown.”
“Sorry, do I know you? Sandy Brown?”
“Well, I suppose you don’t, but I know you.”
“Uh-huh? Well, what do you want - look, it’s late at night, I’m tired, and I’m in no mood for jokes. Can this wait for some other time?”
“Late? Late? What time do you old guys go to bed - it’s hardly eleven o’clock! Jeez! Talk about dozing while the world falls apart!”
“Look, tell me who you are, what you want, or I’m hanging up...”
“OK, OK, man. Listen, I’m your great-great-grandson. Like I said, I’m Sandy - ”
“Oh come on, what nonsense is this. I’m barely old enough to be a father, let alone have a - what did you say? - great-grandson?”
“Great-great-grandson.”
“I’m putting the phone down. Now. And don’t bother me again.”
“Who was it, dear?”
“Some young fool claiming to be our great-great-grandson or something. Oh Hell, there’s the phone again - that’ll be him again. Right, if that’s you again, I’ll - ”
“Listen, old guy, just listen, OK? I am your great-great-grandson, and see if you don’t help me out here, I’m in deep shit. Are you there?”
“Keep talking. But I’ll tell you, you’re not convincing me.”
“Jeez! Right, first off, my mother’s name is Bella, her father was Rufus, his mother was Rachel, and she’s your daughter. Right?”
“What do you mean, right? Yes, my daughter is Rachel, but she’s not married, and she certainly has no children. Anyway, what would possess her to call her son Rufus? No way is a grandson of mine going to be called Rufus. No way! So stop this nonsense now, and tell me what this is all about?”
“You’re not going to be convinced, are you?”
“No.”
“Well, bear with me for a bit longer. But first - can you phone me back - I’ve run out of credit here. Phone me back now.”
“God, he’s gone again. What’s he up to? He wants me to phone him back - should I?”
“I think you should, dear, if only to clear this up. Have you got his number?”
“Well, of course I have - but it’s like no number I’ve seen before - maybe in Australia for all I know. Siberia. Oh well, here goes - 0102005613048496. There. It’s ringing.”
“OK, grandad, you got through to me. Thanks - ”
“Just a minute! Let’s get this clear - first of all, I’m not your grandad, although you seem to think I’m something in that way; and secondly, I’m not running up a huge

phone-bill just for your amusement: you're not on Friends & Family, and I don't have an unlimited calls-tariff. So get on with it!"

"Don't worry, granpa, I'm just in a phone-booth round the corner. This won't cost you much. Listen, there's more to worry about than that."

"I'll bet there is - anyway, there isn't any phone-box round the corner. Are you sure you know where you are?"

"Jeez! I know exactly where I am, I know exactly where you are, I know exactly when I am, as well. This is the year 2075, and the world is a piece of shit."

"Right - there's no need for that language. This is my phone-call, and you'll keep the language clean."

"I'll keep it short, clean and sweet, grandad. It's 2075, the glaciers are gone, the blue sky's gone, half of Asia's gone, Holland's gone, most of the fish and the birds have gone. There's only just us humans now, and we ain't worth dick. There - is that short and sweet enough for you?"

"Well, it was short. What do you mean - gone? Gone like how? Where have they all gone to?"

"Gone, melted, died, vanished, destroyed. Like, humans have destroyed the planet. Did you not hear about that?"

"How could I have heard about it - it's 2006 at this end of the phone, most things are still here."

"No hints at all, no warnings?"

"Well, there's been some talk about global warming, destruction of the natural habitats, rising sea-levels, that sort of thing..."

"OK, well, some of you guys got it right then, it seems. There's not much left here, just twenty billion humans and a lot less land. Oh, and there's no drinking water either, and the oil ran out thirty years ago. We're in deep shit. And the war's never stopped, and now they're going to use viruses."

"Well, what do you expect me to do about it? I can't do much about it - can't send you any oil in the post or anything? Or bring a glass of water round to your phone-box. Can I?"

"No, you can't, grandad. That's right. That's not why I'm phoning you."

"Then what do you want? Hello - hello? Oh. That's funny, the line just went dead."

"Went dead? Oh well, come back to bed. Let's hope we don't get some stinking big phone-bill because of this - you hear about these scams, don't you?"