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OCCASIONAL DESIRE

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OCCASIONAL DESIRE

Essays

DAVID LAZAR

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Set in Fanwood Text by Laura Wellington.

Designed by A. Shahan.

That is true wisdom, to know how
to alter one's mind when occasion
demands it.

TERENCE

Whenever evil befalls us, we ought to
ask ourselves, after the first suffering,
how we can turn it into good. So shall
we take occasion, from one bitter root,
to raise perhaps many flowers.

LEIGH HUNT

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UNFAMILIAR ESSAYS

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CALLING FOR HIS PAST

Public telephones were a specific genre, a public genre, lacking the cool control of environment of the private phone. This was especially true in cities of public exuberance, where passersby were apt to insert themselves into the lives before them. Freud says there are never only two people in bed, and just so, there were rarely only two people on public telephones in New York. The silent stares of those waiting for the phone, accusing the user of an offensive lack of brevity, the casual interruptions of those walking by, their conversational inflections counterpointing one's own, and the occasional pure interruption (I once had a woman wrestle the phone out of my hand in frustration, once had a man fix me with a look and imperiously command me to "Say good-bye") all conspired with the ever-present participant—the city itself, its horns and rumbles, screeches and weathers—to diminish the intensity of the solitary voice and make its attempts at communication precarious. Intensifying these difficulties was the fact that public calls were so frequently generated by some exigency of time or fault in planning. As such, pay phones were magnets of confusion; their products: artifacts of arrangement that could deconstruct as they were being made, the street name blurred, the time obscured.

My specific fascination with public phones began at a movie theater in Brooklyn, one of the old, cavernous, pre-prefabricated variety, when I was seven or eight. These ornate miniature opera houses had fallen on hard times and were usually sparsely attended, a few pockets of moviegoers dotting the vacant landscape of seats. But far from forlorn, one could explore the wide-open spaces of the hall as though urged on by a manifest destiny of vision, finding the right seat for the right film, a suitable distance from the other settlers, preferably close enough to let the screen fill in the entire plot of sight. From the earliest age, I craved an encompassing rather than a comprehensive view of movie screens. I wanted to feel taken as I took it in. I had been deposited at a Saturday matinee and was calling home to confirm the details of who would pick me up and to inform them of my estimated time of arrival into the late summer afternoon. Before plugging in my dime, I checked the coin return and was rewarded with a slim gold wedding band. Too young to imagine the dimensions of the tragic or melodramatic scene that had engendered my surprise, I still had a glimmer of drama and a sense that the ring had been magically bestowed on me. Nevertheless, in the realm of the wonderful, I performed the expected, discharging my obligation of honor by reporting the find to the manager, the guardian of gate receipts, a gentleman of seventeen or so, who irked my wonder with his casual “Keep it, kid,” as though such discoveries were commonplace. Did rings show up in phone booths all the time, a quotidian gesture of a world where marriage and movies were somehow linked? Had I been rudely kept in the dark about this missing link of courtship? I resisted the idea that this was not a signal, a gesture to me from an unknown source, some phone deity, the operative voice of God. In a feminized version of Arthur and Excalibur, I had been the one to pull the ring from slot, and I left

in triumph with my tiny bottomless Grail and the incipient belief that anything can happen at the movies and in phone booths.

This mystery was followed by a later encounter of the “found” world of public telephones. “Phil Abbate keeps calling for his past,” the note said, by the telephone on Greenwich Avenue, in Greenwich Village, thirty years ago. Someone had left it in the space between the bottom of the phone and the hopelessly useless small silver shelf underneath. So I waited there; I wanted to see if he would call again. And I thought, if Abbate did call, what could I tell him? That it was getting dark? That the traffic was light and the shadow of the library was inching toward the phone? Not knowing him would put me in a poor position to answer any but the most extraneous questions. I waited again. I began to think it might be an elaborate joke conceived by some baroque society of Village Pierrots. Perhaps they wanted to test how long some enigma-starved pedestrian would wait to get his Phil. Was there such a thing as a found practical joke? How passive, almost Eastern. There I stayed, twenty minutes, forty minutes, waiting for a fellow to call for his past. He didn’t call; I gave up the vigil, but the note came with me, folded in half, housed in a back apartment of my wallet. I showed it around, but friends tended to be dubious, wary of my instigation of this strange little fiction: “Isn’t the writing just a little like yours,” they would smirk. “Those childish loping loops?” This was plainly nonsense since the writing was firm, almost elegant, not the slightest like my own. One friend decided to decode it when the throes of my speculation were at their peak. She directed my attention to the Greek root of “Phil,” *philo*, love; and what I had been pronouncing as an Italian surname, A-bate, could be read as the plain “abate.” Presto, the note was surely announcing that love abates and keeps calling for its past, a recon-dite epigrammatic note in a bottle. I considered this vision: the

phone as bottle, the note as note, and I the heroic urban scavenger of telephone shores. But this reading collapsed like a house of notes thanks to her cynical version of the text, which cast me as the complete auteur: as bottle, as note, foisting the message on the rest of the world, as me. Doesn't anyone enjoy a good mystery? I returned to the question of Phil Abbate calling for his past, on occasion would briefly stake out the phone, waiting for his ring to return. It never did. But the note did yield another clue, a clue to the way I think. My mind finally turned from the message to the medium, the figure I had avoided entirely, who might be saying to himself, herself, even now, that Phil Abbate kept calling for his past, even now with more years of past to call for, the burden heavier, more complicated. Was it the mother of Phil, Mater Dolorosa, leaving a testament to her martyred son? Old flame who left it in frustration at Phil's insistent, pathetic nostalgia? Or another passerby, creating a chain of sympathy for a random call in search of the past, preparing his substitute for the demands of this phone? Realizing I had an accomplice, another disciple of Phil's vague misfortune, was a relief if not a rescue from obsession, since I still think of Phil, embracing a future as dark as Faust, with Bell his Mephistophiles, calling here and there for his past.

Perhaps my inability to resist ringing pay phones was inspired by Phil Abbate, but I no longer have any hope of meeting his voice. The ringing pay phone was the stray dog of communication, the aural image of urban alienation that called out on some crowded street or in the middle of a crowd-filled day, when perhaps you had spoken to no one, that you could speak to someone, that a voice was waiting for a number, that even a wrong answer was a salve for silence. And there was that most unusual condition of answering with complete anonymity. You could say anything, confess, if you desired, your most heinous crimes,

most lingering guilts, without the danger of being traced. Dangling as an option, of course, was the perverse possibility of dangerous fun, of answering the phone and committing your most heinous crimes. Since my phone falls of many years ago, I've never thought of the receiver in quite the same way.

New York in the Thirties, that is the East Thirties, somewhere around midnight. I was living on the other coast, had come to town to visit, to Manhattan for a rendezvous with friends, a couple who had also entered the diaspora that awaits most ex-New Yorkers. We had met at his mother's apartment, always seemed to gravitate there when we converged. His mother was a gentle woman; she was quite, but not completely, deaf. Years of exclusion from conversation, from the sequence of words and the substance of sentences, had made her apt to insert proclamations that were rarely appropriate to the subject, but seemed to give her an illusion of being included. On my visits, we tried to keep her current with our talk, but invariably the quick rhythms of conversation carried us past her. We had spent a giddy evening indulging in nostalgic reminiscences in the tone of old jokes. We found ourselves snacking on creamed herring and crackers in the garishly bright kitchen light. We agreed it was much too bright for herring. Mrs. Gitmann took on a look of intense concentration, not unlike the pained concentration of a child relieving himself in public. She meant to speak. She issued forth two statements: "I love all the fish in the ocean," meaning she loved to eat them, and "The herring is a good fish," which we later agreed had sounded like approbation. We followed our mostly stifled laughter onto the balcony for a guilty paroxysm of laughter, laughing out into the night and over the Catholic girls' school on Lexington Avenue. One of the sisters gazed unmercifully out at us from her little lit window, restoring us to guilty sobriety. It was time to leave.

The Third Avenue Thirties was a disturbing place to walk at night thirty years ago, when it had no life at all, no one on the streets, the since departed automat a depopulated Hopper with little lit windows, a Nun I thought, in every one, and the still faraway glitter of the Upper East Side, where I would enter the last station of the crosstown train.

The phone rang, a welcome delay and distraction. A man's voice, gruff and provocative, said "Lemme speak to Linda." I was already edgy and found his unmannerliness highly annoying. I engaged before I knew what I was doing. I said, "Linda can't come to the phone right now. Who is calling?" I could almost feel the wind sucked out of him. Dumbfounded, he retorted, "Who's this? Who the fuck are you? Put Linda on the phone." His lack of humor seemed oddly intolerable in the face of my own bad faith. Reaching back into the school yard, I said, "Look, Linda doesn't want to talk to you, so how about shaving your knuckles and sleeping it off." He ended our sequence of delightful repartees by informing me that he and his cronies were coming over to break my legs, and hung up before I could interrupt (would I have in fact interrupted?) and inform him that Linda was not really with me on the corner of Thirty-Sixth and Third. Even so, I felt I had to move on before the gang pinioned me by the phone. So I had progressed from mea culpa to mea maxima culpa. I also carried away, repeated like a novena, the most fervent prayer that my faux mistress could talk on her feet before he got to her legs.

Learning from experience has never been my strong suit. At times, I feel like a walking rebuke to behaviorism. Thirty-three years ago, I lived briefly in Manhattan, in a minute studio apartment on Fifty-Seventh Street, west of First Avenue. It always let in just enough light and noise to keep an awareness of the city maddeningly handy. I would hear pieces of conversation,

juxtaposed bits of pedestrianism: “It’s just like the old job . . . gonna pour in a minute . . . they have those in Jersey?” It was a nightmare of, a penance for, Mrs. Gitmann. At night I would hear more intriguing fragments from prostitutes returning from their shift. These were rendered even more surreal when they woke me from deep sleep, my waking punctuated by incomprehensible sexual prisms of talk. To keep madness at bay, I often wandered out, even if not very far. On one outing, I had barely gone two blocks, when the phone on the corner of Fifty-Eighth and First called to me with an alarming, a brash, a beseeching ring. My earlier experience had informed me of the need for tact and sensitivity; it certainly did not demand that I avoid what would be, were it not for me, local calls to limbo. Besides, after living in that studio apartment for months, I felt it was my right to talk back to the city, to infect it with my own benign voice. I picked up the phone, answered in the tone of a *bon vivant*:

ME: Good evening.

VOICE: Hello.

ME: Who’s calling?

VOICE: I can . . . I see you.

I thought his stutter meant, “could I see you,” a truly blind date.

ME: Well, I’m spoken for, but flattered and charmed nevertheless.

VOICE (WITH MORE AUTHORITY): I can see you down there on the corner. Fifty-Eighth.

ME (SKEPTICAL, TESTING): And what do I look like? Where are you?

VOICE: Aren’t you afraid down there by yourself? Is that why you’re looking up for me?

I thought of threatening to break his legs. I considered calling for my past. But the phone clicked, and I hurried away, back to my tiny box, figuring anyone who could pay for a high-rise could undoubtedly make payments on a long-range rifle.

My pay phone experiences have all but evaporated since then. I still long for the beckoning ring. My expectations are depressed. But I'm not completely cynical. No one who passes by what remains of public telephones with a glimmer of hope for serendipity is completely without hope, layered in a sense of the improbable. On our worst days, I might confess, we are the aural equivalents of peeping toms, urban eavesdroppers, if a little less passive. There is always the chance of seeing and hearing what we wish we were immune to. Think of James Stewart in *Rear Window*. Who could have known that Raymond Burr was so bad? And Baudelaire on his walks around Paris. He might as well have been answering pay phones when he wrote:

Indignant as a drunk who sees the world
double, I staggered home and locked my door,
scared and sick at heart and scandalized
that so much mystery could be absurd!

Vainly my reason sought to take the helm

("The Seven Old Men")

He understands that the streets are full of madness, as were its phones, but even so both were sometimes better than going home alone.