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What a Weird, Wired World It Was

Remember when telephones were for talking on?

By Strawberry Saroyan

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There used to be a cord. Bulky. Corkscrew-shaped. Tied to the machine that was tied to the wall. There were holes in the receiver, wires inside—ones you could see. People made calls before the iPhone, whose 10th anniversary is being celebrated this summer. “Hello?” “Hello.”

There were roads with poles along them that carried these voices via cables. Ring, ring. The sound was of a machine, not a machine imitating another machine. Phones were physical, big, in different colors and styles. But all were simple, built with pieces human eyes could surmise. You held them like objects with weight.

People spilled their guts on them, but they held back too. “What?” “Never mind.” People talked it out, turned it over on the phone. They could cry and it was real, not represented in text or icons. There were answering machines after a while.

“Please leave a message.” “Hi. Call me back.” But still all sound, no face time via FaceTime, no WhatsApp or emojis.

People built their careers, entire lives, via these phone calls. Superagent Sue Mengers in a caftan on a couch in Hollywood purring like a cat. Ambitious young things that were out of the loop geographically made bucks off their luck—their voices, their sonic ability.

Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” had entered the lexicon by then, but the phone was different because it carried our messages. It was personal. I remember as a child listening to late-night calls my father had with my grandmother. I could only hear his side, of course, but she was telling tales that became famous in our family, myths in our minds. I believe they were so resonant because they were honed via that solitary line of communication.

I remember as a teen talking to girls and first boyfriends. “He likes you.” “Did you hear?” “Oh my god.” This was before acronyms and liquid crystal displays, ambient light sensors and touch-screens. There was only sound. You could say “no” and it was a certain kind of no; a “yes” was a certain kind of a yes, too. Listeners understood because they’d, we’d, heard it.

It’s not all bad these days. I like the insta-gratification of apps and my Gmail, the ease with which I can make a firework burst—complete with pop-pop-popping sounds—via text message on my iPhone 6s. When Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone he called it “revolutionary,” not a gadget but a way of life. It does affect, enable, smooth out the hard lines of what used to be called reality—communication and seeing one another, connecting and knowing—even with things like Snapchat Stories or the fast-track feminist dating app Bumble.

Still, I can’t help wanting to mourn, or at least mark, the end of the phone call as I knew it. The days of Dial-a-Poem and party line Dial-a-Spaz, both early versions of social media. The era when one’s voice was an isolated incident, as it were, an isolated instrument for sure. When the phone call was a tunnel to hearts, minds, souls even. When it was just us with our voices, and a ringing.

Ms. Saroyan is the author of “Girl Walks Into a Bar: A Memoir” (Random House, 2003).