

the lost calls

a short story by

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The Lost Calls

I am standing by the payphones in the shadow of Fátima. The church is granite and cold like modern places of worship. Its presence gives a similar flavor to the city block. It is windy and the wind is full of spray from the estuary. The payphones are bright green and blue like the colors of the state telecom monopoly. If I am lucky today they will work. Sometimes the young punks will tear off the receiver and dangle it like a trophy from their motorbikes. Today I am fortunate and the phones in front of Fátima are all in one piece. Only a glass partition from one of the booths is missing.

It is cool out here. I am waiting for the bells. Fátima tells me what time it is. Like a fool I thought I had liberated my life to a greater degree by throwing my old plastic watch into the sea when its band broke. Instead I wander around stung by the impulse to know the hour, turning towards banks and shop windows and public displays of time. Often it is the charity of a church tower that satisfies my desire, an act of charity that provides me with abundant time or a lack of it. I am waiting for the bells to toll nine times this evening.

Seagulls are crying overhead. The clever bastards have built nests in these buildings, safe from the alley cats and other stray beings of ill repute. I watch their white shit fall from the sky like bombs. I imagine getting splattered by their excrement and the subsequent measures of vengeance that I in theory would effect upon them. I have heard that antacids will make their stomachs explode. Or that a club is the best tool for bludgeoning the life out of them whilst they sleep in their urban nests. I quickly feel guilty for my feelings of theoretical aggression. I am sure that the Earth is so happy to swim in the shit that I create day after day. I imagine a bear beating the life out of me for filling his forest home with the shit of my existence. Or an orca biting the lower half of my body off for throwing my watch through his living room window.

I hear the bells toll twelve times to signal that it is a quarter 'till. Or perhaps it was a few minutes ago. I check my phone to confirm the time. The time is wrong. I know because I could never figure out how to change it. Even then, it counts minutes, and seems to infringe upon the false freedom that I won when I threw my watch into the sea. I threw it off the boat that goes across the estuary, into the choppy wake behind the ferry for good measure. I hoped that the turbulent waters behind me with their sirens and squids would carry time down to the ultimate depths, somewhere near the treasures of the Rande Galleons and other lost prizes of British pirates.

I have a doubt about the time that the bells just confirmed. I am unable to remember if I just heard them or not. Sometimes people are capable of imagining something that never really happened, or they imagine that something that did indeed happen happened at a different time than they thought that it happened. I start to find someone to ask the time, but I hesitate. I will not be a slave to the order of time. I am somewhat confused by my thoughts.

I will call her in fifteen minutes. I checked my other pocket for the phone card. I pulled it out and looked at it. It was a nice-looking phone card. I bought it at a kiosk where all the immigrants in that part of town buy theirs. They come with their babble of

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languages and then they use Spanish to request the cards. Then they go to the payphone around the corner to make calls to Africa or South America or China. I am like them, and buy mine after waiting in line in an orderly fashion. To call, I go instead to Fátima. It tends to be quieter here, and the payphones are always free, and there is a taxi stand next to the phones, so there is always someone there at all times of day. The last taxi drives off and at the moment there are no more taxis in front of Fátima. I feel quite alone.

I am unsure why I come so early to make a phone call. People come fifteen minutes early to a concert or a movie or a football match. I have come fifteen minutes early to make a single phone call that may not even last fifteen minutes. Earlier I smoked a joint of extremely over-dry hash and cheap, Spanish tobacco and then went to the cyber-café to try and keep up with the world. It seems to move so fast nowadays. The world now moves with speed. It probably never moved this quickly before. Or perhaps it did. All I know is that it seems to me like only a moment has passed since I smoked and went to the cyber-café filled with a cloud of cigarette smoke, and now I am here, several city blocks away, on the corner in front of Fátima with my mind running circles around my soul and I am beginning to get quite dizzy. I am going to make my call pretty soon and should concentrate a little bit. The world has never spun so fast.

Perhaps to not concentrate would be more appropriate, though probably not. Unfocus can supposedly be clearer than focus in other religions, in ways of thinking other than ours. There are foreign ways of thinking. The time is coming soon and I don't know what to say. Perhaps I will just blather on for some time and not be listened to but speak nonetheless. I tend to speak even when I am not being held in any kind of regard. It must be some sort of self-defense mechanism, like all the poems I wrote to her and all of the art that I think I have created in the past couple of years. Life is never easy, I suppose. People have known this for thousands of years. Even Westerners should know this by now. There are those who realize it, and maybe they can be the triumphant, embracing their fate and still loving to love. Maybe I am stupid for being hopeful and I should silence those voices. Maybe that is why I tossed my watch into the sea instead of fixing the strap at the shoe shop.

I am not sure what to talk about on the phone. The time is coming near. Soon the bell will toll again. I am ready. I am calming down. I start to smoke a Ducado cigarette. Black tobacco. National product. I translate the label to myself, just to keep my mind busy. Smoking is unhealthy. Do not start smoking. The seagulls squawk overhead once again. I am not sure how I got into this kind of emptiness. Were things always like this? It is rather difficult to remember. Memory has always been an issue for me. It seems sometimes that there are large chinks in my fabric of recollection. I often remember things like an archaeologist, when I find an artifact in a stratum of my room, or when I come back to our apartment and find things like small wads of hash, or American whisky, or a captain's chair, or rosaries, or stationery in corners of the place I had forgotten about in the past year.

I should make the call soon. Time must have passed since I last thought about the time. Fortune waits for nobody. Nor does inspiration. One must seek things out in the

world. They are always present but they are not present, and you must seek them out in order to find them and have them and make them yours. I thought about love that way for some time. I had also considered that some things in life, even destiny or fate, could be unnaturally forced. I considered that maybe I could create my own sick nature and hold it to be Nature and create for my self a schema for future or present disappointment. What does such thought matter? I believe I have found love. I suppose I need to hold on to it with the same tenacity that I employed to find it. My grip can feel tenuous but so is everything in the world. I can feel invincible on a beach before a sublime horizon where sea and sky become confused, and soon be swept away by a tsunami.

The Coast of Death is not far from here. My mind jumps to a trip we took. It was not long ago that I was there. That sea that I see now will take me there. Or I could go across this estuary and over the mountains of the Morrazo and then over the estuary of Pontevedra and over the next hills and the next estuary; I can conquer the mountains of Barbanza and sail across the waters of Muros and Noia and I can be there, at the Coast of Death. *A Costa da Morte*. We were there not long ago. Together. It is not far off at all. It is such a beautiful place, and its beauty belies its thousands of shipwreck stories. This city is beautiful too, with all its grayness and saltiness, and its humanity. We were here, too, for some time and found beauty beneath the crust of sea-grime. The loveliness of the city belies the uneasiness in my breathing when I begin to think about what I had and where it has gone now. Time moves more quickly nowadays. The days are shorter and the years go by faster. Love is more ephemeral and even hate becomes short-lived.

My memory is like that too: transient, transitory. But there are things that are hard to forget, and I wonder if I really have forgotten them, and I wonder if now, when I recollect them, I just making them up. I remember, for instance, my first day of Catholic school, and the time that I peed my pants during recess and blamed it on a puddle, and the ham I ate at the ham festival of A Cañiza, and what it felt like to know love at its most burning and most passionate moment. Or I could also remember the moments that just passed when my mind, in its action, tasted that memorable meal and remembered that gaze of love, and stood awkwardly as I was presented to my second-grade class. And maybe it was today on the street in front of Fátima that I wet my pants and have yet to blame it on a puddle as it has not rained in two long days. I could use a love affair or wedlock with Mneme to solve this sort of uncertainty. Goddesses tend to bring trouble in mythologies.

A loud noise awakens me from my memories. It is the tolling of the bells. Sixteen bell-tolls from the tower of Fátima. It is a small church and only has one tower. The sixteen bells are followed by the nine louder bells, the bigger, more important bells that tell the exact hour. The seagulls continue to circle overhead with their cacophony as I listen to the bells. They drop more of their beautifully glistening shit in the setting sun. Another taxi pulls up to the taxi stop and then in a moment pulls away again, going back to the city streets. This corner of town is rather quiet. Developers have yet to discover it. The bell tolling stops and I remember that I am going to make a phone call.

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I walk to the green and blue phone booths and I pick up the first receiver, the one in the booth with the shattered pane of glass. I wait for the dial tone, which in this part of the world is a digital-sounding uninterrupted beep. It is usually in middle-C. The tone does not sound, but there is another phone on the other side of this booth. The phone booth in front of Fátima has two phones on either side. I move over to the other side, still affected by the shattered booth glass. I pick it up. There is the sound of a nothing. Shit, I think to myself. I play this game a couple more times and begin to curse out loud. I am alone in the street, and I feel like my blasphemous dirty speech is useless as nobody is around to hear it. I try again and again and begin to feel truly desperate. She is waiting for me. She is waiting for me to call. Love does not find you, you must find love, and I must call her now. The seagulls squeal again overhead, dropping their angelic, glowing pink bombs on the cars parked on the street. No more taxis have come to the taxi stand. It is still light out, but the sun will begin to set soon.

I am desperate now (truly desperate). I feel the need to know the time. A few minutes have surely passed and I feel like I am going to miss my chance. There is a small window of time when I can call her, when I know she is there. I don't know how long it has been since the tower announced that it was nine o'clock. I fish into my pocket. Fortune, love, inspiration, love, do not wait for anybody. I am missing my chance. These things are neither natural nor ever-present. I have to make them happen. I fumble around in my pocket until I can pull out my phone. Some coins and a handkerchief fall out as I retrieve my cell phone, and they fall mockingly onto the stone sidewalk, the coins spinning towards the street due to the inclination of the hill. I look at my phone. Three missed calls from an unknown number, over fifteen minutes ago. I stare at the screen for a moment. The number is not unknown to me, but I did not know over fifteen minutes ago that I had missed three calls. I translate literally the message that the phone displays to me. *Three lost calls*. The lost calls that haunt me.