



DIAL TONE

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A jogger spotted the body hanging from the cell tower. At first he thought it was a mannequin. That's what he told Z-21, the local NBC affiliate. The way the wind blew it, the way it flopped limply, made it appear insubstantial, maybe stuffed with straw. It couldn't be a body, he thought, not in a place like Redmond, Oregon, a nowhere town on the edge of a great wash of desert. But it was. It was the body of a man. He had a choke chain, the kind you buy at Pet Depot, wrapped around his neck and anchored to the steel ladder that rose twelve hundred feet in the air to the tip of the tower, where a red light blinked a warning.

Word spread quickly. And everyone, the whole town, it seemed, crowded around, some of them

Photograph by Doug Rau

with binoculars and cameras, to watch three deputies, joined by a worker from Clark Tower Service, scale the tower and then descend with the body in a sling.

I was there. And from where I stood, the tower looked like a great spear thrust into the hilltop.

Yesterday—or maybe it was the day before—I went to work, like I always go to work, at West Teleservices Corporation, where, as a marketing associate, I go through the same motions every morning. I hit the power button on my computer and listen to it hum and mumble and blip to life. I settle my weight into my ergonomic chair. I fit the headset around my skull and into my ear and take a deep breath, and, with the pale light of the monitor washing over me, I dial the first number on the screen.

In this low-ceilinged fluorescent-lit room, there are twenty-four rows of cubicles, each ten deep. I am C5. When I take a break and stand up and peer into the cubicle to my right, C6, I find a Greg or a Josh or a Linda—every day a new name to remember, a new hand to shake, or so it seems, with the turnover rate so high. This is why I call everyone *you*.

“Hey, you,” I say. “How’s it going?”

A short, toad-like woman in a Looney Toons sweatshirt massages the bridge of her nose and sighs, “You know how it is.”

In response I give her a sympathetic smile, before looking away, out over the vast hive of cubicles that surrounds us. The air is filled with so many voices, all of them coming together into one voice that reads the same script, trying to make a sale for AT&T, Visa, Northwest Airlines, Sandals Beach Resorts, among our many clients.

There are always three supervisors on duty, all of them beefy men with mustaches. Their bulging bellies remind me of feed sacks that might split open with one slit of a knife. They wear polo shirts with “West Teleservices” embroidered on the breast. They drink coffee from stainless-steel mugs. They never seem to sit down. Every few minutes I feel a rush of wind at the back of my neck as they hurry by, usually to heckle some associate who hasn’t met the hourly quota.

“Back to work, C5,” one of them tells me, and I roll my eyes at C6 and settle into my cubicle, where the noise all around me falls away into a vague murmur, like the distant drone of bees.

I’m having trouble remembering things. Small things, like where I put my keys, for instance. Whether or not I put on deodorant or took my daily vitamin or paid the cable bill. Big things, too. Like, getting up at 6 A.M. and driving to

work on a Saturday, not realizing my mistake until I pull into the empty parking lot.

Sometimes I walk into a room or drive to the store and can't remember why. In this way I am like a ghost: someone who can travel through walls and find myself someplace else in the middle of a sentence or thought and not know what brought me there. The other night I woke up to discover I was walking down the driveway in my pajamas, my bare feet blue in the moonlight. I was carrying a shovel.

Today I'm calling on behalf of Capital One, pitching a mileage card. This is what I'm supposed to say: *Hello, is this _____? How are you doing today, sir/ma'am? That's wonderful! I'm calling with a **fantastic** offer from Capital One. Did you know that with our **no-annual-fee** No-Hassle Miles Visa Signature Card you can earn **25 percent more** than regular mileage cards, with 1.25 miles for every \$1 spent on purchases? **On top of that**, if you make just \$3,000 in purchases a year, you'll earn **20,000 bonus miles!***

And so on.

The computer tells me what to tell them. The bold sections indicate where I ought to raise my voice for emphasis. If the customer tries to say they aren't interested, I'm supposed to keep talking, to pretend I don't hear. If I stray too far from the script and if one of the supervisors is listening in, I will feel a hand on my shoulder and hear a voice whispering, "Stay on target. Don't lose sight of your primary objective."

The lights on the tops of cell towers are meant to warn pilots to stay away. But they have become a kind of beacon. Migratory birds mistake them for the stars they use to navigate, so they circle such towers in a trance, sometimes crashing into a structure, its steady guy wires, or even into other birds. And sometimes they keep circling until they fall to the ground, dead from exhaustion. You can find them all around our cell tower: thousands of them, dotting the hilltop, caught in the sagebrush and pine boughs like ghostly ornaments. Their bones are picked clean by ants. Their feathers are dampened by the rain and bleached by the sun and ruffled and loosened and spread like spores by the wind.

In the sky, so many more circle, screeching their frustration as they try to find their way south. Of course they discovered the body. As he hung there, swinging slightly in the wind, they roosted on his shoulders. They pecked away his eyes, and they pecked away his cheeks, so that we could see all of his teeth when the deputies brought him down. He looked like he was grinning.

What you might not know is, what you're hearing might have been said a minute ago or a day ago or a week ago or a month ago. Years ago.

At night, from where I lie in bed, I can see the light of the cell tower—through the window, through the branches of a juniper tree, way off in the distance—like a winking red eye that assures me of the confidentiality of some terrible secret.

Midmorning, I pop my neck and crack my knuckles and prepare to make maybe my fortieth or sixtieth call of the day. "Pete Johnston" is the name on the screen. I say it aloud—twice—the second time as a question. I feel as though I have heard the name before, but really, that means nothing when you consider the hundreds of thousands of people I have called in my three years working here. I notice that his number, 503-531-1440, is local. Normally I pay no attention to the address listing unless the voice on the other end has a thick accent I can't quite decipher—New Jersey? Texas? Minnesota?—but in this case I look and see that he lives just outside of Redmond, in a new housing development only a few miles away.

"Yeah?" is how he answers the phone.

"Hello. Is this Pete Johnston?"

He clears his throat in a growl. "You a telemarketer?"

"How are you doing today, sir?"

"Bad."

"I'm calling on behalf of—"

"Look, cocksucker. How many times I got to tell you? Take me off your list."

"If you'll just hear me out, I want to tell you about a fantastic offer from—"

"You people are so fucking pathetic."

Now I remember him. He said the same thing before, a week or so ago, when I called him. "If you ever fucking call me again, you fucking worthless piece of shit," he said, "I'll reach through the phone and rip your tongue out."

He goes off on a similar rant now, asking me how can I live with myself, if every time I call someone they answer with hatred?

For a moment I forget about the script and answer him. "I don't know," I say.

"What the—?" he says, his voice somewhere between panicked and incensed.

"What the hell are you doing in my house? I thought I told you to—"

There is a noise—the noise teeth might make biting hurriedly into melon—punctuated by a series of screams. It makes me want to tear the headset away from my ear.

And then I realize I am not alone. Someone is listening. I don't know how—a certain displacement of sound as the phone rises from the floor to an ear—but I can sense it.

“Hello?” I say.

The line goes dead.

Sometimes, when I go to work for yet another eight-hour shift or when I visit my parents for yet another casserole dinner, I want to be alone more than anything in the world. But once I'm alone, I feel I can't stand another second of it. Everything is mixed up.

This is why I pick up the phone sometimes and listen. There is something reassuring about a dial tone. That simple sound, a low purr, as constant and predictable as the sun's path across the sky. No matter if you are in Istanbul or London or Beijing or Redmond, you can bring your ear to the receiver and hear it.

Sometimes I pick up the phone and bring it to my ear for the same reason people raise their heads to peer at the moon when they're in a strange place. It makes them—it makes me—feel oriented, calmer than I was a moment before.

Perhaps this has something to do with why I drive to the top of the hill and park beneath the cell tower and climb onto the hood of my Neon and lean against the windshield with my hands folded behind my head to watch the red light blinking and the black shapes of birds swirling against the backdrop of an even blacker sky.

I am here to listen. The radio signals emanating from the tower sound like a blade hissing through the air or a glob of spit sizzling on a hot stove: something dangerous, about to draw blood or catch fire. It's nice.

I imagine I hear in it the thousands of voices channeling through the tower at any given moment, and I wonder what terrible things could be happening to these people that they want to tell the person on the other end of the line but don't.

A conversation overheard:

“Do you live here?”

“Yes.”

“Are you Pete Johnston?”

“Yes. Who are you? What do you want?”

“To talk to you. Just to talk.”

Noon, I take my lunch break. I remove my headset and lurch out of my chair with a groan and bring my fists to my back and push until I feel my vertebrae separate and realign with a juicy series of pops. Then I wander along my row, moving past so many cubicles, each with a person hunched over inside it—and for a moment West Teleservices feels almost like a chapel, with everyone bowing their heads and murmuring together, as if exorcising some private pain.

I sign out with one of the managers and enter the break room, a forty-by-forty-foot room with white walls and a white dropped ceiling and a white linoleum floor. There are two sinks, two microwaves, two fridges, a Coke machine and a SNAX machine. In front of the SNAX machine stands C6, the woman stationed in the cubicle next to me. A Looney Toons theme apparently unifies her wardrobe, since today she wears a sweatshirt with Sylvester on it. Below him, blocky black letters read, WITHCONTAIN. She stares with intense concentration at the candy bars and chip bags and gum packs, as if they hold some secret message she has yet to decode.

I go to the nearby water fountain and take a drink and dry my mouth with my sleeve, all the while watching C6, who hardly seems to breathe. “Hey, you,” I say, moving to within a few steps of her. “Doing all right there?”

She looks at me, her face creased with puzzlement. Then she shakes her head, and a fog seems to lift, and for the first time she sees me and says, “Been better.” “I know how you feel.”

She looks again to the SNAX machine, where her reflection hovers like a ghost. “Nobody knows how I feel.”

“No. You’re wrong. I know.”

At first C6 seems to get angry, her face cragging up, but then I say, “You feel like you would feel if you were hurrying along and smacked your shin against the corner of the coffee table. You feel like you want to yell a lot. The pain hasn’t completely arrived, but you can see it coming, and you want to yell at it, scare it off.” I go to the fridge labeled A-K and remove from it my sack lunch and sit down at one of the five tables staggered throughout the room. “Something like that, anyway.”

An awkward silence follows, in which I eat my ham sandwich and C6 studies me closely, no doubt recognizing in me some common damage, some likeness of herself.

Then C6 says, "Can't seem to figure out what I want," nodding at the vending machine. "I've been staring at all these goodies for twenty minutes, and I'll be darned if I know what I want." She forces a laugh and then says with some curiosity in her voice, "Hey, what's with your eye?"

I cup a hand to my ear like a seashell, like: Say again?

"Your eyeball." She points and then draws her finger back as if she might catch something from me. "It's really red."

"Huh," I say and knuckle the corner of my eye as if to nudge away a loose eyelash. "Maybe I've got pinkeye. Must have picked it up off a doorknob."

"It's not pink. It's red. It's really, really red."

The nearest reflective surface is the SNAX machine. And she's right. My eye is red. The dark luscious red of an apple. I at once want to scream and pluck it out and suck on it.

"I think you should see somebody," C6 says.

"Maybe I should." I comb a hand back through my hair and feel a vaguely pleasant release as several dozen hairs come out by the roots, just like that, with hardly any effort. I hold my hand out before me and study the clump of hairs woven in between the fingers and the fresh scabs jewelling my knuckles and say to no one in particular, "Looks like I'm falling apart."

Have you ever been on the phone, canceling a credit card or talking to your mother, when all of a sudden—with a pop of static—another conversation bleeds into yours? Probably. It happens a lot, with so many radio signals hissing through the air. What you might not know is, what you're hearing might have been said a minute ago or a day ago or a week ago or a month ago. Years ago.

When you speak into the receiver, your words are compressed into an electronic signal that bounces from phone to tower to satellite to phone, traveling thousands of miles, even if you're talking to your next-door neighbor, Joe. Which means there's plenty of room for a signal to ricochet or duplicate or get lost. Which means there are so many words—the ghosts of old conversations—floating all around us.

Consider this possibility. You pick up your phone and hear a voice—your voice—engaged in some ancient conversation, like that time in high school when you asked Natasha Flatt out for coffee and she made an excuse about her cat being sick. It's like a conversation shouted into a canyon, its words bouncing off walls to eventually come fluttering back to you, warped and soft and sounding like somebody else.

Sometimes this is what my memory feels like. An image or a conversation or a place will rise to the surface of my mind, and I'll recognize it vaguely, not knowing if I experienced it or saw it on television or invented it altogether.

Whenever I try to fix my attention on something, a red light goes on in my head, and I'm like a bird circling in confusion.

I find myself on the sidewalk of a new hillside development called Bear Brook. Here all the streets have names like Kodiak and Grizzly. All around me are two-story houses of a similar design, with freshly painted gray siding and river-rock entryways and cathedral windows rising above their front doors to reveal chandeliers in the foyer of each. Each home has a sizable lot that runs up against a pine forest. And each costs more than I would make in twenty years with West Teleservices.

A garbage truck rushes past me, raising tiny tornadoes of dust and trash, and I raise my hand to shield my face and notice a number written on the back of it, just below my knuckles—13743—and though I am sure it will occur to me later, for the moment I can't for the life of me remember what it means.

At that moment a bird swoops toward a nearby house. Mistaking the window for a piece of sky, it strikes the glass with a thud and falls into the rose garden beneath it, absently fluttering its wings; soon it goes still. I rush across the lawn and into the garden and bend over to get a better look at it. A bubble of blood grows from its beak and pops. I do not know why, but I reach through the thorns and pick up the bird and stroke its cool, reddish feathers. Its complete lack of weight and its stillness overwhelm me.

When the bird fell, something fell off a shelf inside me—a nice, gold-framed picture of my life, what I dreamed it would be, full of sunshine and ice cream and go-go dancers. It tumbled down and shattered, and my smiling face dissolved into the distressed expression reflected in the living room window before me.

I look alarmingly ugly. My eyes are black-bagged. My skin is yellow. My upper lip is raised to reveal long, thin teeth. Mine is the sort of face that belongs to someone who bites the heads off chickens in a carnival pit, not the sort that belongs to a man who cradles in his hands a tiny red-winged blackbird. The vision of me, coupled with the vision of what I once dreamed I would be—handsome, wealthy, feared by men and cherished by women—assaults me, the ridiculousness of it and also the terror, the realization that I have crept to the edge of a void and am on the verge of falling in, barely balanced.

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And then my eyes refocus, concentrating on a farther distance, where through the window I see a man rising from a couch and approaching me. He is tall and square-shouldered. His hair is the color of dried blood on a bandage. He looks at me with derision, saying through the glass, "The hell do you think you're doing on my property?" without saying a word.

I drop the bird and raise my hand, not quite waving, the gesture more like holding up something dark to the light. He does not move except to narrow his eyes further. There's a stone pagoda at the edge of the garden, and when I take several steps back my heel catches against it. I stumble and then lose my balance entirely, falling hard, sprawling out on the lawn. The gray expanse of the sky fills my vision. Moisture from the grass seeps into my jeans and dampens my underwear. My testicles tighten like a fist.

In the window the man continues to watch me. He has a little red mustache, and he fingers it. Then he disappears from sight, moving away from the window and toward the front door.

Just before I stagger off the lawn and hurry along the sidewalk and retreat from this place, my eyes zero in on the porch, waiting for the man to appear there, and I catch sight of the address: 13743.

And then I am off and running. A siren announces itself nearby. The air seems to vibrate with its noise. It is a police cruiser, I'm certain, though how I can tell the difference between it and an ambulance, I don't know. Either way, someone is in trouble.

The body was blackened by its lengthy exposure to radio frequency fields. Cooked. Like a marshmallow left too long over flame. This is why the deputies shut off the transmitters, when they climbed the tower.

Z-21 interviewed Jack Millhouse, a professor of radiation biology at Oregon State. He had a beard, and he stroked it thoughtfully. He said that climbing the

tower would expose a person to radio frequencies so powerful they would cook the skin. "I'd ask around at the ER," he said. "See if somebody has come in with radiation burns."

Then they interviewed a woman in a yellow, too-large T-shirt and purple stretch pants. She lived nearby and had seen the commotion from her living room window. She thought a man was preparing to jump, she said. So she came running in the hopes of praying him down. She had a blank, round face no one would ever call beautiful. "It's just awful," she said, her lips disappearing as she tightened her mouth. "It's the most horrible thing in the world, and it's right here, and we don't know why."

I know I am not the only one who has been cut off by a swerving car in traffic or yelled at by a teacher in a classroom or laughed at by a woman in a bar. I am not the only one who has wished someone dead and imagined how it might happen, pleasuring in the goriest details.

Here is how it might happen:

I am in a kitchen with duck-patterned wallpaper. I stand over a man with a Gerber hunting knife in my hand. There is blood dripping off the knife, and there is blood coming out of the man. Gouts of it. It matches the color of his hair. A forked vein rises on his forehead to reveal the panicked beating of his heart. A gray string of saliva webs the corner of his mouth. He holds his hands out, waving me away, and I cut my way through them.

A dog barks from the hallway, and the man screams a repulsive scream, a girlish scream, and all this noise sounds to me far away, like a conversation overheard between pops of static.

I am aware of my muscles and their purpose as never before, using them to place the knife, putting it finally to the man's chest, where it will make the most difference.

At first the blade won't budge, caught on a rib, and then it slips past the bone and into the soft red interior, deeper and then deeper still, with the same feeling you get when you break through that final restraining grip and enter a woman fully. The response is just as cathartic: a shriek, a gasp, a stiffening of the limbs followed by a terrible shivering that eventually gives way to a great, calming release.

There is blood everywhere—on the knife, on the floor, gurgling from the newly rendered wound that looks so much like a mouth—and the man's eyes are open and empty, and his sharp pink tongue lolls out the side of his mouth. I am amazed at the thrill I feel.

When I surprised him, only a few minutes ago, he was on the phone. I spot it now, on the shale floor, with a halo of blood around it. I pick it up and bring it to my ear and hope for the familiar, calming murmur of the dial tone.

Instead I hear a voice. "Hello?" it says.

One day, I think, maybe I'll write a story about all of this. Something permanent. So that I can trace every sentence and find my way to the end and back to the beginning without worrying about losing my way.

The telling would be complicated.

To write a story like this you would have to talk about what it means to speak into a headset all day, reading from a script you don't believe in, conversing with bodiless voices that snarl with hatred, voices that want to claw out your eyes and scissor off your tongue. And you would have to show what that does to a person, experiencing such a routine day after day, with no relief except for the occasional coffee break where you talk about the television show you watched last night.

And you would have to explain how the man named Pete Johnston sort of leaned and sort of collapsed against the fridge, how a magnet fell to the linoleum with a *clack* after you flashed the knife in a silvery arc across his face and then his outstretched hand and then into that soft basin behind the collarbone. After that came blood. And screaming. Again you stabbed the body, in the thigh, the belly, your muscles pulsing with a red electricity. Something inside you, some internal switch, had been triggered, filling you with an unthinking adrenaline that made you feel capable of turning over Volkswagens, punching through concrete, tearing phone books in half.

And you would have to end this story by explaining what it felt like to pull the body from the trunk of your car and hoist it to your shoulder and begin to climb the tower—one rung, then another—going slowly. You breathed raggedly. The dampness of your sweat mingled with the dampness of blood. From here—thirty, then forty, then fifty feet off the ground—you could see the chains of light on Route 97 and Highway 100, each bright link belonging to a machine that carried inside it a man who could lose control in an instant, distracted by the radio or startled by a deer or overwhelmed by tiredness, careening off the asphalt and into the surrounding woods. It could happen to anyone.

Your thighs trembled. You were weary, dizzy. Your fillings tingled, and a funny baked taste filled your mouth. The edges of your eyes went white and then crazy with streaks of color. But you continued climbing, with the wind tugging at your body, with the blackness of the night and the black shapes of birds all around you, the birds swirling through the air like ashes thrown from

a fire. And let's not forget the sound—the sound of the tower—how it sounded almost like words. The hissing of radio frequencies, the voices of so many others coming together into one voice that coursed through you in dark conversation.