

Don't Call Me . . .

THE TELEPHONE SITS THERE so unassumingly, one would never imagine it capable of wickedness. Yet it is. It has spelled the end of privacy.

That fact came home to me, as it were, last week when some bozo pestered me with a dozen hang-up calls in the course of eight hours. I don't know why I should have been shocked. Our domestic tranquillity has been so thoroughly trampled by telemarketers, opinion samplers, annoyance callers, misdialers, blabsters, heavy breathers, distant cousins one had hoped never to hear from again, and hang-up artists like my own phone friend that it is hard now even to imagine those halcyon days when a person could count on a little peace and quiet in the privacy of his own abode.

There was a time, a few generations ago, when a man's home was his castle and that castle was truly impregnable. In those days, at least for the upper middle class, to "call" was to come around and present the footman with one's card, which was folded at a certain corner depending on what message one wished to convey. A folded upper-right corner, for example, passed along congratulations; a folded upper-left indicated a request to visit. And that request might well be denied. The footman might come back with word that the called-upon was not "at home," even though he really was; he was simply unwilling to be bothered right then.

With a telephone, unfortunately, one is immediately available to every Tom, Dick, and Harry in possession of a finger to dial with. Anyone can call anyone. I once read that in 1939 a particularly eager telephoner named Abe Pickens succeeded in reaching Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco, Benito Mussolini, Neville Chamberlain, and Emperor Hirohito to talk over his plans to head off the coming world war. In the case of Hitler, Pickens was able only to say, "Hello, A. Hitler, this is A. Pickens of Cleveland, Ohio, USA," before the mystified führer, who spoke no English, handed the receiver to an aide.

*The telephone
may be just a tool,
but it has pried
open our lives
for all the
world to see.*

By John Sedgwick



NOWADAYS, WORLD LEADERS have secretaries to intercept such calls, but lesser mortals are left trying to defend themselves against intrusion by using an answering machine for call screening. That's a nuisance all its own. What do you say if you do decide to pick up? Do you claim you just got in?

Given the supposed decline of civility in the current Beavis and Butt-head era, it is wondrous how powerful an obligation most people still feel to answer the phone. It's nearly Pavlovian, our instinct to jump at the sound of a ring. Not just to jump—to scramble. To kick aside small children, knock over furniture, flat-

ten cats as we lunge for the phone. Some years ago, I recall, after a psychopath went on a murder rampage in New Jersey, he barricaded himself into his room, from which he engaged in a ferocious gun battle with the police. But, when that familiar ring sounded, he took time out to answer his phone.

I sympathize. God, the agony of actually missing a call. The hours of puzzling: Was that that cute girl from the restaurant? The head-hunting firm? Mom?

Why do we torture ourselves like this? Is it

just from the belief that, no matter how many disappointments have come over the telephone wire, the next call is sure to convey good news? Are we still so optimistic? I have to admit that even I, on that day when I received hang-up call after hang-up call, continued to answer the phone by the second ring, like a total idiot. Answering the phone is like scratching an itch. The phone rings, you answer it. It's just what you do.

Peculiarly, the burden of obligation has shifted from the caller to the callee. No longer does the caller, in effect, have to ask permission to seize your attention; he can merely assume that you will make yourself available to him. Every caller knows that feeling of irritation, even when calling a private residence, when a call goes unanswered. What's the matter? you think. Can't the guy afford an

answering machine?

For all the telephone's impositions, the idea of unplugging it—or trying to do without the little monster altogether—is practically unthinkable. That would be like relocating to the far side of the moon. Alvin Toffler once remarked that while the television has received more attention, the telephone has insinuated itself more deeply into American life. Take away the television and people feel deprived; take away the telephone and they get panicky.

If anything, we want more phone, not less. We have become telephone addicts, phone freaks. We carry the devices with us everywhere, not just in our cars but in our pockets and briefcases as we walk down the street. Fancy hotels even offer bathroom phones—something I've never understood. Who besides Lyndon Johnson would want to have a conversation from that particular throne? Restaurants are now struggling to devise cellular-phone policies. Airplanes have turned into flying phone booths. At this rate, we'll all soon be wearing Dick Tracy's two-way wrist radio/TV and become slaves to communication, just as we are now—as indicated by the watches strapped to our wrists—slaves to time.

THESE NEW "CONVENIENCES" have changed us. The layers of protection afforded by the old system of calling cards and servants created what might be thought of as layers of psychic insulation, and they have pretty much vanished today. That psychic insulation concealed the essential natures of those ladies and gentlemen of yesteryear, just as the depths of their houses isolated their physical persons. If one believes the novels of manners of the late Victorian era, humans had never before in history been so hard to know. They kept their selves to themselves.

In Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, recently turned into a Mafia power play in the movie by Martin Scorsese, Countess Olenska may feel that she has been snubbed by proper New York society for having left her husband. But another explanation is that society simply can't accept someone who has behaved so barbarically as to act on her feelings and reveal them to the world. Similarly, in Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, one imagines that the characters are not so much individuals as prized assets that, for security reasons, are deliberately withheld from public view. The heroine Isabel Archer's greatest desire is to remain mysterious, and one mark of a person's superiority in the novel is an ability to deflect inquiring glances. Thus, at the end, when Isabel's longtime American suitor, Caspar Good-

wood, seizes her and kisses her—a kiss, James melodramatically writes, "like a flash of lightning"—the reader actually feels her convulsive shock.

It's hard to picture Isabel Archer yacking on a cordless. But the truth is, the wealthy really led the rush to the telephone. At the turn of the century, railroad magnate E. H. Harriman installed 100 telephones in his country house in Arden, New York. He also had a phone in his private railroad car (not that it was so convenient in the days before radio transmission) and one in his camp off in the wilds of Oregon. Accused of being a slave to the telephone, Harriman retorted as, presumably, Microsoft's Bill Gates would today, "Nonsense! It is a slave to me!"

The telephone is not the only piece of technology contributing to the elimination

**Massive computers now
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pornographic videos.**

of privacy. Obviously, the massive mainframe computers that are recording our every purchase—the sexy lingerie, the pornographic video—are a subject of anxiety for civil libertarians. Telescopes can peek at the unwary; scanners can listen in on cellular-phone calls, like the famous one from Prince Charles, in which he wished to be turned into Mrs. Camilla Parker-Bowles's Tampax. I myself was startled, some years ago on Beacon Hill, when I tried out a new pair of binoculars from the back window of our apartment—and spotted a peeper crouched behind a distant chimney staring through *his* binoculars right back at me.

But perhaps technology, having opened the largest breach in our privacy, will now help restore it. I take heart from the development of caller-identification displays, which are now coming to exchanges in the Boston area. By automatically showing the phone number of an incoming call, they will help curb the telephone version of hit-and-run drivers, who are now disturbing our peace and fraying our nerves. E-mail networks function even better. Messages wait until they are wanted, and the exchanges respect confidentiality so totally that, as at some grand masked ball, neither party in the conversational dance necessarily knows the identity of the other. Distant yet intimate. That's my kind of communication. **B**

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