

Communications

Mike Roden tells a mobile story

These days, communicating with someone else is easy isn't it? We've all got email, and the mobile phone is ubiquitous. It certainly was in the Latchmere on that chilly December night. There was some kind of comedy night upstairs in Theatre 503, and the young people were flocking in. Mostly big groups, a few couples. And mobile phones everywhere.

Leo had something else on his mind. 'It's as though I'm being haunted by this chap in the woolly hat and anorak. Five times I've seen him now. It's very sinister.'

'It's all his imagination,' said his wife Harriet. The four of us had met up here for a drink before going on to eat at L'AntiPasto

I eyed him curiously. 'You think this is a premonition of some sort?'

'Whatever it is, I definitely saw him in Asda,' said Leo. 'And up near Battersea Bridge. And the other day he was walking toward me along the river.'

'How can he be following you if he's walking towards you?' said my wife logically.

'Does he just vanish?' I inquired, not entirely seriously.

'I just get out of the way first,' said Leo.

Laughter

There was a sudden burst of very loud laughter from a group over by the bar. Harriet winced. 'They go about in gangs these days. It was enough for us to go out as a couple.'

'And we did talk to each other,' said Leo, 'Not gossip all the time into our phones.'

'Not that you can gossip into your phone,' Harriet looked wearily at us.

'He's lost it again.'

'It'll turn up,' said my wife, 'Where was it the last time?'

'In the fridge,' said Harriet. 'He always forgets to charge it anyway.'

My attention was caught by a couple at a table by the window.

Neither of them was on the phone. But neither of them looked very happy, either. The young man stared restlessly out of the window at the traffic while his girlfriend leaned forward across the table talking earnestly. I supposed there'd been an argument, and she was trying to make peace, trying to communicate. She was very pretty, long dark hair yet he seemed to be refusing to look at her.

'He was coming down the escalator in Asda,' Leo had returned to his stalker. 'And his eyes suddenly fixed on me. As if – as if he was after me.'

'Coming to drag you down to the infernal regions like in Don Giovanni?' my wife suggested.

Something made me look again towards the couple by the window. She'd stopped talking now, and was just gazing at him in a defeated way while he continued to ignore her. Then, predictably she reached in her handbag and pulled out her phone. So she'd given up trying to get through to him. Then without warning she turned sharply, and looked straight at me. I tried to look away, embarrassed, but I sensed she wanted to speak to me.

Spell

My wife's voice broke the spell. 'Time to go.'

'Sorry, I was miles away.' I looked toward the window again, and saw that he was alone, still gazing at nothing; his companion had gone.

Harriet was getting irritated with Leo. 'Get your coat on, Leo. What are you staring at?'

'It's him!' he hissed, pointing towards the pub door.

The young man who'd just come in was certainly wearing a woolly hat, and a dark anorak, but there was nothing sinister or malevolent in the smile he bestowed on Leo.

'I was beginning to wonder... Every time I saw you – well, you disappeared. Started thinking I was seeing things.'

Leo waited uneasily, 'What do you want?'

'I think this is yours.' The young man handed over an ancient looking mobile phone. 'You left it on the 49 bus. I would have called one of your contacts but the phone was dead, and nobody I knew had a charger to

fit it.' He hesitated. 'It's quite an old model.'

'It's an antique!' said Harriet. 'I keep telling him he ought to – upgrade, is that the word?'

'Anyway, I've often seen you on the bus so I knew you lived round here somewhere. Just could never quite catch you.'

He noticed that people were starting to move upstairs to the theatre. 'But glad I found you. Must be off. I'm going to the show.'

As he hurried away my own phone rang. I eventually fished it out of an inner pocket of my coat. 'Hello,' I said cautiously.

'Can you tell Tim that I'll be there in half an hour.' She sounded very faint, 'The train got delayed. I know he's sitting there worrying.'

'I don't know anyone called Tim. You must have a wrong number,' I was very conscious of being watched by my wife and friends.

'It's Caroline.' Her voice was even fainter now. 'I've been trying to contact him. But he's not answering his phone. I'll be there soon.'

'Look, Caroline, I'm sorry I can't help.'

But she'd gone. And then there was someone standing at my elbow. 'Excuse me. But my name's Tim. Couldn't help overhearing....'

It was the young man who'd been sitting by the window. Rather uncertainly, I said, 'Your girlfriend's called Caroline?'

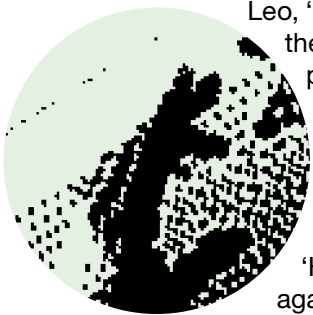
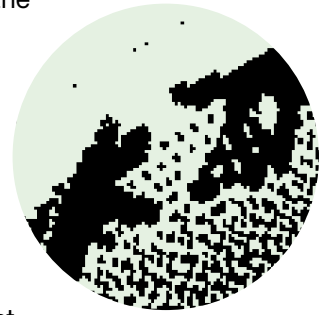
'Yes. I've been waiting for her. But my phone's been nicked. I was getting a bit worried ...'

Very conscious now of my wife listening, I said, 'Caroline's very pretty, with long dark hair?'

'Oh so you know her?' he said eagerly. 'And that was her on the phone?'

'She'll be about half an hour,' I said. 'She has been trying – very hard – to get in touch.'

He was suddenly a different person from the restless, agitated young man of a few minutes before. After offering to buy all of us a drink, he went off to the bar and we made our way out of the pub.



Harriet had been thinking. 'Why didn't he borrow someone's phone and call her himself?'

'Just think about it,' I said, 'People don't need to memorise numbers now. They're in the phone.'

'Caroline knew your number,' said

my wife thoughtfully.

'Well I've never met her,' I said.

'Well, not exactly.'

Leo was unconvinced, 'What does that mean? You know what she looks like!'

All I could do was shake my head.

'Let's go and have some pasta,' I said.

'And if I think of an answer to those questions you'll be the first to know!'

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