

## Mail Call: The Power of Words

Jan Byron

While each drawn out ring beckoned a response, my breath held in all the reasons to hang up. Not well enough. With a flurry of fumbled jerks the receiver crashed into its silent place where it no longer posed a threat to the monotony of an ordinary life. The culprit hand jerked back as though it had committed a crime and planted its knuckle over my mouth. The moment cemented itself in a forgiving tomb of weighted blocks. Despite the physical inertia that willed to dominate however, the desire to connect overpowered. I would try again. This time the phone would ring to flat line. Or. Someone would answer.

My finger again tapped *one*. The three-digit area code. Each number a seared step into burning embers. Smoldering coals lighting the phone face and singeing fingertips! Keep going. One number after the other. Done. The pit of burning embers trod. Wait. The time between the sound of the last number and summon of the first ring took forever. A summon that in whatever language, signals the intention of another, known or unknown, to

communicate. Communicate what? A thought? A request? A simple hello?  
An announcement of joy? A statement of tragedy?

"Hello."

A male voice bearing the monotony of Monday travelled through the wire. The time had come to plunge off the cliff of Mount Silence.

"Is this Steve Hughes?" Doubt and fear in anticipation of the myriad possibilities his response would create sounded a warning. Too late. I'd already stepped off.

"It is."

"Were you in Vietnam and did you go to Sydney, Australia for your R&R in June 1969?"

"I did."

"Do you remember meeting someone by the name of Catherine Moreton?"

"Catherine?" His voice lost ordinary in the two words of a name. "Is that you?"

The glaring moment of a few faraway days hurtled into my wife and mother kitchen and erased the past twenty-five years.

"It is."

"Well, I'll be damned."

The cheap brass spotlights on the freshly painted ceiling focused into a single ray. The receiver became a treasure chest. Open the lid to a possibility of good or bad. Keep it sealed and never know.

"I hope you don't mind me calling. I'm writing my Master's Thesis. I still have your letters. If you don't mind. I'm not using your name or even the dates the letters were written." Too jumbled. "And I'd like you to read my proposal." Too vague. "Actually, I need your approval. I need to know you're okay with this. You meaning you as representative of the collective whole." Too quick.

"Excuse me?"

Clumsy words broke through the wires as a forgotten longing and an immediate need negotiated hesitant steps in a dance of broken familiarity. Just like the call to another man I didn't know twenty-five years earlier. My father. Steve had been there. Did he remember?

"I met lots of other guys who were on R&R, just like you." Finding the right words was as hazardous as walking on hot ashes. "Not exactly just like you. That's not what I mean," I fumbled. "My cousin went over too. You see, I have this collection of over three hundred letters written from Vietnam,

yours included, and I'm using them to figure out what's important in life.

And. The ethics committee requires permission from the writers to use them.

I've had difficulty making contact as you can imagine. Of course their addresses have changed. Some are dead."

"Can you send it down? Do you have my address?"

"No."

"How did you get my number?"

"I phoned your parents' house which I got from the last letter you wrote in December 1969." My fingers tangled the off-white, coiled phone cord and held on. "Your niece told me you were living in Houston. She asked her dad for your number."

"That would be Denny, my brother. Good thing he and his family moved into my parents' place after they died."

"I'm sorry they died." I'd never met them but I was sorry. Their son was little more than a stranger. And yet there was something. The circumstances of our meeting. The war. The age we met. The letters. The four letters he'd written to me had survived all these years. "What did they die of? When?"

"Old age. Dad ten years ago. Mum, about five now."

Silence. There was more to say but whatever it was, or might have been, remained hidden in a veil of caution as sometimes happens when the unexpected appears in the moment.

That was two months earlier.

Today, Steve sits opposite me in a prairie bar in western Canada, thousands of kilometers from Sydney where we first met. Words, like pinpricks, poke their way into the still air of an afternoon hanging onto summer, seeking to be understood. Or manipulated. Or absorbed. We grapple with the fact that no matter which way we look at it, what might have been never was. And what never was, will never be. Nevertheless, the idea tugs like a bad example and invites us to follow. So we contemplate the paths we've taken and dare to unravel the past. To wonder what might have happened had the journey been different. Every decision a choice. One event over and after another. One word over and after another. One person over and after another. And every choice bound and irretrievably connected to all the others that brought us to this moment. We dare to ask but not out loud. What if I'd caught the train instead of the bus? Stayed in bed instead of getting up on any given day? Walked on by instead of stopping to talk? Answered the letter instead of figuring out what to say? Who would be the

important people weaving color, texture and form into the fabric of our lives.

What tones and shapes would we add to theirs?

These questions pause in the spaces between us as Steve talks about marrying out of lust rather than love when he returned from Vietnam. About his flashbacks. His treatment at the VA. About his eventual divorce and increasing alienation from his four children. His current affair with Stella.

And as we sit with no answers and nothing more than where we are, at an outside table with its own umbrella, we begin to wander back to where it all began. Imagining for a moment we're at the Bourbon and Beefsteak by the fountain on Darlington Road. Or the Texas Tavern where patrons trampled on peanut shells and shouted above Creedence Clearwater Revival as they rocked the rawness of their male energy through the jukebox. Maybe even the Whisky a GoGo where the sound of motown yearned for love, cried about loss, and looked to one day while desperate guys and willing girls clung to each other on the undersized parquet dance floor.

"What can I get you guys?" The waiter's white teeth and brown eyes sparkle down on Steve's grey brown moustache, receding hair and sinking eyes. His youthfulness is a reminder of how time erodes and corrodes not just the physical but the emotional and the psychological embodiment of who we

are as aging humans in the journey of our lives. This young man could have been Steve back then. Or any one of them. He also could have been me when I waited on tables in the coffee shop with the tireless sparkle of youth and the wide-eyed expectancy of life about to happen.

"I'd like to try one of your Canadian beers." Steve turns his head with a cautious movement that suggests a stiff neck.

"Molson okay?"

"Sure."

The young waiter fixes his smiling eyes in my direction. Patient as he waits for me to make up my mind.

"Orange juice, thanks."

A light breeze plays with the fringe of our green and beige striped umbrella.

"Do you remember the day we went to the zoo?" I ask.

"Taronga Park Zoo. Every detail. That was quite the storm."

"Yes. That was quite the storm," I echo. Our eyes meet. The sparkle once translucent replaced by years of experiences now past. Were I not married he might reach for my hand, or I his, despite the gaping hole of disconnected years.

The young waiter places our drinks on the table. His eager, yet comfortable manner suggests he enjoys his job.

"My shout," I offer, quick to honour the understanding Steve and I have already established on the phone before his arrival. Our reunion has cost him the price of a return airfare and me his expenses while he is here.

The breeze passes across the deck of the bar and continues west through the small rural town. The umbrella fringe loses its windy playmate and settles to a still calm. The heat of the sun steams the bricks of the old building like a sauna. Steve removes his dark blue, tailored suit jacket and hangs it so the sleeves hang even on the back of his patio chair. He loosens his tie bearing the insignia of the 173d Airborne and rolls up the sleeves of the white shirt, so clean it defies the dirt of life.

It had been difficult to decide what to wear. In the end I opted for white pants and pale blue denim shirt. A smart casual look that didn't quite match his formal suit and tie. He looked like a businessman when he emerged from the arrival doors just a couple of hours ago carrying a taupe suit bag over his right shoulder. With his left hand in his trouser pocket he created a picture perfect magazine image of the guy who'd made it. Military clean and

efficient. Young again. The image would have swept me away in Sydney twenty five years ago. But this was Edmonton. Twenty five years later.

"When did you discover that you didn't love your wife?"

"Some time in the first year."

"Did she love you?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"I was low on her list of priorities. There were the kids. Her mother. Her sisters and the rest of the family. Then there was me."

"Why did you stay together so long?"

"Our first child was on the way when we decided to get married. Then the others just kept coming and life carried on."

At five thirty the Fieldhouse Stop begins to fill with workers ready to embrace the end of the week and the beginning of two unstructured days and unpaid freedom.

"Are you ready to meet the family?" I ask, swirling the white straw to stir the ice cubes in my glass.

"One more beer and I'll be ready," he answers just as the young waiter reappears.

"So. Tell me about Catherine."

"Nothing much to tell. I came over here, met Bob on a blind date on Valentines Day, stayed a couple of months, then hopped over to England and Holland to have a look around. Eight months after leaving I returned to Australia. Bob came down to visit. We decided to get married. Left Australia the next day and we've been here ever since. Just like I told you on the phone."

He brings the brown bottle to his mouth and tips back his head. He is reminded of the twinge in his neck and he takes a moment to adjust. "Are you happy?"

"Very."

"That's good." He peels the bottle's label in strips that resemble colourful bacon. His eyes shift to the green plastic table. He nods four times.

A woman dressed in yellow shorts and a bright floral halter-top walks past our table on her way inside. When she speaks I recognize her as a colleague who never quite became a friend.

"Hi Catherine." Her eyes are on Steve. Her train tracked brow and widened eyes betray her desire to figure out who the man sitting opposite me could be. Steve doesn't seem to notice.

"I'm proud of you for writing your thesis."

"Thank you. It was hard writing about that time by myself having no one to consult with. I'm glad you were there when I called."

No response. "I was worried about using the letters. Even though it was my story I was telling, I hoped that if any of you read it, you would consider my work as a tribute. A small contribution to the ongoing healing process around the Vietnam experience. Another thread in the fabric."

Still no response. He again tips the bottle to his mouth. As he lowers it to the table, his fingers and thumb slip around the neck. He circles the bottle until the momentum turns the amber liquid into white froth. He places the bottle on the table and leans over. "You know, we don't like to see ourselves as victims. There's been a lot of shit written about our experience over there. Your letters speak for the experience."

"They're not all about war."

"No. They're about kids in a war. Being there and trying to stay normal if you know what I mean."

"I think I understand the writers better now than I did then. I don't think I really got it when I first received the letters. I don't think I had a concept of the war at all back then."

"It's amazing you kept those letters. Moving country and all. How did a girl like you come to be in Kings Cross in the first place?"

"My mother found me a job in a record shop through an old school friend of hers."

"Were all those letters really yours?"

"You read my proposal. My Grandma never threw anything out, so they survived." There was a pause. "Did I tell you my cousin, Michael went over?" The dull roar of a painful memory abandoned too soon returns.

"What's wrong?"

I can't speak.

"Did he come back?" Steve asks.

Michael has remained back there somewhere for many years. It isn't the right time to talk about him now.

"Yes, he came back." Butterflies flutter in my chest and the outdoors close in to a queasy nausea. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure."

"Do you remember Carol?"

"Is that the girl who was with you when we met at the fountain? I don't recall her name."

"That was Carol."

"Do you still keep in touch with her?"

"No."

"Nice girl as I recall. But I still want to know who Catherine was. Is."

He spots the waiter and calls him over.

"Catherine was a girl who lived with her mother and sister in her grandmother's house after her father left them when she was three."

"I remember you called him."

"That's right. At the GPO. You were with me."

"Did you ever meet him?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And that's how I met Bob. His step daughter arranged the blind date."

"So there it is. That's Catherine." I check my watch. "Bob will have the barbecue ready. He'll be getting anxious."

That night I realized that the answer to Steve's question involved an understanding of the evolution of my life. Who is Catherine? Catherine, like everyone else, is the product of a certain genetic makeup, her immediate

environment and the choices those combinations allow her to make not just at critical moments but the infinite moments that slip by in the every day.

Over the next few days the answer to Steve's question rumbles around in my mind. Some of it I explain to him. Some of it I don't. Can't. The details. The people. Not yet ready for the interpretation. Scrutiny of someone else. Others, as it would be in the passing on of the story. The written word would remember.

One of my New Year's resolutions had been to keep track of my day-to-day activities in the diary my grandmother gave me for Christmas in 1967. Diaries can be as simple as the factual listing of events, or so complex they can rewrite the commandments in the language of your own soul. With only a few lines for each entry the scribbles were limited to half a mousetrap's worth, barely enough to list phone calls and who made them. As it turned out it was the letters that opened the memory, documented and preserved the experience, set the historical context and immortalized their writers. Each writer every time he put pen to paper reached out and captured the feeling as he chiseled the Rosetta Stone of his youth in the script of the soldier, the man and the friend.

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