

Calling Mexico, Ray Bradbury

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And then there is that day when all around, all around you hear the dropping of the apples, one by one, from the trees.

At first it is one here and one there, and then it is three and then it is four and then nine and twenty, until the apples plummet like rain, fall like horse hoofs in the soft, darkening grass, and you are the last apple on the tree; and you wait for the wind to work you slowly free from your hold upon the sky, and drop you down and down.

Long before you hit the grass you will have forgotten there ever was a tree, or other apples, or a summer, or green grass below. You will fall in darkness...

'No!'

Colonel Freeleigh opened his eyes quickly, sat erect in his wheel chair. He jerked his cold hand out to find the telephone. It was still there! He crushed it against his chest for a moment, blinking.

'I don't like that dream,' he said to his empty room.

At last, his fingers trembling, he lifted the receiver and called the long-distance operator and gave her a number and waited, watching the bedroom door as if at any moment a plague of sons, daughters, grandsons, nurses, doctors, might swarm in to seize away this last vital luxury he permitted his failing senses.

Many days, or was it years, ago, when his heart had thrust like a dagger through his ribs and flesh, he had heard the boys below...their names, what were they?

Charles, Charlie, Chuck, yes! And Douglas! And Tom! He remembered! Calling his name far down the hall, but the door being locked in their faces, the boys turned away. You can't be excited, the doctor said.

No visitors, no visitors, no visitors. And he heard the boys moving across the street, he saw them, he waved. And they waved back. 'Colonel...Colonel...' And now he sat alone with the little gray toad of a heart flopping weakly here or there in his chest from time to time.

'Colonel Freeleigh,' said the operator. 'Here's your call. Mexico City. Erickson 3899.'

And now the faraway but infinitely clear voice:

'Bueno.'

'Jorge!' cried the old man.

'Señor Freeleigh! Again? This costs money.'

'Let it cost! You know what to do.'

'Sí. The window?'

'The window, Jorge, if you please.'

'A moment,' said the voice.

And, thousands of miles away, in a southern land, in an office in a building in that land, there was the sound of footsteps retreating from the phone. The old man leaned forward, gripping the receiver tight to his wrinkled ear that ached with waiting for the next sound.

The raising of a window.

'Ah,' sighed the old man.

The sounds of Mexico City on a hot yellow noon rose through the open window into the waiting phone. He could see Jorge standing there holding the mouthpiece out, out into the bright day.

'Señor...'

'No, no, please. Let me listen.'

He listened to the hooting of many metal horns, the squealing of brakes, the calls of vendors selling red-purple bananas and jungle oranges in their stalls. Colonel Freeleigh's feet began to move, hanging from the edge of his wheel chair, making the motions of a man walking. His eyes squeezed tight.

He gave a series of immense sniffs, as if to gain the odors of meats hung on iron hooks in sunshine, cloaked with flies like a mantle of raisins; the smell of stone alleys wet with morning rain.

He could feel the sun burn his spiny-bearded cheek, and he was twenty-five years old again, walking, walking, looking, smiling, happy to be alive, very much alert, drinking in colors and smells.

A rap on the door. Quickly he hid the phone under his lap robe. The nurse entered. 'Hello,' she said. 'Have you been good?'

'Yes.' The old man's voice was mechanical. He could hardly see. The shock of a simple rap on the door was such that part of him was still in another city, far removed. He waited for his mind to rush home—it must be here to answer questions, act sane, be polite.

'I've come to check your pulse.'

'Not now!' said the old man.

'You're not going anywhere, are you?' She smiled.

He looked at the nurse steadily. He hadn't been anywhere in ten years.

'Give me your wrist.'

Her fingers, hard and precise, searched for the sickness in his pulse like a pair of calipers.

'What've you been doing to excite yourself?' she demanded.

'Nothing.'

Her gaze shifted and stopped on the empty phone table. At that instant a horn sounded faintly, two thousand miles away.

She took the receiver from under the lap robe and held it before his face. 'Why do you do this to yourself? You promised you wouldn't. That's how you hurt yourself in the first place, isn't it? Getting excited, talking too much. Those boys up here jumping around—'

'They sat quietly and listened,' said the colonel. 'And I told them things they'd never heard. The buffalo, I told them, the bison. It was worth it. I don't care. I was in a pure fever and I was alive.'

It doesn't matter if being so alive kills a man: it's better to have the quick fever every time. Now give me that phone. If you won't let the boys come up and sit politely I can at least talk to someone outside the room.'

'I'm sorry, Colonel. Your grandson will have to know about this. I prevented his having the phone taken out last week. Now it looks like I'll let him go ahead.'

'This is my house, my phone. I pay your salary!' he said.

'To make you well, not get you excited.' She wheeled his chair across the room. 'To bed with you now, young man!' From bed he looked back at the phone and kept looking at it.

'I'm going to the store for a few minutes,' the nurse said. 'Just to be sure you don't use the phone again, I'm hiding your wheel chair in the hall.'

She wheeled the empty chair out the door. In the downstairs entry, he heard her pause and dial the extension phone.

Was she phoning Mexico City? he wondered. She wouldn't dare! The front door shut.

He thought of the last week here, alone, in his room, and the secret, narcotic calls across continents, an isthmus, whole jungle countries of rain forest, blue-orchid plateaus, lakes and hills...talking...talking...to Buenos Aires...and...Lima...Rio de Janeiro...

He lifted himself in the cool bed. Tomorrow the telephone gone! What a greedy fool he had been! He slipped his brittle ivory legs down from the bed, marveling at their desiccation. They seemed to be things which had been fastened to his body while he slept one night, while his younger legs were taken off and burned in the cellar furnace.

Over the years, they had destroyed all of him, removing hands, arms, and legs and leaving him with substitutes as delicate and useless as chess pieces. And now they were tampering with something more intangible—the memory: they were trying to cut the wires which led back into another year.

He was across the room in a stumbling run. Grasping the phone, he took it with him as he slid down the wall to sit upon the floor. He got the long-distance operator, his heart exploding within him, faster and faster, a blackness in his eyes. ‘Hurry, hurry!’

He waited.

‘Bueno?’

‘Jorge, we were cut off.’

‘You must not phone again, señor,’ said the faraway voice. ‘Your nurse called me. She says you are very ill. I must hang up.’

‘No. Jorge! Please!’ the old man pleaded. ‘One last time, listen to me. They’re taking the phone out tomorrow. I can never call you again.’

Jorge said nothing.

The old man went on. ‘For the love of God, Jorge! For friendship, then, for the old days! You don’t know what it means. You’re my age, but you can move! I haven’t moved anywhere in ten years.’

He dropped the phone and had trouble picking it up, his chest was so thick with pain. ‘Jorge! You are still there, aren’t you?’

‘This will be the last time?’ said Jorge.

'I promise!'

The phone was laid on a desk thousands of miles away. Once more, with that clear familiarity, the footsteps, the pause, and, at last, the raising of the window.

'Listen,' whispered the old man to himself.

And he heard a thousand people in another sunlight, and the faint, tinkling music of an organ grinder playing 'La Marimba'—oh, a lovely, dancing tune.

With eyes tight, the old man put up his hand as if to click pictures of an old cathedral, and his body was heavier with flesh, younger, and he felt the hot pavement underfoot.

He wanted to say. 'You're still there, aren't you? All of you people in that city in the time of the early siesta, the shops closing, the little boys crying *lotería nacional para hoy!* to sell lottery tickets. You are all there, the people in the city.

I can't believe I was ever among you. When you are away from a city it becomes a fantasy. Any town, New York, Chicago, with its people, becomes improbable with distance. Just as I am improbable here, in Illinois, in a small town by a quiet lake.

All of us improbable to one another because we are not present to one another. And so it is good to hear the sounds, and know that Mexico City is still there and the people moving and living...'

He sat with the receiver tightly pressed to his ear.

And at last, the clearest, most improbable sound of all—the sound of a green trolley car going around a corner—a trolley burdened with brown and alien and beautiful people, and the sound of other people running and calling out with triumph as they leaped up and swung aboard and vanished around a corner on the shrieking rails and were borne away in the sun-blazed distance to leave only the sound of tortillas frying on the

market stoves, or was it merely the ever rising and falling hum and burn of static quivering along two thousand miles of copper wire...?

The old man sat on the floor.

Time passed.

A downstairs door opened slowly. Light footsteps came in, hesitated, then ventured up the stairs. Voices murmured.

'We shouldn't be here!'

'He phoned me, I tell you. He needs visitors bad. We can't let him down.'

'He's sick!'

'Sure! But he said to come when the nurse's out. We'll only stay a second, say hello, and...'

The door to the bedroom moved wide. The three boys stood looking in at the old man seated there on the floor.

'Colonel Freeleigh?' said Douglas softly.

There was something in his silence that made them all shut up their mouths.

They approached, almost on tiptoe.

Douglas, bent down, disengaged the phone from the old man's now quite cold fingers. Douglas lifted the receiver to his own ear, listened. Above the static he heard a strange, a far, a final sound.

Two thousand miles away, the closing of a window.

The end