

MR. CALLAHAN AND THE BOYS OF SUMMER

It was a time when a nickel could go a long way, when one could buy a bottle of coke or 12-ounce Pepsi from the dispenser where they lay amongst the pieces of melting ice, a time of little money, when all we had was our dream of an America that existed somewhere, but about which we really knew nothing. One day Cooper went to visit a relative in Texas, and when he returned he greeted everyone by tipping his forehead as if he were wearing a ten-gallon hat. "Howdy," he would say until he tired two weeks latter. In the meantime we would all wonder if Texas did have as many cowboys as we'd heard about. Had he seen any, we asked him, and did they really go around wearing guns?

Someday, many of us felt, we, too, would visit Texas.

The summer would linger, and on those nights when the Sox or the Braves would be out of town, boredom would set in as we ran out of stories. Granted we could always have stayed home and listened to the play-by-play on the radio. But, then, what was summer for except for friends to get together on the corner, particularly when we knew that soon the cold weather would set in and the corner would not be of much value until the next baseball season.

Every once in a while one of us would disappear. In our desire to mature it was only natural we should seek female companionship - not from the girls down the street, but from the other girls - those who could provide us the chance to touch erogenous zones, to let us explore their bodies and, if we were lucky, to go all the way. Several of us ended up married to total strangers upon discovering that our breaking away from the corner had left us no way out - except to marry and accept the duties of fatherhood before we had even stopped being children. The irony was that, while we were marrying girls from elsewhere, we were still content to think of the girls down the street as the ones reserved for marriage. One didn't knock up the girls down the street.

By the middle of August, many of us would be ready for something drastic. We knew the Sox would once again lose it to the Yankees and that Ted Williams would win some batting championship. Our challenges, therefore, centered on what to do next. That's when we would remember the old telephone trick. We would gather at the corner of Fourth and Hurley as if Nature had instinctively programmed us for the task. One by one we would file into Scalli's Grocery and head towards the rear, to the telephone cabin. We already knew the person we would call would not be one of us, but an Irishman, or an Englishman. Granted some of us many may have had Irish or English names. Some even had Italian names. On the other hand, if one were to check our genealogy, one would find that those names were no older than one generation, strays that had filtered into our Portuguese midst. "Callahan! Yeah, Callahan. That's a good name. Wonder what he looks like?"

We would all rush to be the first, to set the tone. The winner would deposit the nickel and wait anxiously for a reply. Upon receiving it, he would signal happily to the rest. "Yes. Mr. Callahan," he would say.

"Is Melvyn there, sir?"

There'd be a brief pause while the rest of us speculated on the response.

"Yeah. Melvyn Callaghan. UNiversity 4437."

Again, the pause.

"Gee, Mr. Callahan. I'm sorry. I thought he lived there." Pause again. "Would you have any idea, though, where I could locate him?" Pause again. "No. I don't believe he lives in Belmont. Sorry I bothered you, sir."

The caller would hang up. Like the top runner who sacrifices himself for others in order to set the race's pace, he had done his job and felt good when he dropped out. Now it was up to the rest of us to get into the real fray.

We would wait five minutes while Scalli would watch anxiously from the corner of his eye making sure no one sneaked a free drink off him. Granted we never did, for Scalli, too, was a part of our being who, although much older, was nevertheless an extension of ourselves. "I guess I'm next," one of us would finally say, heading towards the booth.

"Mr. Callahan? This is Frank. Is Melvyn, there, please?"

There would be a pause as Callahan answered.

"Well, sir. That's the number he gave me, UNiversity 4437. I saw him just this morning."

Pause.

"Oh, Jesus. I must have written it down wrong. But you are Mr. Callahan?" Pause. "Well, now I wonder how I'm going to get the Sox tickets he promised to pick up for me and my girl friend. I paid him, you know."

The pause would be longer than the previous one. "Why, I'll kill the son of a gun if he took my money and didn't get me the tickets." Pause. "What do you mean, if I find him. Of course I'll find him. I'll keep on calling this number until I catch him at home..."

"What? But if his name is Callahan and that's the number he gave me, how come you say he doesn't live there? You're his father, aren't you?...What do you mean, your son is not named Melvyn?...Oh. Then the son of a bitch gave me the wrong number. Son of bitch. I'm sorry I bothered you Mr. Callahan. Truly sorry."

He had to cut the conversation short. The whole idea was to make Callahan believe he was not being the victim of a bunch of teens at a corner grocery looking for something to do.

"Boy, you were great," his friends would say. "Did he start sounding mad?"

"Well, only when he assured me his son was not named Melvyn." He would then reveal what we had not heard, thereby preparing the next caller for the following stage. Five minutes later the latter would be on the line. The conversation would get heavier, with the caller getting angrier with each word he uttered. Soon he would be insinuating that Callahan was covering for his son, but that it didn't matter. He'd get him at work.

The next caller would take longer than five minutes before he called. By that time, it was felt, Callahan had had a chance to cool off and to forget that someone was giving out his phone number while cheating on his co-workers. On the other hand we all knew that the seed of anger and annoyance had been sufficiently planted within Callahan. Thus, as the next caller rang and asked for Melvyn, it was his duty to calm down the victim, to sympathize with him and suffer jointly for what Melvyn had allegedly done. We would then retire to the outside of the store. Those of us who had extra change would buy whatever we could and share it amongst ourselves. A nickel bag of potato chips could go a long way in those days. Scalli would smile as he saw us exit, although he knew we would be back. "Gee, I wonder what the score is," someone would ask. I didn't matter whether it pertained to the Sox or the Braves games.

About an hour later we would return to the phone booth and enviously watch as the last caller drop his nickel into the slot. How we wished we had all been able to hear the finale, to have that sensation as if we were the first to cut the tape at the end of the marathon. He would dial slowly, savoring every move of his finger as it moved around with the wheel. Everyone would become totally silent. Even Scalli would hold up ringing a sale just to watch us.

"Mr. Callahan," the caller would say. "this is Melvyn. Did anyone call and leave a message?"

I shall not bother you with Callahan's reply. After all, your imagination does have rights.

II

The songs of the times were not complex. One sang of love, and the music seemed to wave in one's mind, as if rolling with the same speed that the records played in the radio booth. Songs were easy to memorize, for they could be understood by all. Singers were popular because they could control a note - not just because they could shout into the microphone. This is not to say that the lyrics weren't silly at times, for they were, just as most of the lyrics of today's generation seem to be. We would never take them too seriously, though, except when we were trying to romance those girls down the street whom we were saving for marriage. Ironic as it may seem, although in our romancing we would often pick music that could be danced chest-to-chest, we would often find ourselves moving to the tunes of Glen Miller and Artie Shaw, rather than to the melodic romantic words of Frank Sinatra.

Suddenly, we were gone from the corner and when some of us returned it was as if it were no longer there. Even Mr. Callahan had passed from our minds. On the other hand he had served us well while he had lasted. Many years later, for example, I was having difficulties with an individual in Brazil who allegedly had cheated the company I represented. The Brazilian, in turn, assured me on several occasions that it wasn't he who had done the cheating. So strong was his argument, that he would occasionally catch me in Brazil and, by using the power of the courts, make my life unbearable. Twice, for example, while my company exhibited at two important international congresses being held in Rio and Sao Paulo respectively, the Brazilian secured court orders that literally closed us down during both events.

One winter evening, out of frustration, I decided to get even with him. Because of the difference in time, I knew it was 3 a.m. in his country and that he would, no doubt, be sleeping. It was only 11 p.m. in St. Louis, a time when I am still alert and awake. I picked up the phone and called him. The maid answered.

"The United States calling for Dr. Marchon," I said in English.

"Quem e?" (Who is it?) she replied in Portuguese.

Pretending I didn't speak the language, but saying enough in it to be understood somewhat, I repeated my request.

"Momentinho," (Just a moment) she replied.

A minute or two passed while I could hear some voices in the background. At one point I even heard her say that she didn't understand, but that she knew the call was for the boss. Finally a tired voice came to the phone. "Aló."

I let it pass for a second or two before answering. "Alo," the voice repeated.

"Marchon," I said, trying to hide my Azorean accent and pretending that Portuguese was a language I had adopted. In fact, I mixed enough of it with Spanish to create a dialect that South Americans call portuñol.

"Marchon, mi amor (Marchon, my love)

...To make a long story short, I pretended in a very male voice that "Marchon, mi amor" was not being very kind by abandoning me. Little by little he started waking up and, good Brazilian that he is, defending his machismo by telling me furiously he didn't know who I was and that, furthermore, he didn't like men. He hung up furiously after explaining his sexual preferences and telling me what to do with mine. By then he was wide awake.

I slept soundly that night - possibly with a smile.

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