

When a Stranger Calls

When you have lived in Los Angeles for a certain length of time, you develop not only a variety of friends, but friends who don't like your other friends, or who in some cases don't even *know* your other friends. While these disparate friends might introduce you to their friends, the groups rarely integrate. It's not like New York, where the 'small world' model of friendship ensures that each new friend already knows a friend of yours. Friendships in Los Angeles don't loop back; instead they spread out, endlessly dividing. At the point where your social circle resembles a cluster of amoebas in a state of perpetual reproduction, amnesia sets in. Sixteen years down the road, I have to strain to recall how I met my friends in the first place.

My social circle resembles one of those grade school math problems that show sets and subsets, with a few circles intersecting and others not at all. There's the Childhood Friends Group, for example, the Mom group and the Ex-Boyfriends Group. And the groups based on shared interests: Writing, Music, Film. Every five years or so, there's a major shake-up, when an entire underperforming group—generally, the Ex-Boyfriends—will be jettisoned to make room for newer, more rewarding friends.

Then there are the Mystery Friends, the ones I have no memory of having met at all. Still, somehow they have acquired my phone number, so they call. One recent Sunday morning, I woke up to this exchange:

'Hi, it's Justin.'

'Who?' The only Justin I ever dated was someone I met on a New York to Los Angeles flight, circa '91. We went to dinner once and split the tab—his idea, not mine—after which I never saw him again. I'm guessing this isn't the same Justin.

'Justin Moore. I'm a painter?'

'A painter?' This really doesn't ring a bell. Moreover, I haven't set foot in an art opening for months.

'I'm a painter and an art dealer?—you gave me your card.' Then he reads the information on it, so I know it's for real. The mystery deepens.

'I did?' I say. 'When?' I'm beginning to feel as if I'm losing my memory, though Justin's predicament seems far worse. After all, he called me, not vice versa.

'You don't remember me, do you?' he says, somewhat accusingly.

'No,' I say, my bemusement increasing. 'Do you remember me?'

‘Not really. I just found your card in my wallet.’

I make one last stab at solving the riddle. ‘Where do you think we met?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says.

At this point, it occurs to me that I’m trapped in a ridiculous conversation with a complete stranger. ‘Well, if you don’t know where you met me, how am I supposed to know?’

‘Hey, I’m right there with you, babe,’ Justin says amiably.

At a loss for a rejoinder, I say ‘Thanks!’ and hang up.

Later, going through my purse, I find a half dozen cards from people I have only the vaguest memory of meeting, mostly film industry denizens that I only seem to see at holiday parties each December. Why we’ve exchanged cards in the first place is a mystery, since it’s obvious we will never contact each other, let alone work together. I throw the cards out as a precaution, so that I won’t be tempted to call the way Justin called me.

But unexpected calls keep coming. Sometimes, my hand poised to answer, I let the call go to message instead, which gives me a buffer against the dreaded phrase, ‘Remember me?’ Generally not. Or sometimes yes, which can be even worse.

Because I’ve been single long enough to have distinct periods of singleness (long-term monogamy back then; serial dating now), I’ve acquired a large crew of ex-boyfriends. Mercifully, the vastness of Los Angeles and the necessity of traveling by car minimizes the chance of finding myself face-to-face with any of them, though it happens. But, unlike New York, whose compactness and public transportation system guarantee encounters with the very people you least want to see, and on a regular basis, Los Angeles provides almost certain post-relationship privacy. I’ve found that staying out of certain restaurants (Nate & Al’s, the Ivy, Newsroom) and certain events (local film festivals, anything having to do with the Academy) minimizes the likelihood of an awkward encounter. But that doesn’t mean they can’t call me.

Last week I came in from the gym—in my case, a vast Hollywood fitness emporium that abounds with single Adonises but is off-limits to me, dating-wise, because I spend too much time there—to find the phone ringing. It was too late for telemarketers, so I picked it up, expecting a friend or perhaps my son. Instead, I got, ‘Hi, it’s James, remember me?’ He gave a little chortle, which I remembered as more nervous tic than expression of joy.

Sure, I remember James. He’s the stammering charmer who swept me off my feet a year ago, told me he loved me, and started talking about the romantic getaways we would take. Around the time he began talking about our wonderful shared future, tragedy struck—his only child became critically ill. James stopped calling, and eventually stopped

returning my calls. The last time I called him was nine months ago, when we had the last in a series of stilted and one-sided conversations. After a few minutes of awkward chatting, James put me on hold to “get rid of another call.” He never called back until now, a human gestation period later.

“Yes,” I said, stunned. Unusually, I was at a complete loss for words.

“How-how are you?” James asked. His tone, devoid of nuance, seemed to indicate he meant it.

How was I? I tried to quell the rage that was welling up in my chest, but I couldn’t.

Shakily I said, “It’s been a year since I last saw you; nine months since we talked, and you’re calling to ask how I am?”

“It h-hasn’t been nine months,” James said, raising his voice. “I r-remember perfectly; you had moved out of y-your house because you were h-having work done on your floors—

“That was the beginning of November, nine months ago. I ought to know.”

“We-we’ve talked since—” He was shouting now.

“We have not—I would have remembered,” I said, outraged. “And why are you so angry?—I’m the injured party here, not you! I’m the one who didn’t sleep for months, wondering why you just disappeared—”

“Yes, y-you’ve told me that,” he said; I had mentioned my James-induced insomnia the last time we spoke. His tone was icy. All I could think was how far I’d come in the past year: if I’d met James today, with his pronounced stammer and nervous laugh, I never would have given him a second glance.

“You stood me up and then you never called. And now you call—”

“I shouldn’t have. S-sorry to disturb your evening,” James said, and hung up.

There was so much more I wanted to say. James’s lack of empathy and coldness made me want to ask him whether he had Asperger’s Syndrome, a form of autism not uncommon among architects. Certainly his single-minded pursuit of work and his complete indifference to human emotions—not just mine but his ex-wife’s and child’s, and to some degree, his clients’—pointed to it. I had talked to parents and teachers of autistic children, and all of them had agreed that James’s behavior sounded like classic Asperger’s.

But it was too late for that conversation now. Long after I had put down the phone, my hand still shook. Of all my ex-boyfriends, James was the only one I never expected to hear from again. His call had come as a shock, though not its timing, coming as it did just when I was happily seeing another man. For some reason, former boyfriends—even those who never ended it—seem to sense the start of a new relationship.

When I told my friend Kim about James's call, she asked, "What did he want?"

"I think he expected to pick up where we left off, but I don't know—I was too angry."

"You should have let him talk."

"It was too late for that—I don't care anymore." And I meant it.

"By the way," said Kim, "Did Justin ever call you?"

"Justin? Is that where I met him—at your house? He called because he had my card, but he didn't remember where we'd met, so I couldn't help him."

"He was that artist guy at my pool party."

"I don't really remember—there were so many other people there. You'd think he'd remember meeting me, if he was going to call."

"I guess," Kim conceded. "What did he want?"

"To remember where we'd met," I replied. "Besides that, I have no idea."