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Phone Calls

by Karen Levy

California, 1999

It is almost time to make the call, one of only two we allow ourselves each year. I sit on my porch under a dark California sky, smelling the night air of a now familiar land. Sweet hay from the meadows across town, and the perfumed scent of jasmine from the white flowers I now anticipate every spring, each one a perfect little pinwheel of snowy petals. The phone sits on the step by my side, the address book propped on my lap because once a year isn't enough to remember such a long number; Country code, followed by city code, then Ronit's home number. Fourteen digits I will have to redial if my fingers go too fast in their excited haste. I sit in my garden so as not to disturb those in the house behind me, slumbering in its midnight hour, the time I have calculated will be best to find my friend at home considering the ten hour difference between our worlds.

Shrouded in darkness, I can still make out the dignified outlines of the cypresses standing guard over the garden I have grown to love. Behind them the Loquat tree spreads its arms wide, taking up space, finally at home among the mighty Oaks we found already planted when we arrived. It had taken nine long years to forgive me for pulling it out of my father's garden, housing it in a soda can, and carrying it on my lap on the plane ride across the world to this foreign soil. Nine years to send down roots and produce the sweet fruit of my childhood.

An owl's eerie screech reminds me of my mission and I check the time left until I make the birthday call. Twenty minutes to go before I can hear the crackle of thousands of miles between us, my voice flying over oceans and mountains, over deserts and cities, until it alights on Ronit's bedside table, where it rings her birthday awake.

"*Aallo*," I will hear her say, the emphasis leaning heavily on the first syllable of her greeting. Weariness and suspicion are always rolled into her tired voice, ready to do battle with an unwanted caller.

"*Happy birthday, old woman!*" Only I can get away with this, reminding her that had she not been born a month prematurely, we would have shared the same birthday.

"*Who you calling old? You're next you know.*" And the voice I've carried in my heart all these years will have regained its lighter tone, its' teasing and confiding lilt reserved for me. From there we will fill the space between us with brief accounts of events we missed in each other's lives, electrical signals transmitting our hopes and fears, our joys and sadness over the span of time and distance. This is the means by which we have learned the details of our separate lives; the birth of our children, the breakdown of her marriage, the start of a new one, the difficulty of her daily life with more duties now than dreams. We keep our calls short, all too aware of the cost of splurging on emotions, wishing for the simple pleasure of having a good laugh or cry over a cup of coffee in each other's kitchens. Every year this is our birthday gift to one another, a few moments of childhood voices echoing

in our ears.

"Wish I were there to celebrate with you in person," I'll say like I do every year.

"Talk to you in exactly one month," she'll say, like she has for the past thirty years.

A rustling in the trees above me makes me remember why I'm giving up sleep tonight, and a glance through the window at the kitchen clock tells me it is time. I feel the familiar flutter of excitement in my stomach as I reach for the phone. Light from the kitchen falls on the page in the address book and I start dialing the codes that connect us, arterial roads leading to the heart. One last number and my old friend will answer. A few moments of chatter will bring the smile back into her voice, and shake loose the accent that had been growing thicker in mine. But instead, the phone I'm gripping to my ear keeps ringing its combination of long and short sound signals; a Morse code of sorts. I let the ringing continue, tapping out its message, while I picture the inside of Ronit's house. Tile floors washed until they gleam, pink walls, still her favorite color, in the bathroom, every item neat and precisely in its place, my phone call the only jarring note in an otherwise orderly world. I look for her upstairs, where no one is allowed to bring food, her fear of roaches bordering on paranoia. I peek into the bomb shelter she has transformed into a pantry, into her daughters' rooms, their photographs replicas of their mother before the nose job. *Where are you?* But this is the first time my voice has not landed on its target, and I can picture it flailing through the air, skidding down the mountains, plunging into those oceans, losing the momentum that had propelled it from my darkened side of the world on the fifth of May to arrive on Ronit's sun filled door step on the sixth.

By now the sky has darkened to a deeper shade of black, the moon hidden between the fan -like fronds of the palm trees that remind me of a distant landscape. I am certain there will be a logical explanation the next day, when I try to call again. But something has changed. A thin but precious thread broken as I push the off button on the now silent phone, and I'm left staring out into the immigrant garden I have created.

Karen Levy is an Israeli-American writer. Born in Israel, Levy spent her childhood traveling between her native land and the United States. Commuting between these two countries and having a keen eye for detail have afforded Levy the knowledge necessary to recount the immigrant experience in a candid style. Her work appears in *Welter Magazine*, *So to Speak*, *The Blue Moon Review*, and her memoir *My Father's Gardens* will be published in April 2013 by Homebound Press.

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