



Coming Home to Roost

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Not too long ago, a newspaper article reported that about two thousand homing pigeons had disappeared. The birds were competing in races and had failed to return home. Pigeon enthusiasts were puzzled and acknowledged that no one really knows how homing pigeons do what they do. The race organizers claimed that these birds use the Earth's magnetic fields to help them navigate and speculated that they may have lost their bearings because of cell phone activity in the area. It made me wonder about all those wi-fi networks and GHz frequencies floating around these days.

The first phone I can remember was on the kitchen wall in my grandparents' house in Buenos Aires in the late 1940s. It was probably one generation beyond the kind you had to crank with a handle. The rotary dial was on the front, just below the speaking tube, and you listened through a hand-held cylinder that hung in a metal holder on the side. The cylinder was attached to the unit with a length of black cloth-covered cord that was no more than two or three feet long, so there was no mobility, no strolling around with a long, curly cable trailing behind you. You stood right there in the kitchen, yelling into the mouthpiece, holding the cylinder to your ear, and everyone marvelled at this amazing technology.

A few years later we moved to Montevideo, where we went for quite a while with no phone at all. At that time, in that place, you didn't just order a telephone, and have it installed the next day; you put your name on a list, and you waited. Sometimes for months on end. While we waited, we relied on the kindness of the proprietors of the café on the corner. They had a wonderfully modern, elegant phone made of black plastic that sat on the counter by the window. It had a sleek little combination talking-and-listening device that sat in a cradle across the top. I can still remember the sturdy feel of that handset, into which I poured who knows how many entreaties, excuses, promises and an assortment of stories of one kind or another. As I grew older, strayed a little farther, and came home a little later, I would call the café to

advise my anxious parents not to wait up. The proprietors—two brothers, Raúl and Manolo—were unfailingly gracious about sending someone to fetch my father to take these calls. He repaid their kindness by ordering cups of coffee and the occasional glass of wine. It was an arrangement that seemed to suit us all.

In the mid-1950s we were traveling in northern Uruguay, on our way to a family vacation in southern Brazil. A few miles before crossing the border, my father decided to call ahead to check on our accommodations. The telephone operator quoted an astronomical price, and explained that—since there was no direct link between Uruguayan and Brazilian telephone networks—the call would have to be routed through Montevideo, across to Buenos Aires, up to New York, back down to São Paulo, and on out to our hotel that was, at most, a hundred miles away from where we were. Instant, easy, and affordable communication at the click of a button was still some years away.

I have sat in drafty post offices, hotel lobbies, and telephone booths in various parts of the world, waiting (for hours, even days, sometimes) for calls to be put through to some faraway number. Those calls were often plagued with a crackling sound that made conversation difficult, or with pulsating waves of roaring, grey noise that swept it away entirely. We struggled, often against enormous odds, to discover whether everyone was well and, for some mysterious reason, what time it was and what the weather was like at the other end of the line. But just getting through, being able to communicate, was worth it. And all the time, our technology kept improving. One day, we thought, we'll all be wearing those Dick Tracy watches, just you wait and see!

Well, that day arrived a few years ago. We carry cell phones in our pockets, in our purses, in our cars. Almost everyone has one. We can call and be called by anyone, anytime, anywhere. I thought I'd be ecstatic when we finally got to this point, and for a while I was. But then I read about those pigeons, and now I'm not so sure.