

"DON'T PANIC, THIS NIGHT WILL PASS"

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INTRODUCTION

This story is about the first telephone company in Los Altos (also called Gopherville).

In 1932, it was located on State Street in Los Altos. The small building, formerly a farmers house, was surrounded by open meadows and oak trees. It had just one business neighbor, the laundry across the street.

The operators I worked with were: Mrs. B. Stussi (Chief Operator), Mrs. J. Whitwam, Mrs. K. Gorman, Miss K. Knapp, and Mrs. Bishop (Night Operator).

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I sat on the tall stool tethered to the Los Altos switchboard. A horn rested on my bosom. An ear clamp dampened my sweaty ear.

It was 1933, my first night all alone in charge of about 450 telephone subscribers. All depended on me, their telephone operator.

The switchboard was old. When I asked where it came from, I was told "around the Horn". When a caller lifted the telephone receiver, a number appeared in the upper glassed section. There were two jacks, one for incoming calls and the other for outgoing.

"Number please?"

"The time is 10:30 P.M.

Another number flipped up.

"Number please?"

"Gimme the depot."

That was easy. I remembered the depot, garage and fire department from my training two weeks earlier--without pay. Yet I was thankful for a real job instead of all the temporary work I had been doing since I graduated from Mountain View High School.

Besides myself, our crew consisted of our supervisor, Mrs. Stussi, and four other operators. Tall and stately, Mrs. Stussi was kind and recognized the strain we were under. Katherine Gorman, a dear friend with a strong face and soft steel blue eyes, worked with me. Later my sister Katie joined the crew. I was taught all the correct words and phrases to use and to never speak back in my own words. If someone asked unusual questions, the phrase would be, "I'm sorry I do not have that information."

My supervisor warned me about Mrs. Bloom. "When she calls her daughter in Redwood City," Mrs. Stussi advised, "don't forget to put a clamp on the cord."

When it was an outside call like hers, there was only one light to tell us if the party hung up. Mrs. Bloom and her daughter had long pauses in their conversation and we'd jerk out plugs before the talking was over. Then we'd see the number in the glass jiggle up and down.

"You cut me off," the two would complain. The ticket would have to be revised for the allotted time missed.

Those tickets! Each girl had a yellow pad with blanks to be filled in. We wrote down: top number calling to called. Since all outside calls had to go through Palo Alto, we'd have to listen to find out if anyone answered or not. Sometimes it was a real hassle during the busy hours when we were swamped.

A Los Altos call to San Francisco could frazzle the

nerves. We would ring and ring to get Palo Alto to connect us. When San Francisco answered, the called number was transferred. If it were a collect call or person-to-person, we had to wait on that line for the process to go through. Numbers in the glass above would pop up like popcorn. Some jiggled, and I heard, "Are you sleeping?"

Not even "Were you." No answer to that.

I kept an eye on the clock - conversation, time started, time finished. We made guesses, but always in favor of the caller. On two- or four-party lines we had to be especially careful.

I hoped no one would ask me for a non-published number. Sure enough. They asked for a Milton Haas. That number was my undoing as the phrase tangled with the name. The standard phrase was, "Mr. So-and-So has a telephone, but he has asked us not to give out the number."

"Milton Has has [close the key, giggle, giggle] but he has ass- [giggle, giggle] us not to give out the number." I barely made it.

I was glad that on this night there was one problem I wouldn't have. No one would come to the small window to pay a bill. During the day (if Mrs. Stussi was not around), still attached to our six-foot cord, we'd go to the window. We'd push up a board, collect the money and give a receipt.

Another task was easier at night. Because I could stand up, I could reach all the local numbers with my cord.

In the daytime, when two girls worked together, or three at the busiest hours, we'd have to relay the cord and give the number out of our reach to our partner.

Tonight the jumping numbers were getting fewer. I began to actually enjoy the slower pace after the hectic shift with the girls.

The clock in the middle of the switchboard said 12:00 midnight.

I remembered what I was told. Put down the buzzer for calls, go to the desk and sort and subtract all the tickets of the day. Enter the charges. I gathered all the tickets up to midnight, unplugged from the board and sat at the desk.

A strange quiet hung in the room and I looked around at the office. It had once been someone's living room. The walls were four-inch tongue and groove, painted a light grey. All were bare except for one calendar and instructions for the telephone company. Above my head dangled a chain to pull if the lights went out. The floor was bare wood with many worn spots. In back of me, on my right, a door led to a toilet and basin. It was a terrible feeling to be halfway through in there and have the buzzer go off.

Idly thinking about that, I remembered another door directly behind me. "Be sure it is locked," Mrs. Stussi had warned. Four deserted musty rooms. I felt a chill slowly crawl from my spine to the top of my head. Was that door locked? And where would the key be? The empty room spiraled with

fear vibrations as I lifted myself up to try the knob. Locked! A sigh of relief.

I walked around and checked two windows. A larger one in the front with no curtains faced State Street. I peered out at a lonesome oak tree in the distance. A Japanese laundry across the street had closed for the night. I could see fields around it. I pushed aside the other window shade. Nothing--just meadows.

I went back to my seat at the desk. How dark outside! How still inside! Unreal. I knew any minute that panic, a fire, a suicide, some emergency could shatter the peace.

Slowly I worked on the tickets going over them twice. It would take my mind off the imagined calamities. A vacuum of silence enveloped me. I'd never been awake all night before. This was spooky. The wind rattled the doors in the back rooms. What was that crunching and gnawing? Where was it coming from? Probably wood rats or gophers. Wasn't Los Altos still called "Gopherville"?

To take my mind away from my fears I decided to look at the trouble log. It hung at the end of our nine-foot-long switchboard. When a complaint about a telephone came through we entered it in that journal. I chuckled when I read this one: "Can't get the operator in the bedroom."

I soon tired of that, and poured a cup of coffee. The pot simmered on the one-burner on a small table. Mrs. Stussi said coffee would keep me awake. Awake? I felt like a bright owl on my first night out.

BBZZZT. The buzzer sounded. I ran to the switchboard, plugged in and recognized the number that flew up. It was right here on the front porch of the house - a public telephone booth.

"Number please?"

"Hello schweetheart, arentcha lonesome in there?" a tipsy voice asked.

"I'm sorry I do not have that information," I replied.

I closed the key and pulled out the plug.

OOPS, there's that number again. I let him wait awhile. Then, "Number please?"

No one had warned me about this. Katherine Gorman did say she kept her dog "Micky" with her all night and was happy for the security. On the farm we never locked our doors at night. There never was a need for that.

"Honey, let me in. I'll keep you company--pleasch," he pleaded.

What was I going to do with this drunk? I threatened, "If you don't go away I'll call the police."

"Ha! Ha!" he jeered, "What police?"

I remembered the sheriff's office was about eleven miles down the road in Santa Clara. You had to call there for assistance - and it had to be important. But this guy was harmless. Or was he?

I went back to the coffee pot and watched the number bounce. At last it stopped. I sighed with relief. Oh, no! He was trying the back door. What should I do now?

I decided if I heard something break or crack I'd call the sheriff. My heart pounded so loud I could hear it. I listened. Silence. What was wrong? The stillness surrounded me. Why was I shaking? Was I that frightened? I looked at my hands and couldn't believe they were mine. They trembled so hard the rest of my body joined in. What had happened?

Suddenly it dawned on me - all those cups of coffee - too many while I was preoccupied with that character on the front porch.

The clock in the middle of the switchboard said 3:00 A.M. Why was I so afraid? How could this dumb thing happen to me. Hundreds of people depending on me for assistance, and I needed help.

I decided to call Katherine Gorman.

"Katherine, I'm sure glad to hear your voice," I said. I could hear her dog whining while I was explaining what happened.

"I can't come," she said. "Call Mrs. Stussi. You may not get any more calls. Just calm down. Nothing will happen."

I didn't want to call Mrs. Stussi. She might fire me and I needed that \$2.50 a day, or in this case, a "nightmare."

I pulled out two hard chairs and put them together. I put the buzzer down on the board, and curled up on the chairs. Shivering, wide awake, my eyes seemed hypnotized by the clock. The hands didn't seem to move. Relax. Relax.

What was that? Something scratched at the front door. It whined. It was a dog! I looked through the peephole. Micky! Micky! Katherine's dog! How did he know I needed help?

I felt comforted as he lay down on the porch.

At 6:00 A.M. when I opened the door for the relief operator, he was still there.

"Oh, it's you, Anna!" She seemed surprised. "Micky's here, so I thought Katherine had the night shift."

I darted past her. Over my shoulder I mumbled, "I wish she had."

Don't put this right wall for

THE LOS ALTOS TELEPHONE CO.
Formerly a house-five Room
Located on State St. near Second
Early 1930's



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