

## PAMELA CARROLL

*Bird Call*  
Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

## DANA FRANK

# Telephone Not Intervened

## Adventures at the 7-Eleven Pay Phone

**O**n a Tuesday, I got an email from Someone Important in Washington, who I'd been working closely with on Honduran human rights for two years. He asked me to call him on Thursday at noon "from a crazy phone that is not intervened"—playing off the Spanish *teléfono no intervenido* (untapped phone). What? We'd barely ever talked on the phone, let alone on an untapped one. I immediately went into panic mode—had I screwed up somehow and blown the relationship, and now he was going to tell me that, and the call was for damage control? This was the only reason I could come up with. No, he reassured me in an otherwise still-cryptic follow-up email, I hadn't screwed up.

I thought about using some phone at the university, but that got too complicated—how could it be private enough, and also protect whoever's phone it was? I asked a friend if I could use her cell, but when I couldn't actually explain what the business of the call might be, that got murky too. So I spent a chunk of Wednesday driving around greater Santa Cruz with my niece Becky looking for a pay phone.

First I learned that pay phones are disappearing. Then I found two or three, but they were in loud places with lots of street noise. I went to the monster Safeway on the West Side and asked around inside—"Is there a pay phone here somewhere?" There I learned something else useful: if you wander around in a public place with a sense of urgency, asking people if they have seen a pay phone—and, in my case, if you look like a white middle-class woman in a mostly white town—a great many total strangers will offer you their cell phones. I had to politely decline them all, quickly, without explaining that I was looking for an untapped phone from which to make a semi-clandestine call having something to do with my largely confidential political life in Washington, D.C., as a Honduran freedom fighter. I also learned that there are no longer pay phones either inside or outside Safeways.

I decided on the phone in front of my neighborhood 7-Eleven off a small parking lot in a little strip of four or five businesses, set back a bit from Mission Street just before the commercial part of town peters out and Mission becomes the road north along the coast. If that phone was busy when I needed it the next day, I could still quickly drive three blocks back down Mission Street to another

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phone in front of the CVS. I made a successful fifty-cent test call, then called it a day.

Thursday at 11:30 A.M., I staked out my territory. Nervous. Very nervous. I parked my car pointing right at the phone and planted myself on the sidewalk in front of the box holding it. But the phone was half-blocked by a giant concrete garbage can with a metallic ashtray embedded on top alongside bits of gum. I tried to push it away but couldn't.

I settled in with the aroma of butts and trash, trying to look occupied with the phone, more or less, while checking out the territory. On one side I got to know the Super Suds Laundry, which had nice big loopy Ss painted on its sign up top. A young guy came out to his car carrying a pile of brightly patterned fleece blankets, impeccably folded, then went back and forth with more impeccable piles. Past the laundromat enticed the Gilded Lily Tattoos, its gilt signage evoking a Wild West saloon. A thin young couple passed me en route to the parlor. On the other side stood the 7-Eleven itself, with its own variegated customers from time to time. Across from me, in the parking lot, a man in a black Audi sat looking vaguely out the

whole time. I thought he might be waiting for his laundry (or perhaps, I now realize, his connection—or both). I was still totally nervous about my mystery call, if amused, and paced in place.

Before I'd left the house I'd excavated a baggie of quarters from my coin drop-off point by the cookbooks. I expended two on another test call. Then I explored the phone itself, while faking that I was talking on it from time to time. Inside its metal box, on the right, a bright yellow sticker promised me FREE CALLS in big red letters. Chase Bank Press \*10. (Okay, useful.) Need Cash Now Easy Quick Loans Press \*13. (Even more useful, but too many adjectives.) Direct Line to God Press \*12. (Well!) Need a Job Press \*14. (I had one.) Social Security Press \*19. (Not there yet.) I refrained.

By this point I'd been there twenty minutes. I looked up and realized that on the wall next to the phone, just before the windows of the Super Suds, there was another large sign: NO LOITERING. POLICE ENFORCED. NO SE PERMITE VAGABUNDOS. SE LLAMARÁ A LA POLICÍA. Loitering! Bilingual!! *Vagabundos!!!* I would have rolled on the floor laughing but it was a bit sticky down there with more gum and the cigarette butts and in any event I didn't want to take my hand off that phone receiver.

At 11:56 I was ready to go. But suddenly, a very friendly young woman with long brown hair came up to use the phone, and I had to defend my territory, politely and very apologetically explaining that I was waiting for an important call (but leaving out the part about the semi-clandestine phone call to Someone Important in Washington, D.C., as part of my political life as a Honduran freedom fighter). She was very nice and moved on (I suggested the CVS).

I took a deep breath, raised my first quarter at 11:59, then saw right there on the phone itself, below the coin slot, another sticker:

OPERATION HANDCUFF. NOTICE TO DRUG DEALERS. ALL NUMBERS ALONG WITH THE DATE AND TIME DIALED FROM THIS PAYPHONE USING COINS, CREDIT CARDS AND COLLECT ARE RECORDED AUTOMATICALLY AND SUBJECT-ED TO SURVEILLANCE BY LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS. Noooooo!!!!

It was too late to find another phone. I was betraying my phone-ee!! I took a breath, decided I had no choice,

and stuck the coin in, figuring I could maybe explain to him right off about the sticker.

"Where are you???" he asked immediately—presumably catching the road noise.

"At the 7-Eleven. On a pay phone." Fortunately, he, too, thought it was all hilarious. So I introduced him to the Super Suds, the Gilded Lily, the ashtray, the Direct Line to God, the *vagabundos*, and the Law Enforcement Presence.

It turned out he had been "half-joking," (or so he said) about the untapped phone, and the call was just to tell me he was leaving his job. He was just being super careful about word leaking out before the news was official. We chatted for an hour about his august new position and our families while I stood there in front of the No Loitering signage, twisting the metal phone cord, and watching the traffic hum by. Then we hung up.

A year and a half later, I went into the 7-Eleven to buy doughnuts for my students and realized the phone was gone. "The Historic Phone has disappeared without a trace," I informed my clandestine contact.

"Impounded for Evidence," he shot back.

**Dana Frank's** books include *Local Girl Makes History*, *Buy American*, and *Bananeras*. The latest, *What Difference Does a Coup Make? Hope, Terror, and the United States in the Long Honduran Night*—part memoir, part history—will be published in the fall of 2018. Her writings have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Nation*, *Los Angeles Times*, the *Baffler*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and elsewhere. She is a professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz.