

# Cell Call

By Marc Laidlaw

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Marc Laidlaw was born in Los Angeles, spent many years in San Francisco, and currently lives in Redmond, Washington, with his wife and daughters.

His novels include *Dad's Nuke*, *Neon Lotus*, *California*, *The Orchid Eater*, *The Third Force* and *The 37th Mandala* (winner of the International Horror Guild Award for Best Novel). In 1997, he joined Valve Software in order to write and design computer games, beginning with the very successful *Half-Life*.

"It must be a writer's reflex to encounter a new piece of technology and wonder impulsively, 'How can I get a story out of this?'" speculates Laidlaw. "More specifically, for this writer, a ghost story. The attraction is to figure out the latest twist on something very old. The danger is that such stories may age very poorly - especially if the object of the piece is something faddish and prone to fade.

"I wrote this story in an evening and didn't show it to a soul for four years. I suppose I was waiting to see if it might be rendered obsolete before I pinned any hopes on it. Also, it is a story that depresses me immensely, but since that was sort of the point, I can't blame the poor story for the fact that I couldn't bring myself to touch it again until very recently."

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**H**e wasn't used to the cell phone yet, and when it rang in the car there was a moment of uncomfortable juggling and panic as he dug down one-handed into the pocket of his jacket, which he'd thrown onto the passenger seat. He nipped the end of the antenna in his teeth and pulled, fumbling for the "on" button in the dark, hoping she wouldn't hang up before he figured this out. Then he had *to* squeeze the phone between ear and shoulder because he needed both hands to finish the turn he'd been slowing to make when the phone rang. He realized then that for a moment he'd had his eyes off the road. He was not someone who could drive safely while conducting a conversation, and she ought to know that. Still, she'd insisted he get a cell phone. So here he was.

"Hello?" he said, knowing he sounded frantic.

"Hi." It was her. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the car."

“Where?”

“Does it matter that much?”

“I only meant, are you on your way home? Because if you are I wanted to see if you could pick up a pack of cigarettes. If you have money.”

“I’m on my way home, yes.” He squinted through the window for a familiar landmark, but considering the turn he’d just taken, he knew he was on a stretch of older suburban road where the streetlights were infrequent. There was parkland here, some-where, and no houses visible. “But I don’t think there’s a store between here and home.”

“You’ll pass one on the way.”

“How do you know which way I went?”

“There’s only one way to go.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“If you have any sense, there is.”

“I have to get off. I can’t drive and talk at the same time. I’m driving the stick-shift, remember?”

“If you don’t want to then forget it.”

“No, I don’t mind. I’ll take a detour.”

“Just forget it. Come home. I’ll go out later.”

“No, really. I’ll get them.”

“Whatever. Goodbye.”

He took the phone out of the vice he’d made with jaw and shoulder. His neck was already starting to cramp, and he didn’t feel safe driving with his head at such an angle, everything leaning on its side. He had to hold the phone out in front of him a bit to be sure the light had gone out. It had. The read-out still glowed faintly, but the connection was broken. He dropped the phone onto the seat beside him, onto the jacket.

The parkland continued for another few blocks. The headlights caught in a tangle of winter-bared hedges and stripped branches thrusting out into the street so far that they hid the sidewalk. It would be nice to find a house this close to woods, a

bit of greenbelt held in perpetuity for when everything else had been bought up and converted into luxury townhouses. If all went well then in the next year, maybe less, they'd be shopping for a house in the area. Something close to his office but surrounded by trees, a view of mountains, maybe a stream running behind the house. It was heaven here but still strange, and even after six months most of it remained unfamiliar to him. She drove much more than he did, keeping busy while he was at work; she knew all the back roads already. He had learned one or two fairly rigid routes between home and office and the various shopping strips. Now with winter here, and night falling so early, he could lose himself completely the moment he wandered from a familiar route.

That seemed to be the case now. In the dark, without any sort of landmark visible except for endless bare limbs, he couldn't recognize his surroundings. The houses that should have been lining the streets by now were nowhere to be seen, and the road itself was devoid of markings: No center line, no clean curb or gutter. Had he turned into the parkland, off the main road? He tried to think back, but part of his memory was a blank - and for good reason. When the phone rang he'd lost track of everything else. There had been a moment when he was fumbling around in the dark, looking at the seat next to him, making a turn at a traffic light without making sure it was the right light. He could have taken the wrong turn completely.

But he hadn't turned since then. It still wasn't too late to backtrack.

He slowed the car, then waited to make sure no headlights were coming up behind him. Nothing moved in either direction. The road was narrow - definitely not a paved suburban street. Branches scraped the hood as he pulled far to the right, readying the car for a tight turn, his headlights raking the brittle shadows. He paused for a moment and rolled the window down, and then turned back the key in the ignition to shut off the motor. Outside, with the car quieted, it was hushed. He listened for the barking of dogs, the sigh of distant traffic, but heard nothing. A watery sound, as if the parkland around him were swamp or marsh, lapping at the roots of the trees that hemmed him in. He wasn't sure that he had room to actually turn around; the road was narrower than he'd thought. He had better just back up until it widened.

He twisted the key and heard nothing. Not even a solenoid click. He put his foot on the gas and the pedal went straight to the floor, offering no resistance. The brake was the same. He stamped on the clutch, worked the gearshift through its stations - but the stick merely swiveled then lolled to the side when he released it. The car had never felt so useless.

He sat for a moment, not breathing, the thought of the repair bills surmounting the sudden heap of new anxieties. A walk in the dark, to a gas station? First, the difficulty of simply getting back to the road. Did he have a flashlight in the glove-box? Was he out of gas? Would he need a jump-start or a tow? In a way, it was a relief that he was alone, because his own fears were bad enough without hers

overwhelming him.

He started again, checking everything twice. Ignition, pedals, gears. All useless. At least the headlights and the dashboard were still shining. He rolled up the window and locked the door. How long should he sit here? Who was going to come along and . . .

The phone.

Jesus, the cell phone. How he had put off buying one, in spite of her insistence. He didn't care for the feeling that someone might always have tabs on him, that he could never be truly alone. What was it people were so afraid of, how could their lives be so empty, and their solitude of so little value, that they had to have a phone with them at every minute, had to keep in constant chattering contact with someone, anyone? Ah, how he had railed at every driver he saw with the phone in one hand and the other lying idly on the steering wheel. And now, for the first time, he turned to the damned thing with something like hope and relief. He wasn't alone in this after all.

The cell phone had some memory but he'd never programmed it because he relied on his own. He dialed his home number and waited through the rings, wondering if she was going to leave the answering machine to answer, as she sometimes did - especially if they had been fighting and she expected him to call back. But she answered after three rings.

"It's me," he said.

"And?" Cold. He was surprised she hadn't left the machine on after all.

"And my car broke down."

"It what?"

"Right after you called me, I got. . ." He hesitated to say lost; he could anticipate what sort of response that would get out of her. "I got off the regular track and I was looking to turn around and the engine died. Now it won't start."

"The regular track? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that I, uh—"

"You got lost." The scorn, the condescension. "Where are you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Can you look at a street sign? Do you think you could manage that much or

am I supposed to figure out everything myself?"

"I don't see any," he said. "I'm just wondering if something happened to the engine. Maybe I could take a look."

"Oh, right. Don't be ridiculous. What do you know about cars?"

He popped the hood and got out of the car. It was an excuse to move, to pace. He couldn't sit still when she was like this. It was as if he thought he'd be harder to hit if he made a moving target of himself. Now he raised the hood and leaned over it, saying, "Ah," as if he'd discovered something. But all he could see beneath the hood was darkness, as if something had eaten away the workings of the car. The headlights streamed on either side of his legs, losing themselves in the hedges, but their glare failed to illuminate whatever was directly before his eyes.

"Uh . . ."

"You don't know what you're looking at."

"It's too dark," he said. "There aren't any streetlights here."

"Where the hell are you?"

"Maybe I got into a park or something. Just a minute." He slammed the hood, wiped his gritty-feeling fingers on his legs, and went back to the door. "There are lots of roads around here with no lights . . . it's practically . . ." He pressed the door handle. ". . . Wild . . ."

At his lengthy silence, she said, "What is it?"

"Uh . . . just a sec."

The door was locked. He peered into the car, and could see the keys dangling in the ignition. He tried the other doors, but they were also locked. They were power doors, power windows, power locks. Some kind of general electrical failure, probably a very small thing, had rendered the car completely useless. Except for the headlights?

"What is it?" she said again.

"The keys . . . are in . . . the car." He squeezed hard on the door handle, wrenching at it, no luck.

"Do you mean you're locked out?"

"I, uh, do you have the insurance card? The one with the emergency service

number on it?"

"I have one somewhere. Where's yours?"

"In the glove-box."

"And you're locked out."

"It looks that way."

Her silence was recrimination enough. And here came the condescension: "All right, stay where you are. I'll come get you. We can call the truck when I'm there, or wait until morning. I was just about to get in bed, but I'll come and bring you home. Otherwise you'll just get soaked."

Soaked, he thought, tipping his head to the black sky. He had no sense of clouds or stars, no view of either one. It was just about the time she'd have been lying in bed watching the news; there must have been rain in the forecast. And here he was, locked out, with no coat.

"How are you going to find me?" he asked.

"There are only so many possible wrong turns you could have taken."

"I don't even remember any woods along this road."

"That's because you never pay attention."

"It was right past the intersection with the big traffic light."

"I know exactly where you are."

"I got confused when you called me," he said. "I wasn't looking at the road. Anyway, you'll see my headlights."

"I have to throw on some clothes. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Okay."

"Bye."

It was an unusually protracted farewell for such a casual conversation. He realized that he was holding the phone very tightly in the dark, cradling it against his cheek and ear as if he were holding her hand to his face, feeling her skin cool and warm at the same time. And now there was no further word from her. Connection broken.

He had to fight the impulse to dial her again, instantly, just to reassure himself that the phone still worked - that she was still there. He could imagine her ridicule: he was slowing her down, she was trying to get dressed, he was causing yet another inconvenience on top of so many others.

With the conversation ended, he was forced to return his full attention to his surroundings. He listened, heard again the wind, the distant sound of still water. Still water which made sounds only when it lapped against something, or when something waded through it. He couldn't tell one from the other right now. He wished he were still inside the car, with at least that much protection.

She was going to find him. He'd been only a few minutes, probably less than a mile, from home. She would be here any time.

He waited, expecting raindrops. The storm would come, it would short out his phone. There was absolutely no shelter on the empty road, now that he had locked himself out of the car. He considered digging for a rock, something big enough to smash the window, so he could pull the lock and let himself in. But his mistake was already proving costly enough; he couldn't bring himself to compound the problem. Anyway, it wasn't raining yet. And she would be here any minute now.

It was about time to check in with her, he thought. She had to be in her car by now. Did he need a better excuse for calling her?

Well, here was one: The headlights were failing.

Just like that, as if they were on a dimmer switch. Both at once, darkening, taken down in less than a minute to a dull stubborn glow. It was a minute of total helpless panic; he was saved from complete horror only by the faint trace of light that remained. Why didn't they go out all the way? By the time he'd asked himself this, he realized that his wife had now lost her beacon. That was news. It was important to call her now.

He punched the redial number. That much was easy. The phone rang four times and the machine answered, and then he had to restrain himself from smashing the phone on the roof of the car. She wouldn't be at home, would she? She'd be on the road by now, looking for him, cruising past dark lanes and driveways, the entrance to some wooded lot, hoping to see his stalled headlights - and there would be none.

What made all this worse was that he couldn't remember the number of her cell phone. He refused to call her on it, arguing that she might be driving if he called her, and he didn't want to cause an accident.

Should he . . . head away from the car? Blunder back along the dark road

without a flashlight until he came in sight of the street? Wouldn't she be likely to spot him coming down the road, a pale figure stumbling through the trees, so out of place?

But he couldn't bring himself to move away. The car was the only familiar thing in his world right now.

There was no point breaking the window. The horn wouldn't sound if the battery had died. No point in doing much of anything now. Except wait for her to find him.

Please call, he thought. Please please please call. I have some-thing to tell—

The phone chirped in his hand. He stabbed the on button.

“Yes?”

“I'm coming,” she said.

“The headlights just died,” he said. “You're going to have to look closely. For a ... a dark road, a park entrance, maybe . . .”

“I know,” she said, her voice tense. He pictured her leaning forward, driving slowly, squinting out the windshield at the street-sides. “The rain's making it hard to see a damn thing.”

“Rain,” he said. “It's raining where you are?”

“Pouring.”

“Then . . . where are you? It's dry as a bone here.” Except for the sound of water, the stale exhalation of the damp earth around him.

“I'm about three blocks from the light.”

“Where I was turning?”

“Where you got turned around. It's all houses here. I thought there was park. There is some park, just ahead . . . that's what I was thinking off. But ...”

He listened, waiting. And now he could hear her wipers going, sluicing the windshield; he could hear the sizzle of rain under her car's tires. A storm. He stared at the sky even harder than before. Nothing up there. Nothing coming down.

“But what?” he said finally.



“There’s a gate across the road. You couldn’t have gone through there.”

“Check it,” he said. “Maybe it closed behind me.”

“I’m going on,” she said. “I’ll go to the light and start back, see if I missed anything.”

“Check the gate.”

“It’s just a park, it’s nothing. You’re in woods, you said?”

“Woods, marsh, parkland, something. I’m on a dirt road. There are . . . bushes all around, and I can hear water.”

“Ah . . .”

What was that in her voice?

“I can . . . wait a minute... I thought I could see you, but. . .”

“What?” He peered into the darkness. She might be looking at him even now, somehow seeing him while he couldn’t see her.

“It isn’t you,” she said. “It’s a car, like yours, but. . . it’s not yours. That . . . that’s not you, that’s not your . . .”

“What’s going on?” The headlights died all the way down.

“Please, can you keep on talking to me?” she said. “Can you please just keep talking to me and don’t stop for a minute?”

“What’s the matter? Tell me what’s going on?”

“I need to hear you keep talking, please, please,” and whatever it was in her voice that was wrenching her, it wrenched at him too, it was tearing at both of them in identical ways, and he knew he just had to keep talking. He had to keep her on the phone.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “Whatever it is. I won’t make you stop and tell me now, if you don’t want to talk, if you just want to listen,” he said. “I love you,” he said, because surely she needed to hear that. “Everything’s going to be fine. I’m just, I wish you could talk to me but—”

“No, you talk,” she said. “I have to know you’re all right, because this isn’t, that’s not, it can’t be . . .”

“Sh. Shhh. I’m talking now.”

“Tell me where you are again.”

“I’m standing by my car,” he said. “I’m in a dark wooded place, there’s some water nearby, a pond or marsh judging from the sound, and it’s not raining, it’s kind of warm and damp but it’s not raining. It’s quiet. It’s dark. I’m not. . . I’m not afraid,” and that seemed an important thing to tell her, too. “I’m just waiting, I’m fine, I’m just waiting here for you to get to me, and I know you will. Everything will be . . . fine.”

“It’s raining where I am,” she said. “And I’m . . .” She swallowed. “And I’m looking at your car.”

Static, then, a cold blanket of it washing out her voice. The noise swelled, peaked, subsided, and the phone went quiet. He pushed the redial button, then remembered that she had called him and not the other way round. It didn’t matter, though. The phone was dead. He wouldn’t be calling anyone, and no one would be calling him.

I’ll walk back to that road now, he thought. While there’s still a chance she can find me.

He hefted the cell phone, on the verge of tossing it overhand out into the unseen marshes. But there was always a chance that some faint spark remained inside it; that he’d get a small blurt of a ring, a wisp of her voice, something. He put it in a pocket so he wouldn’t lose it in the night.

He tipped his face to the sky and put out his hand before he started walking.

Not a drop.

*It’s raining where I am, and I’m looking at your car.*