

Equinox Society Radio 000

My Dear Strangers,

Last night, a text alert woke me up at 1:17 A.M.

I'd been sleeping hard and the chime only partly woke me up. Plus my wife was travelling for work, and whenever she's gone, it's disorienting to find myself alone in bed. All of which is to say I wasn't very sharp when I rolled over and checked my phone. The screen was so bright in the dark, my brain couldn't process anything but the light, and I had to scan the message a few times before the words made sense. The text read:

"I fantasize about your death."

That woke me up. The text was from an unknown sender. No number was displayed. I have some pretty weird friends, but none of them would send me a text like that, even as a joke. Ignoring it would have been the sensible move, but it's amazing how fast the imagination conjures enemies and threats. If somebody was making a genuine threat, I wanted to know.

"Who is this?" I wrote back.

They answered, "I'm terrified of being alone."

If it *was* someone I knew, they were obviously in a bad headspace, and I didn't want to blow them off if they needed somebody to talk to. I've been in that position myself before—emotional, alone, texting late at night just to feel some connection. If the sender was a stranger, on the other hand, I thought they ought to know they had the wrong number. I tried to clarify things by offering my own first name.

"This is Dennis. Do I know you?"

"I have violent sexual thoughts," they wrote.

"Why are you texting me?"

"I need someone to love me more than anybody else."

"Tell me who you are."

"I'm going to hurt you over and over," they answered.

We went back and forth like this for a while. I tried different approaches, sending message after message, trying to move the conversation in a positive direction.

“Are you high on something? What do you want from me? Is there a therapist or relative you can talk to? Do you realize how weird your messages sound?”

In answer to all my questions, they texted things like:

“Everybody knows you’re pathetic and needy. Your mistakes don’t make you a bad person. I love you. You should kill yourself if things get hard.”

Maybe this all sounds harmless, dear strangers, like the text equivalent of a long prank call. But when you’re alone at night, getting messages like these, it doesn’t feel harmless. It feels like an assault. All I could really do was block the sender—assuming I *could* block an anonymous number—but that would leave my worry unresolved. They’d still be out there.

I stopped answering for five minutes, hoping to frustrate the sender into a normal conversation. But once I *wanted* them to text, they didn’t send a word. The silence, after everything, felt even worse.

After the five minutes had passed, I wrote, “I need an explanation or I’m shutting off my phone.”

They replied, “Look under your bed.”

I don’t remember ever being afraid of things under my bed, even as a child, but I stared at those words a long time and didn’t know what to do. I felt like I was sprinting and passing out simultaneously. I tried to think it all through, but my thoughts rushed together. Was it a trick? Was it a trap? What do you do when you’re old enough to know better, but you really believe there might be something dangerous under your bed?

The box spring creaked, probably from my own weight, and scared me so bad, I wasn’t even aware of jumping off the mattress until I banged into my wall. The crash knocked the phone out of my hand. I flipped the bedroom light on and stared at the shadow under my bed. No way I was getting down low enough to investigate at eye level. But I had to check, either now or later, and my indecision and fear made me so angry, my body started trembling from the tension in my limbs.

I lunged and flipped the bed against the wall. It settled there, leaning on its side, and then I jumped back and stood in a kind of karate fight stance, in case whatever I’d exposed suddenly leapt toward me.

But it was just my old, familiar stuff—everything I’d crammed out of sight and ignored the last time I tidied up and tried to change my life around. I almost laughed, I felt so relieved and ridiculous, having made such a mess over ordinary things.

I picked my phone off the floor, ready to put the whole night behind me.

When I looked at the text exchange again, the sender's messages were gone. Everything I had typed was there, like a long, insistent monologue.

"Who is this? This is Dennis. Do I know you? Why are you texting me? Tell me who you are."

The recipient of my messages had no name and no number. So had I been dreaming? Sleep-texting? No, I couldn't have imagined it. The conversation had lasted too long, and I'd been way too alert. I reread everything I'd written, reconstructing the missing parts of the exchange in my mind. It was all so clear and terribly familiar.

Then the little thought bubble appeared on my screen, with three blinking dots. The sender had been real. They were writing something new. I waited and watched a few minutes, but the message didn't come. I hoped they were typing out a long explanation. I pulled my bed away from the wall and resituated it on the floor.

I waited more. I couldn't sleep after that. I checked my phone over and over. The dots kept blinking. They still haven't stopped.

You're listening to Equinox Society Radio, and I'm a stranger. Like you.

I text a lot with other society members—Claire, Amanda, William, Hank—and even when we haven't messaged in a day or two, just knowing we *could* talk at a moment's notice is reassuring. I grew up using landlines. If you needed to reach somebody, you had to know which stationary telephone to call and hope they were near it. Most of the time, they weren't.

It's easy to forget how remarkable texting it is. An idea forms in somebody's head, gets typed into words, flashes into space, zips down to your phone, and enters your own head in seconds. It's as sudden as a kiss, or a punch, and you never know which one it's going to be.

We have one more story tonight. It comes from society reporter Hank Ridley. He emailed it to me this morning, and it was the first thing in hours that made me stop obsessing over those three blinking dots on my phone.

A dog in South Carolina has been tunneling in and out of the ground for at least three weeks. The dog is described as a mutt weighing approximately fifty pounds. Its color and markings have been hard to discern because of the grime covering its fur. Numerous witnesses have spotted the dog vigorously digging and descending into the ground. The dog has also been seen emerging at various locations, often at significant distances from its last known point of descent.

Two college sophomores watched the dog burrow into the dirt beside a bike path. Believing the dog had trapped itself, they tried to help by widening the hole with their hands, only to find the dog was gone and the tunnel extended well beyond the reach of their cellphones' flashlights.

Three days later, a construction crew saw the dog crawl into a freshly dug foundation.

"We've seen this kind of thing before," worker Doug Chaskey said. "I saved a cat one time after it fell into a muddy foundation and couldn't get out. This dog was having a blast, though, rolling in the mud and runoff. I slid down with a rope to get him and he vanished underground like a worm. It broke my heart. I thought he'd hit a sinkhole and that was it, no getting him out. But then a couple minutes later, the whole crew sees him scabbling out of a gravel pile thirty yards away. We couldn't believe it. Had to be another dog, right? We made a lot of noise, yelling amongst ourselves and trying to call the dog over. He just looked at us and wagged and took off into the woods nearby."

When the crew inspected the gravel pile, they found a sealed metal box where the dog had emerged. They pried it open and discovered it was a time capsule containing newspapers, photographs, letters, and various household items and novelties from 1945.

Animal Control received a call the following week when the dog emerged from a preschool sandbox, frightening several of the children when its paws and snout broke through an array of molded castles.

"He startled me, too," said Missy Clewit, a teacher at the school. "But then he jogged around the schoolyard, wagging his tail and obviously happy. Another teacher and I took the children inside, and then we tried to lure the dog closer with Goldfish crackers. He just looked at us for a few seconds, drank from a puddle, and started digging his way under the fence. Or rather that's what we *assumed*. He dug and dug, flinging dirt in the air behind him, and before we knew it he was totally underground. We kept expecting him pop back up on the other side, but he never did."

While Clewit inspected the hole near the fence, her colleague Annie Motts checked the sandbox and was startled to find a human jawbone. Further digging revealed additional bones. The school has been temporarily closed while police perform a thorough excavation of the site. Forensics results of the unearthed bones are pending.

Accounts of the dog's subterranean activities exploded after a local news story went viral. Dozens of witnesses shared their own sightings on social media, although it's unclear how many of these reports have been verified.

Most accounts follow a similar pattern of the dog unearthing buried materials before vanishing underground again, but one last anecdote is remarkable because of its incongruity. I heard a version of it during my inquiries and contacted the source directly. I'm using pseudonyms due to personal nature of the story.

A thirty-year-old woman named Kate was grieving the death of her sister Donna, who had overdosed a month earlier after years of heroin addiction. The sisters had been extremely close. They had both struggled throughout their lives with depression and PTSD resulting from severe childhood abuse.

Kate had made tremendous progress with therapy and antidepressants. She was happily married and had recently earned a Master's degree in art history. Having found security in her own life, she was determined to help her sister Donna, who had spiraled into a cycle of self-medication and masochistic relationships. But Donna expressed resentment over Kate's positive transformation. In the weeks prior to her overdose, she frequently described herself as "alone", "abandoned", and "hopeless".

The sisters argued during their last phone conversation. According to her husband, Kate was deeply shaken by the argument but refused to tell him any details. When Donna was found dead two days later, Kate obsessed over their final argument and became so depressed, her husband checked her into an in-patient facility.

Kate stabilized but remained despondent after she returned home. She still refused to discuss her last exchange with Donna, but her therapist encouraged her to write it down as accurately as possible in a journal. Kate wrote out the conversation, along with other memories and thoughts, in a Moleskin notebook.

She obsessed over the Moleskin, carrying it everywhere and even sleeping with it at night. One morning, her husband moved it while she was showering. Kate panicked when she thought it was missing, and even after her husband showed her where it was, she screamed at him and collapsed into tears. Her therapist praised her journaling but expressed concern that the Moleskin itself had begun to exert a negative influence. Shortly thereafter, Kate abandoned her sessions.

She became almost catatonic in depression, spending hours in her yard with the Moleskin. Her husband cared for her as well as he could but felt increasingly desperate. Friends and relatives visited but Kate's emotional state continued to worsen.

At 7:30 A.M. on a Saturday morning, she was sitting in the yard when her husband, still inside, heard her shriek. He ran outside, worried she had harmed herself, and found her kneeling with a muddy dog.

The dog had surprised her when it emerged from the center of the lawn, but it was friendly when she approached, and Kate was more concerned for its well-being than she was about its mysterious appearance. They sat together on the grass. The dog placed its head in her lap and slept while she held it.

She refused to move or change position for more than two hours. When the dog finally woke, Kate asked her husband to bring the garden hose, a bottle of dish soap, and a towel. She washed and dried the dog, and then she fed it two cans of tuna fish and the dog fell asleep in her arms again.

“It was the first time I’d seen her be affectionate in weeks,” her husband said. “She didn’t want to talk to me, but only because she thought it would wake the dog. I just stayed there and watched the two of them together. It was good to see. She was uncomfortable on the ground—one of her legs fell asleep—but she wouldn’t get up. She had this look on her face. I don’t know how to describe it. But that dog, those hours on the lawn... I watched her come back to herself.”

The dog slept a while longer. When he finally woke, he stood and stretched, wagging in the sun. Kate stretched her own legs and pet the dog’s back. Her husband suggested they adopt him, assuming no one came forward to claim him. Before they could discuss it, the dog picked up Kate’s Moleskin in his mouth, trotted back to the hole from which he’d emerged, and vanished underground. Kate’s husband panicked, both for the dog’s safety and his wife’s state of mind, but Kate remained calm.

“She convinced me it was OK,” he said. “I don’t know why or how, but when the dog disappeared, it suddenly felt all right. Like really weirdly normal. We were thrilled to hear the dog’s OK, still popping up in so many different places.”

“I’ve been depressed on and off all my life,” Kate said. “Some dog isn’t going to fix that. And I’m never going to stop missing my sister or regretting how we ended. But I’m back in therapy now. It feels productive again. Not as motionless and dead. I have good hours... good days a little more often. I can’t explain what happened that morning in the yard, but something changed. That was a really good dog. I hope a lot of people see him.”

Hank Ridley
Equinox Society Reporter

As visitations go, I think most of us would prefer the dog to my anonymous texter—even those kids with the human remains in their sandbox. I'll bet those kids were pretty excited about that dog once the panic wore off.

But in all these instances of contact, it isn't just about the receiver. It's also about the visitor or sender.

For all I know, my exchange with the mystery texter may have done as much good for them as Kate and the dog did for each other. Something transpired between us, and just because it didn't make sense to me doesn't mean it didn't make sense. Now that it's gone from my head to yours, maybe, dear strangers, it makes sense to you.

Equinox Society Radio is produced by Dennis Mahoney. New episodes appear sporadically.

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Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.

Imagine our closing song is "Frank" by Just Mustard.

Until next time, dear strangers... take care and look beyond.

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