

## Dialing Back the Years

*Ding-ding, ding-ding—another car rolls in for gas as she enters the booth. She clicks her dime into the slot and dials the four digit number. Sitting on the triangular seat, she removes her shoes and rubs her feet, staring out the dirty glass. She hangs up after ten rings and the dime tumbles into the coin return. Snatching it out, she slips back into her shoes and opens the door. A train horn wails in the distance as her eyes scan the streets. Where is he?*

*Ding-ding?* What is that? If you're unfamiliar with that sound—heard at gas stations all across the U.S. for many years—or with the experience of using a pay phone, you probably grew up in the internet age. The excerpt above, from my story “The Garbage Man,” takes place in a 1966, small town America. The heroine of my story, Gwen Schmidt, has just entered a phone booth—perched on a street corner next to an Esso gas station. Back then, gas stations were full service—you could get your car repaired in one of their bays, and an attendant would pump your gas. Your windshield would be cleaned, and if you happened to be a lady, especially an attractive young lady, service often escalated to include an oil and tire check. This would offer an earnest young

man more opportunity to flirt—there were no distracting cell phones. Sometimes the owner or another mechanic had to pump gas, and they needed a signal to drop their wrench, wipe their hands and leave the oily-black garage for customer service. The driveway bell did the trick—rubber hoses, laid out in the pump plaza, would ring a bell (yes, an actual bell) when any vehicle drove over them—and it was fairly loud. I grew up hearing that sound.

Phone booths, once a common and vital asset, are now rare. When the last one disappears, will anyone mark the date, or mourn the loss? They'll probably just fade away, like a dying species, in obscurity. And that's a shame, because like many aspects of bygone days, it was an experience. As you approached one, you often hoped the directory pages were still intact, or that the phone even worked. Their surfaces were not the most pristine, and sometimes wasps would find a nice home in a remote corner—often unnoticed until you were fully engaged in conversation. They did block off a lot of outside noise—and nosy listeners. A dime got you in the game for a local call, but long distance could be a pain because a live operator would interrupt you every three minutes asking for more coins. (Operators were always women, and always courteous.) Gwen dials only four digits because it's a local exchange and why would she need more numbers? She lets it ring ten times (no answering service, sorry) and then hangs up and gets

her dime back. Us kids or bums—often hard to tell apart except for size—would stick our grubby finger in the door flap of the coin return, hoping somebody was forgetful. A dime got you two big candy bars or two boxes of caps for our cast metal six-shooters. It was unthinkable that any cop, if one were around, would mistake us for “an active shooter,” or “terrorist threat.” We could fire at will.

As a kid I loved to read about the past—but being so young, it was always somebody else’s past. One day, I don’t recall when but probably sometime in my forties, I must have realized the years of my youth have drifted into that shadowy and mythical thing called history. I had become historical. I was fifty-two when I wrote “The Garbage Man,” and though it involves adult characters and their issues, the setting represents the world of my youth. The idea for this story came from a memory I have of a garbage man that serviced our neighborhood. He was a big man in overalls, lumbering about with a clumsy gait. I distinctly recall his loud thumps as he went up and down the plank steps of our backroom, where we had our garbage can stored. He never said much, if I remember correctly. My mom explained he’d been okay, or even smart at one time, but that his “mind had snapped.” I know nothing else about him—how long he collected our garbage, his appearance, name, history, or what became of him. I was only between five to ten years old at the time. But these pieces—garbage

man, mind snapped, small town—were more than enough to weave together a story.

If you're lucky enough to find a phone booth, perhaps left on some obscure corner of a forgotten town—its glass shattered, its phone missing—go in, sit down and close your eyes. You may hear the door creak, the tinkle of a coin, the scratchy sweep of a dial—and then smell perfume as a housewife taps her foot, impatient, waiting for her lover to pick up.

For a picture, see the image gallery