

Telephone Booth

On a walk the other day, I caught sight of an old, metal telephone booth perched at the side of someone's yard, in amongst the bright orange of California poppies, beginning to rust along its metal seams like some sort of anthropological garden ornament.

You know the one: tall and narrow, silver metal edged glass on all sides, with a panel at the top the recognizable sky blue with the white phone logo that identified the booth as belonging to AT&T. The front was the door - that could be pushed inwards into a V to open, and closed behind you for privacy.

Remember public phone privacy? None of this walking down the street or riding a bus or standing in line in the grocery store, listening to everyone's personal conversations ("He said what? Oh my god, you're kidding!" "Yeah, the doctor said I need to come in and have it looked at." "I don't know, I tried to tell her to just leave it alone, but she told me to mind my own business."). You could simply wedge yourself into the tiny glass booth, put the books you were carrying, or the slip of paper that held the number you wanted to call, on the built-in metal shelf; dig in your pocket or purse for the requisite coins (Remember your mother always asking if you had "thirty-five cents for a phone call" before you left the house, as a teenager?). Lift the receiver (is that word even still in the dictionary?) and with your other hand, slip the coins into the narrow slot; dial, or later push the buttons, of the number you want to call. It was like its own world; you could stay dry if it was raining; but how annoying if someone was there and talking when you wanted to make a call! You could stand and wait, maybe even glaring at the person hogging the booth, if they were absorbed and unaware of your presence, to try to will them to finish and let you take your turn. Or, alternately, jog on to where you knew there was another booth.

Then there was that fad in the 1950s known as "phonebooth stuffing," which involved seeing how many people could be crammed into the thirty-two inch by thirty-two inch by seven-foot space. Before my time; but I remember seeing a photograph of a booth crammed full of seemingly disconnected body parts. The world record was set in South Africa, with a total of twenty-five people managing to fill the booth. Nothing was said if they managed to get out of it, afterward. It boggles the mind.

Clark Kent made use of telephone booths to change his clothes and who knows what else, to transform himself into Superman.

In movies with stories of espionage, someone would be outside a phone booth, waiting for it to ring, the call from some anonymous contact with important information.

And then there was The Matrix – where dialing the right number and connecting with the person at the other end would enable one to be transported to another location. Invariably someone would manage to reach the booth in time to dial the number that would trigger the

transport and jettison them to safety, and all that would be left in the booth was a phone receiver dangling from its metal cord by the time the pursuing enemy arrived.

And The Matrix was set in the future – do they know something we don't? Will the telephone booth make a comeback? If so, my neighbor down the street will be ready.