

Phone Call from the Other Side of the World

Ken Smith

I got a new cell phone a couple of months ago, and I confess that it wasn't the one I really wanted. I coveted an iPhone. We stood there in the mall trying to find a family plan that would make all four of us happy. The kids wanted certain sleek models offered by Sprint. The annoying little guy who wears a red cape and sits on my left shoulder said, "Just pull rank and make them choose from the company you like. You work hard, you deserve a cool phone." The nerdy little guy in white on my other shoulder nodded at the kids, who were grooving on the display models. They sure looked happy. Oh, all right. I'll take one of these little Blackberry things with a keyboard the size of my thumb and the clunky Internet service and the mouse control that looks and feels like a life-size, realistic white plastic model of a pimple.

Almost right away, my Blackberry started getting phone calls from overseas, or so I figured since the caller's number was several digits longer than good old U.S. numbers. Presumably this was a friend or family member of the last person who was assigned my new number. I ignored the calls, but they kept coming, so one day I finally picked up and said hello. The person on the other end spoke a completely mysterious language. I said, "You have the wrong number," and pretty soon he hung up. But he'd call again every couple of days and we'd go through it all once more. I had the impression that

the fellow didn't understand any English at all, and the words he spoke didn't sound like any of the European or East Asian languages we Americans study in school or hear in the movies. The calls continued, but there was no communication going on. None.

Eventually I realized that I could look up the caller's country code. His first digits were 233; in a moment Google told me that the calls were coming from Ghana. I checked out a map of Africa. There was Ghana, south of the Sahara on the continent's big curving west coast, facing the Atlantic Ocean and looking south. And still the calls came, and when I said, "Do you speak English?" there would be more of that unfamiliar tongue. I looked it up – more than a dozen languages are commonly spoken in Ghana, with names I'd never heard before and didn't know how to pronounce, like Asante, Ewe, Fante, and Dagarte.

So somebody in Ghana was missing somebody here in area code 574. Maybe some son or daughter had come to study at one of our area colleges? During the Christmas season, more calls – there had been no holiday trip back home to Africa. Somebody was lost here or didn't want to be found.

I read a little about Ghana. Drug traffic, but too poor an economy for the international drug cartels to launder as much money as they might like. Average education, ninth grade.

Lifespan 59 years for men and 60 for women. Home of Lake Volta, the largest man-made body of water in the world. Risk of malaria, rabies, typhoid, and some other diseases I'd never heard of before. I saw pictures of villages and countryside, I heard collections of beautiful rhythm-driven music.

An image of the country started to form in my mind, and I realized that the next time a call came from overseas on my cramped little phone, I could say, "Hello, Ghana." But what good would that do? Someone was lost here, and half the world away a friend, a father, perhaps a husband, was calling and calling and never getting through.