

the  
first  
phone  
call  
from  
heaven

a novel

Mitch

Author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*

Albom

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call  
from  
heaven

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# **Dedication**

For Debbie, a virtuoso with the telephone,  
whose voice we miss every day

# Contents

Dedication

The Week It Happened

The Second Week

The Third Week

The Fourth Week

The Fifth Week

The Sixth Week

Four Days Later

The Seventh Week

Three Days Later

The Eighth Week

The Ninth Week

Four Days Later

The Tenth Week

The Eleventh Week

One Day Later

The Twelfth Week

Two Days Later

The Thirteenth Week

The Fourteenth Week

The Fifteenth Week

The Sixteenth Week

The Day of the Broadcast

After Midnight

The Next Day

Two Days Later

Two Months Later

Tell Your Friends!

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Credits

Also by Mitch Albom

Copyright

About the Publisher

## The Week It Happened

On the day the world received its first phone call from heaven, Tess Rafferty was unwrapping a box of tea bags.

*Drrrrnnn!*

She ignored the ring and dug her nails into the plastic.

*Drrrrnnn!*

She clawed her forefinger through the bumpy part on the side.

*Drrrrnnn!*

Finally, she made a rip, then peeled off the wrapping and scrunched it in her palm. She knew the phone would go to answering machine if she didn't grab it before one more— *Drrnnn*— “Hello?”

Too late.

“Ach, this thing,” she mumbled. She heard the machine click on her kitchen counter as it played her outgoing message.

*“Hi, it's Tess. Leave your name and number. I'll get back to you as soon as I can, thanks.”*

A small beep sounded. Tess heard static. And then.

*“It's Mom. . . . I need to tell you something.”*

Tess stopped breathing. The receiver fell from her fingers.

Her mother died four years ago.

*Drrrrnnng!*

The second call was barely audible over a boisterous police station argument. A clerk had hit the lottery for \$28,000 and three officers were debating what they'd do with such luck.

“You pay your bills.”

“That's what you *don't* do.”

“A boat.”

“Pay your bills.”

“Not me.”

“A boat!”

*Drrrrnnng!*

Jack Sellers, the police chief, backed up toward his small office. “If you pay your bills, you just rack up new bills,” he said. The men continued arguing as he reached for the phone.

“Coldwater Police, Sellers speaking.”

Static. Then a young man’s voice.

“Dad? . . . It’s Robbie.”

Suddenly Jack couldn’t hear the other men.

“Who the hell is this?”

“I’m happy, Dad. Don’t worry about me, OK?”

Jack felt his stomach tighten. He thought about the last time he’d seen his son, clean shaven with a soldier’s tight haircut, disappearing through airport security en route to his third tour of duty.

His last tour of duty.

“It can’t be you,” Jack whispered.

*Brrnnnng!*

Pastor Warren wiped saliva from his chin. He’d been napping on his couch at the Harvest of Hope Baptist Church.

*Brrnnnng!*

“Coming.”

He struggled to his feet. The church had installed a bell outside his office, because at eighty-two, his hearing had grown weak.

*Brrnnnng!*

“Pastor, it’s Katherine Yellin. Hurry, please!”

He hobbled to the door and opened it.

“Hello, Ka—”

But she was already past him, her coat half buttoned, her reddish hair frazzled, as if she’d dashed out of the house. She sat on the couch, rose nervously, then sat again.

“Please know I’m not crazy.”

“No, dear—”

“Diane called me.”

“Who called you?”

“Diane.”

Warren’s head began to hurt.

“Your deceased sister called you?”

“This morning. I picked up the phone . . .”

She gripped her handbag and began to cry. Warren wondered if he should call someone for help.

“She told me not to worry,” Katherine rasped. “She said she was at peace.”

“This was a dream, then?”

“No! No! It wasn’t a dream! *I spoke to my sister!*”

Tears fell off the woman’s cheeks, dropping faster than she could wipe them away.

“We’ve talked about this, dear—”

“I know, but—”

“You miss her—”

“Yes—”

“And you’re upset.”

“No, Pastor! She told me she’s in *heaven*. . . . Don’t you see?”

She smiled, a beatific smile, a smile Warren had never seen on her face before.

“I’m not scared of anything anymore,” she said.

*Drrrrrrnnnnng.*

A security bell sounded, and a heavy prison gate slid across a track. A tall, broad-shouldered man named Sullivan Harding walked slowly, a step at a time, head down. His heart was racing—not at the excitement of his liberation, but at the fear that someone might yank him back.

Forward. Forward. He kept his gaze on the tips of his shoes. Only when he heard approaching noise on the gravel—light footsteps, coming fast—did he look up.

Jules.

His son.

He felt two small arms wrap around his legs, felt his hands sink into a mop of the boy’s curly hair. He saw his parents—mother in a navy windbreaker, father in a light brown suit—their faces collapsing as they fell into a group embrace. It was chilly and gray and the street was slick with rain. Only his wife was missing from the moment, but her absence was like a character in it.

Sullivan wanted to say something profound, but all that emerged from his lips was a whisper: “Let’s go.”

Moments later, their car disappeared down the road.



It was the day the world received its first phone call from heaven.  
What happened next depends on how much you believe.

## The Second Week

A cool, misting rain fell, which was not unusual for September in Coldwater, a small town geographically north of certain parts of Canada and just a few miles from Lake Michigan.

Despite the chilly weather, Sullivan Harding was walking. He could have borrowed his father's car, but after ten months of confinement, he preferred the open air. Wearing a ski cap and an old suede jacket, he passed the high school he'd attended twenty years ago, the lumberyard that had closed last winter, the bait and tackle shop, its rental rowboats stacked like clamshells, and the gas station where an attendant leaned against a wall, examining his fingernails. *My hometown*, Sullivan thought.

He reached his destination and wiped his boots on a thatched mat that read DAVIDSON & SONS. Noticing a small camera above the doorframe, he instinctively yanked off his cap, swiped at his thick brown hair, and looked into the lens. After a minute with no response, he let himself in.

The warmth of the funeral home was almost smothering. Its walls were paneled in dark oak. A desk with no chair held an open sign-in book.

"Can I help you?"

The director, a tall, thinly boned man with pallid skin, bushy eyebrows, and wispy hair the color of straw, stood with his hands crossed. He appeared to be in his late sixties.

"I'm Horace Belfin," he said.

"Sully Harding."

"Ah, yes."

*Ah yes*, Sully thought, *the one who missed his wife's funeral because he was in prison*. Sully did this now, finished unfinished sentences, believing that the words people do not speak are louder than the ones they do.

"Giselle was my wife."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

“It was a lovely ceremony. I imagine the family has told you.”

“I am the family.”

“Of course.”

They stood in silence.

“Her remains?” Sully said.

“In our columbarium. I’ll get the key.”

He went to his office.

Sully lifted a brochure off a table. He opened it to a paragraph about cremation.

Cremated remains can be sprinkled at sea, placed in a helium balloon, scattered from an airplane . . .

Sully tossed the brochure back. *Scattered from an airplane.* Even God couldn’t be that cruel.

Twenty minutes later, Sully left the building with his wife’s ashes in an angel-shaped urn. He tried carrying it one-handed, but that felt too casual. He tried cradling it in his palms, but that felt like an offering. He finally clasped it to his chest, arms crossed, the way a child carries a book bag. He walked this way for half a mile through the Coldwater streets, his heels splashing through rainwater. When he came upon a bench in front of the post office, he sat down, placing the urn carefully beside him.

The rain finished. Church bells chimed in the distance. Sully closed his eyes and imagined Giselle nudging against him, her sea-green eyes, her licorice-black hair, her thin frame and narrow shoulders that, leaned against Sully’s body, seemed to whisper, *Protect me.*

He hadn’t, in the end. Protected her. That would never change. He sat on that bench for a long while, fallen man, porcelain angel, as if the two of them were waiting for a bus.

The news of life is carried via telephone. A baby’s birth, a couple engaged, a tragic accident on a late-night highway—most milestones of the human journey, good or bad, are foreshadowed by the sound of ringing.

Tess sat on her kitchen floor now, waiting for that sound to come again. For the past two weeks, her phone had been carrying the most stunning news of all. Her mother *existed*, somewhere, somehow. She reviewed the latest conversation for the hundredth time.

*“Tess . . . Stop crying, darling.”*

*“It can’t be you.”*

*“I’m here, safe and sound.”*

Her mother always said that when she called in from a trip—a hotel, a spa, even a visit to her relatives half an hour away. *I’m here, safe and sound.*

*“This isn’t possible.*

*“Everything is possible. I am with the Lord. I want to tell you about . . .”*

*“What? Mom? What?”*

*“Heaven.”*

The line went silent. Tess stared at the receiver as if holding a human bone. It was totally illogical. She knew that. But a mother’s voice is like no other; we recognize every lilt and whisper, every warble or shriek. There was no doubt. It was *her*.

Tess drew her knees in to her chest. Since the first call, she had remained inside, eating only crackers, cereal, hard-boiled eggs, whatever she had in the house. She hadn’t gone to work, hadn’t gone shopping, hadn’t even gotten the mail.

She ran a hand through her long, unwashed blond hair. A shut-in to a miracle? What would people say? She didn’t care. A few words from heaven had rendered all the words on earth inconsequential.

Jack Sellers sat by his desk inside the converted redbrick house that served as headquarters for the Coldwater Police Department. It appeared to his coworkers that he was typing up reports. But he, too, was waiting for a ringing.

It had been the most bizarre week of his life. Two calls from his dead son. Two conversations he thought he would never have again. He still hadn’t told his ex-wife, Doreen, Robbie’s mother. She had fallen into depression and teared up at the mere mention of his name. What would he say to her? That their boy, killed in battle, was now alive somewhere? That the portal to heaven sat on Jack’s desk? Then what?

Jack himself had no clue what to make of this. He only knew that each time that phone rang, he grabbed for it like a gunslinger.

His second call, like the first, had come on a Friday afternoon. He heard static, and an airy noise that rose and fell.

*“It’s me, Dad.”*

*“Robbie.”*

*“I’m OK, Dad. There’s no bad days here.”*

“Where are you?”

“*You know where I am. Dad, it’s awesome—*”

Then a click.

Jack screamed, “Hello? *Hello?*” He noticed the other officers looking over. He shut the door. A minute later, the phone rang again. He checked the caller ID bar. As with the previous times, it read UNKNOWN.

“Hello?” he whispered.

“*Tell Mom not to cry. . . . If we knew what comes next, we never would have worried.*”

Once you have a sister, you never stop having her, even if you can no longer see or touch her.

Katherine Yellin lay back on the bed, her red hair flattening against the pillow. She crossed her arms and squeezed the salmon-pink flip phone that had once belonged to Diane. It was a Samsung model, with a glitter sticker of a high-heeled shoe on the back, a symbol of Diane’s love for fashion.

*It’s better than we dreamed, Kath.*

Diane had said that in her second call, which, like the first—like all these strange calls to Coldwater—had come on a Friday. *Better than we dreamed.* The word Katherine most loved in that sentence was *we*.

The Yellin sisters had a special bond, like tethered children scaling small-town life together. Diane, older by two years, had walked Katherine to school each day, paved the way for her in Brownies and Girl Scouts, got her braces off when Katherine got hers on, and refused, at high school dances, to take the floor until Katherine had someone to dance with too. Both sisters had long legs, strong shoulders, and could swim a mile in the lake during the summer. Both attended the local community college. They cried together when their parents died. When Diane married, Katherine was her maid of honor; three Junes later, the positions were reversed. Each had two kids—girls for Diane, boys for Katherine. Their houses were a mile apart. Even their divorces fell within a year of one another.

Only in health had they diverged. Diane had endured migraines, an irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, and the sudden aneurysm that killed her at the too-young age of forty-six. Katherine was often described as “never sick a day in her life.”

For years, she’d felt guilty about this. But now she understood. Diane—sweet, fragile Diane—had been called for a reason. She’d been chosen by the Lord to show that eternity waits for the faithful.

*It's better than we dreamed, Kath.*

Katherine smiled. *We*. Through the pink flip phone she held to her chest, she had rediscovered the sister she could never lose.

And she would not be silent about it.

## The Third Week

**Y**ou have to start over. That's what they say. But life is not a board game, and losing a loved one is never really "starting over." More like "continuing without."

Sully's wife was gone. She'd died after a long coma. According to the hospital, she slipped away during a thunderstorm on the first day of summer. Sully was still in prison, nine weeks from release. When they informed him, his entire body went numb. It was like learning of the earth's destruction while standing on the moon.

He thought about Giselle constantly now, even though every thought brought with it the shadow of their last day, the crash, the fire, how everything he'd known changed in one bumpy instant. Didn't matter. He draped himself in her sad memory, because it was the closest thing to having her around. He placed the angel urn on a shelf by a couch where Jules, two months shy of his seventh birthday, lay sleeping.

Sully sat down, slumping into the chair. He was still adjusting to freedom. You might think that after ten months in prison, a man would bask in liberation. But the body and mind grow accustomed to conditions, even terrible ones, and there were still moments when Sully stared at the walls, as listless as a captive. He had to remind himself he could get up and go out.

He reached for a cigarette and looked around this cheap, unfamiliar apartment, a second-story walk-up, heated by a radiator furnace. Outside the window was a cluster of pine trees and a small ravine that led to a stream. He remembered catching frogs there as a kid.

Sully had returned to Coldwater because his parents had been taking care of Jules during his trial and incarceration, and he didn't want to disrupt the boy's life any more than he already had. Besides, where would he go? His job and home were gone. His money had been depleted by lawyers. He watched two squirrels chase each other up a tree and kidded himself that Giselle might have actually liked this place, once she got past the location, the size, the dirt, and the