

It was Yoko Ono who taught me the sound of one hand clapping. It happened in San Francisco, on a hot August day in 2002. My girlfriend and I were in town to visit a friend of hers, a former Microsoft employee who'd retired a millionaire and now spent her days involved in *projects*. That morning, she'd ushered me into her backyard and waved her hand over what looked like a whale skeleton. "I'm building a yacht to sail the globe." Of course, I thought. I'd want to get away too if I'd spent so many years cooped up with Bill Gates.

Now my girlfriend and I were headed to the Museum of Contemporary Art, my prize for being so agreeable in discussing the future of the microchip. A longtime Bealtemaniac, I'd been going on for days about seeing the bag from which John and Yoko had once conducted interviews. "Great," my girlfriend had sighed, looking away.

Was I fan of Yoko Ono? Kind of. I liked her first album where she caterwauled like an electric instrument fighting feedback. And I'd appreciated her performance piece where she'd given viewers a pair of scissors and told them to snip off bits of her clothing. But I'd only become aware of these because her husband was a Beatle. And I was only at the exhibit now because I hoped to catch a glimpse of him in her work.

You'd think I would have known better, seeing as the Beatle in question was John. My favorite since junior high, I'd long admired his caustic honesty and lack of

sentimentality, his willingness to say that he was bigger than Jesus and that there was no religion too. Yet there I was in that bastion of high culture, trolling for images of the former Mop-Top like some *People* magazine reader at the checkout counter. I may have thought I understood John because I'd counted the number of times a certain numeral was repeated in a certain song (*number 9, number 9, number 9*), but I was about as far from getting him as his sentimental foil Paul McCartney.

Still, I enjoyed the exhibit more than I'd expected. There was that famous slow-motion film of John smiling. And there was the ladder that *he'd* climbed at *his* first Yoko exhibit, and the tiny sign *he'd* read at the top with a magnifying glass (*YES*). There also was wall after wall of conceptual pieces that reminded me of the Zen-koan-styled directives that Yoko had sent to John while he was on retreat with the Maharishi, my favorite being, *Dig A Hole In the Ground So That When It Rains You Can Catch the Sky*.

Near the end I found myself in a white room decorated with a chair, bed, mirror, and so forth. Strangely, each was cut in half. I stepped back and read the title: *Half-A-Room*. All of these things that I usually took for granted were now just shapes, in the case of the legless tables and chairs, suspended as if frozen in aspic.

I became intrigued. Was Yoko saying something about how her life had been cut in half since John? Or was she maybe saying that there'd been as much discord in their relationship as in any couple's, their home sometimes

seeming to be divided between His and Mine? Then again, was she directing the whole thing at people like me who'd reduced her to nothing more than an attendant to *his* life, taking away her identity so that she'd become—to paraphrase another of John's partners—half the woman she used to be?

Then I saw the one thing in the room that wasn't cut in half. A phone. It sat on a pedestal with a small sign next to it: *If it rings, pick it up. It's Yoko.*

I stood there, waiting for the phone to ring, willing it to do so: *Come on. Get Yoko to push the buttons. Get her to reach out and touch someone—ME!*

I don't know how long I remained there, but finally my girlfriend had had enough. "Let's go."

"But it might ring."

"It's *not* going to ring."

"You don't know."

"I know."

"How?"

"It's part of the joke. Like one of those koan things."

"Like the sound of one hand clapping?"

"Yeah, like that."

She reached for my hand. I turned to follow, then I froze. "Hold on!"

I grabbed the receiver and put my fingers to the buttons. Star. Six. Nine. There was a pause, a click, then my heart in my mouth as the ringing began. What was I going to say? *Hi Yoko. Great exhibit. Really love the half-room thing. But what about the phone? Why not half-a-phone? And why not half-a-sign on the wall by the phone? Or half-a-wall? Or pedestal?*

"I'm sorry, but the number you have reached is unavailable. Please hang up and try a different number or consult your operator. I'm sorry but the number you have reached . . ."

"Well?" my girlfriend smiled.

"She says leave her alone."

"Really?"

"Naw. She doesn't pick up. Like the sound of one person having a conversation."

We turned to go and I felt the sweat in my palm from where I'd held the phone, the faint throb from where I'd stabbed the buttons.

About a week later my girlfriend and I had The Talk. She said that I never heard what she wanted and that I was focused always on myself. I told her that there were plenty of times that this wasn't the case, counting them off on my fingers as she turned and left. 